

The cover features four red octopus tentacles, each with detailed suckers, framing the central text. One tentacle is in the top left, one in the top right, one in the bottom left, and one in the bottom right.

A HORROR NOVELLA

# THE INEVITABILITY OF EVIL

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# The Inevitability of Evil

*A Sci-Fi Horror Novella*

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*First edition*

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*To everyone who said, 'There's something wrong with those three...'*



# Preface

This novella is written in British English by three separate authors who each have their own distinct narrative voice. As such, you may notice some style changes chapter to chapter as we dance in the horrors of three diabolical brains. Enjoy the grey matter.

## We Tip Our Hats to...

Our heartfelt thanks to the legendary, exemplary Anya Pavelle for her proofreading and support. We each owe you an organ and a blood sacrifice.



# I

## Part One



## Where We Started

**H**e'd walked down this path maybe a dozen times. The memory of his last visit was still fresh, but this time felt different.

The familiar crunch of gravel underfoot was the same, but the silence...the silence was new.

It was impossibly dark, and his flashlight couldn't cut through the blackness. The dark wasn't just an absence of light; it felt alive, suffocating like a giant tentacle, a thick black noose around his neck.

He had the growing feeling that he wasn't alone in the darkness. He could sense a presence watching him stumble up the path, hoping to grasp a cold hand on his shoulder and pull him into a lifeless void.

He thought he could hear a little whisper on the wind: *Closer... closer...*

But he knew it was his tired mind fooling him. He couldn't feel a breath on the back of his neck or in front of his face, but he got the skin-prickling feeling that it *was* there, just beyond the light.

His flashlight flickered, gasped, and died.

Now, Ward's only guide to the house was a dim light illuminating the face of the broken figure on the porch. He knew, from snippets of light, that the face belonged to Joe McCain.

The house and its surrounding area was exactly how he remembered as a kid. Same broken fence panels. Same broken porch light that flickered as though it was haunted. And the stories? Well, they remained the same: *The Sightings of Sparrow Road*. Same broken couple inside, only Joe and Marie were the next generation. They say, *History repeats itself and abuse has patterns*.

Moving through the darkness, he felt the same gut-wrenching sensation he'd experienced the first time he walked up this path: ten-year-old Alex Ward, the boy who dared to knock.

A nervous smile broke across his face as he reminisced. How he'd stolen his first tentative kiss from Sandy Mildred for being...brave.

That was another time, a fleeting moment of bravery compared to how he felt now.

It was the silence.

The choking silence.

The never-ending silence.

Shouting and screaming were the usual chorus for this isolated monstrosity.

He carried on towards the house and away from the stale coldness behind him, fighting the urge to look back with every step.

Silence here held an eerie quality that was only amplified by being at the far end of the island, miles away from the next broken porch light.

*You're on your own, Ward, you brave boy.*

An abrasive voice cut through the silence.

‘Wardy, you move slower than a man on the shitter trying to avoid the missus. Get your arse up here! Stop fucking around in the dark. Jesus, what’s got you spooked? Why, you look more startled than sheep when they hear a hungry wolf howling at the moon.’

Even though Ward could see Joe, his voice felt alien in the darkness, and it unsettled him.

‘You always had a way with words, Joe. Deb said Marie called in about the baby. She said something about a light in the sky? Anything else I need to know before I wake the whole town up?’

Joe McCain flicked his cigarette at Ward’s feet as he retreated into the house, his voice a low, haunting invitation. ‘Shit, I don’t know. Why don’t you come in and see for yourself?’

\* \* \*

‘Marie, look alive. Ward’s here. You wanna tell him what you saw?’

Joe McCain moved towards the fridge, opened it, grabbed a beer, popped the cap, and then slammed the door closed. The noise it made jolted Marie to look up from her hands.

Joe threw the bottle cap in the direction of the sink.

It was dark, but Ward could see Marie had been crying into a dishcloth.

Her hair was matted.

Her fringe clung to her forehead and covered most of her left eye.

‘Why’d you have to go and bang that thing all the time? I damn told you about a hundred times,’ she said as she threw

the dishcloth in Joe's direction.

It landed on the wooden floor without making a sound, like it had seen this play out before and tried to keep out of it.

Joe ripped a chair out from underneath the table and threw himself onto it, slamming his beer down with enough force to send it spilling up and out of the bottle like the sinister tension that had burst into the room.

Frantic, foaming alcohol pooled around the bottom of the bottle; the fizz added an eerie quality to the silence.

'Why don't you tell me what happened, Marie, whilst Joe drinks his beer?'

Marie motioned towards the fridge. 'You think he's the only one who needs a drink around here, Ward?'

'You watch your mouth, woman,' Joe said. 'Detective Ward's a guest. You don't speak to my guests that way. You understand?'

Marie ignored her husband's efforts to put her in check. 'My boy was taken...taken...by a beam of light and I couldn't even...move...let alone stop it from happening.'

Ward opened the fridge, popped the cap, and handed her a beer.

Joe switched his beer to his left hand.

'When you say a beam of light,' Ward said, 'do you mean...'

'I know what I mean, goddamnit. It was a green light that dragged him to God knows wh...'. She broke off and the tears started to flow again.

Joe downed his beer and slammed it back down onto the table.

Ward moved closer to Marie, putting Joe out of his line of vision. 'Ok, Marie. Look, I'm not here to judge. I just need to know what happened, is all.'

She knocked back half of the bottle before facing Ward. Her

eyes told him she believed what she'd just told him. Believed it with every fibre of her heart. 'The light took him and it wasn't no miracle light. This light had evil to it. An evil I've never seen before and never wanna see again.'

Joe slammed his fist on the table. It made both Marie and Ward jump. 'For God's sake, Ma. What the fuck's he meant to do with that?' He rose and moved towards her like a tiger circling its prey. Joe gripped Marie's face and forced her to look at Ward. 'You'll have the whole goddamn town thinking we fucking killed our boy. Green light, my ass. I bet your sister done took him. All part of your big plan to make me feel like shit for staying out last week with the boys. Now tell him the fucking truth, woman. Enough of this light shit.'

Ward stared at Joe. He motioned him to back away from Marie with two pleading hands held high. His stance said, *This is your house and I respect that, but just bring it down a notch or I'll have to bring it down for you.*

\* \* \*

The small, translucent frame of a child, with a glazed expression on its face, lent in the kitchen doorway.

Its eyes were bone-white, rolling back into its head, but there was no mistaking that it was staring at all three of them.

Waiting.

Marie spotted the child first and couldn't find the courage to speak. She tried to raise her hand, but only the hairs on the back of her neck rose.

*Covered in bruises.*

Waiting.

She found little comfort in Joe's firm hand around her chin.

For a split second, she wished it would wrap around her throat and force her to look away from what she knew to be the soul of her dead child.

The room descended into anarchy.

In that moment, she knew death itself would be more comforting than what she was being forced to see.

*Toes exposed.*

Waiting.

Ward saw the frantic look on her face and followed her gaze. When he saw the child, he couldn't comprehend it either. It was so far beyond what his mind was prepared to accept, that if he'd done anything other than stare, he would have immediately shut down, sending him into a world more unresponsive and darker than the one he knew.

His senses were fading and his mind was hurling into mayhem with each passing moment.

His breathing became uncontrollable and urgent.

*Stay in the now. It's not real.*

He was one prolonged breath away from collapsing into a world where light, or anything close to it, simply didn't exist.

A restricting sensation crawled around his throat like a python looking for its first meal after a brutal, bitter famine.

Feeling a shift in the tension, Joe turned to see what had distracted the others.

The boy's eyes flickered. His arms shot out towards Marie, his mouth exploded into a deep hole of pain and sadness...then his head snapped back in a violent rage.

'What the fuck?!' gasped Joe.

The child vanished.

\* \* \*



All three stared at the space where the child had stood. All were struggling to put their thoughts into words. A chill lingered in the air, but the temperature was climbing back towards normal, which, with the sea being a stone's throw away, it was always cooler than most places.

'Please tell me you saw that too and I'm not losing my mind over here,' said Joe.

'I saw it. I'm having a hard time believing it, but I saw it,' said Ward as he pulled a chair from under the table and sat down. He was worried that his legs were about to give way and didn't want to be so vulnerable with aggression hovering in the room.

'My boy!' cried Marie. 'That was my boy!'

Joe gripped both of her shoulders. His face suggested to Ward that he was contemplating wrapping his hands around her throat, so he was relieved when he moved down her arms, grabbing her wrists and pulling her to him.

'Our boy! That was our boy! You did this to him. What did you do, Ma? What did you do?!'

Every ounce of her body pulled away from him, then collapsed onto the table.

\* \* \*

'That...was...my boy,' Marie cried.

Ward put his hand out to touch hers. Joe slithered closer to him, eyeing him up as he moved within swinging distance.

'I know how you feel, Marie. Believe me, I do, but you'll have to tell me what happened, every detail, if we're going to find him again.'

Joe stepped back. 'Don't be daft, Ward. He's dead. We've just seen his fucking ghost.'

Ward looked up at Joe. 'I've been doing this as long as you've been driving your grandad's tractor, and nobody is dead without a body. That's my way, and I *will* find your boy. Dead or alive, I promise I'll find him.'

Marie sobbed heartily.

Ward took her hands in his. 'Marie, look at me. Marie...'

Slowly, she lifted her head.

'I promise you, I'll find your boy. You might not like what I find, but I'll find him. What we saw...he's at least two years younger than that, isn't he?'

Joe opened the fridge and gave Ward a look. He was on thin ice, and another beer down Joe's neck would only make it thinner. 'He's right, Ma. It was definitely our lad, but it wasn't at the same time. Looked much older. That ghost boy was full on stood up.'

'Can you tell me what you saw again, Marie?' Ward asked. 'Joe, if you wouldn't mind just drinking your beer and letting her finish uninterrupted this time, it will help her think and help me get the picture.'

Joe snapped the cap off his beer without turning to Ward. The fizz cut the silence. 'Sure thing, Columbo. Tell me what to do in my own home again, though, and I'll smash this fucking bottle into your nose, you understand?'

Ward cocked his head, withdrew his left hand from Marie, and clenched it under the table – out of sight, out of mind. 'I understand, Joe. Marie, please...what did you see?'

Marie looked up at Ward. It was dark, but he could see her eyes were shot with blood, and she had tiny red pin pricks on her cheeks. She placed her hand into her apron and pulled out a box of matches. 'Would you mind grabbing a couple of candles from that drawer to your left, Ward? It's too dark in here now.'

Joe stomped over to the drawer, took out two candles, and threw them at Ward before storming out of the kitchen.

Ward took the candles and placed them between himself and Marie. He placed his hands on hers and tenderly took the box of matches from her.

‘Let there be light,’ he said as he struck a match and lit both candles.

‘I’m sorry about what happened to Jessica,’ Marie said. ‘She was such a wonderful woman, Ward. Such a beautiful soul.’

‘Marie, this isn’t about me. Tell me what happened to your boy when you went into his bedroom. He was in his cradle, right?’

‘He was when I left him. He was asleep. He looked so peaceful. Joe was bounding about making all sorts of racket, but he just slept. He was so perfect when I left him, Ward.’ She started to sob again. Ward rubbed the top of her hands to try and comfort her.

It was the same way he’d comforted her when Mindy McFerce had ridiculed her braces.

He wanted to stroke her hair again, even kiss her eyelids like he’d done when they’d still had hopes of being crowned prom king and queen, but Joe was already on a warpath. Ward didn’t want to have to put Joe down whilst the baby was still missing. Marie had enough to worry about; she didn’t need a dead husband to clean up off the floor.

‘What happened when you came back, Marie?’ Ward asked.

‘I can’t,’ she sobbed.

‘You can. I’m here. You can tell me, Marie. I’m here, here to listen.’

‘He was floating above his cradle. Motionless. Content. This green light illuminated his tiny face, then the light started

dragging him out of the window. Dragging him up and out of the window and into the night sky, but...I couldn't move. It was like I wasn't even breathing. All I could do was watch it happen. Watch as my only child...left my life.' She sobbed, but despite the rattle in her voice, she continued. 'As...as he floated out of the window and...up into this light in the sky, I felt my lungs burst and I just screamed. I just screamed...'

\* \* \*

Ward rubbed her hand again, comforting her the only way he knew. 'I'm sorry to probe you, Marie. I'm just trying to do what I'd normally do.'

'I understand, but I don't know what else I could say.' She looked up and stared at him. Her hopeful eyes were still wet from the tears, but she'd stopped crying.

'I know, I know, you're doing really well. Did you notice anything else before that happened? Any noises or anything?'

Marie thought for a moment. Embracing the silence between them. She wanted him to kiss her. She wanted him to tell her that everything would be alright and that she'd wake up from her nightmare to find him cradling her in his arms while her boy slept silently beside her.

'No. Nothing,' she said. 'I've put him down a hundred times before, and nothing felt different about this time. I only opened the window because it was warm and he doesn't sleep well when the heat is like this. Why did I open the window?! Oh, God, if I hadn't opened the window...' She broke off and settled her head on his hands.

'Hey, hey...you opened the window because you're a great mum and you wanted him to be comfortable. You couldn't have

known that...'

He felt the tension and pain in her body. He felt her dead weight on his arms.

Then he saw Joe standing in the doorway.

'When you two lovebirds are done,' Joe said, 'there's a fucking circle in the yard you might want to check, Detective. You know, do your job...instead of encouraging that shower of shite.'

\* \* \*

Ward stepped out into the open air. Joe was behind him like a shadow, close enough to feel his stale breath on the back of his neck.

The night was calm, silent, and impossibly dark. Darker than when Ward had arrived.

He looked up at the night sky, but the impenetrable darkness continued. All-encompassing shadows surrounded them.

Ward tried to find the wooden rail that led up to the house, but he clutched at air and almost lost his footing before Joe grabbed the scruff of his collar, pulled him upright, and pushed him towards the rail.

'Watch your step there, Superman,' Joe said. 'Lois would be mighty disappointed if you busted your face open on the way out. She needs you to find her boy. Save the day.'

Ward found his footing and turned back towards Joe. 'He's your boy too, Joe. You not concerned?'

Joe jumped off the final steps and squared up to Ward, towering over him in a way he hadn't before. His whole frame filled Ward's vision and added to the darkness. 'If you weren't a fucking cop, I'd knock your head clean off. You hear me, bitch? Go and sniff that fucking circle or some shit and stay out of my

business. Just 'cause your wife is fucking dust don't mean you can try and slide into mine.'

Without warning, Ward was shoved hard in the chest. He stumbled backwards and hit the ground with a thud. The soft, wet grass cushioned his fall, but the sudden collapse of his legs made his head spin.

He felt around at the black ground, his fingers searching for something to hold his senses together, but the feeling of needing to breathe had already kicked in.

He felt his chest tighten, and his vision blurred around the edges.

Then he felt a never-ending darkness close in on him. A ringing invaded his thoughts, and he couldn't focus. Flashes of his wife's fearful, tear-ridden face flooded every inch of the darkness. Shattered, fleeting visions intoxicated his surroundings.

Screams.

Death rattles.

Silence.

His breaths became shallow and more frantic.

The moisture in the cold night air burnt his throat as he tried desperately to get oxygen back into his lungs.

Only silence.

He clutched at the cold, damp earth around him and pleaded for a slither of light.

A flower. A butterfly. Anything with an ounce of beauty to fight away the fear.

He was a fly caught in a spider's web, waiting to be eaten. Fighting frantically for a way to leave the all-consuming grief that was trying to destroy him.

Then his breathing seemed to stop, and the intensity became

unbearable.

His wife's face flashed again, only this time it was still, cold, and lifeless.

## What Went Wrong

### 3 Days Old

**T**he baby was cold.

And covered in blood.

A bone cradle chafed his chubby, naked limbs, crunch, crunch, *crunching* beneath the weight of his wails. He peed an amber splash on the sticky floor, shrieking himself into insanity.

But no one came.

Well, no one he would consider someone.

Scratches peppered his plump cheeks. Shallow welts. Globby bruises. All ghosted with apology. The baby knew little, but he knew he shouldn't hurt this much. Even at three days old, he tasted hate. The feeling skewered him, bitter and devouring. He liked it. Hate listened when nothing else did. He could use it. Control it. Cuddle it in this cold, damp hell.

His shrieks faded, his shivers stilled, but his hate remained, rising.



\* \* \*

## 6 Months Old

Time blurred.

The baby knew he was broken before he knew his name. His body grew while his mind didn't, and he only remembered scraps. A greasy lamp. A tattered blanket. Two things shouting. Panic for a roof.

Then there was this room. Or was it the same room? The baby didn't know. Everywhere felt dark and bleak, stuffed with slimy fury and groping shadows. The baby wanted to *leave*, but he couldn't walk, couldn't talk, could only *scream*.

Still, the things ignored him.

Still, the hate listened.

The baby chewed this hate till he became it, and hate stroked his fragile, bald, gash-mottled skull. *Shh, shh. There, there.* His lullaby was scorn.

He could sit now. Though no one watched, no one cared. Not the things on the ground, nor the things in the sky. He fell more than he rose, added his own bruises to his skin. Violet blooms. Indigo blossoms. A pain garden thrived on his delicate flesh. Someone should have noticed this phantom baby, his strangeness, but work, bills, school, sports, friends, family, money, life.

The baby was alone.

\* \* \*

## One Year Old

Something was wrong.

With the baby.

With his world.

The dark consumed him, the drip, drip, *drip* of despair. The baby shouldn't know this feeling yet, but he knew its depth like an ancient womb. He hovered in nothingness, poked and prodded, his sobs swallowed, his screams harvested.

These things liked his screams.

But not his tears.

They scraped his sorrow away. Replaced water with blood. Painted his face agony-red, then shimmied through puddles to slap a shadow.

The dark belched him here. To a cramped room, a splintering crib, an empty fireplace filled with ash. Voices blared behind a crooked door. The baby didn't know the words, but he knew the hate. Liked the hate. Wanted the hate to be his, not theirs. He tried to stand. Toppled against the wall. Cried through the blood.

The voices didn't pause, didn't help. They speared the baby's eardrums, and he clapped grubby hands to his bleeding skull. He wanted it to stop, them to stop, everything to finally stop, stop, *stop*.

The voices ballooned. They stretched into monsters attached to those things, different things from the dark, but the light offered no shelter. The baby crawled away. No one saw. Took his first steps. No one knew. Said his first word. No one heard.

'No, no, no, no...'

\* \* \*

## Two Years Old

They taught the boy. Words. Sounds. But he didn't like the noise.

The dark caged him more and more. He seldom saw the light. When he did, he found other things like him. Squashy bodies. Bulbous eyes. Toothy mouths that smiled instead of frowned. He didn't smile. He hadn't learnt how. They had weird strings growing from their heads, their brows. The boy didn't have these strings. His skull and face were smooth, empty. Stark and white as bone.

The boy tried to share his hate with them. It was all he knew. The squashy things cried, *shrieked*, when his ragged nails dug into their flesh. The boy didn't understand. This was what was done.

'No, Cain. Bad, Cain,' a stern lady scolded. She shoved the boy into a madman's arms. He had named the boy, but he never used the boy's name. Behind him, a madwoman shook her head. She did that a lot. She also forgot the boy a lot. They all did.

Back to the room. Then back to the dark. Shadows slithered over the boy's pale, prickled skin. Inky tentacles suckled his face. He cried, and cried, and cried. Mist kissed his blood-jewelled scratches as he waddled away, his nappy dropping, soiled. Shadows followed. If the boy were normal, he would think this a game, but normalcy was a fantasy, a fallacy, *wrong*. He stumbled across slippery metal. Dread robbed his tiny heart. Terror smashed his lungs. His little legs scurried quicker, *quicker*, but the dark was always faster. They caught him, tossed him into the bone cradle, now larger and sharper, like the boy.

Images sputtered through the muggy air. Plastic toys. Wooden trains. Plush sweaters. All things he never had.

‘Stop,’ the boy bawled, his second word. ‘Stop, stop, *stop*.’ The images stopped. The shadows didn’t. They probed him again – searching, seeking. The boy screeched and slashed the air, the shadows, till his fingers fractured. Pain ripped him apart. Music caressed his sawtooth tears. He recognised the tune from the ground things. They sang it while they cried. The boy bawled harder, a bone-splitting sob. The music roared louder, till the words became bombs.

‘Stop, stop, stop, stop...’

\* \* \*

## Five Years Old

The boy grew odd.

He knew what he shouldn’t, and he didn’t know what he should. In school, his scribbles were violent. Bitten-down crayons tore every page. Markers popped in watery death. Pencils snapped; their shards carved his wrists. Teachers asked him why, but he didn’t have the words, and even if he did, he wouldn’t have told. No one believed him, and no one ever would.

When he knifed kids with scissors, they called him troubled. When he howled for escape, they called him mental. A few would have helped, if they could have helped, but they couldn’t. The boy was absent most days, anyway. The madman and madwoman said he was sick, hurt, tired, off. He was all of these, but he was also lost. His grades suffered, like him, but they were enough, unlike him.

The boy would have worried, if he had time to worry, but the

dark stole most of his time. The hungry dark. The greedy dark. The slimy, blistering, ever-feasting dark. He was their meal. Tendrils wriggled in his ears, nose, mouth. The boy choked on shadows, then on vomit. Tears scrawled anguish down his naked skull. He was still bald, still hairless, still pale and moon-spun. Circular scars dappled his head and neck. Glacial eyes pierced the gloom. He gnawed his chapped lips, scrawny arms crossed, back hunched, body spasming from the chill. Hate spread inside him, a comfort, the only one.

Shadows writhed, tangling in mucky threads. Wormy splats echoed against metal. Wet squelches bounced off glass. Lights and sounds hovered midair, an assault of people, places, and things the boy didn't understand.

'No, no, no, *no*,' he wept. 'Make it *stop*. Let me go.'

He curled into a skeletal ball, but the dark curled with him, licking his bumpy spine. His limbs convulsed against the unforgiving floor. Bruises mottled his translucent skin. Scratches snaked over every vein. Bones creaked, groaned, cracked. Sobs bubbled from his blood-glugged mouth as needles punched his shoulder.

The boy stopped. Flopped. *Limp*. The dark gulped his tiny body down its tentacled maw. Pain died, but hate died, too, and the boy wanted hate to *live*.

As he drowned, he heard the madman bark, 'Wake up.'

But the madman didn't understand. The sky wasn't the dream.

The dream was the ground.

\* \* \*

## Ten Years Old

The boy had no friends.

He liked it this way.

Without friends, he was free. No one asked how he was doing. No one cared where he was. He couldn't blame them. Even he didn't know where he was most of the time.

But there was the rare occasion when he shone a little too bright. Did the wrong thing. Shoved the wrong kid. Said the sky was alive.

At an abandoned playground, they found him.

'Think you're better than us?' a ground thing asked.

The boy laughed. It was a raw, serrated sound, a rusty blade over concrete. *Better*. The boy laughed again. The ground things blinked. They didn't understand. Their squishy eyes wobbled in their vacant skulls. The boy had seen inside those skulls. He knew there was nothing worth saving.

'You hurt Jack,' one of them said.

The boy hurt a lot of things. He didn't know their names. He wasn't here long enough to remember them.

Walking away, the boy tracked the ground things' clumsy footsteps. *Go away, go away, go away, go away*, he pleaded. Swings creaked in the tepid breeze. Paint peeled off a rumpled slide, its surface beaded from recent rain. The sky cleared to a striking blue, and clouds skimmed the sun as the footsteps trod closer. *Leave me alone, leave me alone, leave me alone, leave me alone*.

They didn't.

A jab found his ribs with a twig-like *snap*. The boy doubled over, clutched his gut, as a third laugh rolled through him. He could laugh or cry, but tears brought more tears, so he laughed.

Besides, this was fun. Pain erased fear, and he cherished their hate. Ground things didn't scare him like sky things. They were boring, listless creatures. Grow up, grow old, die, rot.

Predictable.

The boy liked predictable. He spat on their shoes and made their cruelty his god. Maybe if the ground things bloodied him, the sky things would no longer want him. Maybe they'd no longer beat him, poke him, squeeze him, taste him. So the boy urged violence into a storm. Copper soured his tongue. Gore burst in his throat like rotten fruit. Forged from agony, he spasmed, joyous at escape as he convulsed on the grass-furry ground.

But the shadows still came.

A scream tore from the boy's mouth. Eyes swollen, body bruised, he crawled away from the tentacled dark. Clammy tendrils pressed at his pulse. Slime lathered his skin, a chunky mucus that stung every wound. He kicked and thrashed, hit and flailed, but it was useless. *He* was useless. Useless, over, done.

His skeleton slumped, a bag of bones. 'Why?' he rasped, voice desperate. 'Why, why, *why*, *WHY?*'

He'd asked the question a thousand times, but the dark had never answered before, and they did not answer now. Shadows smothered him as he sank.

\* \* \*

## Fourteen Years Old

The teenager drifted. He was flotsam, wreckage. He skimmed time's skin while other ground things made plans about a future they didn't understand.

The dark possessed him. Needles in the night. Poison-tipped scalpels. Vomit-thick drugs and electric torture. Shadows drilled his brain, shocked him with cattle prods.

And he changed.

It was subtle at first. Seconds raced by on broken wings, then minutes, hours, days, weeks. He didn't notice the loss; time always fled him when he needed it most. The madman called him slow. The madwoman called him lazy. *Go faster*, they snapped, but the teenager couldn't, already at light speed. He was a frozen star, red as blood, dim as hope, balanced on a horizon he could never reach.

The teenager dulled himself with beer. If he couldn't feel it, it couldn't feel him. He became dizzy, disoriented, a waterlogged corpse. But time kept slipping – and space, too. He swore he saw things move. *Crazy*, they told him – the ground things, the beasts. He didn't care. He'd been called worse, but never better.

"There's something wrong with me," he told his headmaster one day.

The headmaster sighed. He didn't remember the teenager. The boy was mostly absent, but his grades were okay, and okay was enough. "Adolescence is a difficult time, Cain. I'm sure everything will sort itself out soon. You're fine."

"I'm *not*," the teenager said. Teeth bared, he showed the headmaster his inside, the inside where the sky had planted thorns, prickles, and spikes. "There's something *wrong* with me," he repeated and punched the desk. Skin ripped from his



bone-white knuckles as he stabbed the headmaster with steely eyes. He was still scrawny, hairless, and scarred. *Not* fine. *Not* okay. *Not* all right and what everyone wanted him to be.

The headmaster's bushy brows furrowed into one. 'Mr Ward, we take insubordination seriously here in Ramsey.'

'And there is something *seriously* wrong with me,' the teenager said again, but the echo faded like ink in a pond.

Frazzled, the headmaster scrubbed his drooping face, then wrung his hands in exasperation. 'Go back to class. You'll feel better. I have a meeting. Sorry I can't help.'

The teenager didn't move.

'Now, Cain.'

Before the teenager could protest, time mutinied. It smeared into an emotional tapestry of the headmaster's escalating words and reddening face. His arms wagged in frustration as the teenager tried to leave yet couldn't. Panic squirmed through his veins, but in seconds, time settled again.

'Out,' the headmaster bellowed. 'If you won't listen, get *out*. You're suspended for a week.'

'Please, I need help,' the teenager begged.

'You don't need help. You need discipline.' With a rough grip, the headmaster escorted the teenager into the hall, then slammed the door in his face.

Hot, heavy tears fell from the teenager's eyes. He fled the school before anyone could see him cry. At the edge of his vision, he spotted a ground thing. Scrawny. Pale. A lot like him. Then it vanished. Or he vanished. Didn't matter in the end.

Feet stomping, heart pounding, the teenager sprinted almost four kilometres to Port Lewaigue. When he reached the beach, he collapsed. His knees smacked claggy sand. Silky water lapped at his thighs. He fell into the surf, rooted his forehead

in the Irish Sea. Water soaked his uniform, and wind chilled his raw skin. Maybe if he ran far enough, hard enough, the dark couldn't reach him. Maybe the school would believe him. Maybe his parents would, too.

No.

None of them would.

The teenager was damned since birth.

'Lost?' a woman asked, approaching. Armed with knives and pills, she reached out a temptation-drenched hand.

The teenager startled and hauled himself from the beckoning shore, scurrying away. The woman's question followed him, then her cackle, high and shrill. Though he needed escape, he couldn't afford debt. He just wanted to forget himself like everyone forgot him. He wanted the dark to forget him, too.

So he ran home, slower now, a weak jog instead of a fierce sprint. The madwoman was out, and the madman was asleep. The teenager stole a bottle of Manx whisky, then retreated to his room. Drink scorched his throat. He relished the fire after endless ice.

Time raced again, but he didn't notice. His parents didn't, either. Neither did the neighbours or the school or anyone else on the entire isle.

The dark noticed, though.

Raven tendrils slid over the teenager's wasted form. The boy who was no longer a boy screeched at the damp dark, at the bulging bone cradle, at the slimy, metal cage that plagued him always.

'No,' he sobbed. 'Don't. I want to go home.'

But the teenager had no home.

More needles. Shocks. Pain. Rage. Shadows sedated the teenager till his sobs became murmurs. 'Please,' he prayed, but

he didn't know where to pray. Not to the sky. There was nothing up here except night and nightmares. And not to the ground. There was nothing down there except worry and an empty world. But the teenager kept praying. It was all he could do.

'Please, please, please.'

Tentacles sucked his skull.

'Please, please.'

Blood swam with his tears.

*'Please.'*

He was gone.

\* \* \*

## Eighteen Years Old

The man died a thousand times.

He woke groggy, in a churning sea of time, his room clawed to disarray. Again, he survived. Again, the dark revived him. No matter how often he left, it always dragged him back.

Knives dripped red on the floor. They had healed his wrists with puckered scars. *No. Set me free. Let me go.* They didn't. So the man cut again, angry slices through weeping flesh. He carved crimson letters into his skin, curses in a language the ground things didn't understand.

The sky things understood, though. They prodded him less, shocked him more, frightened by this new thing they had made. Each time they mopped up the man's blood, poured life back into his skull, the man fuelled his hate. *Let me die*, he howled after every salvation. And after every salvation, the sky things

fondled him in their slurpy tongue: *We did. It didn't work.*

The man was confused, but not as confused as he should have been. Confusion was a luxury, but he was hope-poor and anguish-stricken. No time for curiosity when even time itself abused him.

He hacked himself apart again and again. Shadows strung him back together again and again. He was trapped. Caged. Mortified. Done with this moth-eaten, tumbledown existence. Neither here nor there. Neither sky nor ground. He floated in limbo, the monster in the middle of two very different hells.

The madman and madwoman kicked him out, swept him out the door. He was only a bit of dust that had clung to their floorboards for eighteen neglected years.

The man wandered for weeks beneath a robin egg sky. Over billowing land. Through curling mist. Across heather, ruins, and desolate beaches, their sorrow a mirror he didn't want to see. He wore holes in his soles. Tore his clothes to shreds. And hate walked with him. Whispered in his ears. Impaled him with truth. Riddled him with lies. The man worshipped this hate, his sole companion, fed it his rage, let it drink his pain. Hate listened when nothing else did. Soothed him. Comforted him. Told him it would all be okay.

During these stilted, dangerous weeks, the dark stole him more. It groped him. Abused him. Tortured him with false promises and barren dreams. The man became reckless. He wanted *out*. So he punched, kicked, shrieked, bled – fighting against the dark with every drip of his soul. *Let me out, let me die, let me out, let me die*, he begged, shattered, but the shadows grew. There was no escape from the dark side of the moon.

Later, when the man was older, everyone asked each other *why*. Why his talons? Why his fangs? Why his searing venom

and spiny thorns? These questions were the only things on which ground and sky agreed, on this ignorance that sprouted a demon. They could have pointed to these early years, to the agony, to the despair, but they didn't. Even at their end, they never understood him, never paid attention to the baby, boy, teenager, man, beast. He slipped through the cracks, then became a ghost, haunting and breeding guilt, shame, and regret. No one liked him. Few related to him. But everyone feared him, both fools and saints.

The ground fucked up.

The sky did, too.

Both cowered beneath the weight of their sins as the sun fell down and the stars bled Cain.

## How We Ended

**T**he Nexus. The minds of a people melded together in a growing web of synapses, reaching out, touching and spreading. Seeing in all directions, feeling past, present, and future across an endless ocean of possibility. An organic supercomputer holding the consciousness of a hundred thousand Cephs. It expands finger-like fungal hyphae, reaching out and accepting new initiates.

Cyan stood by the edge of the void, gazing down at the vast basin and its phosphorescent glow. She felt her Progenitor take her hand and turned to gaze into the eyes of her closest relative.

Her eyes over-lubricated; she tried to hold back her ink. Spilling here would be humiliating, but not unexpected or without precedent. Cyan was determined to hold her emotions in check, if only for her Progenitor's sake. As she closed the gap between them, she reached out with her tendrils to seek a connection. They touched foreheads while their tendrils entwined. 'You're ready?'

'Cyan, don't be sad. You will always be my most genetic similar, and I will always be your direct Progenitor. We are

family, and I am fortunate that I can join the Nexus.'

'Yes. Of course. I didn't mean to suggest otherwise.'

'Some of our genetic lines have not been so fortunate. They have been left to degrade, their function unsuitable for the collective consciousness.'

'I know. It's just...I wish we had longer while you were an individual.'

Progenitor's tendrils stroked against Cyan's face. 'You greatly impact my emotions.'

'As you do mine.'

Their tendrils fell apart. A smile graced the Progenitor's face, and she nodded, spreading her arms wide.

Two guardians of the Nexus came forward while Cyan stepped back. They lifted Cyan's Progenitor, one by each arm, and carried her towards the edge. Her feet dangled over the edge of the chasm that led down into the basin, into the sprawl of sparkling neurones.

Through Cyan's feet, she felt the connection to the group as the ceremony began. An abrupt flood of communication. A bubbling of emotion, thought, vision, flooding towards her, embracing her within the observing group. All outward thoughts were the same. In unison, they sent, "To the Nexus we are called, where all thoughts are one. Your experiences and intuition strengthen us all. Into the depths you fall to see the past, present, and future. Forever we exist in the Nexus. Currents take you.'

A convulsion passed through the guardians holding the chosen over the edge. Their bodies squirmed while they held their grip on the initiate. The thoughts of Cyan's Progenitor surged through them for all to receive. 'I am prepared, I am ready, I shall fall and rise as part of the great consciousness.

Prepare to hear my words.'

Then Cyan watched as they cast her Progenitor over the precipice into the depths. The fluid rippled with the impact as the Progenitor's body vanished beneath the surface.

Every member of the ceremonial party waited without passing a public thought. This was Cyan's first time witnessing a joining to the Nexus. It was an event only observed by those entrusted with the governance of the Ceph people, and those who were directly responsible for the Nexus itself. One close genetic companion was allowed to escort a new consciousness to this point in the journey, and the Progenitor had asked Cyan to be her last personal contact as an individual. It was an honour, but it was also ink spilling.

'She rises,' the adjudicator, the most sacred member of the Nexus keeper's court, said.

From within the pool, the waters stirred as writhing nerve clusters broke the surface. Synaptic cords intertwined to form tentacle-like tendrils, not unlike those that adorned every Ceph's face, and rose. Wrapped within them, dripping from the waters of the Nexus, was the Progenitor. Her eyes were wide open but unseeing. The Nexus lifted her until she reached the edge of the precipice once more, and it placed her standing on the surface. Her feet connected with the connective tissue that covered the floor and allowed the Ceph, who watched, to communicate.

'The Nexus thanks you for bringing Teal. Her knowledge and wisdom are great, as is her emotion as Progenitor of Cyan. In return, we bring you a warning for our people.'

A wave of emotion flooded across the public synapses. A warning from the Nexus was serious, and rare. These moments were for the sharing of wisdom, ideas that would benefit the



whole of Ceph society. Warnings were not given lightly.

‘There is one who will wipe thousands of our individual consciousnesses from existence. There is one who will take lives upon lives and blink them out of existence. The Nexus can feel their screams. It is not one of us, but another species, sentient but savage.’ Teal, who was no longer an individual, raised a hand, and in the mist above, images appeared. Star systems and routes, a map, a genetic sequence. Images that could only be seen by those connected as it was cast into their mind, giving the illusion that it appeared in the air. ‘You have been warned. The Nexus suggests intervention.’

‘Intervention by what means?’ the adjudicator asked. Their thoughts were unsteady, unsure.

‘Individual intervention by our people. We see no more than that. What has come before will pass again; what has passed shall come once more.’

The images left, but the memory of them remained in full. Then Cyan watched as the body of her Progenitor shrank as the tendrils used the no longer needed organic matter as a source for nourishment. The flesh seemed to dissolve until all that was left was the brain stem, now wrapped in new nervous tissue that reached out from the basin below.

Silence held for a moment. Not a single public thought crossed the interconnected local nerves until Cyan broke it. ‘What the fuck was that?’

\* \* \*

Memory is a fiction. The gaps in information filled in with the glue of imagination to hold the web together. The Nexus made sure there was no glue needed.

‘Every witness reported the same coordinates in time and space. The creature that destroys a thousand of us appears at this point. We will take action to save ourselves.’

Not a single thought was effused as the project lead spoke. She was a Ceph of advanced years, due to step into the Nexus herself in a matter of weeks. Her wisdom, for an individual, was near unquestionable.

‘The vessel is prepared, it’s...this is ambitious,’ the government representative said.

‘This undertaking has spanned several of your predecessor’s roles, Glaucous. All of them have questioned the expense, the hours of work, but all of them concurred with the Nexus in the end. Are you the first who knows better than our collective wisdom?’

The politician squirmed beneath the project lead’s gaze. His tendrils bunched close around his chin.

Cyan spread her fingers out a little further on the mound, slipping beneath some of the narrow vessels that passed over it. Several Ceph were sitting around it, palms to the surface, so they could all hear the thoughts of the discussion.

‘If I might interject—’

All eyes turned to her, and for a moment, she hesitated.

‘Since the day my Progenitor joined the Nexus, we have focused on this threat to our people. How so many thousands could have perished at this moment in time. We all understand Representative Glaucous’s role is to question the expenditure, but we are now far beyond the point of turning back. Representative, may we record your concerns as a matter of record, and move onwards?’

The politician lifted his hands from the ganglia, the tumour-like mound serving as the focus of their thoughts. He made

a clicking sound, a vocalisation of displeasure. It was a rare sound among the Ceph, and it lacked subtlety. 'You are the specialist?' he said, slapping his hand on the nerves to reopen the connection. The sudden jolt of emotion in his action caused some at the meeting to flinch, but not Cyan.

'I am the specialist. Since the day of the warning, I have spent my time working with this team to prepare for our task—'

'Then I doubt you are capable of viewing this without bias.'

'You jumped up, prawn,' she snapped. 'Busy yourself with the tedium of government and leave the saving of our species to people less concerned with their own social standing.'

The politician stood, his fronds standing to attention. Both hands pressed against the nerve ganglia to the point where the mucous layer was swallowing them. 'How dare you?'

'How dare I? You have come here with the sole intention of ensuring you have made a public show of your doubts to score political points. You have no intention of doing anything to stop this mission and merely need to show that you are involved in the undertaking. Otherwise, you risk appearing as impotent as you likely are. So swim back to the shallows where a child like you belongs.'

Clicks of shock came from around the tumour, but the project lead sent mirth. 'Not very kind, Cyan.'

'I apologise. I meant to be honest, not unkind. We are days from launch where the crew and I will leave all Ceph we have ever known, and he comes here to question the necessity of our life's work.'

The politician, Glaucous, appeared to recognise this was not a public forum as he glanced around the group. Thoughts of shock lingered, but there was overwhelming annoyance, frustration, and an unexpected amount of animosity levelled

towards him. 'I...have misjudged this forum,' he finally sent. 'I do not appreciate being spoken to in such a tone, and it will have repercussions, but I wish only to note my concerns.'

'Save your repercussions, Glaucous. I'm about to be thrown through a vortex powered by a Dyson sphere in the hope of saving thousands of Ceph. We have harnessed the power of a star to give us what we need to traverse space and time, to reach a point we never even knew existed. What do you intend to do? Dock my wages?' Cyan said, pulling her hand from the ganglia mound and turning away.

She had no way of knowing what else they said as her connection was severed, but her patience was as dry as the beaches when the tide went out. In hours, she would board the vessel and only be able to hope that one day she might return. In two days, she was being sent to quell the beast that would end thousands of Ceph lives...and she would do it with kindness.

\* \* \*

She followed behind the first lieutenant. His name was Periwinkle; they called him Lieutenant Perry. The large Ceph carried a high-velocity projectile weapon designed and manufactured with the help of the Nexus by the finest Ceph engineers for this low moisture environment. Behind her, following in single file, were two more of the crew. The team of support Ceph were all experienced in exoplanetary incursions. Cyan knew they had been in battles, that they had killed living organisms, but the carrying of weapons and violent acts were unusual amongst Ceph.

While she was, as all Ceph were, against such abhorrent acts as violence or murder, she could acknowledge that some would

be required to carry out such heinous deeds. They had her respect. There weren't many who would give up their chances of becoming one with the Nexus to protect their species from hostile threats. She was, however, not convinced lethal weapons were required on this mission.

'Specialist, we are one hundred steps from the target. They are located in that manufactured construction. There appear to be other life forms present,' a private said, interrupting Cyan's thoughts.

'Do they present a threat?' Cyan asked.

'They are physically larger than us, and built for this hostile, arid environment. If they attack, we must not hesitate. They have hard skeletons.'

'Internal calcium-based armour. It's weird,' a private interrupted.

'We all know about their biology,' Cyan said. 'I was asking if they exhibited threatening behaviour?'

'We don't know. The swimming teeth do not exhibit threatening behaviour until they are threatened.'

'These things are not the swimming teeth. They dwell on dry land. They are aliens.'

A thought from behind. 'Freaking crusties.'

'Crusties? Sounds a little offensive,' Cyan said.

'What's wrong, Specialist, are you into friction burns?' the private said. Mirth passed through the group.

'Stow it, Private,' the lieutenant snapped.

Cyan smiled. This kind of humour was good for morale. She understood that. 'It's not me I'm concerned about, Private. I'm sure one of these dry things would find you irresistible. You'd better hope your cloak works, or they'll mistake you for one of the local foods.'

‘They can’t see us, can they?’ the Private said, thoughts laced with fear.

‘As long as the suits are working, we don’t believe so. There is a chance we might appear in some form, but it is slim and likely to be exceptional. Little more than a translucent afterimage.’

‘Like ghosts?’

‘As you say. Spirits, like the hallucinations of those who spend too much time with the Nexus.’

They trudged forward in silence, the suits they wore doing most of the hard work against the gravity of this planet. The lack of moisture made the visibility clear, but the colours were too bright. It seemed every part of the visible spectrum burned through the thin air. Gone were the soothing blues of their homeworld, replaced with the violent scatter, as if their sky were a prism.

‘It’s so garish,’ Cyan said, forgetting for a moment that they were connected.

The lieutenant’s thoughts were gentle. ‘You can turn down the spectrum on your HUD, Specialist.’

‘Yes, of course, it is just interesting to observe it this way.’ A lie, but then, she was allowed her pride.

The construction was angular. Everything seemed to be at ninety degrees, straight-edged and uniform in an unnatural way. ‘As primitive as we imagined,’ she said, breaking the silence that had fallen between them.

‘They fight natural forms, nature itself. Operations warned us to watch for edges, corners. They round nothing,’ Lieutenant Perry said.

‘Their world is in pain. So they inflict pain on themselves.’

‘By bumping into corners?’

‘A minor example. Pain is everywhere here.’

‘And pain creates monsters.’

‘Not monsters,’ Cyan interrupted. ‘Don’t fall into the drift. That current only pulls us down into suffering. We help, and we save ourselves.’

‘Kindness is the answer,’ the lieutenant and the two privates said in unison.

They breached the entranceway, a large panel of wood. Small pieces of metal around its edges formed a rudimentary lock. It took one private barely a moment to open it without causing any harm. Inside, flat walls formed a narrow channel that led to an incline interrupted by short, uniform levels.

‘Weird,’ Lieutenant Perry said. ‘These floors aren’t large enough to serve a purpose.’

‘They are designed to aid in rising to the next large level.’

‘Why not use a ramp?’ a Private asked.

Cyan held back an angry response. *Kindness*, she reminded herself. ‘Gravity is higher here. A ramp is harder to walk up. Remember, they are dry and they do not connect to their surfaces like we do.’

‘But they have ramps in some places.’

‘Yes. Perhaps it’s more about construction.’

‘But you said—’

‘Now is not the time.’

‘How do they speak?’ the same private.

‘They use sound waves,’ Cyan said. ‘This was in the briefing and the pre-mission—’

‘The private was a late addition to the team,’ the lieutenant interrupted. ‘She has done her best, but there was a lot in the mission pack.’

‘A late addition?’ Cyan asked.

‘The original Private had some difficulties.’

‘Difficulties?’

‘They were unkind.’

Cyan froze for a moment and looked back at the two privates, then forward at Lieutenant Perry. Unkindness was a curse that often came from those most hardened by the worst the galaxy had to offer. ‘I’m sorry to hear that.’

‘There’s no need to be fearful, Specialist. The other private did not drift far from the waters of kindness; they will easily catch the current once more. It could happen to anyone, *not just those of us who protect the Ceph.*’ The last he conveyed with a clear undercurrent.

‘I apologise.’

‘No need. Now let’s focus.’

The lieutenant was the first to step over the threshold, and he pointed to his right at another doorway. This one was open. Cyan followed, then hesitated as she observed one of the local inhabitants. They were staring at a box while lying prone on a soft furnishing. She quickly adjusted the suit’s settings to focus on the sounds emanating from the device. The HUD and inbuilt organic interface reacted to her thoughts. The screen itself was invisible to anyone but her, as it was cast into her brain’s visual centre.

‘It watches more of its own species,’ Lieutenant Perry said. ‘It is one of the forms of entertainment we spoke of.’

‘Stupid,’ a private said. ‘Why have it on that box when they could impulse cast?’

‘Private. When you get back to the ship, I suggest you continue your studies. This species cannot integrate their synapses with others.’

‘They’re...alone?’ The private didn’t bother to hide the revulsion from her thoughts.



‘Kindness, Private,’ the lieutenant sent. ‘Kindness *and focus*.’ Then he began his ascent. This species was large, and the ‘staircase,’ as they called it, was awkward for the Ceph’s smaller strides.

As he reached the summit, the lieutenant held up a fist, and they paused in a line on the ascent to the second level. ‘When we enter this room, we hasten. The specialist takes the subject, and we exit through the silicate screened entranceway to the side. The drop is far. Make sure you are prepared for the landing. Three, two, one...’

\* \* \*

‘Death might be a simpler option,’ Cyan said with a sigh.

‘Simpler, but not kind or legal. Do I need to reschedule your psych evaluation?’ the captain asked.

‘No, no. I’m just saying what they’re all thinking, what *we’re* all thinking.’

She checked the system, designed to be as comfortable as the womb. A laboratory grown uterine wall lined the interior of contraption, but she acted as the umbilical cord and the crew were all part of the placenta, giving this cursed child a chance at something else. *External reproduction is so much simpler.*

‘Cyan, you’re the specialist. Is this the kindest way?’ he asked.

‘We have to give him opportunities to grow, to develop as he is supposed to. All the studies—’

‘All the studies suggest this is the best way. You always say that. I’m asking, as your captain, do *you* think this is the best way?’

She hesitated, then took a step back, silencing their conversation for a moment while staring into the crib. It moved, making

that high-pitched noise it so often did. Moisture leaked down its face. A wasteful act that she had discovered was not dissimilar to an ink spill.

‘It makes noise,’ the captain said, placing his hand on her shoulder.

‘It does.’

‘Is this the kindest way?’ he asked again. The responsibility for their success, the pressure of saving thousands of lives, was on the captain’s head. By asking her, he was transferring that load. ‘I am following the protocol that was agreed upon at the start of this mission. We must not deviate. It is still early.’

‘Protocol you helped to plan. You witnessed the Nexus warning.’ She felt herself tense but kept their connection loose, light as a feather. ‘I was there – by luck, not by choice. The Nexus sees in all directions, and it understands more than we can ever hope to comprehend. We must have faith.’

‘I have faith in the Nexus. It’s those who interpret the finer details that I must question. That is part of my role, Cyan. I do not doubt you personally.’

‘Thank you for your kindness,’ she said, careful to push the sarcasm away from her connection. ‘Shall we continue?’

‘Very well. Is it awake?’

‘Yes, and it’s “he.” His species likes to define that sort of thing. We must try to be considerate.’

‘Kindness is the answer,’ the captain said.

‘Kindness is the answer,’ Cyan responded, then pulled her shoulder away from him, ending the conversation.

They had travelled further than any Ceph ship on record had ever travelled. Beyond their humble binary star system, not unlike this one. Contact with their small blue orb ended long ago, and would not return while anyone they knew on

Ceph still inhabited their individual forms. At least, she hoped most would be with the Nexus. They might meet the future generations of the ones they now saved. It is said that you can reach the consciousness of an individual through the Nexus, though it takes great meditation and nobody speaks of it. *I will speak to my Progenitor when I return. If it takes all my time as an individual, I will tell how she and I saved all Ceph.*

Allowing doubt to creep into the mission wasn't an option, but as she stared at the small fleshy creature inside the crib, she couldn't help but wonder. They had built the crib out of the same calcium armour it possessed within its flesh, something familiar to it, a kindness. *True, they are large, and mostly dry, but are they as fearsome as we imagined?*

The captain placed a hand gently on her shoulder once more. 'Have you managed to communicate?'

'I have attempted, but my research suggests they barely communicate with each other at such a young age,' Cyan said, 'so I did not expect success. I will try again.'

'We have but days before we must return it—'

'Him.'

'We have only days before we must return *him* to his own Progenitors. This is the kindest way.'

'True.'



# II

## Part Two



## Where We Started

**M**arie made her way to the fridge and opened the door. She took out the remaining beer bottles, popped the caps, and poured them down the sink.

She placed the empty bottles on the table. Joe would be fuming when he returned, and the idea that he might even hit her was expected, but it was the only way to get him out of the picture. He'd get in his truck, drive to the nearest garage, and grab a dozen more.

She knew her husband.

It would give Ward enough time to look around the house undisturbed, and if there was a clue to find, she was confident he'd find it.

Seconds after she placed the bottles on the table, she heard Joe shouting, but she couldn't make it out. She'd heard him slam the door shut when he'd led Ward out of the house, and it was thick enough to distort the words.

As she walked over to the window to try and see what Joe was shouting at this time, she heard the unmistakable sound of a baby crying and froze.

She listened hard, trying to focus on the fleeting cries. They grew weaker as her heart began to throb.

Then she became certain the cries were coming from the basement.

Slowly, the door to the basement opened. As though it had been pushed from the other side.

Then the sound came again.

Faint and low, but constant.

It was muffled and distorted like the shouting from outside, but the hairs stood up on the back of her neck, her chest ached, and she had to work to suppress the urge to throw up.

A weak, luminescent glow started pulsating in the mouth of the basement doorway like a fading heartbeat.

She made her way to the door, pushed it all the way open with one tentative hand, and took a deep breath. The air was crisp and cold in her throat. Looking over her shoulder, she thought about calling out for Ward, or even Joe, but something told her that she had to go alone to find what she wanted, like whatever was waiting for her would only be there if it were her.

Only a mother.

The luminescent glow had no source, but it cast a faint light on the rickety stairs that led down into the basement. The basement was seldom used since she moved into Joe's family home, and she struggled to remember the last time she'd been down there. Joe's mother had always insisted that the men were to go down there if they needed anything.

*It's not a woman's place to go snooping around down there, dear.*

Marie heard that voice again now.

*I don't like it down there. I always get the sense that there's a pair of eyes on me. Let Joe get it, dear.*

Her hand touched the wooden railing along the wall, and



she immediately drew back. A splinter had punctured her forefinger, leaving a painful shard of wood trapped in tender flesh. She yanked it out and threw it away in disgust. Her finger throbbed, her pulse rising and falling to the same beat as the light.

\* \* \*

Joe dragged Ward up by his collar, heaving him to his feet like a newborn lamb struggling to make sense of the world.

‘Stand up, detective.’

Joe stood Ward upright with ease, holding him by the arm to keep him steady.

‘Stand up, goddamnit!’

The acidic smell of sick hung in the air. Joe slapped Ward in frustration. The air sizzled as the workman’s hand pulled back and landed another harsh blow on panicked tender flesh.

Ward’s legs weakened, and without Joe’s firm grip, he would have fallen back down to the safety of the cold, wet grass.

His eyes were heavy, and a searing pain shot through his skull. A pain burned through his face, hot fire in his cheekbone and a light sizzle at the bridge of his nose. He closed his eyes and tried to focus, tried to find the strength to fight back, but there was nothing but darkness in every direction.

‘You’ve got a job to do, sick boy. Remember there’s a little lost baby who’s been abducted by little green men in a flying tin can.’

Joe dragged Ward across the length of his field, hardly breaking a sweat. After a few minutes, he found the spot he was heading towards and threw Ward down over the lip of a forgotten well. Water hadn’t seen the well since Joe’s father had

handed the family business over. What remained was a huge circular hole with a layer of brick dust around the rim. Ward smelt the bitterness of the ashes as his face hit the ground. The taste of charred wood burnt his throat.

‘I told you there was a circle in the yard you might wanna check out, detective.’

Joe stood back and clapped his hands together to brush some of the earth off.

‘You see, when I was a boy, my old man would drag my arse out here for the littlest thing. Shit, I accidentally knocked his beer out of his hand running through the house, and he put me in this bastard hole for three days straight.’

Joe bent down and dragged Ward’s body over the drop, one hand holding his collar, the other clutching the back of his shirt.

‘Now, comforting a man’s wife under his nose. Shit, I think a week might be a starting point. Don’t worry, detective. The drop won’t kill you. Hurts like a bitch when you hit the bottom, but you’ll forget that when you look up. That’s when the real pain kicks in. And when you’re down there, Superman, just know that I’ll be seeing to Lois for you. You’re probably just out of earshot, but if you’re lucky, you might just hear her scream.’

Joe tossed Ward’s body into the well.

After a few seconds, he heard the familiar thud and turned to go back to the house.

\* \* \*

Marie stood at the top of the stairs, which descended into the basement. The light was still in time with the pulse in her finger, but it was fading.

Holding the rail, she made her way down the steps. Each

step felt alien, like she was descending into another time or place, somewhere far beyond the home she knew. The life she'd somehow stumbled upon. One drink too many had led her into a nightclub she could never awaken from.

The late-night drinking.

The fists.

The 'turn over and let me inside you' moments that were coupled with the smell of stale alcohol and the rough, dry, ripping pain between her legs that hurt even more in the morning.

She looked back at the kitchen. Everything was exactly the same, only it felt different. Further away than she expected. It was only five steps back, but it felt like more.

*I always get the sense that there's a pair of eyes on me. The devil lives down there, dear. I've seen him.*

She couldn't feel eyes staring at her yet, but there was definitely something about the narrowness of the stairs that put the hair on the back of her neck on alert.

She called out into the dark.

'Is anybody there?'

The stairs twisted around a curved wall which descended into a never-ending blackness. She couldn't see the bottom of the stairs from where she stood. When nobody replied, she reached out for the light switch, hearing the click underneath her fingers. She expected a light to guide her down, but a brief faded flicker was all she received.

Shit.

She took another step, tried to peer around the corner of the wall, and almost lost her footing.

As she approached the bottom of the stairs, the air temperature dropped considerably. The tiny hairs on her arm stood up

as the biting cold made her more aware of her exposed skin.

The pulsating light had died at the exact moment she'd stumbled off the bottom step. Marie looked back to see if there was any light coming from the kitchen, but the curve of the wall meant she was now in total darkness.

Part of her body wanted to reach a hand out into the blackness, but she was too afraid to move.

The only thing she could see and hear was the warmth from her breath as it hit the cold air, but she tried to keep it to a minimum through fear it would give her away to anything lurking in the shadows.

*I don't like it down there. I always get the sense that there's a pair of eyes on me. Let Joe get it, dear.*

The words of caution from her mother-in-law haunted her momentarily and almost forced her to flee back up the stairs.

'I need to do this,' she said, barely above a whisper.

Marie closed her eyes, trying to find a source of comfort with her only sense of control – whenever life was too difficult, she often found herself closing her eyes.

As soon as Marie closed her eyes, a faint voice echoed through the darkness. Her body became rigid with fear, yet the pounding of her heart reverberated loudly in her chest.

*Help me.*

\* \* \*

Joe walked back towards the house, stopping just before the steps which led up to the main door.

He'd stopped because he'd noticed the hammer that he'd left out earlier that afternoon after putting up the chicken wire on the top field.

He kicked himself for not seeing it on the way out. A couple of raps on Ward's knuckles would have made clawing at the walls of the well a touch more painful, and that son of a bitch deserved every single second of pain he got. Coming onto a man's wife like that, in his own home too, goddamnit.

He couldn't hear screaming yet, so Ward was still alive and unconscious, or the fall had snapped his neck. Either way, Joe would check on him in three days. Three days was long enough for any man to beg and plead their way out of a fight-or-flight situation.

Three days was long enough to make Marie pay for her sins. He'd teach her to pine over another man.

Three days was long enough for her to cave and finally tell him where his son was being kept.

Joe walked towards the hammer and picked it up, tossing it from left to right in a playful manner at first, then he stopped throwing it and started to caress the claws on the back of its head.

'Well, it's just you and me now, Steely. What say we go and show the wife what happens when you try to invite another man to taste the forbidden fruit?'

Joe took the hammer and smashed it against the wooden bannister. Splinters shattered everywhere. Shards narrowly missed his face, but he threw down another vicious blow.

'Yeah, baby!'

He turned the hammer in midair and brought the claw side down, three times, in quick succession.

A huge gaping wound was left in the frame, and he stopped to admire his craftsmanship. He took a deep breath in through his nostrils.

*Wham. Whack. Smash.*

Then he took another deep breath, followed by several shorter bursts.

He placed his fingers into the warm hole of frustration that he'd just forged, and a thin smile grew across his face. Excitement took hold of him as he burst into song.

'Wake up, Maggy! Steely's got something to say to you!'

He brought the hammer back down onto the frame, and it started to buckle under the pressure of his blows. The wood snapped and then cracked as it hit the floor beside his feet.

He kicked out at the remaining skeleton, three huge size-twelve blows. The wood finally gave up and collapsed into a dejected pile.

'Better than a fucking therapist, that, Marie, And a damn sight cheaper too. Whoo!'

He kissed the top of the hammer and looked at it for a moment – it steamed from the heat – before letting it drop down to his side.

He climbed up the steps, wrapped the door with the hammer three times, and then booted the door open at the handle.

'Honey, I'm home!'

\* \* \*

Ward could feel the pulse in the side of his face as he tried to prize open his left eye. He'd hit the walls of the well, in multiple places, on the way towards the ground. The drop must have been at least ten feet long.

He hadn't had the opportunity to put his hands out to brace himself for the impact, but his landing had been softer than he'd expected.

He'd landed on his face first with part of his left shoulder.

On impact, a loud crack had split through his forehead. The pain had shot through him like a bolt of lightning through a scarecrow, tearing through his body and paralysing him momentarily.

To move was to ache – like failing to escape a hangover after a night of trying to drown a lifetime of mistakes in whisky.

When he tried to peel his face away from the cold, wet earth, the smell of earth mixed with the vinegary scent of fresh blood, and it made his stomach growl.

He could taste the bitter dirt as it crept over his face. He tried to find a comfortable spot to right himself, but pain forced his weight to collapse and fold in on himself.

‘Fuck!’ he screamed into the crisp night air. Despite the blood and the pains, it felt good to cry out into the blackness.

Ward turned onto his knees and forced his body up against the side of the well’s walls. The depth of the wall was too high to climb out, but it wouldn’t stop him from trying. Judging by the height, it was between ten and twelve feet, which would have been easy to climb if the walls had been dry, but they were thick, wet, and slippery.

He clawed at the flesh of the wall with his left hand. Pain shot through his shoulder like a gagged shard of glass. He bit his lip and let out another ‘fuck.’

Mud tarnished his hand, and he tried to rub it clean against his pants, smearing dirt and blood over his coat in vain. Thick chunks of earth clung to his palms as though he was their only escape too.

Pressing his left hand against the wall again, he stumbled onto his right and pressed both palms into the wall’s edges. Spreading his body across both sides, he tried to plant his feet against the bottom of the well, to give himself leverage. His first

attempt was utterly pointless – he slid down the wall like warm jizz running down outstretched thighs. Utterly exhausted and powerless to gravity. His second attempt was somewhat more successful; using his hands and feet in unison brought him about two feet from the foot of the well.

The second time around, the pain of the fall hurt more than the initial drop into the well. Frustration and pride mixed with soft tissue, nerve damage, and fractured bone to send a short, sharp ripple from Ward's shoulder and into his head. An intense light burst into his vision and temporarily blocked out the darkness, the ever-consuming darkness that can only be found at the bottom of the pit in the middle of the night.

Ward turned onto his back and looked up at the sky. A scattering of stars illuminated the hole at the top of the well. The never-ending infinite space above him made Ward feel entirely insignificant. In that moment, he felt less than insignificant. He felt helpless and without hope.

*What's the fucking point of trying to help solve the world's problems when men like Joe McCain get to waltz around beating on his wife and throwing people like me, good people, into deep fucking holes? Tell me, what God would steal the woman I love and rip my chance of being a father away in the same day? Who are you to leave me in fear every time I close my eyes? I pray for the panic attacks to fade, only for them to get worse. Every fucking night praying to forget the fear on her face as she...*

Then he saw something that froze his mind. It wasn't a cloud or a star, it was barely even a blur, but it was there.

*What the actual fuck...*

A green glow trailed from a disk-like object. It was like a comet, only quicker, gone in the blink of an eye, but he'd seen it and that was enough.



Hope didn't return, but his desire to help Marie find her baby came back, making him splutter as he took a deep breath and turned to his side.

He took in another huge breath, planted his palms in front of his face, and then pushed himself up from the ground. His left hand rested against the cold, wet mud of the walls as he forced himself onto his feet and steadied himself.

He looked up at the stars again, then the mouth of the hole.

He removed his jacket, wrapped it around his hands, kicked off his shoes, and tried the climb again. Stretching his limbs as far as they would go. Arms forward, legs out behind like an accordion being pulled to breaking point.

*God, if you're listening...*

He thrust his arms up and then quickly pushed them into the wall's surface. Then he did the same with his feet, forcing them to meet the level of his arms before jamming them into the wall.

This time, he got a little further before crashing right back down to the bottom. Only this time, the pain didn't come when he landed.

He was fired by determination.

*Please, God. Please. Help me, just this one time. In this one moment.*

He went again, the same pattern.

Clawing and pushing, forcing his body to move in rapid motions.

A little bit further.

Plummet.

*I beg you, please.*

He tasted the better earth mixed with the metallic tang of blood more intensely every time he hit the dirt, but no pain.

*Again.*

Plummet.

*Again!*

Then he felt the lip of the hole underneath his wrists, and he slammed his feet against the wall beneath him. With one almighty effort, his forearms and biceps burning, he dragged himself over the lip and out of the hole.

He lay breathing heavily, looking at the stars.

*Every...one...a...miracle...*

*Thank you.*

\* \* \*

Marie moved forward in the darkness. She only stopped when she clattered into something that sounded hollow.

*What the fuck?*

She couldn't see, but the sound grated like bone on bone, and it sent a chill through her spine. That hollow, dull ringing lingered in the air.

Moving away from the sound, she could hardly focus on the moment. Terrible thoughts crossed her mind. She saw dead animals filling the whole basement, and the thought was fuelled by the dank smell of death. It felt like all the moisture had gone, only to be replaced by dust and rotting flesh. Her throat went dry. She licked her lips to rid herself of the feeling that her whole body was drying up.

Then she remembered the torch, pulled it from her pocket and flicked the switch. A dim light choked and threatened to die out, before stabilising. Then the beam flickered and died.

*Great. Well, there's a fucking surprise.*

She closed her eyes and pictured the basement. In her mind's eye, she saw old furniture, boxes, forgotten and once-loved

toys.

She lifted her arm towards the faded sound's source and then opened her eyes.

A face flashed into her vision. It looked like a bearded man, only his face was melting. He had brittle horns, bright red eyes, and two browning fangs.

She closed her eyes immediately and focused on her breathing.

*Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. It's just your imagination, woman. Just breathe.*  
After a few moments, she opened her eyes again.

The reason it sounded like bone on bone was because that's exactly what it was – a skeleton hung from a large hook on the wall.

*Holy shit.*

She moved her torch away from the skeleton and illuminated her immediate path.

Six skeletons filled her vision, each hanging on similar hooks, but all were noticeably different sizes. They hung in midair, but they looked like they were trying to touch the ground with their feet in the same tentative way you would when trying to lower yourself into a hot bath.

The skeletons hung on one side, and four waist-high work benches lined the other sides. She noticed they were slightly above her own waist. These were designed for someone taller... like Joe.

Tools of varying sizes and shapes sat like obedient dogs waiting for a treat.

## What Went Wrong

### Twenty-Three Years Old

Cain slept on park benches and ate rubbish from bins. He stole clothes from tourists' luggage and worked odd jobs to buy shitty booze. It was a gaunt life, a haggard reality, homeless and heartbroken, but it was his.

He couldn't hold down a career; the sky took him too often. He couldn't ask for help; the ground threatened to lock him up. So he learnt to mask himself as best he could, to fade invisible, to hide in plain sight. The booze helped. Not enough, but it did.

Something tickled his periphery. Something or someone. Regardless, he recognised it. Scrawny. Pale. Fitted suit and coat. Then it was gone. Odd, but not oddest. Cain moved on.

'Cain,' a ground thing said. A woman. Invading his park. Skinny with chipped teeth and stringy yellow hair.

Cain didn't know how she knew his name – hell, he forgot his own name most days – and he didn't want to find out. 'Sorry,

love, you've got the wrong chap.' After over two decades, he had learnt enough ground language to sculpt his speech into others' expectations. As a child, he had stuttered, fumbling for greasy words that slipped away like oil on ice. Now, as an adult, he switched on this vacant machine he had become while his gears crumbled with every turn.

'You're a pretty liar,' the woman said.

Cain wasn't pretty, nor was he a liar. His hard-won words were true: Most days, he wasn't Cain. When the sky robbed him, he was their pet, nothing more.

'Not lying,' he said.

But the woman didn't budge. Instead, she sat beside him on the spongy grass, dew sopping her shabby trousers. 'I'm Bahey. You've nice eyes. But you frown too much. And what happened to your hair?'

Cain didn't want to speak to this woman. He didn't want to speak to anyone. But loneliness is a festering, rebellious disease. In a riot of words, his tongue betrayed him. 'Never had any.'

'That's strange,' Bahey said in a way that suggested she had seen many strange things. 'Why?'

Fleecy clouds skidded across the storm-thickening sky as Cain juggled possible responses. He could leave. Brush her off. Spin a lie. Instead, he gave her truth. It would push her away quickest. 'Shadows abduct and experiment on me. They've tortured me my whole life.' There. That sounded mental.

But Bahey didn't even flinch. 'Hmm, makes sense. Is that where you got those scars?' She pointed towards the sucker marks on his head and neck.

Baffled, Cain jolted. No one ever listened to him, never mind believed him. Besides hate, Bahey was the first to treat him like a person. But hope was dangerous. It rooted, branched,

wrapped in strangling vines around his ever-present, steadfast gloom. He didn't want to lose his gloom. Without his gloom, the world was too bright, jarring, *bleak*.

'I'll take that as a yes,' Bahey said with a phlegm-muddled cough. 'So, spare a few quid?'

The real reason for her visit. Cain sank as hope died. Its rotting corpse nourished his gloom, maddening yet comforting. The ground never changed.

'No,' Cain said. He turned out his ratty pockets, then stopped. He owed neither her nor this mouldy world any explanation. 'Piss off.'

Bahey smiled, buoyant in the newborn rain. 'Don't think I will. I know you got money or something better.'

Fury charred Cain's raw heart. Bahey had mauled him, slashed him vulnerable, and he had let her, because he was desperately, painfully *alone*.

'Leave,' Cain growled. The word wrenched itself from his gut with the force of a storm.

Bahey's smile widened. Saliva trickled between her chapped lips, peeled back from her putrid teeth. 'Lighten up. Just want some help. Looks like you could use some help, too.'

Under a lightning strike, Bahey whacked Cain's jaw, disorientating him. He rolled away, staggered to his feet, as rainfall rose to downpour. The woman advanced, limbs spindly, eyes wild. She lunged and grasped Cain's threadbare shirt; the fabric melted beneath her greedy hands. Fingers crawled along his rain-soaked chest, clawing for money, for drugs, for *anything*.

'Where is it?' Bahey asked. Then, louder, as the caw of a million crows: '*Where is it, Cain?*'

Cain pushed her away, but Bahey followed. He tried to untangle himself from her wolfish bones; she knit her flesh

into his own. Choking on panic, on thunder-laden fear, he stumbled backwards, but she fell on top of him and braided their skin.

'Where is it?! Where is it?! Where is it?! Where is it?!' she chanted, the dirge of a thousand nightmares.

'I've no fucking idea what you want,' Cain said.

He could have crushed her wrists with a simple squeeze, but for some reason, he didn't. His mercy mortified him. He had never shied away from violence in the past. He liked to hurt things. Or rather, he liked others to feel his hurt. But here, now, he was no longer a scared, sad, lonely kid. He was a scared, sad, lonely man, and scared, sad, lonely men did scared, sad, lonely things.

'They said you had it,' Bahey barked. 'They said you could fix me.' She drooped, spent and deflated, as fight drained from her. The storm rumbled away, and unwelcome sunlight bathed their drenched, knotted bodies.

Cain scurried backwards, freeing himself from her snare. 'Who?' he rasped. 'Who said that? And had what?'

Bahey shrugged, the gesture limp. 'Some boys from Ramsey. Said you were odd. Thought you had junk.'

Cain stiffened. Others knew him. Others *remembered* him. The thought warmed him more than the sun. It shouldn't. He knew it shouldn't. But it did. Bloody hell, it *fucking* did. He wanted to be invisible – no, he *should* want to be invisible – but he had forgotten how glorious it felt to be *seen*.

'Sorry, I don't deal,' Cain said. He had considered it before, but dealing reminded him of needles, scalpels, shadows, *pain*.

He would not become the sky.

'But you have connections?' Bahey's voice held a feral edge of desperation, the same desperation that tinted his own.

Cain laughed. The sound disturbed them both. 'I have nothing.'

They stared at each other for a bloated minute as mirrors. Magnets. Twin souls caught in ravenous flames. Despite her hunger, Bahey understood Cain, and Cain understood Bahey, too. The ground had abandoned them, had thrown them both away. Thought they were no better than the rubbish they ate. Meant for the bin. Fated for nothing but early death.

This incisive link pierced Cain. Drove him off balance. His hand lifted in the storm's balmy aftermath, cutting through sun rays and air gagged with humidity. Bahey could be someone, could be *more* to him. A friend perhaps, or a person to take up space beside him so life didn't feel so empty, so blank.

Cain paused. His hand hovered between them, a pale spider weaving a fragile web. Bahey bit her chapped lip, then reached her hand to his. Their fingers touched, and for a moment, Cain could *breathe*. There was finally enough air in this soggy, stifling world. He could smell the grass, sweet from recent rain. Could feel the wind, gentle in its feathery touch. His back straightened, chest expanded, with the power of this frail connection.

Then time lurched.

The park blurred. People and animals bolted around them. The sun fell overhead, arcing towards the leafy horizon. The sky dimmed from blue to violet to black, then the moon and stars punctured the dark, glittering like stolen gems. Throughout it all, Bahey stared at Cain, mutilated by shock, caged by his cursed touch.

In seconds, night fell from noon.

Cain jerked his hand away, in awe and dread of what he had done.

He had dragged her through time.



Before, only he had travelled, and no one ever believed him. He was lazy, slow, sluggish. It was all in his head. All in his fucked-up, shit-caked, rotten-skull head.

Until it wasn't.

Bahey *knew*. Bahey *believed*. In him. In everything. He wasn't crazy anymore. It was all *real*.

She tripped, landed on her arse, eyes flooded with horror.

'I can explain,' Cain said, then realised he was indeed a liar – as well as a hypocrite – though never pretty. Never seen. Never until her. 'Okay, maybe I can't, but please...don't run.'

Bahey ran.

Cain chased her.

She scrambled up a hill, slipped, rolled down. 'Get away,' she croaked. 'Don't want your money, your junk, nothing. Just leave me alone.'

*Leave me alone.* Cain had begged the dark the same, but he was not the dark. Her words made him angry, so he grabbed her arm. Again, time galloped, stampeded ahead. Days ticked by like a deranged clock till Bahey wrested herself free from his grip. She spat at him and slapped his cheek. The pulpy *crack* echoed across the now-vacant park.

'I don't know who or what the fuck you are,' Bahey said, wheezing, 'but if I ever see you again, I will fucking kill you.' She stomped off through the dreary twilight, shedding dreams with every step.

'No, Bahey, you don't understand.' Cain didn't understand, either. Hell, no one did, but that didn't stop him from clinging to the one person who had looked at him like he was a person, too.

He sprinted after her. She was fast, but not fast enough. When he caught her, they toppled to the ground. He straddled her,

pinned her arms with his knees.

‘Listen to me,’ he said.

‘Help!’ Bahey shrieked. ‘He’s killing me!’

Cain felt slapped again, worse than before. *No, no, no, no, no.* He just wanted to talk. To share. To savour a moment with another living soul.

But he didn’t release her.

‘I just want a friend,’ Cain said. His words were pathetic; he didn’t care. He had tasted connection, and he wanted *more*.

Bahey wriggled beneath him. Cain needed her to stay *still*.

‘Stop it,’ he said. ‘Just fucking *stop*.’

She didn’t. Her body bucked under him. With her attempt to break free, wrath rose in Cain. It grew. Burst. Ruptured his reason. Towered over all other thoughts.

And Cain *broke*.

He screamed a scream that could end all worlds. His hands found her throat, and beneath his clenched fingers, gravity bent. Her neck bulged, meat dissolving like fleshy sand. *No, no, no, no, no,* he thought again. The words were damnation’s chimes. Her skin flaked off till naked tissue remained, her neck red, exposed, a gnarl of veins, nerves, and arteries.

Petrified, he let go.

Bahey touched her flayed throat with shivering fingers.

Then shrieked again.

‘Don’t go,’ Cain pleaded. Tears slit his cheeks. ‘Don’t leave me alone.’ His hands shook with the memory of her wet, gummy muscles. He ached to touch her again. ‘Stay with me.’

‘You *freak*,’ she bawled, mad with pain.

He didn’t think as he snapped her neck.

He thought too much as he buried her.

No one would mourn her, save for him.

No one would miss her, and no one would miss him.

\* \* \*

## Twenty-Three Years Old

After Cain killed Bahey, he welcomed the dark, and the dark welcomed him.

Shadows found him near her burial mound. Springy dirt sank beneath Cain's knees, his fingernails filthy with memories, with her. She would have wanted him, if she had listened. She would have loved him, if she had known. He was not a monster. He was not the sky.

Cain blinked, and he was above. Sable tendrils roamed his rain-sticky body. Blood-curdling chittering battered his ears. The bone cradle strained beneath his adult frame, pricked him with shards, split his paper-thin skin. Shadows plucked samples from his flesh, his tears, as needles drilled his arms, his legs.

At first, Cain surrendered. This was familiar, if not desired, whereas Bahey was desired, but not familiar. Familiar was easier. Not better, but easier.

Hate didn't let Cain surrender for long.

'You did this,' he snarled at the dark. 'This is all your bloody fault.'

The dark prodded him. Tentacles slithered into Cain's mouth, and he retched on their slime. At his distress, gravity again bent, lending him strength. He ripped the feeler from his throat, then tore it off. It twitched, spewing clear, gooey fluid, and stilled.

The dark bled, too.

Cain froze. Triumphant realisation surged inside him. Their

sins had accidentally given him this hellish, godless power. Abuse backfired. People did, too. A self-fulfilling prophecy. Never before could he even scratch them, yet now, he had maimed one, had hurt it like it had hurt him.

He wanted to do it again.

Shadows shirked away as they felt the shift in his glacial gaze. Their molesting language drifted to him in manic crumbs: *No. Can fix you. Want to help. Stuck loop. Cain key. Please, please, please, please, please.*

Cain – the baby, boy, teenager, man, beast – laughed. Time warped. Gravity buckled. He lifted his hands and roared. The shadows nearest him exploded into sloppy scraps. Their clear blood splattered his face. Agonised squawks bounced off dank metal, and the dark morphed into a panicked mob.

All the while, Cain laughed again and again.

He touched some, dragged them through time. Hit others, chopped them with gravity. The immense, cataclysmic power of a dead star coursed through his blackened veins as he raged and raged, avenging all those lost, stolen years.

It lasted seconds.

It lasted a lifetime.

But the dark caught him.

It always did.

Needles pierced his spine. Sedative iced his bones. He couldn't move. Couldn't talk. Couldn't *hurt*.

And fucking Lord, he wanted to hurt them all.

But he couldn't. All he could do was cry.

Sobs fluttered his rabid lips as he collapsed hard as a fallen kingdom. He had fought. Had lost. Had tried and failed till breath abandoned him. *Stronger*. He would become stronger. Yes, stronger and more powerful. He would train. Would wait.

And then he would strike.

*The dark bled, too, he reminded himself.*

Splotchy, beetle-black fog robbed his sight.

*The dark bled, too.*

Frantic buzzing filled his ears in a wasplike delirium.

*The dark bled, too.*

*Dark bled, too.*

*Bled, too.*

\* \* \*

## Twenty-Five Years Old

For two years, Cain waited. Ate more rubbish. Slept outside. Worked more odd jobs to buy more booze.

The sky waited, too. They checked on him from time to time, poked him with needles, pumped him full of drugs. But they feared him. That much was clear, even to Cain. They had also made him, had created the thing they feared. He didn't know why, and he didn't care. Only one thing mattered: pain. How much he could take, and how much he could give.

So Cain practised. He travelled months in a blink. Destroyed buildings with a touch. Learnt to control a star's dying wrath. Police searched for his power, but not him. They never suspected a washout, throwaway, ramshackle man could ever wield more than a blade. Cain wasn't a blade. He was a bomb. Or more apt, a black hole. Both literal and metaphorical.

No one could escape his rage.

Not even him.

Yet despite his soul-deep ache for revenge, he tried to run

away. Many times. Reached the ferry only for the dark to yank him back. He was trapped. Shackled to the isle. Chained to a land that hated him.

But Cain loved hate, so he let it fester. He'd kill the sky. He'd slay the dark. These vows boomed in his hate-hollowed skull, loud as gunfire – and just as deadly. Still, he didn't know *how*. The dark was strong; he was weak. Training narrowed that gap, though not by much. He needed help, but no one had helped him before. They took one look at his pasty, scraggly, hairless flesh, then ran away as he could not.

Cain dropped into despair.

Again.

Then fate pitied him for the first and last time in his life.

'Pardon me,' a suit-clad man said across the park. He had auburn curls, a spray of freckles, and keen green eyes that saw too much. 'Could you point me towards Peel?'

His accent was genteel, refined, and it took Cain several seconds to realise the man was talking to him.

'W-what?' Cain stuttered.

'Peel,' the man repeated, and to his credit, he was not frustrated. 'I'm here on sabbatical.'

Cain frowned. He didn't know what sabbatical was, but it had too many syllables to mean anything safe. 'Can't help you.' He turned to flee, but the man called after him.

'Didn't mean to frighten you.' His full, healthy lips broke into a grin – neither chapped nor cracked. Cain found this odd. 'I'm a history professor. This research is for an upcoming publication. I tried Town Hall, but they were rather impolite.' His grin tilted sheepish, and this stumped Cain more. 'If you help me, I'll buy lunch.'

The stranger's kindness perplexed Cain, but he couldn't

afford to turn down food. 'You're in Ramsey. Peel is on the other coast.'

'Ah, shit. I'll have to catch a cab. Thanks, mate. Now, what's for lunch?'

Cain shrugged. 'Whatever you want.'

The man pried several more times, trying to make Cain choose, but Cain only knew the bin, and he doubted this professor had ever eaten on anything less than fine china. Finally, they settled for a corner shop, where the professor bought two cheese and pickle sandwiches. Then they sat on a bench near the kerb, and Cain struggled to take small enough bites to hide his starvation, to leash the animal within.

'I'm Paul, by the way,' the professor said between cheesy mouthfuls. 'Paul Richards. But no pressure to tell me your name. Just wanted you to know I'm not a serial killer or anything. On second thought, a serial killer would lie, but hopefully, you see from my utter lack of murderous acuity that I am a pleasant, if chatty, bloke.' An easy smile brightened Paul's face. Cain had never found a smile easy, nor had anyone given him something without taking everything, so he reciprocated before karma could backlash.

'I'm Cain. Cain Ward,' he said, finishing the sandwich. His stomach growled, still mostly empty, and he flushed, embarrassed.

Paul chuckled. 'I agree, quite delicious. I'll grab more.'

'No, Dr Richards, that's not necessary.'

'Well, I've made a career of studying unnecessary things, and for the love of God, please call me Paul. Dr Richards is my father, and I am highly more entertaining than my beloved, yet surly, old man.' He smiled again, then popped into the shop. When he emerged, he tossed three sandwiches at Cain.

Cain baulked. 'Dr Richards...Paul...I can't accept these.'

'And yet you must,' Paul said with a hint of mischief. 'If you don't eat them, those dastardly pigeons will, and they are already hearty enough to qualify as weapons. Plus, if I don't spend Cambridge's money on you, they'll force me to spend it on something boring and unremarkable.'

Cain tore into his second sandwich to stifle his tears at the kindness, at the generosity, at the fact that Paul thought he wasn't boring or unremarkable. *Pathetic*. He was pathetic. But he was also lonely and starving, so he ate the rest of the sandwiches in grateful silence.

Minutes passed while they sat comfortably together. Not talking, not eating, just being. Cain was unused to being. He knew going well, but being was for people who had money to burn and time to lose. No one wanted him to just *be*. They wanted him to fade, to exist as wallpaper. Cain didn't want to be wallpaper anymore, but he was stuck to this isle's fractured bones. The sky wouldn't set him free.

A familiar shadow lingered on the fringe. A ground shadow, not a sky shadow. Scrawny. Pale. Fitted suit and coat. Floppy hair. Cain had seen it before. He worried it had seen him, too. But then it disappeared, though Cain remained tense.

Cars rumbled down the narrow road. Sunlight breached the whorling clouds, and Cain felt too exposed.

'Thanks for lunch,' he muttered. 'I should go.' He stood, but the professor laid a gentle hand on his arm.

'Stay awhile,' Paul said. 'No pressure, of course, but it's been years since I've had the opportunity to speak with someone unburdened by academia's restraints.'

Cain would have loved the burden of academia or any other purpose. He ached for a direction that was not pain, pain,



*pain*. But it was dangerous to connect. He remembered Bahey, her flesh-bare throat, the snap of her neck, and cringed. Paul couldn't be another Bahey. Cain should leave, should run back to the park. But he didn't. Loneliness crushed him in too strong a grip. So he sat back down on the bench and kicked a few pebbles with his mangy shoes.

'You know, I've always held a rather obsessive fascination with underdogs,' Paul said.

'Underdogs?' Cain asked, then clamped his lips shut. He learnt long ago to hide his ignorance. Sky things hadn't let him bloom, and ground things had let him wither.

The professor didn't tease him, or judge, or question his lack of...everything. Instead, he apologised. 'Sorry, Cain, it was ill-mannered of me to assume you knew. An underdog is someone, a team, or even a country forecasted to lose a competition or war.'

Cain knew war. Intrigue sparked, spurred him to ask, 'Is it possible for an underdog to win a war?'

Excitement gleamed in Paul's emerald eyes. 'Oh, certainly. Many have throughout history, and I suspect many more will before our time is up.'

'Our time?'

'On Earth, I mean. Sorry again. I have a disastrous tendency to drift into metaphysical terrain. Drives my wife mad.' The professor smiled a third time, and this smile made Cain's insides melt.

He wanted that smile, that warmth, that *love* for himself. He wanted to know someone was waiting for him at home, at an actual home, someone who asked how his day went and cared about the answer. Longing gnawed at his gut, deep and bruising, an unhealing wound. But no one wanted him. He was a smudge

on the timeline, something to sneer at then wipe away.

Smothering grief for a life he'd never lead, Cain asked, 'How do underdogs win?'

Paul clapped his hands, delighted. 'Well, there are several ways. Some use high-risk strategies. Others use the familiarity of their home ground, or enlist external help. Guerilla and siege warfare are common, too.' At Cain's vacant stare, the professor added, 'Guerilla warfare is when a small group uses irregular and improvisational – or spontaneous – tactics against a much larger force, such as an empire. Since the larger force is organised yet inflexible, the guerilla fighters' speed, agility, and versatility can overcome the larger force's numbers. And siege warfare is when one group traps their enemy in a castle, building, or other enclosed space, cutting off their supplies to starve them into surrender.'

Thrill rushed through Cain, his blood awakening. If empires could fall, perhaps shadows could, too. 'What are some examples of irregular and imp...impro...' Shame reddened his cheeks as he couldn't remember the word.

But again, *again*, Paul didn't judge. With a warm grin, he offered, 'Improvisational?'

'Yes, that one,' Cain said, ears heated. 'What are some examples of those tactics?'

'Espionage, sabotage, ambush, and deception are oftentimes used to varying degrees of success. Guerilla fighters trade numbers for intelligence.'

Cain didn't know what espionage and sabotage were, but ambush and deception lit a fire within him. He could *fight*. Maybe *win*. He'd have to be patient, play it right, but if others had beat unbeatable odds, perhaps he could, too. *Stupid boy*, memory echoed in his mind. Two words that had haunted him

for decades. *Stupid boy. Stupid man.* But not a stupid beast.

‘Inspiring, isn’t it?’ Paul asked.

More than inspiring. This knowledge was *lethal*.

‘Thank you, Dr Richards...Paul,’ Cain said. ‘For the food, for the conversation, for everything. I don’t want to steal any more of your time, though.’

‘You’ve stolen nothing, Cain,’ Paul said. ‘I enjoy speaking with you, yet I fear I’ve hogged more than my fair share of the conversation.’ He glanced at his watch – a nice watch, gilt and polished – then sighed. ‘Unfortunately, I must be off. Professor Moore will pull his grumpiest, wrinkliest face if I am any later to Peel than I already am.’ He paused for a second, then pointed a finger at the sky. ‘Before I go, however, wait here.’

Confused, Cain waited as the professor popped back into the corner shop. A minute later, he emerged with a pile of new clothes and shoes.

‘They aren’t anything special, but it’s the least I can do.’ Paul dropped the pile into Cain’s lap, then pulled out his wallet and plucked a fifty-pound note from its buttery leather. ‘I wish I could do more, but this is all I have at the moment.’ He handed the money to Cain’s bewildered self. ‘Take it. All I ask is that you spend it on something that isn’t boring or unremarkable.’

Cain gaped. His trembling fingers held the note, more money than he’d ever seen in his life. Tears stung his eyes, slid down his cheeks, a river of relief. ‘This...this is too...too much,’ he stammered. ‘I can’t...I don’t deserve...I shouldn’t...’

‘Everyone deserves more than they have, kid,’ Paul said, then clapped Cain’s shoulder. ‘Especially underdogs.’

As the professor walked away, Cain reached out a hand, then recoiled. He was emotional. His control on time and space loosened. If he touched Paul, he would hurt him. Connection

was fatal. "Thank you, Paul. I hope you find what you're looking for."

Paul beamed, an expression that made his curls dance and freckles sing. "I hope you do, too, Cain. I hope you do, too."

## How We Ended

‘**A**bsolutely fucking not.’  
‘Is profanity really necessary?’  
‘Absolutely fucking yes.’ Cyan took a step back, ending the conversation and pressing herself against the moist inner wall of the hull. The species she was watching used profanity a lot; it was liberating. Pushing her back against the wall’s warm embrace, she revelled in the moisture. Everything felt too dry. She could feel the friction of her fingers as she trailed them across her skin. The delicate membrane of a frond threatened to tear. A shudder coursed through her at the thought.

At her waist, the urchin vibrated, and she glanced down. Its iridescent spines waved blue and red. It was time. *Ignorant grunts and arrogant single-minded ambition will lead us all to ruin*, she snapped, but she was disconnected, silent, her thoughts her own.

The captain crossed his arms. The urchin at his waist was waving the same alarm as he glared at her. His tendrils tucked under his chin. Conversation over.

Dim lights glowed around the pulsating holes of the flight deck. The crew moved into position, pushing their faces against the sucking pores of the ship as they connected. Hands reached into the mucus bays beneath their stations, ready to take control.

With one last glare at the captain, Cyan turned to face the wall, then buried her face in its warm, wet embrace. The voices of the crew burst into clarity.

‘The anomaly has been located, Captain.’

‘Identify all potential witnesses. Cut incoming and outgoing transmissions. Prepare for extraction.’

She couldn’t hold her tendrils still as she pushed her face further into the moist membrane layer. ‘Captain, I really feel we should—’

‘Your concerns are noted, Specialist, but the mission is clear. Need I remind you all that we know, without a doubt, that this individual is responsible for the deaths of thousands of people? With this task, we save them all. It is the kindest way.’

‘Captain,’ the executive officer snapped over the comweb. ‘We have a window, but the specialist and her team need to launch in the next few minutes.’

Cyan put her hands against the wall, stretching out her fingers, before pushing back. The ship didn’t want to let her go. Suction held her firm for a moment until, with a lurch and a satisfying pop, she came free.

Sprinting through the tunnels, she ran her fingers along the walls. Section four, laboratory, section seven, the effluent recycling centre, section nine, propulsion, section eleven, sleep cycle, section thirteen, environmental lock.

Pushing her hand into the wall, she sent out orders. ‘Suit up, full tether, check comms and prepare to step out there. I cannot

stress enough that we must be prepared for an extremely arid atmosphere. Humidity is brutal out there. These creatures have internal respiratory systems that are soaked in fluid like some kind of—’

‘We know, Specialist. This is not the first time for any of us.’

‘It is protocol—’

‘We know the protocol.’

‘Good,’ Cyan snapped, removing her hand from the wall. She lay back against the surface opposite the environmental lock, standing with arms and feet apart. It will be more difficult this time. The more the subject aged, the less receptive it was to the visitations. Despite her best efforts, she believed it was beginning to resent their presence in its life.

‘Let’s get dry,’ the private said, pulling down her helmet.

Lieutenant Perry waited while Cyan pulled on her own suit, tucking her tendrils in the neck of it before donning the helmet. There were few things more painful than trapping a nerve cluster in the seal. She watched while the lieutenant’s face vanished beneath the helmet to be replaced with the matt black surface. The suit absorbed all light and created a near-flat black surface to aid with the cloaking effect. Tiny receptors covering the suit’s surface then mimicked what would be seen if the suit wasn’t there at all. It was organic, a thin layer of skin. They took the method of camouflage from a type of creature native to Ceph Major, their closest ancestor.

‘We are picking up from a new location, outside a structure that appears to be for the education of their young. There is a higher risk of incurring some kind of resistance. Remain vigilant,’ Lieutenant Perry said.

Cyan emitted a thought, ‘Remember, kindness—’

‘We bloody know,’ a private said, failing to internalise their

emotion.

There was resistance, but only from the subject. It had grown significantly and was now almost as strong as Lieutenant Perry, who was by no means a small Ceph. One of the privates' suits was torn, and she suffered a cut, along with some drying. Nothing serious, but the gravity, low pressure, and the arid atmosphere caused the loss of blood to be worse than it would've been.

The pressure was the hardest thing for the crew to understand. How could these life forms have grown to this level of intelligence in such a low-pressure environment? It was a wonder that everything didn't just burst and float away. Their suits were the only thing protecting the Ceph from this gaseous environment. It was a breath away from hard vacuum.

\* \* \*

After years of tests, some invasive, some that could be misunderstood as cruel, it finally happened. Communication. In the first moment, before realisation came to the fore, Cyan had recoiled in shock. A barrage of information, a violent surge of heated emotion, none of it positive or kind. It was alien to her, but that was to be expected. This species was more fury-filled than she had expected. There was little she could make sense of, but then it wasn't Ceph. The loci in which they anchored their information would be different.

Hate, anger, frustration, and isolation.

She placed herself in the nourishment room in an empty corner. A moment later, Private Indigo joined her. The last-minute replacement to the crew had grown to be something of a confidante over the years. The Ceph was quite striking with



her neon blue spotting. Cyan had once floated the suggestion that they would have made good Progenitors. Alas, on this vessel, procreation was not possible. There was no breeding pool. They had to make do with mere titillation, but at some point, every crew member had assisted every other member, as was to be expected.

‘What’s happened?’ Indigo asked. She was intuitive, a talent that had surprised Cyan before she had purged herself of such stereotypes. A protector should be more empathetic than others, not less.

‘Nothing,’ Cyan said.

‘A lie?’

‘Apologies. I don’t mean to lie. It’s just difficult to quantify if it’s something “wrong” or “right.” The subject communicated.’

‘It spoke?’

‘I wouldn’t call it that. More a kind of primal scream.’

‘So they can connect? I thought—’

‘No. They cannot. You have been with me when we have attempted to test subjects that have suggested otherwise. Those who bend culinary instruments, or profess to be able to see forward through time, or talk to the dead. Charlatans, all of them. They possess no extrasensory ability.’

‘The ones we experimented on.’

‘Indi, that was necessary, and no harm came to them. We voted. The crew agreed it was a kindness.’

‘I know. Apologies for bringing it up.’

‘Then it’s diluted?’

‘Yes. I’m over it. Beyond parts per billion. But the subject spoke to you? That’s fantastic. What did he say?’

‘It wasn’t speaking. It was more like a youngling’s howl for attention,’ Cyan said, before taking a draw on the nutrient

syphon. Today's meal was based on local produce. It was mainly krill and small decapods ground into a paste with a mild glucose solution to make it easier to imbibe. This batch was better than previous attempts, but it still suffered from a hydrocarbon aftertaste. The waters of this planet had suffered from exploitation by its quasi-dominant species.

'They do like noise. I thought you meant by our means—'

'It wasn't auditory, not literal howling, but synaptic, and yet, it wasn't. I was in contact, as I have been trying to do for so long when it began...but I think it continued after I broke off.'

'That's not possible. There's no medium for transmission—'

Cyan dropped the tube, some of the pink fluid splattering across the floor, pooling in between the ship's capillaries. 'I have to go.'

'Cyan, what do you mean? It continued after you broke off?' Indigo said, but Cyan had already disconnected from any of the nearby mucous membranes. There was no nervous connective tissue; she was leaving and was out of reach.

Cyan hurtled through the corridors, bare feet slapping against the floor as she turned through the twisting corridors of the ship until she returned to the place members of the crew had begun to call the 'shallow end.' It was an unkindness, and she had tried to put a stop to it, but the captain refused to shut it down. 'Things like this create a togetherness. We are alone here, Cyan. It's a kindness to our crew to let them make bad jokes.' She had accepted it, almost agreed with it, but couldn't join in.

The subject was taller than her now. Though she was not a large Ceph, perhaps even diminutive, not that she considered such trivial things. Admittedly, she wouldn't have complained about being slightly taller.

She arrived in the lab and plunged her hands up to her wrists into the mucous pool at her desk. Images appeared before her as the biological neural interface projected them into her brain as though they were external to her body.

This ability to project emotions was new. From what she had gathered, the species did convey emotions through non-verbal means. Their physical appearance, the glare, and even something inherently unspoken, but it was not neurological according to her studies. Perhaps it was a sign of the burgeoning power, the only thing that could explain how such a primitive species could cause so many Ceph deaths. What made this one so different from all of the others?

\* \* \*

When they brought the subject back to safety this time, some of his own had injured him. It made him angry and difficult to constrain. Lieutenant Perry had taken a blow to the face and had lost some moisture. It had harmed the large Ceph's pride, but he laughed it off. He was a professional.

In the struggle, they discovered they had underestimated the thickness of the species' hide.

'You shot him?' Cyan said.

'In self-defence,' Perry said. 'We must be kind to ourselves as well.'

'But it failed?'

'Their skin is much thicker than ours, and they are land-dwelling. It makes them—'

'Do not say crusty.'

The lieutenant let out a click. 'Our projectile weapons function perfectly, but the projectile itself needs to be pointed.'

‘If it is pointed, it will break its skin.’

‘That’s the idea of a projectile weapon. It is not just for him. What if others attack?’

‘What do you suggest?’

‘We must do more invasive tests. Work out exactly what kind of pressure and force is required to puncture the skin with a projectile.’

Cyan had tentacles wrapped around the subject, a protective web. ‘No. We have done enough harm. We mustn’t hurt—’

‘His own species is hurting him. We must do more tests, more samples.’

She turned to face the subject, placing her face closer and attaching her suckers to his temples. ‘What did they do to you? Why did they do this to you?’ she thought at their subject.

Anger. Frustration. Fear.

‘There’s nothing to fear. We won’t let them get you now. Think of the deep spaces, the calm spaces. Imagine the darkness of the depths.’

\* \* \*

It had been a rush, the throbbing through the corridors of the ship as the muscular walls pulsed. The bridge crew had activated a peristaltic warning that sounded throughout the ship. She had pushed through the corridors and found herself matching the pace of Private Indigo of the exoplanetary crew. They didn’t speak often anymore. There was a rift between the shoal.

Cyan and the three members of the exoplanetary squad were suited in moments. Through the airlock, one at a time, dispersed and reconstructed instantaneously at ground level.

The armed members of the team stood behind her, visually scanning for any threat, using only passive monitoring equipment to check for danger.

She stepped towards the pile of dirt and rubble, then scanned it, knowing already what lay beneath. Her breathing grew unsteady, and she took a knee. The suit tried to pass on the sensation of the ground beneath her, but she turned off the synaptic tracking. This was too real already. With a trembling gloved hand, she reached out, brushing away some of the dirt to reveal a face.

‘Are you reading us, Specialist?’

‘Yes...yes, I’m receiving, Captain, apologies.’

‘We can see through your suit’s ocular sensors, but you are not moving. What are we seeing? Is that a dead native?’

‘Yes. I believe it is.’

‘Though it is a sadness, and I mean not to be unkind, but why are we focused on this? This species dies frequently.’

She buried the thought. It desperately wanted to pass through the network and be present in all the crew, but she held it back. *I can’t be sure. It could be normal. An accident. We have been kind, nothing but kind. He just needs us to be kind.* It was easier to bury the thought when she was within the suit. The neuro-connection between the airwaves was different. It made the thoughts clipped, robotic, un-Cephlike.

‘Captain,’ Cyan said, ‘I am concerned that this one attacked him. Like the others before. It may be that they recognise he is different, and fear him.’

‘That does sound primitive. Lieutenant Perry?’

The large Ceph to Cyan’s right stepped forward. His suited boots crushed the flowers around the limp figure’s body. ‘Yes, Captain?’

‘Is there a threat present?’

‘Captain, I really feel—’

‘This is not the time to debate the sensor blackout, Lieutenant. We can talk about that later.’

‘No, sir. No threat. It looks like there was a violent confrontation and this one died. Then the subject covered it in dirt.’

‘It’s called a burial,’ Cyan said. ‘It is like returning a body to the waves.’

‘Why does that fucking matter?’ the lieutenant asked.

‘So we remember they are sentient beings with feelings, and emotions, that we don’t forget to be kind—’

‘So, he was attacked again?’ the captain said over the comm.

‘Indeed. It would be *kinder* if we protected him,’ the lieutenant said.

‘Bring him back on board.’

\* \* \*

‘Doubts? We all have doubts, Cyan. You are the specialist, the one who must face down our doubts and keep us on task,’ the captain said. ‘If this is about the lieutenant, he knew the risks.’

‘We have not lost a single crew member in twenty of this planet’s orbits. Now Lieutenant Perry dies carrying out a routine task—’

‘It was a rupture. Rapid drying. His inkwells exploded. From so many trips up and down to the surface, a strange environment, he put too much strain on his body. Too much exposure to a hostile environment. The lack of pressure was always a concern, and we had no idea what long-term effects it might have. From what the medical team has been able to piece

together, it makes sense. We knew there would be unexpected problems with our biology. It was horrible, Cyan, I know. But it was an accident. It's a terrible thing, but why would that cause doubts about the mission?'

She took her hand off the captain's room's ganglia for a minute. Massaged the joints in her fingers. The seven fingers of her third hand were strapped up. Another accident in the lab from long ago that wouldn't heal. A bite from the subject that was infected with something from this evil place. *It's not evil, it's different. Don't fall into the trap.* She felt old; she was old. They all were.

'It's just—'

'I know it was your lab, Cyan, but we saw the recording. The ocular feedback was clear.'

'He was screaming.'

'Of course he was. I imagine it was very painful.'

'I meant the subject. The subject was screaming.'

The captain took his hand off the mound for a moment. He clicked a few times, then placed his hand back. 'Cyan, are you trying to suggest that the subject may have somehow screamed and caused the lieutenant to have...burst?'

She lifted her hand, severing the connection. Pulled air through her pores and expelled them, *one, two, three*. Her skin felt dry, like she was struggling to absorb enough oxygen. 'Are you telling me you saw that recording and didn't think it was strange?'

'I'm telling you I don't believe this simple bipedal species has surpassed our own abilities to influence the world around us. It's ridiculous. It can't even communicate with us. Are you suggesting such a developmental leap that it would jump beyond us? Beyond the Nexus? You're the specialist. Is that

possible?’

‘No. Not without some kind of great unknown variable.’

‘Good. We have mourning to do. Is there anything else?’

‘It’s not just about the lieutenant. It’s about the discord in the crew, and the reasons for it. I wonder if it would be kinder to end his life. He seems to suffer.’

‘Cyan. We don’t know enough about them to know if it’s suffering, or if it’s all just normal for them. You have carried out your tests. You utilise everything that works for the children of the Ceph in the hope it will help. Tentacle massage, ink letting, you cradle his head and push your thoughts of kindness into his consciousness. You soothe with thoughts of the deep, of the dark, of being coddled with the deep waters’ pressure. What more can you do?’

‘The others—’

‘The crew is fine. That’s all in a forgotten tide. Perfectly within the expected parameters, better even. There hasn’t even been an attempted mutiny, which is, sadly, expected on this type of extended mission. Those currents have long since passed. The crew is fine. The date from the Nexus grows closer, and everything is calm. You did it. You managed to defeat the monster with kindness.’

\* \* \*

Cyan caught sight of her own reflection in the reflective membrane between the bridge and the corridors leading to the rest of the ship. Her tendrils hung limp from her chin, dangling in the way her school used to mock. *You look like old saggy tendrils Soulashes. Turning less cuttlefish and more jellyfish, Cyan. What have you let yourself become?* Then she let out a click.



Vanity was something for those who didn't have more serious goals.

A hand touched her shoulder before she could open the muscular valve to the bridge, and she turned as Indigo spoke. 'You look tired, Cyan.'

'I could say the same to you.' Specialist Cyan, offspring of the Ceph who spoke the warning and expert in the Beast, smiled. Indigo wasn't looking any younger or healthier than anyone else. The project lead had made it clear that all crew members should be of a similar age. They needed to be at their peak while they hid, carrying out their mission of kindness. It was a long mission, and there were years to go, but living on board a ship for so long aged them faster than they wanted to admit.

'Time only flows in one direction outside the Nexus.'

'We travelled through space and time in an experimental vessel for three years, and we weren't in the Nexus.'

'Don't be so literal. You know exactly what I meant,' Indigo said with a smile.

'So why did the captain call us? Another check-in?' Cyan asked.

'Oh...oh, Cyan, I thought you knew.'

'Knew what?'

'You reported doubts to the captain.'

'I did. That was confidential—'

'When Lieutenant Perry...when he had his accident, I took on his duties. The captain had me watching on location.'

'You were offship? In secret?'

'Covertly, yes. Not from you, Cyan, it wasn't to keep it from you. Let's...let's just let the captain explain.' The exoplanet team leader dropped her hand from Cyan's shoulder.

Cyan, tentacles tucked beneath her chin, struggling to hold

back the ink from leaking out her pores, stormed onto the bridge. Her feet immediately connected with the neural network of the mucous layer. On the bridge, every surface allowed communication. There was nowhere to hide. Everyone froze. The members of the flight crew went about their duties, tasks that had become harder to maintain over time as the ship itself began to age, but not a single public thought was released across the neurons, and not a single eye would meet Cyan's.

Sometimes it's not possible to hold the emotion back, and Cyan hadn't felt this kind of rage since she had pulled the tentacles off a suctionless guppy by the name of Glaucous.

'Specialist, to my office please.' The captain's thoughts pushed everything else to the side. His emotions were molten steel while hers were fire, and neither helped keep things moist. Lubrication was lost; there would be friction.

She slapped across the bridge floor, refusing to make eye contact with any of the crew while Indigo – *Lieutenant* Indigo – followed in her wake.

As the sphincter to the captain's chamber closed behind them with its customary sucking sound, Cyan slapped a hand on the ganglia, feeling the capillaries beneath pumping the life's blood of the ship. 'You've been carrying out secret surveillance.'

'Watch how you project at me, Specialist. I am the captain of this ship, and if I decide something needs to be done, I will tides well do it. Am I clear?'

'This is outrageous. I'm the specialist here, the person who—'  
'Expressed doubts.'

'But...' She held back her ink. This was too much. Her emotions were in tatters. 'That was a conversation in confidence.'

'It was a conversation between captain and specialist. Lieutenant Indigo undertook surveillance, nothing more. Your

reaction is unwarranted, extreme. I'm concerned about your well-being, Cyan. We've spent so long here, on this task. Out of all of us, the burden on you has been the hardest.'

Her hands curled into fists. Eyes narrowed, she felt ink leaking from her pores. She made a clicking sound. 'Yes,' she finally sent, once she could place a hand on the nerve cluster. 'I am not controlling my emotions well. Indigo, Captain, I apologise. This is a shock.'

'Maybe we could do this later?' Indigo said, her fingertips barely touching the node, an attempt to be gentle with her thoughts.

'That is respectful of you, Lieutenant,' the captain said. 'Your kindness is welcome. I wish I could agree to delaying this matter, but Cyan needs to know what the lieutenant has discovered.'

'Discovered?' Cyan asked. 'You mean to tell me it is worse than this betrayal?'

'Cyan.' Indigo placed a hand on her back; another hand lingered on the mound. The conversation was not meant to be hidden. 'It is not a betrayal. Only the captain and I were aware of the task—'

'That can't be possible. You need to suit up, use the exfiltration system to reach the surface. You need to have someone monitoring the suit—'

'The captain did all that. To anyone else, he was running drills.'

'Obsessively,' the captain said. 'My second has questioned my own mental state.' His facial tendrils lifted for a moment, a wry smile at the situation. 'It must be contagious. Are you calm?'

'Still waters,' Cyan said.

'Still waters,' the others repeated.

‘So, what did you find out?’

‘We’re not sure,’ Indigo said. ‘Long periods of nothing, isolation, almost no contact with another of his kind. Then a flurry of activity, violence.’

‘Violence?’ Cyan’s palm pressed harder into the sticky surface of the mound, fingers wrapping around the tangle of tendrils. ‘He is attacked?’

‘No, at least, it doesn’t appear so. We think he is the aggressor. Is it normal for them to kill each other?’

‘...No.’

‘And this manipulation of gravity? Something we didn’t know they could do.’

‘Manipulation of gravity? That’s not possible.’

The captain placed both hands on the mound, fingers spread to make his message clear. His thoughts, not coherent words as much as a forced interruption. Commanding attention. ‘Cyan, this is abnormal?’

‘Yes.’

‘You told me when we spoke that this kind of...ability is beyond this species. As it is beyond our own.’

‘Yes.’

‘Unless there was some kind of significant event. An exterior influence.’

‘Yes. I remember our conversation.’

‘Cyan. Could you...we...be the exterior force?’

‘No, all we’ve tried to do is communicate. Which has been very difficult, but we managed it, a previously impossible task for a human. It reached out and... Oh, fuck.’

\* \* \*

They monitored. A watchful eye on the inscrutable behaviour of the subject. Cyan, terrified of the ramifications of their own involvement, began to study the others in greater detail.

‘Perhaps it isn’t as rare as we think,’ Indigo had offered when Cyan had sunk into a maudlin mood. ‘We don’t really know how often they kill each other.’

‘If they killed each other this frequently, I doubt they’d speak to each other as much.’

Indigo had laughed at that. It wasn’t funny, but dark humour was something that had begun to take hold of the crew. There was a growing sense of unease, of impending doom.

The crew’s medical officer, a Ceph named Turq (it was short for Turquoise, though often young Ceph these days were simply called Turq, as if their Progenitors had forgotten where the name came from), regularly assisted Ceph in their attempts to better compare the baseline of the species against the subject.

‘They do nothing for large periods of time,’ Turq said. ‘Have you noticed?’

‘I have,’ Cyan said.

‘And they spend excessive time attempting to find mating partners.’

‘Their procreation is difficult.’

‘Of course, it’s internal...and quite messy.’

‘True.’

‘The subject does not seem to obsess over it as much as others. He is not sociable.’

‘His behaviour in this respect is not distinctly abnormal. The species as a whole seems to want it to appear so. It’s probably a survival function. Evolution will do that to a species. It’s not as if Ceph are not inordinately interested in procreation. When was the last time you indulged in—’

‘Mind your own business.’

They clicked at that, how they clicked.

Indigo and the remaining Private took it in turns to observe the subject whenever they could, working hard to remain unseen. Privately, though not on record, the crew, including Cyan, now believed that Lieutenant Perry, long now deceased, might have been murdered by the subject.

‘Cyan?’

A thought interrupted the specialist as she filtered data through an internal HUD. The thought was dull, attenuated through distance, the best the suits planetside could offer.

‘Indi?’

‘This is an open line.’

‘Lieutenant Indigo, I read you,’ Cyan said, this time mindful to project a more professional attitude.

‘The subject is more erratic than usual. He is...being social with others of his kind.’

‘That’s good. They are a social species. This could be important, a turning of the corner.’

‘It does not feel...good. Suggest you join the ocular feed. I have asked the captain to join us.’

‘Understood.’

‘Private Cerulean, weapons at the ready,’ Indigo said.

‘Do not attack, Lieutenant Indigo,’ Cyan said over the relay.

‘There is a large number of the native species present inside the building. They are erratic in their movements and behaviour. We must prepare for self-defence.’

The medical officer, Turq, joined the conversation. ‘Check your suits. Pressure levels and seals. They’ve already been in this planet’s atmosphere far longer than they were designed for.’

‘They’re well maintained,’ Indigo said.

‘I was not questioning the maintenance. Regardless of how well we protect the stone, the waves of time are relentless.’

‘Everything is blue across the board,’ Private Azure, the other member of the exoplanetary crew, said.

Cyan knew that Private Azure had been part of a group of crew members who had, for a time, considered changing the mission parameters. It had been years ago, and now Cyan wondered if the private might have been right all along.

The lighting in Cyan’s laboratory was set low. Frequencies on the visual spectrum that best resembled the colours of the school areas, the great coral reefs where the Ceph young were born. The organ they had grown to house the subject in had colours of muted reds and oranges, colours of birth, of the waving coral into which Ceph were born. It was soothing, but right now, Cyan wondered if it had made things worse.

The captain’s thoughts cut into the conversation. ‘Risk assessment, Lieutenant Indigo.’

‘We’re safe. We have taken positions outside the facility where they are gathered.’

‘And what about him?’ Cyan asked.

‘He’s fine,’ Private Azure snapped. ‘Pretty sure he could tear them apart with his freak powers anyway.’

‘Private Azure, you will remain professional, or you will suffer the consequences,’ the captain broadcast, making no effort to disguise his frustration. ‘Lieutenant, if you can’t keep your one subordinate under control—’

‘Apologies, Captain,’ Indigo said. ‘It has been a long cycle. Azure and I were due back on board some time ago.’

‘Nexus, take me!’ Azure exclaimed.

‘Are you seeing this? Captain? Specialist? Any of you? Are

you seeing this? They're dying, they're all dying.'

'The subject, get the subject out of there now.' Cyan's thoughts were erratic. On board the ship, the crew flinched as one.

The captain silenced her connection. 'No. Lieutenant, Private, run. Get to safety. The subject is a threat. Get out of there. Abort.'



# III

## Part Three



## Where We Started

Marie reached her hand out towards the tools and felt the weight of one as she turned it over in her hand. She noticed small traces of blood on the tips of the tool, which looked like a pair of nail clippers, only much larger, large enough for clipping fingers and toes clean from bone and tissue connections.

She flinched at the thought of someone clipping her own flesh down to the bone and dropped the tool. It made a loud clanging noise as it hit the floor, and Marie's torch flickered as she tried to focus in on where it had landed.

The temperature in the room dropped significantly, and Marie's whole body felt numb.

The pit of her stomach felt hollow, like it had been scooped out with a melon baller, and she struggled to stay standing.

Her body buckled beneath her as thoughts about her empty, lifeless stomach swelled, and she felt the sensation rise up through her chest and into her throat. She reached out towards the tool bench side of the basement and tried to hold her weight upright to avoid falling. Torch in hand, she felt the pressure and

heard the sharp crack as the bulb snapped under the pressure of breaking her fall. The torch flickered and then died – leaving her in complete darkness again.

‘Help me. Please, help me.’ The voice was hollow, sombre, and in the distance to Marie’s left.

Her skin pricked, and her throat went as dry as sawdust.

She tried to turn her head towards the voice, but she couldn’t move.

‘Leave this place!’ cried another voice from the opposite direction.

‘Leave. Leave.’

She was frozen with fear, but wanted to run. Run back up the steps and into the kitchen. She wanted to find Ward and burrow into the warmth of his embrace. Away from the bones, the voices, and the darkness, but she couldn’t move.

She heard the rattling of bones against one another, and as she turned her head to look where the noise was coming from, she saw the skeletons shaking and moving on their own.

They were moving in unison like a morbid ballet class. Limbs shook back and forth at unnatural angles like broken swing sets in the wind.

Their arms were stretching and reaching, trying to lure her into a deathly embrace.

One of the skeletons dropped to the floor, scattering fragments of bone in every corner of the basement. The legs were completely severed from the torso, but the arms dragged the top half of the skeleton towards Marie. The head tilted to one side, and the jaw bone moved.

‘Stay! Stay with us,’ it cried as its fleshless hand reached for her ankle.

She kicked out in desperation.

*Fuck, fuck! Holy fuck! Arhhhh. Fuck off!*

The half skeleton continued to crawl towards her, grabbing at her tense thighs as it dragged its frame up her leg and towards her mouth.

Bony, outstretched palms clawed and climbed in an effort to contain the hysteria in the basement of bereavement. Stop any potential screams.

Two sharp, powerful hands scaled her body, pulling and ripping off chunks of her clothing as it moved.

Marie fought back, but she was falling under the sheer force of the skeleton frame. She felt the rib cage against her and tried to pull her hands in tight to her body. She didn't want to feel any part of the monstrous being that was attempting to wrap its hands around her throat. It continued to pull and tug at her face, throat, and hair.

Before she hit the floor, landing painfully on outstretched palms, she felt three or four more hands pull on her clothes and hair – dragging her down into the darkness.

Once on the ground, the hands quickly moved over her face and clamped down over her mouth and nose.

She could smell the stale dust and taste the bitter rusty pieces of broken bone on her lips and tongue as she tried to manipulate her jaw to take another lungful of air – she felt like she was about to drown in an ocean of blood, tears, and pain.

Her jaw wouldn't move – it was stiff and rigid – but she tried, with all her strength, to let out a scream. To let out a cry for help, in the hope that someone would answer it and rescue her before the oxygen in her veins ran cold.

\* \* \*

Joe stood at the top of the basement stairs. He didn't think that Marie would have the bottle to go down there, not after the way his good old mum used to go on.

*The devil lives down those stairs.*

For Joe, it was the safest room in the house. His space, the space he inherited from his father – the space where he learnt his trade and a little bit more for good measure.

How to skin a kill without tearing the flesh.

How to remove the flesh from the bone.

How the body still felt wet and moist for several hours after the blood had stopped flowing.

Standing at the top of the stairs, Joe thought about his father. He thought about the time his mother had wandered down without warning and into his space. Their space.

*I told you never to come down here, you stupid bitch. Get out. Get out!*

Joe remembers what little Joe feared.

He'd feared that his mother was going to end up on the table...snipped and sliced...the gas...the oil...the sizzle...the hiss...the plate.

He still hadn't forgiven himself for wondering if she'd have been sweeter than the others.

*The real forbidden fruit.*

He doubted it then, and he still doubted it now – it sent a shiver along his spine. He felt for the door and started to descend, hammer swinging low by his waist.

*This is what we do, Joe. The pixies demand it, Joe. We always do what the pixies demand, Joe, always. Do you understand?*

'I understand, Pop. I understand.'

\* \* \*

Ward reached the foot of the house. He was covered in mud, panting, and in pain.

The hole was a distant memory now, and only Marie's safety filled his mind.

He knew he didn't have time to get any backup at this hour. The whole island would be under the spells of the sleeping pixies.

Envious at the thought of those currently dreaming of a world where sorrow and suffering didn't show their ugly heads, Ward took a moment to catch his breath and bring it under control.

He looked at the mess Joe had left.

His fingers ached and his joints were swollen pressure points, but it didn't stop him from reaching a tentative hand onto what remained of the porch.

He tried to pull a wedge of wood from its base; it didn't budge, almost as though it was afraid to move or accompany Ward.

Moving his hands from piece to piece, Ward found what he was looking for a moment later.

It had been hiding amongst the broken shards of porch wood.

It was all the backup he needed.

A thick, two-foot-long piece of wood with two menacing rusted nails protruding from the base like fangs.

\* \* \*

Joe could hear a commotion, and he quickened his pace. He'd moved down these stairs hundreds, if not thousands, of times and knew every creak and crack.

He threw the switch at the bottom, illuminating the basement momentarily, and what he saw made his heart sink to the pit of his stomach.

He instinctively tightened his grip on the hammer.

The six skeletons, which had been the trophies of his youth, were scrabbling over his wife like spiders trying to share a fly, tearing and ripping at her clothes and flesh. Two of the skeletons focused their attention on him, turning their hollow eyes in his direction.

Both let out a screech and scattered towards him at pace along the ground, leaving the others to tend to Marie.

Joe smashed his hammer down hard onto the skull of the closest skeleton, breaking its head into two clear pieces and a shower of bone fragments. Its bones continued to claw at Joe's boots, but he kicked out hard, sending them into all corners of the basement.

Turning his attention to the second skeleton, he tried to force the hammer down onto its frame, but he was too slow. Firm hands clapped down hard on his shoulder.

The pressure forced him to lose his footing, and the hammer fell from his grasp.

Joe fought back and tried to put the figure into a headlock on his way to the ground, but it slipped and dodged his grasp.

His fingertips scraped against the skull, and the bone on bone sent a shiver down his arm.

Joe landed hard on his back, then immediately put his hands and feet up to protect himself.

The skeleton eluded his efforts, clawing at his face and tearing into his cheek with repeated blows.

A searing pain shot through his jaw as his face felt lighter and his teeth felt exposed.

A warm sensation gathered in his throat, and a metallic taste filled his mouth, preventing him from screaming.

He tried to make sense of what was happening, but fists of



bone kept landing on his skull.

The snapping sound of his nose brought a new darkness to the room, and he tried desperately to cover his face. His vision was blurring around the edges, and he felt the strength in his arms and legs leave his body.

Reaching out for the protection of the hammer was a natural response, but it had fallen just out of reach as though it hadn't wanted to come to his aid.

He could sense Marie's fading light, and that fuelled Joe's rage – he was losing control of his life, and he wanted to be the one to make her pay for taking his son away from him, hiding him away like the lost treasure he was. His father had taught him how to be, and it was Joe's right as a father to do the same for his son. His son, not hers.

When the skeleton thrashed out at his face again, he caught the bone just above its wrist, then brought across his other hand and pulled in opposite directions. The bones snapped under the weight of the tension, and the skeleton stumbled onto his chest. He rolled it over with a newfound strength. With one smooth motion, he forced himself on top of his attacker and made quick work of pulling at its rib cage – picking bones out as easily as apples from a tree.

Blood dripped from his torn cheek and jaw. The dark red drew a harsh contrast with the yellowing bone as he started smashing a rib bone against the skull, which was viciously trying to bite at his arms. Several savage blows were all it took for the body of the skeleton to go limp and lifeless for the second time – permanently into the void.

The others, recognising the stillness, left Marie and made their way to Joe.

Marie took a fading, gasping breath, which burnt the back

of her throat. Her mouth was dry, beyond anything she could have imagined, and the pain of breathing brought tears down her face.

\* \* \*

Ward appeared at the foot of the steps. What he saw in the harsh light of the basement was difficult for his mind to comprehend. The scurrying skeletons clabbering over Joe and forcing him to the ground. Marie lying limp and seemingly lifeless on the floor.

He took a firm grip of his backup, carefully noting the direction of the nails, and then slowly made his way towards Marie's body.

As he edged past Joe, struggling to fight off the skeletons, he heard animalistic grunts and moans, but couldn't determine where they were coming from. He focused his attention on getting to Marie without causing any reason to draw attention to himself. He crept past the chaos with the elegance of a ballet dancer performing their opening act.

When he reached Marie, he slowly crouched down to her, paying careful attention to position himself so he could keep one eye on the horror unfolding merely a few feet away.

'Marie,' he whispered, lowering himself closer to her ear. He kept the wooden baton in a swinging stance, ready to strike at any given moment. With his free hand, he gently shook her shoulder. 'Marie, if you can hear me, I'm going to place you on my shoulder. I need you to work with me. I need you to give me everything you have.'

She didn't respond.

He placed his free hand on her neck and felt the fleeting

sensation of a pulse. Slow, but steady.

It was in that moment he knew he would have to clear the path and carry her out, if they were both to leave the basement alive tonight.

\* \* \*

Ward stepped in front of Marie's body, ever the protector, and gripped the wooden makeshift bat with an iron determination. Speed and precision were key factors that would only last for so long; the element of surprise would be short-lived.

Lifting the nails above his head, he ran towards the skeletons devouring Joe and smashed the baton onto the spine of one of the creatures.

The crack of the wood ricocheted through his arm and into his damaged shoulder. Seething agony forced his teeth together, clapping the pain deep inside his core.

The sensation forced him to take a step backwards, but he found the strength to force another blow into the skull of the thing that now stared at him with cold, hollow eyes. The creature's jaw exploded with vengeance, then it let out a deafening roar of fury.

Ward swung the bat again, this time against the side of its skull. The nails on the baton dug into bone before he pulled back to go again. Without thinking, he lashed the wood across the throat of the skeleton. The connection was clean and forceful enough to drive the head to tumble across the basement like a glass thrown from the hand of a drunk in a late-night brawl.

The others started to see Ward for what he was: a threat. They snarled and snapped their jaws at him, moving their attention away from Joe's anguished face. They scuttled across the floor

like spiders sensing a new treat in their web. The ping of excitement at a new catch on the line fuelled their fury.

Six black, lifeless eyes looked up at him with a new sense of urgency.

Ward gripped the baton with a grin as he stood his ground and waited for his moment to strike. This only fuelled them further. Furiously, they lashed out with menacingly fragmented fingers, clawing at the air with large slicing movements.

He took a step backwards, but purely for momentum as he smashed the nails against the skull of the one closest to him, knocking another head clean off. Instinctively, he raised the baton over his head and slammed it down on the shoulder of the next approaching skeleton. Tearing through the shoulder, down through the ribs and out the pelvis like a hot spoon through butter. He wasn't so lucky with the third figure as it clasped his trailing arm and bit hard into his forearm, sending a searing wave of fire up into his shoulder and hand, forcing him to drop his weapon to stop the pain.

The jaw attached to his forearm was relentless and tried to sink its teeth deep.

The second beast clawed at his ankles, snapping at his heels with a knife-like determination.

Joe lifted his frame from the floor and tried to level with Ward.

It was more menacing than the dead undead trying to attack him.

Joe had a conviction in his stare that was vacant from the corpses that were trying to consume him.

Ward shook the forearm-eater off, stamping its skull into the ground like a used cigarette.

He then gripped the throat of the ankle-grasper. Pulling his

left hand across his right, he dispatched the beast's skull from its spine. The bones fell to the floor with a clinking sound as the ribs caved into one another, leaving a dejected, lifeless pile of bones at Ward's feet.

Joe pushed himself up. Flesh hung from his cheek, exposing his teeth and jaw. Crisp white bone covered by a raw gaping wound.

Joe stood, looking at Ward like he was yesterday's garbage. Perplexed how he could be back in his presence. 'You should've stayed...in the pit. Safer in there.'

He was fatigued and could barely hold himself up, but the look in his eyes told Ward that Joe wanted to hurt him and that he had to be ready for a scrappy fight. A man of Joe's size wouldn't go down easily.

Ward stood firm. He lifted his hand to show Joe he wasn't scared and refused to buckle under his gaze. 'It's more fun this way. You don't look too good, although that flap suits you.'

Ward scanned the basement. The weapon just out of his reach, off to the left. His only protection was now in the strength he could muster in his balled-up fists.

\* \* \*

Joe dragged himself towards Ward with his hands outstretched in front of him, aiming for Ward's throat.

Ward weighed the situation, then charged at Joe like a freight train heading for a wall. He hit him hard in his midsection, forcing the big man down. Joe's head hit the ground with a sharp snap, but he managed to keep hold of Ward's head. He squeezed his forearm around Ward's neck, slowly forcing the breath out of him.

The more Ward struggled to break free, the harder Joe's grip became, like a boa constrictor squeezing the life from its prey before devouring it whole.

Ward turned his head towards Marie; she was still unconscious, just out of his reach. Gasping for air, Ward focused on the space between him and Marie. The wooden baton lay in front of him. He needed to protect her, needed to reach her. Take her to safety.

He pleaded for the weapon to move within reach. He could see the rusty nails sticking out of the top like two teeth. He tried to pull himself towards it, but Joe's vice-like grip remained intact. Kicking off the floor, he tried to force Joe's grip loose, but every movement was in vain.

Pressure built around Ward's eyes; his world started to fade. That's when he saw the boy.

The boy from the kitchen.

He floated by Ward to Marie. The boy placed his translucent hand on her forehead and then kissed her chin.

Marie's body jerked upwards like she'd awakened from a nightmare, and a raspy scream left her lungs.

Ward watched as the ghost boy took the piece of wood off the floor. Patting it in his palm like an old friend, Ward watched in horror as the boy pulled the weapon backwards and took a huge swing just above his line of vision.

Suddenly, the grip around his neck loosened, and a splatter of warm blood exploded onto his face.

The boy disappeared into dust.

Ward pushed himself out from under Joe and pulled himself to his feet.

He looked down at Joe's lifeless body; the wooden baton was sticking out of the side of his head, and the nails...the nails

were buried deep into his skull. His eyes pooled with blood and looked cold, dark, and menacing, but there was no doubt in Ward's mind he was looking at a dead man.

He turned to Marie; she was now sat up and crying uncontrollably. He put his arms around her midsection and pulled her up from the floor.

'It's over, Marie. It's alright now, it's over.'

Supporting her weight, he held her against his chest and helped her past Joe, then up and out of the basement.

Before Ward left, he noticed something. A tendril. A tentacle, wrapped around shattered bone, almost lovingly. *A kindness*, he thought, though he didn't know why he thought it. *A cruel, cursed kindness.*

\* \* \*

When they reached the kitchen, he carefully placed Marie onto a chair and then closed the basement door, sliding the bolt back across the lock.

*Wah! Wah! Wah!*

The unmistakable sound of a baby crying followed the bolt sliding into place and broke the silence.

Marie bolted out of the kitchen and up the stairs. Ward ran after her.

*Wah! Wah! Wah!*

When he reached the top of the stairs, he saw Marie rushing into the first room on the left. As he entered the room, his breathing heavy from the rush of adrenaline, he saw the baby for the first time. Its cry echoed from deep in the cradle.

*Wah! Wah! Wah!*

He watched as Marie lifted the child out and into her

comforting arms.

‘Oh, my baby! Oh, my boy.’

She turned to Ward, tears streaming down her face, and smiled.

Ward smiled, too. The baby was never Joe’s to begin with.



## What Went Wrong

### Twenty-Five Years Old

Cain never saw Paul again. This comforted him; the professor would dislike what he had become.

Shrieks sliced the nighttime air. No one could hear them – well, no one but Cain, and most people considered him no one, anyway. More shrieks. A splatter of rain. Then blood. He dragged soggy, squishy bodies to this abandoned corner of the isle to practise. The shadows were humanoid, so he hoped they had similar physiology, similar weaknesses. *Deception, distraction, ambush.* He used all three every night: set a trap, divert attention, attack a new ground thing. To kill the sky, he had to be ready, a guerilla. He'd have one chance to slaughter the stars.

Cain didn't want to be this monster. He wanted to be a man, a boy. Hell, he wanted to be a babe, one loved and adored. But he was only a beast, hated and feared, feeling nothing or everything yet rarely in between. He should have worried about this. He

didn't. Instead, he cut screams from darkness with the edge of his blade.

'Please...please stop,' a young woman bawled. She was twenty tops with wavy blonde hair, bronze eyes, and ashen skin. Popular, probably. Wanted. Loved. She would be missed. Jealousy spiked Cain. No one would miss him. He held her steady as her long arms and legs flailed, then he cut again.

'Stay still,' he grunted. His knife dug into her shoulder, and she screamed while he frowned. She wasn't dead yet, but she needed to die. If he didn't kill the shadows quick enough, they'd overwhelm him in the sky.

'Freak,' the woman spat at him.

Bahey had called him the same. It had hurt then. It did not hurt now. The shadows had stolen too much of him. Before, he had feared loneliness. Now, he embraced it. Solitude was a shield.

'My name is Daisy,' the woman said, 'in case you care.'

'I don't,' Cain said, scrutinising her wounds.

On the rugged, windswept cliff, he had stabbed her a dozen times. Although Daisy bled, she still burnt with life. Glistening red holes punctured her goosebumps. She wore only a vest and pyjama bottoms; Cain had jumped her near a wheelie bin, then dragged her here, to this deserted cliff. Her clothing was drenched and torn in scarlet strips. Blood pooled in her belly button.

'Why are you doing this?' Daisy asked for the fifth time.

Again, Cain didn't answer. He had answered the first time, but she hadn't accepted his reason: to practise. If she didn't believe him, it was futile to repeat himself. And exhausting.

Daisy opened her plump mouth. Cain squeezed her throat before she could say more. She choked, but not fast enough.

Her eyes bulged, and her nostrils flared, but death tiptoed out of reach. With Bahey, it had been easy to snap her neck. It hadn't been easy since. Back then, perhaps luck was on his side. Or the devil. Same thing. Regardless, nothing blessed him anymore. Only curses remained.

After a few seconds of fruitless strangling, Cain released Daisy. She gasped, breath jagged. Even wheezing, she was pretty. Cain didn't trust pretty. Pretty things told pretty lies. She deserved to die, he told himself. He was saving everyone she would undoubtedly hurt.

A shrill gust thrashed them both. Cain toppled off Daisy, clutching the damp grass. Rain fell in larger droplets, cold plops against Cain's naked skull. Daisy used the opportunity to run. Cain grabbed her ankle and yanked her back. She fell to the ground with a sickening thud, raking her fingers through moss and dirt. Cain shook his head. He was messy. Reckless. Not thinking straight. She had run. Had *run*. She could still use her legs.

With a nearby rock, Cain smashed her kneecaps. Daisy's shriek mangled the night. Clouds whipped overhead as the storm joined her violent tears.

Better. Much better. Now, Cain could think. Snapping her neck didn't work, so he returned to stabbing. Maybe if he could stab her heart, Daisy would die quickly. While she cradled her knees, Cain pierced her like a pincushion. He hit ribs a few times, then stabbed too low, then too high. On himself, he could find his own heart – cold and parched though it was – but she wriggled too much for him to stab her palpitating organ. Another tactic then. Arteries. Yes, arteries could work. Easier to find. Faster to cut.

Daisy sobbed and screamed and flailed at Cain. Calmly, he

grabbed her injured legs. She blacked out from pain. That wouldn't do. He needed to *practise*, needed her *awake*. With a cheek slap, she roused, groggy and confused. Good enough. Cain slashed her hip, a wicked strike, right through an artery. Blood bubbled from the gash in thick torrents, but though she screamed louder, Daisy remained alive.

Agitated, Cain scrubbed his face, then forced himself to calm down. No worries. She had more arteries. Swamped in her gore, he crawled over her twitching, panicking body to reach her neck. With one hand, he held her head. With the other, he sawed through her throat. It was tougher than he thought it'd be. Not buttery or silken as it seemed. Frustration hammered him, but he cut till he severed the artery with a crimson splash. Victory.

In seconds, Daisy fainted. In minutes, she died. Still not fast enough, but Cain had time if nothing else. He would not rush. He would not strike till ready.

With a surge of gravity, he shredded Daisy, then willed her fleshy scraps over the cliff. She joined the sea as fish food. This was how he should kill, using his shadow-forged power. The sky gave it to him, after all. It was only fair to return the favour. Though it was demonic, unpredictable, it was also fast and fatal.

Still, he needed to practise.

\* \* \*

## Thirty Years Old

For five years, Cain shed his soul, piece by piece by piece.

He was a weapon, a warrior, an army. Revenge ate all other thoughts in his head, pulsing with a crimson rage. Whenever the sky stole him, he no longer fought them. Instead, he studied them, marked their habits, memorised their weaknesses. And on the ground, he maimed, trained. Blood and flesh soaked the isle's roots. Time and space bowed to him. He scribbled with months, painted with stars. Hate churned in a whirlwind as he laughed, and laughed, and laughed.

Then came the night before his fuck-it-all attempt. His last-ditch play. His bloody Hail Mary. He had practised. Prepared. Had honed his body into a soulless machine. He knew exactly what he would do tomorrow, knew exactly where and when reckoning would unleash. Yet he did not feel excited. Or relieved. Or anything else he wanted to feel. Instead, he felt distant, apathetic. Like he had left his body long ago. Perhaps he had. Perhaps this was never his body to begin with. We all own nothing in the end.

Cain shook off his sticky thoughts. He was an animal, driven by instinct, nothing more and everything less. Tomorrow, he would bite the hand that had fed him to oblivion. But tonight, he was a wolf in man's clothing, and for once, he didn't want to die. Tonight, in fact, would be the first and last time he lived.

When the sun dipped below the horizon, when the cloud-muddy sky darkened to pitch, Cain left the park, his bench, and walked. The evening was starless, moonless, godless – shadowless. They wouldn't steal him tonight. He had scared them too much this morning. Clammy air choked him. Rain-squishy grass squelched beneath his shoes – shoes the professor

gave him half a decade ago. They had lasted well, as had his clothes. He deserved none of it. *Everyone deserves more than they have*, Paul said in memory. Everyone except for him.

After a five-minute walk, Cain heard the muffled sounds of the Beatles. He followed their rhythm down one road, up another, to a shambly house surrounded by a dozen hastily parked cars. Grimy light poured through chipped windows. The door hung open, unhinged. Music gurgled from a manic record player, the vinyl scarred with overuse. Bodies crammed into tiny rooms, and cigarettes perched in carefree fingers, beer bottles sweaty against greedy palms.

It was perfect.

Cain wished he had done this before, but he couldn't have. He was a murderer, after all, of Bahey and countless others. If police came after him, he couldn't escape – shadows trapped him on the isle – and he'd rather spend his meagre existence in a park than in prison. But tonight, none of that mattered. Tomorrow, he would leave or die...or both.

He approached the party.

Someone stopped him immediately.

'Oi, you there, hold up.' A beefy man with arms thick as pigs blocked the door. 'Don't recognise you.'

Years ago, Cain would have panicked and left. Tonight, his last night, he shrugged and said, 'I know Mark.' There were a lot of Marks. Bound to be at least one inside.

The pig-man turned and called into the throng, 'Mark? Yes, you, you bloody piece of shit. Know this arsehole?'

Again, Cain waited for panic. Again, panic never came. Worst-case scenario, they would beat him up – would *try* to beat him up. It wasn't the celebration he wanted, but he'd take it all the same. He wouldn't mind ripping them apart. Anything to calm

his glass-shard mind.

‘The bald one with creepy eyes?’ someone – presumably Mark – asked. Another man emerged from the writhing crowd, this one lanky with riotous brown hair. He scanned Cain’s filthy skin, dirty clothes, and emaciated frame. ‘No, don’t know him.’

Sighing, Cain retrieved a fifty-pound note from his trouser pocket: Paul’s note. He had saved it till now, till tonight, for this suitably not boring or unremarkable occasion. ‘Know me now?’ he asked, dangling the note before Mark’s bloodshot eyes.

Mark’s face brightened. ‘How could I ever forget?’ He snatched the note with sin-quick fingers. ‘Good to see you again...’

‘Cain.’

‘Cain. It’s been too long, mate.’

The pig-man narrowed his beady eyes at Mark. ‘Money slut.’ ‘I’ll split it with you, dickhead,’ Mark said.

‘Guess we’re all whores here. Come on in, Carl.’

Cain didn’t correct him. He’d be Carl or Caleb or whomever the fuck they wanted him to be tonight as long as he could just *be*.

The house was a disaster. Hot. Humid. Grubby and cluttered. Empty bottles and cans littered the crusty linoleum floor. Beer drenched the grungy couches and chairs. Lamps perched at dizzy angles, and music screeched with the ghost of a song.

Cain loved it.

He sat on the closest couch. Booze soaked his pants. He didn’t give a shit. He was here, *free*, for one final night.

Someone passed him a beer. Someone else lit his cigarette. A third someone plopped in his lap.

He could live like this.

Hell, he could die like this.

But he couldn't die.

Not yet.

Alcohol scorched his throat. Smoke filled his lungs. Voices clogged his head, and skin searched his own. The party possessed him. He was no longer forgotten, no longer abandoned. Here, he was found, was warm, was home. His chest ached at the realisation. He found home tonight only to lose it tomorrow. It was cruel. Heartless. Then again, so was everything he had ever known. Except Paul. But part of him thought the professor was a dream.

Through the haze, Cain spotted something familiar. Scrawny. Pale. Fitted suit and coat. Dark eyes and floppy hair. Then beer drowned him, and he forgot again.

'What are you thinking about?' the woman in his lap asked. She traced his hairless eyebrows, cheekbone, jaw – fascinated.

'Nothing important,' Cain said.

'What?' she shouted over the dying music.

He shook his head, and a foreign smile split his chapped lips. Blood dribbled down his chin. Embarrassed, he turned away, and the woman fled, disgusted. Well, some things never changed. It was for the best. He had more control than he had with Bahey, but he also had more strength. People *should* leave him. He was a living bomb.

As the crowd stuffed the living room to play darts, Cain retreated upstairs. He wanted something he hadn't had in twelve years: a shower. Since the madman and madwoman had kicked him out at eighteen, he had bathed in puddles and the sea. Never warm. Never clean. He caught many colds, suffered every virus on the Isle of Man, but he had survived – unfortunately, some would eventually say.

The top level was quiet, save for whispered moans and fuzzy



conversations. Cain passed a couple bedrooms, then arrived at the bathroom. Giddy and ridiculous with anticipation in a way he never was before, he locked himself in and turned on the shower. Water steamed from overhead, turning the small space into a sauna. Cain stripped in seconds. His mucky clothes and shoes flopped onto the tiled floor, then he stepped into bliss for the last time in his life.

Heat infused him. Ignited his bones. Kindled his blood. He slumped forwards and rested his hands on the plastic stall. Water scurried down his barbed spine, swimming in rivulets around each raised vertebra, his skeleton on display. Dirt flowed down his chest, his legs, pooling on the shower's floor.

His baptism.

His rebirth.

Rapture claimed him. Temporary, yet consuming. For a moment, he was a man, not a beast. The shower scalded away worries, and he sunk into its volcanic embrace. Then memory stained this brief, fragile comfort. Squeezed his heart. Shrivelled his lungs. He dropped to the stall floor. His knees boomed against cheap plastic. The water became shadows on his bare skin. His *baby* skin. Flashes of groping darkness maimed his mind. He couldn't move. Couldn't see. Couldn't fucking *breathe*. Ink leaked from his pores, slathering his flesh with blinding agony.

Time bent. Seconds smeared. Hours lasted minutes, then minutes lasted hours. Space spasmed into Stygian tendrils as death beckoned with skeletal nightmares. Pain lashed every capillary as doomsday crashed cymbals inside his skull. *Now, now, now, now*, the reaper's drum demanded. Plastic melted. It dripped onto his back in cursed rainfall, burning and blistering in an excruciating splatter. Beneath his hands, the floor quaked

with Earth's rage. Tiles sizzled with spiderweb cracks. The mirror splintered, then shattered. Glass erupted in glittery hail, cutting him in its storm. His blood ran away from him as he wanted to run away from himself.

Downstairs, a chorus of screams exploded. Cain blinked, startled. He thought it was all in his head: the pain, the anguish, the devastation. But it had never been in his head, and that was the problem.

The broken, molten bathroom whined. Before Cain could rise, he fell. The floor gave out. The room collapsed. He plummeted from the top level to the bottom in a gory, meaty blur. Shrieks welcomed his arrival. *No, don't run. It's me,* he wanted to say, but his mouth was ash, his throat rough as charcoal. They yelled at him, hit him, punched him into pulp. He panicked.

And his panic caused an avalanche.

The house buckled. Its tiny rooms crumpled like paper, trapping everyone inside. Walls dissolved into sand. Windows fractured into glassy knives. Beer bottles swirled in a tornado, and cigarettes floated as candles in the wreckage. With a hair-raising roar, it all fell down: the roof, the house, everything.

The screams stopped.

Cain stood on wobbly legs, naked and alarmed. The raven night stretched overhead, the moon and stars still absent. Wind kissed him. Ruin surrounded him, but didn't touch him. A clean circle ringed his corpse-powdered feet. He was alive. Hurt, but alive. No one else was. Amidst the house's lumpy carcass, skinned bones and deflated organs scattered throughout the wooden and fleshy debris. Even the cars outside lay in crushed metal heaps.

*Gone.*

Everything and everyone was *gone*.

And it was his fault.

*No.*

He didn't want this. Had never wanted this. Had just wanted to be alone but not lonely. Free but not forgotten. Not abandoned. Not broken. Yet he *was* broken. Had always been broken.

Tears spilt from his eyes, fate's fingers marking his cheeks. There was no escape. Death had chained him from birth. He was only meant for revenge.

If someone had loved him, he could have learnt.

If someone had cared, he could have changed.

But hate was all he knew.

\* \* \*

## Thirty Years Old

The sun bloomed. Hate bloomed with it. His one friend. The one constant.

In the frail morning light, Cain recognised something. A moonlit silhouette. Scrawny. Pale. Fitted suit and coat. Dark eyes and floppy hair. Scrunched, curious, concerned eyebrows. A ghost that had followed him his whole life. Or perhaps he was the ghost in the end. They stared at each other. Cain nodded. The ghost shook its head – *his* head. He was a man. A detective, Cain realised, but he was too late. Cain wasn't a puzzle to be solved; he was a puzzle to be smashed.

Blisters popped on his back as he sat on the park bench, naked. Gashes oozed pus in a pain constellation. They were infected.

*He* was infected. But today was his last day, so he didn't care. Memories seared him: the melting shower, the crumbling walls, the corpse garden. He had planted agony. Had sowed disaster. There was nothing left for him here. He grabbed the blade he kept beneath the bench and stabbed through flesh, between ribs, into his heart.

Death blossomed. Blood spurted from his chest, beyond the dam of its former chambers. It was warm. Wicked. A heady rush of victory.

For a moment, at least.

Then they came.

As he knew they would.

*Deception*, as the professor had taught.

Shadows plucked him from the ground, then lobbed him towards the sky. He landed with a wet thump in his spiky bone cradle. Sharpened fragments gouged his skin. He relished the added pain. Tentacles fussed over him, wove his heart back together, pumped him full of lost blood. He was his own bait, the most powerful lure. They would never let him die, but they would never let him live, either.

Cain grabbed the nearest shadow. Greasy suckers scraped his skin, suckers that had scarred his face and neck. Panic rippled through the trapped tendril. It tried to tell him something, tried to escape. Cain chuckled and tore it off. *Distraction*. Their panic escalated to hysteria. Needles sprouted in dim, watery light, but he was ready – was too ready at last.

The man, the beast, spun. His bare feet slid on damp metal as he crouched. Then he reached inside the festering darkness and howled his demons free. *Ambush*. Time crawled. Gravity trembled. Shadows slowed, in shock, suspended in free fall.

It was a feast.

Cain surrendered to the monster within.

He clawed at their sticky, clammy chests, ripped their mucus-slick skin open in savage slits. Clear blood blobbed and beaded in the air, near-frozen with his clutch on gravity. His teeth sank into their tentacle-bearded necks, bit through meat and sinew till he mangled arteries. For decades, he had feared the dark, had cowered under the tangled sky, but beneath their mushy, brambly shell, they were as human – as *weak* – as him.

Time slipped from Cain's grip. Sped up. Slowed down. Shadows twitched and jerked, unable to function in his cosmic web. Cain broke their bones. Drank their crystalline blood. Laughed, and laughed, and laughed. He had waited for a time when they'd all be in this room, had caged them inside his own cage, shackling them to his lifelong terror. They were creatures of habit. Slaves of routine. From his years studying them, they never strayed from this schedule. There was no need. Cain wasn't a threat till he was the greatest threat of all. Now, he deserved this. He had waited. Fucking hell, he had waited till he was strong enough, good enough – just *enough* for once in his cursed, ill-fated life. The ground wouldn't remember him, but the sky would never forget.

Cain seized gravity's reins and *pulled*. Shadows liquefied in sludgy streaks, still alive as they prayed for mercy. Hate throbbed through him, a new and better heartbeat. Flesh stretched in syrupy particles. Bone ground to dust. Ink and blood streamed in stringy threads. They were undone, like him. Ruined, like him. Wrecked beyond repair.

Just  
like  
him.

The baby, boy, teenager, man, beast detonated. Universes

wailed as he wrenched reality apart. Shadows ruptured, their last words erased. The bone cradle broke. Cain broke, too. He unleashed the bomb that was his heart and dragged the ship from heaven to hell.

Metal groaned as the butchered bird fell. Wings severed, she dropped like a boulder, and Cain surfed death's storm, deranged. This was all he ever wanted, all he never wanted to want. *If only, if only, if only* pounded through his ears, but nothing mattered when there was nothing left. This time, *he* would steal *them*.

The ship sliced the sky, then buried herself in Earth's crust with a deafening blast. Land rumbled from her force. A shock wave cascaded over the isle's hills, valleys, and towns. Even the sea herself shuddered in rage's wake.

Smoke plumed from the skeletal debris. Damp metal rubble sputtered with electric tears. Sulphur and petrol stung the air. Distant sirens rolled over the scarred ground beneath the slashed clouds and mutilated sky. Further above, the sun cried in nettled pricks of rain. Only one thing lived in the ashes. Neither ground nor sky, neither man nor beast, but something in between.

Naked and burnt, splattered with blood and riddled with gashes, Cain rose.

Destruction surrounded him.

Hate blessed him.

Shredded corpses boiled at his feet.

Then shock mauled him.

He had been here before.

## How We Ended

**T**he captain had gathered the most senior members of the crew in the briefing organ. Its walls pulsated with the gentle throb of the ship's circulation. Here they were, close to the central pump of the organic vessel that had been their home, caught between two currents, stuck in the riptide.

'The subject has been toying with us,' the ship's second-in-command said, a Ceph Cyan barely knew even after all these years. Her responsibility had been running the skeleton crew during off-duty hours, but her experience and wisdom were as great as any at the meeting. 'I believe we must consider kindness to ourselves, to our people.'

'But all this time we have been clear in our mission, unwavering. Kindness is the answer.'

The murmured response, echoing the words of the Chief Bioengineer, was muted, lacklustre.

'We have fulfilled the mission brief,' the captain said. He buried his hands up to the wrists in the nerves that stretched around the mound. The thick mucous, warm to the touch,

accepted them all, building the strength of their connection. In this room, with this node, their thoughts were almost as clear as those within the Nexus itself.

‘That sounds like you think we have reached the end?’ Cyan thought.

‘For over thirty of this planet’s orbits around its weak star, we have remained with this current,’ the Medical officer, Turq, thought. He wasn’t a Ceph prone to excessive outbursts; when he intervened, they listened. ‘Those who only drift with the currents end up where the current takes them without considering the destination. Those who consider the destination fear not turbulent waters.’

‘Well, that’s very poetic,’ Lieutenant Indigo thought. ‘Right now, I’d like to know what we’re going to do. I just witnessed the Beast kill a number of his own kind with an ability that we may have given him. This is disastrous. Almost as disastrous as our failed subterranean calcification experiment. Some things are not meant to be done, some things are not meant to hold—’

‘We don’t know—’

‘Oh, for fuck’s sake, Cyan, the only one of its kind that can do this stuff just happens to be the only one who has had incessant interference and attention from us? I realise I’m not a high-flying specialist. One of those who thinks we should hold power over life and death itself.’

‘—that was a completely unrelated.’

‘—act of necromancy? Not all of us were lucky enough to be standing there when the Nexus gave the warning—’

‘Lucky? You think I’m here by luck? I have dedicated my life—’

‘Yeah, poor you. Spending your whole life being the one who will save all of Cephkind. It’s almost as if the rest of us didn’t



need to even be here. What about our sacrifices? We could've killed this thing, and we might have made it home in time to see our own offspring before they went to the Nexus. Did you ever consider that?'

'Kindness is not selfishness.' Cyan's hands clenched the vessels of the node. Fistfuls of nervous matter wrapped around her fingers as she squeezed them. The walls of the chamber moved faster as she tugged.

'Step back, Lieutenant, Specialist. You're hurting the ship.'

Cyan looked down. Realisation dawned, and she released her grip. Lifted her hands out of the ganglia while attempting to wipe away the ink that was pooling around her. Gently, she placed a hand on the nerve cluster. 'I apologise.'

'Get beached,' Indigo said, then she left through the organ's valve, feet splashing through the fluid pooling on the pulsating floor of the organ.

The captain looked around the space, unable to keep the disappointment from his thoughts. 'While I disagree with almost everything the lieutenant said, she may have a point. Specialist, if we caused this, if the Nexus sent us here in error...'

A shockwave of clicking burst out from around the table.

The captain held up a free hand and continued. 'Or if we misinterpreted the warning, we may have followed the wrong current. Perhaps we were warned never to come here?'

'No,' Cyan thought. 'I understand doubts, but we were supposed to come here. Thousands of our kind have died. The subject is the cause—'

'And kindness is not working,' Turq thought, but it was a quiet thought. Even he was afraid to say it.

'So we kill it?'

'We can't. It's not the way. Nexus save us, we do not kill.'

Kindness will save us.'

'I'm not so sure,' the captain thought.

'But—'

The walls of the ship convulsed as peristaltic convulsions passed through the vessel. Across the ship-wide network, thoughts passed. 'We've located the subject, and also friendly contacts.'

'Friendly contacts?' the bioengineer thought back. 'That's not possible.'

'We switched to active and passive sensors,' the captain said.

'That's against mission protocol,' Cyan thought.

'I decide the fucking protocols, *Specialist*. And I want that Beast collected and locked in your lab right now. Am I clear?'

'What are you going to do?'

'We're going to get it here, and then we'll worry about what we do next.'

\* \* \*

Cyan had run through the ship, splashing and sliding around corners until she reached the airlock. Azure and Indigo were already there, half suited up, ready to drop down to the surface.

'Why are you here?' Indigo asked, with a hand pressed against the wall.

'Protocol,' she replied, not bothering to touch the wall. Her feet carried the impulse, but it was an unkindness not to reach for a stronger connection. She pulled herself into the suit. Her body filled the space within it as she stretched out her limbs. Before she had a chance to do it herself, Indigo had reached for her helmet. The lieutenant helped put it in place, and as she turned it to force the seal, the Ceph paused.

'I'm sorry for the meeting,' Indigo said. 'I'm not angry with you...it's all of this. I wasn't even supposed to be here.'

'I remember,' Cyan said. 'A last-minute replacement. Not everyone was as lucky as me, getting to watch their Progenitor being cast into the Nexus.'

'Yeah...sorry I said that. It was a real sex organ move by me.'  
'Sex organ?'

'I've heard the natives use it as an insult.'

'Surely it's a compliment. Sex organs are—'

Their conversation was interrupted. 'A fascinating discourse, but you're broadcasting ship-wide right now. You're both sex organs, in both meanings.'

'Thank you, Captain,' Cyan said, allowing herself a brief smile.

'We're working on why we're getting signals on Ceph frequencies. It doesn't seem like something that should be on this planet, but it probably is. Keep an eye out while you're off-planet picking up the subject, but remember, your mission is simple. Collect it, bring it back, lock it down.'

'Him, Captain—'

'No. At this point, I think we need to consider that some of us have over-familiarised ourselves. There is such a thing as too much empathy, Specialist. Work on distancing yourself.'

She didn't respond and instead moved to the back of the line. Lieutenant Indigo and Private Azure were already standing by the double sphincter, ready to drop.

Moments later, they were planetside. Warnings kept flashing up on Cyan's HUD. The one that most filled her with dread was that her suit's camouflage might be at risk. *Quick in and out...this might be the last time. You can do this.*

Indigo started moving in the direction their sensors indicated. The tracking chemicals they had placed within the subject's

blood were slowly decreasing in concentration. Once upon a time, they had been able to monitor it from above, but now it was limited to much shorter distances. 'Safety off, Private. Take no chances. If there is any sign of a threat, take it down.'

'Lethal shots, Lieutenant?' the private asked.

'Yes.'

'Only if absolutely necessary,' Cyan said.

'You're not in charge here,' Indigo said. 'Stay behind us, observe, and give us useful information, or go back up.'

She bit back a response as they began to trudge forward. Precipitation fell from above. A small additional amount of moisture. It made Cyan feel a little safer. They called it a dry, arid place, but the waters were present, not so far away. A quirk of nature had caused this species to develop on the smaller dry landmass, but the currents still flowed, even if they were alien.

The landscape here was green, when it was untarnished by their constructions. Blocklike structures that looked like they were made from youngling toys. Nothing seemed to be grown that wasn't food.

'This way.' Indigo pointed with her weapon, the projectile device that now housed tiny pointed ballistic missiles to ensure they could penetrate the dry creatures of this planet. Lieutenant Indigo had decided to name them Perries, after her previous commanding officer.

In the distance, they spotted a figure, but it wasn't the subject. Few faces had grown familiar to any of the Ceph, but Cyan couldn't help but sense familiarity. Maybe it was the clothes this one wore.

'Get the subject up here immediately,' the captain said. 'We've worked out the problem with the signals.'

'Elaborate,' Cyan said.

‘It’s us, and others like us. There’s...there’s thousands. We’re not the first to come here.’

‘What?’

‘Get up here, now.’

\* \* \*

Cyan and Indigo were ordered to the captain’s office as soon as they returned to the ship, leaving Private Azure and Turq, the medical officer, to secure the subject. A job they were both used to.

When the sphincter to the bridge puckered open, a barrage of thoughts hit them. The bridge was a hive of activity Cyan hadn’t seen since the day they’d first set up their low geosynchronous orbit.

‘You two, in my office, now,’ the captain said. He slapped across the bridge without waiting for a response.

Inside the office, they placed their hands on the ganglia, and the captain skipped any pleasantries.

‘There are Ceph ships all over this area. Some of them seem ancient. Others far more advanced than this one. How is this possible?’ He fixed his gaze on Cyan.

‘I...are you sure? It could be an illusion? Perhaps something we brought up in the resource supply. Like when we were poisoned—’

‘It’s not a ship-wide, sensor-inclusive illusion, Specialist. They’re all dead. Those ships must have housed thousands of us. Thousands of dead Ceph caught in slight dimensional shifts from this one.’

Cyan’s head felt light; her grip on the ganglia began to slip. ‘No. No, that’s not possible.’

‘The Nexus has been sending Ceph here over and over again, in every possible dimension, just to age, rot, and die.’

‘No,’ Indigo said. ‘When we’re done, we return. They shouldn’t be here unless they failed.’

‘Look at the ships,’ the captain said. He waved his tendrils, and into their optic nerves, the images flowed.

Images of destruction, of burning, of dry, horrific death. Ships torn and shredded like they had been caught in the mouth of a giant predator and chewed through for amusement, the metallic surfaces rent through with jagged tears and forced open as if they’d been burst from within. ‘No, that’s...the thousands—’

The ship’s floor undulated beneath them, pulsating warnings throughout the vessel, then it lurched to the side.

‘The subject,’ Cyan thought. She pulled her hand from the ganglia and burst through the sphincter to the bridge, ignoring the panic as the ship lurched from side to side. The interior of the vessel undulated with palpitations pulsed as it panicked, as though the ship itself were having a systematic attack. She picked up snippets of thoughts as her feet slapped against the floor.

‘—pumping organ blockage—’

‘—overstimulation of the main ganglia cluster—’

‘—aneurysm—’

‘—coronary blockage—’

‘—internal bleeding—’

She pushed them from her mind. *The subject*. She had to rescue the subject. Vessels burst as she ran. Transport fluid cascaded from punctured and burst capillaries. A main artery in the corridor sprayed high-pressure fluid through the system. She passed Ceph bioengineers trying to stem the bleeding,

screaming for more coagulation agents in their efforts to slow the flow, to close the wounds.

When she reached the valve to her lab and opened it, she froze. The subject was outside the protective restraining zone.

Indigo was held in the air, her tentacles whipping around her as she jerked. She locked eyes with her friend. In that moment, without any neural connection, Cyan felt everything Indigo wanted to say. Every emotion, each and every moment of conflict, agreement, anger, and quiet reflection. She could feel—Indigo vanished in a violent burst of blood and flesh. Through the mist that remained, the grin of the beast appeared.

Then Cyan stared into the eyes of death itself. Its thoughts reached out to her: 'Monster.'

\* \* \*

The Ceph committee watched as the initiate rose from the water. Born on a mass of intertwined neurons, ganglia held the new member to the Nexus, who was becoming part of the great hive mind.

'Hear our warning. There is one who would take thousands of Ceph lives...'

A moment later, a Ceph stepped forward, the witness as her Progenitor had given the message. 'Kindness is the answer.'

The committee repeated the thought. 'Kindness is always the answer.'

## About the Authors

### Chris Hooley

In the pulsing heart of Manchester, England, there's Chris Hooley: not just another writer but a siren song of the working class. He crafts tales, like *Death, Just Grin and Bear It*, that don't just tug at your heartstrings but attempt to rip them out. Every time he writes, he sees it as an invitation to be shocked, to feel something raw and real. When he isn't penning gut-punch narratives, he's grilling authors - from the underdog self-published to the literary elites - on the Writing Community Chat Show. No flashy website for Chris. But the digital alleys of X (that old haunt once called Twitter)? That's where you'll find him, lurking, waiting, always ready to engage.

### Ross Young

Ross Young was born in Newcastle Upon Tyne in a hospital that has since been knocked down. He spent his childhood in a variety of international locales and uses this fact to affect an air of the windswept and interesting, badly. He enjoys diving and travelling and has lived and worked in various interesting places.

Dead Heads is his debut novel and forms part of a series of



books set in the city of Gloomwood. He does not write from experience as, despite his appearance and demeanour, he is not dead. You can find him @rossyoungsulk on twitter.

## Halo Scot

Halo Scot is an award-winning author of dark fiction. Reviews and press are available on **HaloScot.com**. Halo has been featured in *Publishers Weekly*, *BookLife*, and TCK Publishing's 2022 Readers Choice Award Winners. Also, as a founding member of **QueerIndie.com**, Scot has appeared at Brooklyn Book Festival and Pop Pride Week, an event hosted by ReedPop, BookCon, and New York Comic Con.

## Also by Chris Hooley, Ross Young, & Halo Scot

### Chris Hooley

Chris Hooley is the author of *Death, Just Grin and Bear It* and *The Covid Criminals*. He is also the co-host of The Writing Community Chat Show and a NetGalley reviewer. Learn more at [\*\*linktr.ee/ChrisHooleyAuthor\*\*](https://linktr.ee/ChrisHooleyAuthor).

### Ross Young

Ross Young is the author of books set in the Grim Reaper's afterlife and the City of Gloomwood. Beezy and Grim are part of an ongoing comic series that can be found on Ross Young's Twitter feed. Learn more at [\*\*RossYoung.ink\*\*](https://rossyoungink.com).

### Halo Scot

Halo Scot has written seven novels and two novellas that are often too dark for this realm. Find all of Halo's book monsters at [\*\*HaloScot.com\*\*](https://haloscot.com). Sign up for her chaotic newsletter to be further disturbed.

*ALSO BY CHRIS HOOLEY, ROSS YOUNG, & HALO SCOT*

\* \* \*

All three authors have appeared in Malarkey's *ImaginOmnibus* anthologies.

