

# ENTER THE UNIVERSE

REMNANTS UNIVERSE

NOVELLA BOX SET

SHANNA TERESE



ENTER THE UNIVERSE: REMNANTS UNIVERSE NOVELLA BOX SET  
Copyright © 2022 by Shanna Terese Bude

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced (stored or transmitted) in any form, physical or electronic, for any purpose without prior written permission from the author.

BLACKOUT  
Copyright © 2022 by Shanna Terese Bude

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced (stored or transmitted) in any form, physical or electronic, for any purpose without prior written permission from the author.

WENAPREEM  
Copyright © 2022 by Shanna Terese Bude

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced (stored or transmitted) in any form, physical or electronic, for any purpose without prior written permission from the author.

THE BOY WHO FADED  
Copyright © 2022 by Shanna Terese Bude

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced (stored or transmitted) in any form, physical or electronic, for any purpose without prior written permission from the author.

HYBRID  
Copyright © 2022 by Shanna Terese Bude

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced (stored or transmitted) in any form, physical or electronic, for any purpose without prior written permission from the author.

# CONTENTS

---

Blackout.....	7
Wenapreem.....	75
The Boy who faded.....	173
Did you enjoy this book? .....	506





# BLACKOUT

SHANNA TERESE

WHEN ALL ELSE IS GONE  
WHAT DO YOU FIGHT FOR?



BLACKOUT

---





REMEMBER IT AS THE DAY MY MOTHER DIED...

I could remember that day in so many ways, as the ending to so many things. But one end will always stand out truer than the others.

I knew, before my eyes had opened after the explosion, before the scattered neurons of my brain could interpret heat or noise or the force that threw me back into the wall as an explosion—before all of that, I knew.

This was the day my mother died.

I came to against the wall with the taste of metal in my mouth. Aerosolized metal.

I tasted it and knew what had happened. A lifetime lived on interstellar warships will do that, make vaporized metal a familiar taste. There had been an explosion. It ripped through us, gutted us, vaporized the metal and circuitry inside the walls, but left the shell of our ship intact.

Why had we even invented such things?

Really, what was the point of destruction on this level?

The other half of that equation made more sense to me—the fact that we were still here, that the ship had been built to survive even this. But then, I suppose that's why we have to keep inventing more and more terrible weapons, because we just keep finding ways to survive.

I thought I heard my name, spat out the metal, and forced my eyes open.

Blue light assaulted me. I could feel the heat against my skin, and

inside my skin, radiating through me and numbing my mind. Burns covered one side of my face, and I had hit the back of my head when I fell, though I didn't think that was serious. None of the flying debris had reached me, just waves of pure heat, radiating out from the bulkheads. No abrasions. No broken bones.

I felt all of this as soon as my eyes opened, probably a sign that I had been doing this for altogether too long. It should take more than a second to comprehend exactly how and why your body has been damaged by military-grade explosives. But one second was all I needed.

I felt the burns across my face and chest and left hand. My mind found the centers of those burns, skin that no longer felt anything, and the stinging, throbbing edges where nerve tissue was still intact. My throat and lungs still burned from the heat, too, and I did not want to breathe in. I knew exactly what this contaminated air would do to my lungs.

What it was already doing to my lungs.

*"Tein Eros!"*

It wasn't my imagination. Someone was calling my name. I tried to balance as a medley of blue emergency lights danced across my vision. A buzzing filled my ears, making me wobble as I tried to raise myself onto my knees. People underestimate how much we depend on our ears for balance, and how the ringing in your ears can make your skull feel like concrete.

But it wasn't just one person calling my name. A garble of voices—*Tein Eros*, Dr. Eros, Stacy, all jumbled together—somehow made it through the buzzing in my head and the flashing, unsteady lights. I took a breath and gagged on metal vapor, made it to my knees only to tip over, caught myself with one hand flat against the floor grate, and felt the grate burn into my skin. Not heat this time. Coolant and other liquids never meant to touch Human skin, oozed from the pipes beneath the floor. It only intensified the sting of metal and heat inside my lungs. Our ship, our lifeboat in the void of space, was attacking us now.

*"Stacy!"*

A set of fingers dug like talons into my shoulder, and then Ellie's

face appeared like a ghost in front of mine. The water in my eyes blurred her features, and it took me longer than it should have to recognize someone I had worked and laughed and eaten and prayed and lived with every day for almost a decade. She was a few years younger even than I was, which made her position as Chief Engineer all the more impressive, especially eight years ago when this nightmare began.

Eight years. Gatch! We had been living in this crap for eight years.

I wanted to give up then, to collapse into the grate and let the acid eat it all away, cry and fade into the nothingness around the frail hull of our ship. Be done with it.

“Stacy?” Blue light glinted off Ellie’s face, showing the raw, charred marks all across it. Third-degree burns on her left cheek, from both acid and heat, radiated out across her jaw and nose and temple into second-degree burns, then first-degree. I could hear the numbness in her voice, caused by all the pain trapped inside her nerves because shock would not allow her brain to interpret it as pain.

Small mercies.

“*Tein Eros!*” another voice shouted from somewhere over my right shoulder. I took a deep breath, needing oxygen more than I feared the other things in the air right then. I could extract the metal from my lung tissue later, assuming there was a later. At this moment, it couldn’t matter.

I pulled myself onto my feet, focused on one point of light, and forced it to remain stationary. The emergency lights were just dots, smaller than the palm of my hand, placed at nine-foot intervals along the top of the walls.

I was in a hallway, one of dozens that I knew like the back of my hand. The walls and the ceiling were made from a fusion of metal and plastic fortified with trace amounts of clearsteel. That diamond-like substance had kept the ship intact around us.

The clearsteel also made our metal surroundings even more reflective, especially in the dark, intensifying the emergency lights and making it possible to have so few of them, to run them on almost no power at all.

I pressed my hands into one of the dark, reflective walls, breathing

in and out, counting off eight seconds—one for every year since the war began. I felt all the heat of this latest explosion during those seconds, pulling me down into the acid-laced floor, eating through skin and muscle, blood and bone, until I was all-consumed.

Five seconds in, I almost dropped to my knees, a sob trapped inside my brutalized esophagus, breakfast threatening to come up too.

Six seconds in, the heat closed like a fist around my torso, squeezing even the too hot air away, turning my body into a vacuum as dark and lifeless as the void around us all.

Seven seconds in, that void, the nothingness beyond life and death, sealed over me. I saw imprisoned within it the great and total ending of all things. How stupid were we to think we could challenge it? How helplessly idiotic was I, the doctor, with my trinkets and toys, built to pretend the end was not inevitable. I couldn't save them. I couldn't save myself.

I couldn't even save my own mother...

Then my count reached the eighth second, the eighth year of an endless war that became more pointless every day. Eight seconds, and the buzzing cleared from my ears. My eyes opened to find all the blue lights in focus and the people who needed me calling my name. I stood up straight and turned to face the hall around me.

"*Seera ee-teh!*" a soldier shouted—*help me*. I saw the sparks shooting from a hole in the wall—a circuit access point. Ellie stumbled over, and her hands, covered in fire-resistant gloves, shot into the sparking hole. It wasn't my job, and I left them to handle it.

Two feet away from me lay a body, and I didn't stop to give it a name. After eight years, I could recognize death before faces.

"Dr. Eros?" Another soldier appeared. He had participated in one of my emergency triage clinics not too long ago, and I should have remembered his name.

"Kit," I choked, metal stinging my throat. My ears started buzzing again, and I pressed a hand against the wall to steady myself. "Red panels..."

There was a red panel in the wall in every corridor, stocked with emergency supplies. I had left my own medkit behind in my room that morning, of all the stupid, short-sighted things.

"I have it," the soldier said, and before I knew what was happening, we were beside another body, this one with a pulse. I took in the burns, deep tissue wounds, none of which were bleeding, some with bones showing through. Then I opened the medkit and whacked at the display three times before giving up. I closed the kit and scrambled back to my feet. The hallway swam around me, and a fleeting thought of compassion went to the morphine in that kit. But with burns that deep, he wasn't feeling anything anymore.

Others would be.

"He's alive!" the soldier said as I stumbled away, my eyes already sweeping for the next living body.

I dragged my hand across the wall, noticing my limp for the first time. A twisted ankle, that was all—nothing serious. "The nanites are dead," I said, the thing I had feared even before opening that kit. The microscopic machines were resistant to heat, but heat on that level, that close to their container—I hadn't expected to find them functional. "There's no repairing injuries that extensive without them," I told the soldier.

Truth was, even with medical nanites, it would have been a long shot.

"Dr. Eros..." The soldier grabbed my arm, maybe to stop me, maybe to keep me upright as I tripped. Panels had come loose from the walls and lay strewn all across the floor ahead of us. We were coming to the source, the part of the wall that had exploded.

Two feet away from where I had come to. If I had just been two feet further down that hall...

I shoved could-have-beens aside, met the soldier's gaze, planted my feet. "I cannot save everyone still alive in this hall," I said.

His gaze dropped to the floor. But he stayed with me, stumbling from hall to hall and room to room, with the hours dragging by, and nothing except destruction in our path.

I remember it as the day my mother died.

Not the day that a decade-long war ended for us.

Not the day our engines blew out while traveling at seven-before-light-speed, hurling us into the middle of literal nothingness.

Not the day the exploding engines sent a backlash through every conduit connected to them, gutting half the circuitry in our ship.

Not the day I stood over the broken bodies of a hundred crewmates and decided in ten seconds flat which to save and which to leave to die.

Not the day that I told God that he did not exist—never mind that to tell him so, I would have to be talking to him, anyway.

Not the day that I decided my own life was over.

No. I remember it as the day my mother died...

Hours I spent with the dead that morning, until it was no longer morning—not that such labels really mattered in space, anyway. I journeyed downward from the hall outside the dining room, stopping over bodies, making the choice, moving on. If I had to, I would say I was headed toward the engine room. Really, I just needed a direction, and that was as good as any.

Four hours in, the tel on my wrist crackled. I had forgotten about the circular piece of metal adhered to my wrist by static cling technology. The explosion would have damaged our entire communication system, and some distant part of my brain had just assumed it wouldn't work again.

But four hours into my rescue efforts, the tel crackled, blue connection lights flashing for a few seconds, then going dark again. Half an hour later, the lights flashed again. Then again, a while later, this time, to my astonishment, changing from blue to green.

*"Ser'seeztok ser'sahni."* The voice crackled in the tel, but its words came through. *"Ser'seeztok ser'sahni."* A call to check in, be heard, and counted as alive.

The voice had to repeat itself a few times before I understood it through the static. By then, I had my hand inside a soldier's chest cavity, and couldn't respond. There was something comforting, though, about hearing the BelDom language through the tel.

We were a Human crew, and whatever our native languages, we

spoke Human Standard most of the time. But BelDom was the language of the Be'shon, our dying government—dead government, maybe. It was the language that everyone understood, the language of order and of peace, which we spoke at formal times, and to any non-humans we encountered, and, often, when giving orders.

Orders like begging survivors to check in after getting the communication system to work again.

I was closer to the engines now, the heat more intense. Actual fires had broken out in this hall, and more of the wall panels had blown. The debris was flung across the floor and embedded inside my *senereh*—my crewmates'—bodies. Inside his body, beneath my hands, as I stitched living arteries back together with a needle and thread.

One person. I'd found one person in this entire corridor who could still be saved.

On my wrist, voices interrupted the static, some easier to hear than others, but dozens of different replies. Survivors from all over the ship. Another artery split and I scrambled to repair it, listening for the one voice that I really wanted to hear.

I finished my stitches, unable to remember the last time I had to resort to such an ancient method of repairing bodies. Back in school, for a test, probably.

The spotlight in the emergency bag had an end like the back of the tel on my wrist, static cling technology that allowed me to stick it onto any surface. I stuck it on the wall above my work, glaring down into blood and viscera and making my eyes water. I wasn't sure how much longer I could concentrate on such detailed work.

As long as I had to.

"Okay, clotal now," I told the soldier across from me, my hands still poised over stitches, making certain they would hold. The soldier across from me was a woman now. I'd lost track of the number of times my assistant had changed during this trek toward the engines. I kept leaving them behind, to deal with the fallout of repairs I made to the bodies of our *senereh*. I moved on to the next, and the next, and left them all behind.

She had her hand around the side of the other soldier's neck, stopping the bleeding there. But that wound was minor compared to the

damage in his chest. Clotal would stop it without stitches.

More voices were checking in through the tel now. Half my mind listened for my father's voice, and even that half was more than I felt I could spare, with a man a minute or two away from bleeding out beneath my hands.

I waited a moment for my latest assistant to give the injection, watched to see if my work would hold, then slowly removed my hands. The bleeding stopped and I let out a held breath, pulling off the latest pair of rubber gloves and just dropping them without ceremony on the floor already scattered with debris.

"*Ser'seeztok ser'sahni,*" the original voice on the tel repeated into a pause.

"Watch him," I told my assistant. "Give the clotal ten minutes to work, then two IVs, saline and synthetic blood."

She nodded, and I was already moving off down the hall again, wondering who my next assistant might be and where they would come from...

"*Tein Eros, sa'seeztok sa'sahni!*"

I flinched at the sound of my own name through the tel.

"Stace, *tok'sa*, you there?"

It was Marlo, the Ship's Manager, his voice laced with desperation. He had to speak my first name before I recognized him. I tapped at the green light on my tel.

"Yeah, *sener*, I'm here," I said, forcing the words past the burns in my esophagus. Somehow, speaking through the tel felt harder than speaking to other people in the hall.

A few different voices crackled over the tel, a few variations of the phrase "*An'pen seera.*" *Thank God.*

My father's voice still wasn't among them...

"Can you get to medical?" Marlo's voice was frantic, stumbling over itself. "Where... *Maysai'sa'sahni?* Stacy, we have medical working, can you get there?"

Medical was working. My shoulder slammed into the wall, hanging my weight against it and taking a moment to just breathe, in and out, ignoring the damage aerosolized metal was still doing to my lungs.



Medical was working.

Some fragment of my brain had been praying for this call since the explosion.

"Cots?" I asked. "I'm in corridor C-H, above the engines. I can get there. But others can't, so I need crash cots..."

"Yeah, we'll send them," Marlo said. Relief made his voice sound frantic now. "Just get yourself to medical!"

I remember it as the day my mother died.

Not the day I climbed the service shaft latter up twelve decks in under seven minutes, my hands raw from burning metal.

Not the day I found the med bay half working, half the emergency beds beeping angrily at me when I tried to activate them, the other half nowhere near what I needed to accommodate the volume of injured crewmates.

Not the day I spent hours upon hours wading through triage with living bodies piled up against one wall, and dead against the other.

In all the death and suffering, I remember it as the day my mother died.

My mother was not like those hundred crewmates, healthy that morning, only to be mangled in the explosion. My mother had been dying for years. Cancer had infected every system in her body, and it was the only reason she was on our ship to begin with. Because I was on the ship, and I was the only doctor left to treat her.

She'd even fallen into a coma, a blessing really, about five weeks before the explosion. There was nothing more that I could do to manage her pain. There was nothing I could do at all. Four thousand years of Human medicine left me helpless against the single cells of her own body. I think God put her in that coma, protecting her against her daughter's insatiable need to fix her. But anyway, she hadn't seen, felt, or heard anything in over a month. Our last conversation had lasted three minutes, had something to do with dogs, and how we

wished warship protocols would allow us to keep pets on board.

And then she was gone.

She was dead long before the power went out, cutting her life support and finally allowing her lungs to do what I refused to believe they had to do—to stop.

I watched more than a hundred people die that day and saw more dead before I arrived. I knew them all, at least in passing, and some very well. I'd eaten breakfast with three of them that very morning, girls my age, just out of the military academy like I was just out of med school, eight years ago, when this nightmare war began.

And still, I remember it as the day my mother died.

I did my job that day. I chose the people who were most likely to survive over those who were least likely. I think I was even right in those choices. I patched soldiers back together with needles and thread in the glare of a flashlight, because power was still off in the halls. Even in medical, all available power had to go to the life-support beds. I told God that he did not exist, or that he had failed us, or some other version of the nonsense that comfortable people say when their comfort collapses and they become desperate and afraid.

And then I prayed, harder and more sincerely than ever before in my life.

I did all of this without peeking into my mother's room. I knew what had happened to the ship and what it meant for our life-support systems. Even the oxygen scrubbers, protected by a thousand layers of security and redundancies, were off. Every passing minute filled the air with more carbon dioxide and would continue to do so until we suffocated inside our own breath. There was no way my mother's little life-support unit had survived. And without it to breathe for her, she was dead.

For sixteen hours, I knew without checking.

Sixteen hours, patching the dying back together.

Sixteen hours of blood and death and all the horrifying smells and sounds that accompany both.

Sixteen hours, during which I collapsed twice before one of my assistants figured out the problem. She forced me to stop and extract metal particles from my lungs, while a less-wounded patient forced

my twisted ankle into a nanite brace.

It was annoying, having to stop, pause, let them fix me while the bodies continued to pile up. For sixteen hours, I thought of nothing except how to keep the people in front of me alive—and how to ignore those I could not do that for.

And then, sixteen hours after the explosion ripped through us, I blinked and found that the medical bay had gone silent. Against one long wall stood twenty-four life support beds. Ten of them were dark and useless. The other fifteen were occupied. Their various lights blinked at me, each one meant to tell me something vitally important, none of which I could make any sense of at that moment.

Against the other long wall, a series of doors led into various closets and exam rooms, my office, two showers, and hazmat disposal. Crash cots blocked most of these doors from use. They were planks of plastic with built-in monitoring and resuscitation equipment, used to transport the injured and the sick. And each one of those cots, dozens of them, our entire supply, was occupied. Like the beds, there were nowhere near enough.

And against another wall, piled inside the black disposal tarps, lay the dead.

As if to accent the horror of this scene, the room was dark. We spared no power for overhead lights, resorting instead to blue emergency orbs and the spotlights stuck to various walls and pieces of furniture. But the light wasn't so dim that I couldn't still see the carnage—blood everywhere, burnt skin that medical nanites had cut off, rags stained from every bodily fluid in existence, and barbaric surgical instruments that our technology was supposed to make obsolete. Since taking the position eight years ago, this room had been my sanctuary, my refuge of healing and health and life.

But this was a horror show, a scene from my literal nightmares—life preserved by the desecration of the holy. I felt the void well up inside me again. Darkness, oblivion, and inevitable ending to all things.

“Stacy...”

I think she had been speaking to me for a while, but I had only the vaguest sense of her presence until her hand touched my arm. Then

I flinched. “Irene, what?”

She smiled. A reflex. Just what was done. “I think we’re out of it,” she said. “You should sleep.”

And then, I was just in the shower. I have no memory of walking there, working between the cots, opening the door. The soft, off-white walls just appeared around me. The lights flashed on, always, by design, on a low setting that would not interfere with our ship’s limited functionality.

The room was all plastic, but somehow still felt warm, inviting. The door opened into a dressing chamber, a set of drawers in the wall to my left, a bench against the wall across from the door, with the sink beside it. A white towel hung below the sink, beckoning me in, inviting me to wrap myself in its soft and fluffy depths.

Then I saw my clothes. The white-gray medical uniform was covered in stains that looked blue and silver in the calming, low lights. For a few minutes, I just stared at it as the room began to spin around me. Then I ripped the uniform off, shoved every piece through the slot that was supposed to lead to the bio-disposal incinerator—who knew if that were still working—and snapped at the computer to start the shower.

Nothing happened, which had me rolling my eyes at myself. It wasn’t the first time I had given orders to the ship’s nonfunctional A.I. over the last few hours. Habit. I slid open the door to the actual shower, stepped inside, and slammed my hand into the manual control panel.

The water shot on, hitting me with all the force of that fluffy white towel. A tremor ran through my body, and then I was on my knees against the warm plastic wall. I felt everything inside me come up with a sob as my crewmates’ blood and skin and bile all drained away around my legs.

It wasn’t just that day, or that explosion.

It was the war, battle after battle after battle.

It was eight years of dying and fighting for a government that no longer existed anyway.

It was eight years, watching my mother every day come closer and closer and closer to something that I, her doctor, refused to accept.

And there, in that shower, after sixteen hours of blood and death that ended the prior eight years of blood and death, I was done.

My hair clung in strings around my face. I could smell blood, and bile, and acid and chemicals, all in the water around me, and feel the void inside my chest. I was as empty as the vacuum around our ship, and as unable to breathe as I would have been if ejected into it.

"*An-pen Seera!*" I gasped, with the void collapsing inside my ribs. I pressed my weight against the plastic, its white fragility stained red and brown beneath my hands, repeating the phrase over and over again because it was the only thing my fragmented brain could hold inside it. "*An-pen Seera!*"

Until that day, I had always thought it strange that the same phrase in the BelDom language meant both *Thank God*, and *God help*. After that day, I never would again. Because that day, in the shower, with blood and worse draining away in pools around my legs, I started with the second meaning. Then I cried and screamed and raged my way into the first.

*God help* was an accusation almost, a rage against the death, and blood, and things I had to do with instruments we thought barbaric. The accusation transformed itself as I screamed it into a sincere request. And the request found itself answered by all the bodies in the room next door that were still breathing, by the fifteen beds that were still working, by all the medical nanites that had not been exposed to intense heat and had not been destroyed.

By the retro medicine classes I had opted to take years ago, teaching me how to use obsolete tools.

By the number of crewmates who had volunteered their free days to my emergency medical seminars.

I had watched more than half the ship die that day. But I had also patched part of it back together. As that truth sank into me, as I opened my eyes to find only clear water around my legs, *God help* became *Thank God*. And then I realized what I think a part of me had always known—that these two phrases always had been and always would be the same thing.

I stumbled out of the shower maybe an hour after entering it, got a fresh white-gray medical uniform out of the drawers, sat on the

bench with one of the soft, fluffy towels wrapped around my shoulders. The air felt heavy as it entered my lungs. My eyes drooped, and suddenly I found my head resting on another fluffy white towel, with the haggard form of a man standing frozen in the doorway across from me.

"*Tein...* um... sorry..." he stammered as I blinked. "Sorry, we, um..."

"I'm dressed," I said, sitting up, tossing the towel away.

"We thought you'd gone to your room," he said, still uncomfortable about stumbling on me in the showers, dressed or not.

I nodded to clear the lethargy from my head. "How long was I asleep?"

"No one's seen you for a few hours," he said, still frozen in the doorway.

I nodded again, forcing stiff legs to take my weight, forcing stiff arms to get a fresh pair of boots from the drawers. "Shower's all yours," I said, patting his arm on the way out.

I think he said *thanks*, or something like it in parting, but my mind had stopped processing speech. I was clean now, and a single walk around medical showed that there was nothing left for me to do except leave beds and surgeries and medicines to do their quiet work.

I had no more distractions now, and only one thing left to face. So I climbed out the broken medical door and dragged myself to her room.

Someone, somewhere, had gotten full reserve power back on. Blue lights, their lowest setting, shone down from the ceilings of every corridor and also framed the edges of every door. It made it easier to walk over the shattered bulkheads. It made it easier not to step on the bodies. It was my job to organize the organic cleaning crews, personnel trained to handle the dead, and I almost seized onto that distraction, almost doubled back to medical.

Instead, my feet kept moving, down the dim corridor and the dimmer maintenance shaft to a residential level.

It was time to see my mother.

Her door was already forced open when I arrived. But that didn't surprise me. I knew he would be there. A minute after me, ten minutes before. Either way. The moment the explosion gutted us, we both knew her fate. And so we both would come.

I stood in the doorway, looking in, frozen like a corpse myself. My mother brought little with her, but what she had was now smashed across the floor. She was still on the bed, hands at her sides, eyes closed. The breathing apparatus was gone. He must have removed it, but at the time, I didn't think of that. I just saw her face and knew that for the rest of my life, this would forever be the day my mother died.

He sat on the edge of her bed, his face pointed toward hers, holding one of her still hands. Just holding. He wasn't in uniform. The explosion hit just after breakfast for *A Rotation*, and he was probably still in his room.

They'd shared a room all through her sickness, and I was pretty sure he still spent a lot of nights in the chair beside her bed. But the coma had shifted everything. A part of him moved on the moment she stopped moving. I'd been angry at him for that. I no longer was. There was no room left for anger now inside this loss. There was no room inside it for anything, except her, and all she had ever been and left behind inside us both. Her death, the thing that had terrified me for so long, was suddenly nothing. Literally nothing. An emptiness, a momentary pain inside the lifetime of memories.

She, my mother, was everlasting.

I'm not sure how long I stood in the doorway, or when, exactly, he realized I was there. He never turned, and eventually, I made myself step inside.

As my foot crossed the threshold, my father turned to look at me. There was a deep gash on his forehead. The blood had dried, but he probably had a concussion. With all the training they put warship captains through, I doubt it slowed him down. Still, I reached out, my fingers in his hair and my thumb running along the edge of the cut. He put his hand on my arm.

My parents had been together for more than sixty years, married for fifty-seven. Theirs was the kind of love story most people want deep down, the simple kind, where two people find each other, learn to support each other, and join forces against whatever force says love is not a choice made again each and every day. He was career military. She was a schoolteacher. I grew up on his ships, while she ran the ship schools. Because, back then, before the war, Be'shon military was basically a galactic shepherding service, and it was normal to have families on board military vessels.

She'd gotten sick for the first time three years into their marriage—two decades before I was born. All I knew of it was the proud statement that my mother was a cancer survivor.

Until it came back, twelve years ago. By that time, I was halfway through med school and had already dedicated my focus to pediatric care. She wouldn't hear of me changing my calling just to help her.

And then the war hit. The government literally blew up. A hundred planets and the hundred factions on each of those planets all went to war with each other overnight. Every medical student was forced to pick sides, then focus on one thing—the same thing. From that moment on, all anyone cared about was war medicine. My calling to care for children, and my mother's cancer treatment, both fell to the depths of space. The galaxy convulsed, then shattered.

It had yet to come back together.

At this point, I was sure it never would.

Forced to choose, I fled back to the life I had always known, to my father's ship. Together, we took my dying mother from a hospital that could no longer afford to worry about anything unrelated to the war. I told myself I could take care of her, that I could learn everything I needed to know and cure her.

When I failed, I blamed God. But it wasn't God. None of it was God. It was all just people. People being awful and weak and broken and cruel and scared.

Scared most of all.

At the time, I couldn't appreciate the gift I had been given, that the three of us got to be together every single day of my mother's last seven years. I'm convinced now that she would have died in the



hospital just as surely as she died on our ship.

But on the ship, we were together.

We left my mother's room together, my father and I, hand-in-hand. We went to the only place there was to go at such a time.

The bridge.

My father liked to say that *barreh* class warships, like ours, had two hearts. One was medical, the other the bridge, each located at the center of one of the two rectangular halves of the ship.

Aerodynamics do not matter in space, and *barreh* class ships were not intended to enter a planet's atmosphere. We could, in extreme circumstances, had heat shielding for that purpose. But if we had to use those heat shields, we were never getting off the ground again.

So, we were designed like two bricks, rectangular sections connected to each other by a cylindrical walkway. Each section had its own heart, bridge and medical, in its center. We called the section around the bridge the front, and the section around medical the back purely because back and front were convenient terms. The connecting cylinder had a seven-foot-thick wall of pure clearsteel, literally indestructible, around a single walkway that allowed passage from one side of the ship to the other.

Apart from medical, the back rectangle housed crew quarters, hydroponics, food stores, and dining hall. Engines and engine control rooms took up the three lowest decks. Apart from the bridge, the front rectangle housed computer control rooms, the massive A.I. servers, the main power reactor, power control rooms, and the armory.

As my father and I passed through the transparent cylinder that connected the two sides of our ship, I could see everything in the void around us. Clearsteel, as the name implies, is transparent in its rendered form. The naturally occurring version is a semi-transparent black. But when we process it for use, it loses all color and becomes even more translucent than glass. It's not steel, though. It's not even

metal, but a crystal formation like diamond, native to the volcanic BelDom Origin World, Acar, and stronger than any other known substance in the universe.

This walkway, surrounded by clearsteel, was usually a nice place to sit, watching the stars, contemplating the universe. The artificial gravity was much weaker here, too, and if you kicked off just right, you could float with the illusion of nothing between you and the stars.

But I was glad of the gravity that day, glad to keep my feet on the grated walkway, and glad for the brisk pace at which we marched from one side to the other. Being able to see everything meant I could see the damage.

Two decks at the bottom of the back rectangle were just gone. A third hung exposed to deep space. And the bodies, more crewmates, floated in the void, imploded when the pressure inside them met the vacuum. I swallowed and fixed my eyes straight ahead on the less damaged front rectangle, trying not to wonder how much oxygen we had lost before the exposed decks sealed themselves off. Certainly, more than we could afford to lose.

Had they gotten the carbon dioxide scrubbers working again? They must have. Half of us would be unconscious by now if they hadn't. It was a faint spark of hope, but still hope, as we crossed from the starry walkway into the dark front half of the ship.

The damage was less here, the lights brighter, but still I saw evidence of blown conduits, bulkheads thrust out of the wall by heat, bodies burned beyond repair and left where they fell.

I had to organize the organic cleaning crews soon. How was I supposed to do that? How was I supposed to send them all away, launch their bodies into space, not to be seen again until the ending of time?

Send my mother away until the end of time...

*An-pen seera.* The phrase turned over and over again in my mind.

*An-pen seera.* God help. Thank God.

*God, help me find the strength to let go of my mother.*

*Thank God for the father who still walks beside me, holding my hand.*

It was the same prayer and always had been.

*An-pen seera.*

The walkway connected on the same deck that housed the bridge, so we did not have far to go. No need for another tedious climb up the maintenance shafts. After a half-mile walk through the battered hallways, we stepped over yet another broken door into the command center of a warship.

The room was smashed, like everything else. The circuits beneath every console had blown out. And the crew, those still standing, were as beat up as the ship. A few appeared to be asleep in corners. Others were cleaning, pulling out burnt wires, salvaging wires that weren't completely burnt yet.

My eyes found Ellie Kotien, standing over the central console. A ripple of shock ran through me, though I didn't quite know why. I remembered her scorched face bending over me, pulling me back to consciousness only seconds after the explosion.

I had not seen her since.

In the day since that explosion, like me, she had showered and changed. Her fresh green engineering uniform stood out in sharp contrast to our broken surroundings. Her dark hair was pulled back into a crisp ponytail, making me ashamed of the unruly tangle around my own head. Someone must have helped her apply burn cream, because I saw only a dark red mark across the left side of her face now.

She met my gaze as we entered the bridge. The center console, where she stood, was a holoscreen. It resembled a round table with half a dozen different ghostly images hovering over it. Most of the light in the bridge right then actually came from those images. They were brighter than the emergency lights. I recognized the life support readouts hovering a few feet from Ellie's shoulder. They showed normal CO2 levels throughout the ship, and I breathed a sigh of relief. The oxygen levels concerned me, though. And it looked like we must have lost some water reserves, too.

Ellie had a different readout in front of her, and across the central console from her, Marlo Calldin flipped through a series of holographic images more quickly than I could take any of them in. Both of them turned from what they were doing when they saw my father.

"*Nareh*," Marlo said, the BelDom word for *leader, captain, or sir*.

“And Stacy... *tein*...

“Just call me Stacy,” I said. Unlike Ellie and most of the others, whom I had known for years now, Marlo had transferred to our ship only months earlier, and he sometimes still fell back on formalities. But this, the sixtieth or so time I told him to use my first name, barely registered with me. My eyes had fixed on the water readout. We had definitely lost more than was safe in the explosion.

“Thank you, both of you,” my father said.

I pulled myself from self-obsessed exhaustion to wonder how much, exactly, the two of them had done during the last day. Half the engineers were floating in space around us. The other half might well have been in my medical bay. None of the *senereh* cleaning around the bridge wore green engineering uniforms. Could Ellie’s entire staff be gone now, when they were needed most? It was actually possible.

And I had been annoyed by how long it took them to get the lights back on...

“*Seera, nareh*,” Ellie said, drawing my attention to how pale she was.

“Anything changed since I was last here?” my father asked.

Ellie let out an exhausted breath as Marlo said, “Not really.” For several dragging seconds, we all just stood there staring at each other, not sure where to begin.

This was it, I realized. The four of us—three department heads and our captain. We were the entire command structure left on this ship.

“Okay,” my father said after the silence had dragged several seconds past too long. “Let’s just do this... First thing, Stace, ship’s population?”

I nodded and tapped one of the touch screens that lined the edges of the central console, activating it. We were all tagged, data chips beneath our left ears that transmitted location and biometric information back to the ship’s computer. I had to enter my thumbprint to access the program, and then a ghost map of our ship rose from the center of the holoscreen, red dots for living bodies, black for dead. I shoved the image off to one side to make more room for the written data, my hand freezing beneath the first and most significant line.

The words, written in BelDom, sucked the oxygen straight out of

my lungs, as if an outer bulkhead had burst, and the void had rushed in on us. I felt my eyes close, but I think I had gone temporarily blind before that. I'd known it would be bad, but...

"Ninety... seven..." Ellie read the words as if they contained a question. "That..." She appeared to choke, taking an awkward second to get the rest of the sentence out. "That's up and moving, right?"

"No." I forced my eyes open, cupped my hand around the ghostly readout, and drew it toward my face. "No, that's total life count."

The rest of the information on that readout was as I expected. My voice droned out in a monotone, reading words off the screen that should have mattered more to me than they appeared to. "Of those, thirty-four have healthy life signs, four are critical—I don't think they'll survive the day—and, well, the rest is tedious. But we should have another forty up and moving by the end of the day."

"Ninety-seven alive," Marlo said, as if that were the last number anyone had mentioned. I understood their shock. I shared it. We were built for a crew of two thousand. We'd been operating below capacity for years, but never below four hundred. And now...

Even if everyone made a full recovery by tomorrow, and we managed to repair every vital system, there was no running this ship with fewer than a hundred people—and that was pushing it.

My father took a breath, reached over my shoulder, and waved the life-signs data away. "But... you have life support working again, right?"

Ellie nodded. "Yeah. I mean, if there's an upside to having less than a hundred people on board..." Her eyes dropped to the console. "I'm sorry!"

"No," my father said. "We know what you mean. And you're not wrong. What about food? The hydroponics?"

"Yeah, it's bad," Marlo said, as Ellie continued to stare at the console. "The hydroponic system is working, technically. But we lost a lot of water. Our chances of sustaining a crop yield over any length of time—Well, there... *isn't* a chance of sustaining a crop yield over any length of time. And once the plants all die..."

"When the plants die, the oxygen system will fail," Ellie said, raising her eyes from the console. "We will produce more CO<sub>2</sub> than we

can cycle. We will suffocate, and then anyone left will freeze. *Nareh...*"

My father lifted a hand to cut her off before her voice completed its spiral into panic. I took the moment to put a hand on her arm, trying to pull her back, to cover over the facts that we all saw on the readouts in front of us.

"What hit us?" My father asked.

Marlo shrugged. "Hard to say, since whatever it was no longer exists, but... It had to be some kind of time-delay mine. Probably picked it up in that last battle."

Three days ago. Or four days ago now, I supposed. We'd responded to a distress call, a refugee convoy of Preilat ships fleeing their homes on alien worlds, attempting, like so many thousands of refugees, to hide from the wars by retreating to the Preilat Origin World, Senta. Twelve Be'shon warships had come to their aid. Five remained after the fight. And if we had attracted a mine in that fight...

Were there four more ships, right now, floating and dead like us?

And there were so few of us left, anyway.

I could see the same questions and realizations cross the faces next to me. What we had all been trying to deny for years rose up before us, as clear as an image on the holoscreen, impossible to ignore. Our vast, connected, interspecies fleet of millions of ships, billions of soldiers, vanished before our eyes. Never, in all my life, had I ever felt so alone, or known just how vast and empty space was.

"Okay..." My father ran a hand back through his graying hair. "*Tok'teh*, I know the answer, but I still have to ask—the OPD drive..."

"Doesn't exist anymore," Ellie said. "And I mean that literally. I've been running scans of the space around us for hours. There are no parts even out there to salvage. As far as I can tell, that entire deck just vaporized."

I'm not sure how my heart could sink any lower than it already was, but it did. The OPD—*Outside Proper Dimension*—drive, that we used to slip through dimensional layers, bend space, and travel without traveling, was the only thing that made interstellar journeys realistically possible. Without it, we were absolutely stranded.

It wasn't supposed to be an issue. The engineers who had designed and outfitted our military had not conceived of a time when other

Be'shon ships could not come to the rescue of a stranded vessel. Ships were so well tracked and accounted for that we wouldn't even have had to call for help. We would simply fail to arrive at our destination, and someone would come looking within the day. Even as the war raged on, and we lost ships by the hundreds, we forgot to think about maybe having to save ourselves—until now, when it was too late.

"We have spare parts," my father said. "They're stored in *this* section of the ship."

"Yes, and we could maybe cobble together a working drive out of those parts. But there is nothing to physically plug that new drive into," Ellie said. "I can't just patch a reality-bending machine into any conduits. It takes specialized circuitry—about two decks' worth of specialized circuitry. And at least one of those decks is—again—vaporized."

Fixating on our strandedness, after everything else, was just too depressing. I changed the subject. "By the way, why isn't Sidi working? The A.I. servers are on this end of the ship. And they don't look damaged." The question had been nagging at me since I woke up in the shower. We had reserve power back, had the mechanics, even the computers, up and running. But still, the ship's artificial intelligence remained unresponsive.

It wasn't just that I enjoyed being able to order the lights on, either. Without the A.I., all outside links, internet access, and communication with moving targets—like other ships that might come to our rescue—were non-functional.

"The servers aren't damaged, physically." Marlo sighed. "That explosion, the circuits it didn't just obliterate, it introduced to an A.I. killer. The best one I've ever seen, honestly."

"A virus?"

Marlo nodded. "It wiped the A.I. software. Sidi is totally dead."

"So, we're stranded in deep space with no way to call for help and no engine," I said.

"And chances are there aren't even any Be'shon ships left to help us if we could call," Ellie said.

"We do have thrusters," Marlo said. Ellie rolled her eyes at him, and he snapped back, "Well we do! On this side of the ship, the

thrusters are still functional.”

“Right, so, we reach an inhabited system in what, a thousand years?” Ellie asked. “We’re in the middle of deep space!”

“What is the nearest inhabited system?” I asked.

The other three turned to me with looks of mild curiosity. Then Marlo shrugged. He tapped a few glowing icons, and a three-dimensional star chart knocked all the other images out of the space above the holoscreen.

“So, nearest inhabited...” Marlo reached into the star chart, pulled the glowing red dot that represented our ship into the center of the space above the console, and enlarged the area of space around us. I saw a white dwarf star glowing hot about seventy light-years away. And then, more intriguing, a system of gas giants orbited twin stars some ninety light-years away.

“Um... there’s a research outpost...” Marlo moved the chart over to the twin star system and enlarged it. I saw six moons orbiting the last gas giant. Five were lifeless orbs of ice and volcanic rock. But the sixth had an atmosphere, evidence of plant life, but no large bodies of water.

“Yeah... I knew this system looked familiar...” Marlo waved his finger through the ghost image of the sixth moon. A BelDom text article appeared beside it, showing data and statistics about the moon, which Marlo began to skim and summarize for us.

“It’s a SeeKay research outpost,” he said, referring to the Be’shon’s scientific corp. “They Earth-type bio-formed the moon a few centuries ago. Looks like they were studying the close gravitational effects of the gas giant on the evolution of plant life, um... There were seven laboratories spread out along the moon’s equator line. About twelve thousand assigned researchers, plus their families—it’s not a small outpost.”

“Are they still there?” my father asked.

“Yeah, that’s a big question mark.” Marlo sighed as his heavy eyes skimmed a second time through text documents, looking for evacuation orders, transport records, something that would answer the question. But even if the documents existed, we all knew they weren’t necessarily accurate. Every day that the war went on, the question of



where people were and whether they had made it where they meant to go became more uncertain.

Marlo blinked, rubbing a finger against the bridge of his nose. "There's nothing that says one way or another. The SeeKay tried to evacuate all their outposts years ago, but this one's pretty remote, and large enough to be self-sufficient. Even if they did receive an evacuation order, they may have decided it was safer to just dig in and ride the wars out where they were."

Something like hope had come into Ellie's face as Marlo spoke. "But an outpost that size would have its own..."

"They would have their own OPD fitted ships, yes, definitely," Marlo said.

"Satellite coms?" my father asked. "We can't send a general distress signal to the fleet, but that is a stationary target, and it looks like it's in range of old wave communication..."

"Yeah, give me five seconds!" Marlo's fingers flew over the touch screen in front of him, shoving the star chart aside for a readout of streaming code that I hoped he could understand. Two more code windows appeared in the air in front of Marlo, and then the three collapsed together.

The image of the moon pulled away from the rest of the star chart and enlarged, showing a network of man-made satellites in its orbit. An image of our ship's communication dishes, three of them, appeared over the holotable as well. They all turned to face the moon and its satellites, showing us that their real-life counterparts were doing the same thing out there in space. With a final keystroke, Marlo turned to my father.

"Okay," he said. "Old wave has a lag time, so there's no way to tell if we can establish a signal until we send a message."

My father took a moment, then nodded to Marlo. The rest of us held our breath, kept silent, like the old Earth submarine crews trying to pass undetected through enemy waters.

"*Teh'tokah'tahni deh barrer'pahnkini dehni'Be'shon Staynar. Tays ehl-teh Jonathan Eros, nareh...*" My father began in BelDom, because our first instinct as Be'shon soldiers was always to communicate with the outside in that language. Then, as always, he began again, saying the

entire thing over in Human Standard. “I repeat, this is the Be’shon warship Staynar, captain Jonathan Eros, operation security number two-eight-two-two-seven-five-eight, speaking for the ninety-seven surviving crew members now stranded at the location file accompanying this message. We have limited supplies. No engines. No means of contacting the Be’shon fleet. And you are the only inhabited world within old wave communication range. If you can help, please respond. If you are there... *Seera...*”

He drifted into a request not included in the original BelDom message. “Even if you cannot help, please respond.”

Those last words hung in the air for a moment. Then Marlo started tapping the screen beneath his hands again, and the message went off. Sound waves transformed into light waves and hurtled through space faster than light could travel on its own. I felt that void enter my lungs again as we flung all our hope out into it to be answered, or lost.

At that moment, as we screamed for help across the vastness of space, I felt more lost than I yet had.

“What’s the lag time we’re dealing with here?” my father asked.

Marlo ran a hand across his forehead. “About three days. One way.”

“So... a week before we know if anyone is even there,” Ellie said.

“Yeah.”

“Even if they are...” My father sighed. “A captain’s security code and embedded Be’shon communication I.D.—both can be stolen or forged. If I were in charge over there, I’m not sure I’d risk a response.”

“Then, what now?” Ellie asked.

A heaviness sank into me, pulling me down to the floor, begging me to hide there from the responsibility that rose once more to the surface of my mind. “I have to organize organic cleaning,” I said.

Ellie’s face turned green, and Marlo studied the keypad in front of him like it was unfamiliar.

“Hold off on that,” my father said. “First, I want... Marlo, send a general call for everyone who can to gather. The dining room should be large enough. Let’s say, in thirty minutes. Sorry, *teh’su’seer*, I know you’re exhausted, but... If you could each just put a quick report

together, a few bullet points will be fine, and send it to me. I want to make sure the entire crew knows exactly what's going on before we do anything else. *Tokah'ser?*"

"*Tok, nareh,*" we said in unison.

My father vanished after that. Marlo sent out the assembly notification. And then the three of us worked in silence, still at that center console.

It took me all of four minutes to condense eighteen hours of medical hell into a seven-point list. I concluded with a statement about needing the organic cleaning crew to gather in medical after the general assembly, then realized there might not be enough trained personnel left. So I added a line: *Volunteers welcome.*

Something about those words, welcoming people who would volunteer to clean up corpses, felt more morbid than anything I had done over the entire course of the war. I tried to think of another way to word it, but nothing came. After spending more time on those two words than on the entire rest of the report, I just took a breath and sent it.

Maybe my father could think of a better way to word it. I clung to that hope because it was something to cling to as I made my way behind Marlo and Ellie into the back of the ship, to the dining room, where I had eaten breakfast just before our end began.

The dining room, somehow, looked the same as it had yesterday. Round tables covered the floor, ready to seat the five hundred soldiers that should have eaten three meals a day in four strictly monitored shifts. Years had passed since we'd given up that formality. Years now, we had gone to eat when we could, walked into the kitchen, taken things from the walk-in refrigerators, cooked for ourselves, hung out in this room. The kitchen staff was all needed and trained elsewhere, and there were no longer enough of us to worry about supplies running low.

Plus, we trusted each other, because we all needed each other, and we all knew it. We were a warship that had come to feel like a lifeboat, fighting for a government that was gone and a civilization that was becoming extinct.

No, that couldn't be what we were fighting for.

I knew there was more to our fight as I followed Ellie and Marlo into the dining room. But in the fatigue that lingered over me, I had no idea what, then, did keep us fighting. It all seemed so empty under the glare of emergency lighting, the gaping kitchen pass-through window where food should be served in steaming bowls, the table where I had eaten yesterday morning, sent into a fit of laughter by something Asalam had said.

I found Asalam dead on a crash-cot ten hours later, shoved her body aside with the rest, and sent the cot out for another potential survivor.

"Stace!" Ellie grabbed my arm just before I walked into a table. "*Tok'sa bal?*" she asked. "Did you sleep at all?"

The room wasn't empty after all. Just about everyone who could come, about fifty people, had already clustered together at the five tables nearest the kitchen pass-through window. And it seemed like every one of them turned to look at us as we entered, reminding me, once again, that we were all that remained of the command staff.

Eight years ago, I had joined the crew as one of three doctors under a chief medical officer. He was killed two days later. Four years after that, the acting chief medical officer made an unscheduled, unauthorized exit from the ship in an escape pod. We tracked the pod's signature to a Human colony world, and let it be. With no real government left, what were deserters even deserting against, exactly?

When I asked which of us should take charge, Webby, the only other medical officer, just grunted and left the room. The next day, I discovered that Marlo's predecessor as ship's manager had already transferred all the medical protocols and access codes into my name. I was never promoted, technically, never trained for the position, technically. And now, here I was, one of four remaining command officers on the ship.

"Hey, have you slept?" Ellie repeated, with the same expression of

concern on her face now as when she had woken me in the hall after the explosion. She and Marlo had seated themselves at a table behind the rest of the crew. I realized I was just standing there, staring at the tabletop.

I blinked, then shook my head to get blood circulating to my brain again. "More sleep than you did, probably."

"I got about six hours after we got the systems up and running again." She sounded like she was apologizing for that. "Just curled up in a corner on the bridge and passed out. You?"

Truth was, I had no idea how long I had slept, or what time I had gone into the shower, or what time it was now, even. I shrugged, shook my head, said something about water or coffee, and wandered past the occupied tables into the kitchen.

The emergency lights fell on several massive ovens and stovetops, all dark and cold, like tombs against one wall. Mixing stations and counters occupied the center of the room. Giant doorways like black holes led back into food storage rooms. I wondered how much we had left in those rooms, and how long we could even keep the cold food before it spoiled. I shook the question off on my way to the coffee prep counter.

I wasn't the first. Two fresh pots sat waiting already with protein flavoring powder open beside them. I emptied what remained in the first pot, finished filling a nondescript, military-issue mug from the second, then dumped in a few generous spoonfuls of protein powder, and stirred it all together on my way back to the dining room. Two crewmates came into the kitchen as I left it. We exchanged the weak type of smiles that people give each other at such times. I think they were more concerned with the mug in my hands than with me at that moment.

"Yeah, there's more. Start a fresh pot, maybe?" I heard myself say as we crossed paths. I think they nodded.

Out in the dining room, people whispered together in their clumps. Maybe they had been whispering all along, and I just needed the smell of coffee and cinnamon to wake my brain up enough to notice. There was also a lot more movement than I had realized before, people getting up and down, some still trickling into the dining room.

My father had appeared near the pass-through window and the kitchen door where I paused. I don't think he noticed me, reaching instead for the arm of a woman who stood at a nearby table. Her conversation with that table ended as my father guided her away, closer to the pass-through window, and me.

It was Irene Narad, the *Emotional Health and Wellness Coordinator*. Of all the jobs that had fallen away and become obsolete with the dwindling of crew and resources, that one remained ever-vital.

"Jon," she said, squeezing his arm. "I'm so sorry, about Lana."

My mother's name sliced through me, conjuring the image of her silent in her bed, my certainty of her eternity overshadowed by the gaping hole that her loss ripped into my own existence.

My father nodded, watching the air above Irene's shoulder. "Thank you."

He cleared his throat, then looked at her, leaning closer to keep the surrounding tables from overhearing. "Irene, I'm going to need you to keep a close eye on everyone in this room while I do this."

Irene nodded. "*Tok'teh pen, nareh,*" she said. The BelDom phrase had many meanings, ones as simple as *yes*, or *of course*, to the more complex *I agree*, or *I understand everything you're saying, even the parts of it you haven't said, and all the implications of why you're telling me to do it...*

I'm pretty sure that last one was how Irene meant it, anyway.

"*Seera,*" my father said as she moved away and faded into the shadows at the edges of our gathered crew.

I moved to the nearest table, sank into one of the cold plastic seats, not really noticing what I was doing or where I was. If I had intended to rejoin Marlo and Ellie, I forgot to. The warmth of coffee seeped through ceramic into my skin, and I gripped the mug between both hands. That warmth alone seemed to anchor my existence against the eternal and overwhelming cold of the void around our ship. My eyes drooped closed, focusing on the warmth, forcing the cold of the vacuum away, and wondering all the time why I did it, why I bothered, why we continued to fight, now, for the galaxy that would never come back together.

I don't know when, exactly, I realized that my culture had died.

But I was too certain of it at that moment for it to have just occurred to me. The galaxy I had known, been born and raised in, was never coming back.

And then, for a moment, I was floating, like a space-walker untethered from the ship, cast adrift as we would soon cast the bodies of the dead. Except I was warm—warm, and then safe, and then certain of that safety in a way that I had never been before, until my father’s voice, at last, cut through nothingness to find me.

*“Senereh, teh’tokah’tahni seera An-pen en-sahni.”*

The words, a well-known call to attention, did not feel real, and I missed the programmed response. As everyone around me chanted back, *“Seera An-pen en-sahni, nareh,”* I blinked, shook myself, and downed half the mug of coffee in one gulp, trying to wake up. My father needed me awake, as he needed Irene and Ellie and Marlo.

“I know we have a lot to do,” my father said as the room fell silent to listen. “We will get into the logistics soon. But first, I want to make sure everyone knows exactly what the situation is...”

“Shouldn’t—*teh’su’seer, nareh,* sorry, but...” The speaker, a table behind me, cleared his throat. I recognized the voice of an internal security officer named Prentis. “Shouldn’t we wait for everyone to get here?”

“Yeah, where is everyone?” A woman, Stevensen, communications officer, spoke up. “The deadline to gather was fifty seconds ago.” She was annoyed. Military protocols had been breaking down for years now, but we were still soldiers, and we still took deadlines seriously.

A silence followed that I think my father just did not have the heart to interrupt. As it dragged on, I felt the reality of our situation occurring to my crewmates, felt them coming to the one inevitable and horrific conclusion, felt it all sink in.

“Wait...” Brandon Holler, an engineer—so some engineers other than Ellie had survived—spoke at last into the silence. “Wait... No way...”

My father took a breath, then turned to me. “Stacy?”

I stood up so the crew could see me, taking a co-pad—portable computer—from my pants pocket and accessing the crew biometric data, just to confirm what I already knew. Then I nodded, raising my

voice so everyone could hear. "Yeah. There are about forty incapacitated in medical, but otherwise, we're all here."

"There can't be more than fifty people in this room!" Stevensen snapped, as if I had personally offended her.

"Fifty-nine," I said, sinking back into my chair. The whispers erupted around me, and my father had to hold up his hands and call for silence.

"*Tok'teh pen,*" he said, raising his voice in response to the rising volume of the whispers. "*Teh'tokah'tahni pen.* I know!"

But soon, the other voices were no longer whispering at all.

"This ship cannot run with fifty people!"

"What was that explosion?"

"You're telling me that three hundred people are just dead?"

"Can we even fly right now?"

"Oh, forget moving! How much oxygen do we even have?"

I couldn't place half the voices now flying around, echoing various versions of these questions in Human Standard and BelDom and a few other languages, too.

"Yes, I am well aware of the problems," my father spoke over the whispers that were coming nearer and nearer to shouts. "That is why we are here, to answer these... to set straight... Enough!"

My father rarely raised his voice, which meant that when he did, you paid attention. I caught sight of Irene, standing silent and half-hidden by shadows cast in the low lighting, watching the crew with her shrewd gaze. And then the talking ceased as military training took hold again. Fear and grief gave way as we remembered that we were soldiers, and Jonathan Eros was our commander.

"I understand," my father said when all else fell silent again. "I am going to tell you now exactly what the situation is. And then..."

I saw my father falter, saw the moment of terror that comes when you realize you have no way to finish the very important sentence you have started. I'm not sure how many others noticed it, because, at that exact moment, Irene spoke from the edge of the room.

"And then we will figure it out," she said. "Even if what we figure is that we die together here in the void. We will figure it out. *Doh'tokah'dohkni see'eh deh'be'shon. Beh. Shon.* The road keepers. The



ones who keep the travelers safe. Who protect those who cannot protect themselves and serve a higher purpose than ourselves. That is what we have sworn to be. *Doh'pantay doh'dohkni deh."*

*We will remember it.*

We all respected Irene, which made her command to remember slice and silence as well as any shout or threat. In the silence that she commanded, my father got through the rest of the briefing, I organized the cleaning crews, and Marlo organized other teams to attempt what repairs we could.

As the day dragged on into tomorrow, we began the work of mourning, and finally parted ways with our dead. The funerals lasted for days, and the feeling of them hung suspended over us for days more, as our water dwindled and the plants withered. We mourned, and we waited for a reply from a distant star system that seemed less likely to come with every passing hour. We waited until the full measure of hours had passed, and the time came when we had to face the truth, that if they had gotten our message, they had chosen not to respond.

And then, in the black and the cold, we were truly and totally alone.

Day six came.

And went.

No messages.

No proof, even, that our message had reached its destination.

We sent another. What else could we do?

Hydroponics was failing. Marlo hoped, at first, that the hydrogen fuser would solve the problem. With it, we could create water molecules out of the air around us. But everything is finite in space. No sooner had we repaired the fuser, than the one remaining biologic engineer determined we did not have enough oxygen left to spare for water creation.

An argument broke out. One side yelled that we had to make water in order to make plants grow, in order to get more oxygen. The other side yelled that if we did that, we would suffocate before the plants grew.

Day twelve came.

And went.

No messages.

No idea what to do about water and food and air.

Mostly air.

I launched four more crewmates in coffin pods, but the rest were recovering. They walked from medical into the reality that—whichever side won the argument—life support was about to break down.

Day fifteen came.

And went.

No messages.

Did we send another? Was there any point?

I sat on the walkway that connected the sides of the ship, with debris from the back of the ship still floating around us, watching the nothingness. Every star I saw was a thousand lifetimes away, twinkling and mocking me, my crew, my faith. It was all blackness in the end—the cold, empty, silent ending to eight years of war. A great civilization died in fire and then... Nothing.

My entire life ended around me in that blackness, twenty-three years of hopes and dreams and plans put on hold by eight years of war, but never actually forgotten. For years, in the back of my mind, there had been this idea that the war would end, and I would return to the path I had been on, join a traveling medical ship as its pediatric expert. At some point, I had realized that I was now in my thirties, that the war was not ending, that the chances of life ever lining back up with my age-twenty-three plans grew smaller and smaller with every passing day.

Still, I pushed the realization away. Thirty was still young. The average lifespan was a hundred and twenty-five. At eighty-two, my mother was considered too young to die, and my father was still more than a decade from retirement. People twice my age went back to school and started whole new careers. There was time still. Time

for the wars to end. Time for life to return to normal. Time to become myself again.

In the black around our dead ship, time at last ran out. Twenty-three years of planning caught fire like a plume of oxygen in the vacuum. And then it was all just vacuum.

Then I was thirty-one, and old enough to die, because there was no future left out here in front of me. My body lived on. My mind continued to think and feel and love and hurt. But my future was no more.

So what was I? What is life without progress? Can a thing without potential even be alive?

Day sixteen came.

It was Sunday.

My body knew that it was Sunday. My body got out of bed, got dressed in a clean, gray-white medical uniform, downed a cup of coffee, and then just started walking. I was halfway to the chapel deck before my brain caught up to my feet. I realized where I was going, and why, and where the sixty or so people around me were going too.

And then I just kept walking.

There were no seats in the chapel. The altar stood in the center of the room, and we stood in prayer circles around it. How many circles depended on how many people showed up. Military regulations set up shifts of two hundred people each throughout the day. Like meal shifts, we had stopped bothering with that a while ago. People showed up when they showed up, worshiped with those who came at the same time. Services lasted as long as they lasted and happened as often as was needed. And with the crew now so small, there would probably only be one service that morning.

Someone had replaced the wax candles on the altar with electric ones. Because we were running low on oxygen, I realized. Aside from the candles, the room was dark. There were cushions stacked against one wall, to kneel or sit on if someone stood up to speak. I grabbed

one without thinking, brought it to my spot, and dropped it there, even though, in my thinking mind, I was pretty sure no one had a sermon that day.

We formed the prayer circles around the altar, joined hands, and sang *The Summons*, greeting each other, calling God into our midst. My body knew these actions. My voice knew the words, notes, and harmonies. I slipped into the ritual, and the void around us fled away, replaced by the peace and calm that comes from the known and the familiar.

For the first time in sixteen days, I was safe, and I was certain. My future was gone, but I was not. I breathed, I sang, and I was known. I lived, and death could not erase the fact of my existence, just as it would never erase the fact of my mother's life.

Like her, death notwithstanding, I was eternal.

Probably because my father was career military, and I had grown up on warships, I had never been afraid of death. I feared my mother's death because I didn't want to face my own life without her. But I had never once feared dying.

Again, a combination of my father's career and my upbringing. But it was more than that.

I had grown up in a religion that fused the teachings of Human Christianity with the dominant BelDom tradition—a religion that Christians believed to be the same religion, born on a different world, but fathered by the same God. It was the religion that most Be'shon soldiers practiced. And its first, most important teaching was resurrection.

Not reincarnation. Not rebirth in this universe as it was. Not resuscitation. We believed in the resurrection of all dead at the end of time.

We believed, as science also taught, that the universe we knew would end. Scripture described the end as fire and judgment. Science described it as the cold conclusion of entropy. Both taught the same thing. The universe had a beginning, a birth from nothingness. And so, as a thing with a beginning, it would also have an end, a full circle conclusion, a return to oblivion.

But even in science, oblivion never truly won. Death only ever brought about new life in the end.

We were soldiers, the guardians of the roads and of the travelers, trained to walk the line between protection and violence, between life and death. We were people of faith, and people of science, and we knew the first promise of both to be resurrection. Fire or entropy, our reality would end, tomorrow or in ten trillion years, only to bring about what all endings brought about: a new beginning, new universe, new reality. Science proved everything until this point, and faith went a step beyond, to say that each one of us, alive and dead, would also begin again in that new reality. We would begin again as better, stronger versions of ourselves in a better, stronger reality beyond the evils of our universe, because it was born from our destruction.

As all things born from destruction are stronger than what has been destroyed.

It was in the words of this tradition that we sought comfort on that Sunday, on our sixteenth day stalled in deep space, with no hope of reaching land again. In that hour, we sang the old songs. We prayed the old prayers. We broke ration bars and pretended it was the Eucharist—the sacred meal of the Christian church. We joined hands and sang again, remembering that we did not fear death.

In the old songs, we chose to believe again that even in death we served a purpose, that even dead we remained connected to each other and to the source of Life itself. We chose to believe, again and again, with every over-known word of every over-known prayer, that even as we died in the middle of nothingness, God would one day gather our corpses from the void and make us live again.

After all, God had given us life once. Why not again?

I had never been afraid to die, a privilege granted to me by my father's career and my faith tradition. But those same things also told me it was better to live. Be'shon soldiers faced death to preserve the lives of others. My religion taught me to live as long and as well as I could, to help as many other people as I could. The longer the prayers went on that morning, the more songs we sang, the more annoyed I became at this thought of dying.

Even as I accepted my death, I fought against it. It felt wrong. Like giving in. Like giving up. After all, I was a doctor. The deeper I sank

into prayers meant to comfort me into the next life, the more I felt myself tensing against it. I was not meant to die here. It wasn't stubbornness, and it wasn't fear, or anger, or denial.

It was a fact.

I remember the moment I opened my eyes. I stood in the part of the prayer circle nearest the altar, and I opened my eyes because I felt a flame burn the skin on my neck. The sensation could not be real. They were electric candles on the altar, and even a real flame would have been too far away to touch my skin.

But I felt it.

"Holy crap!" I said, right there, in the chapel, in the middle of a prayer. My mother had always said that if I wasn't comfortable saying it in chapel, I shouldn't say it anyway. And for the most part, I followed my mother's advice.

Sixty heads swiveled my direction, most of their expressions somewhere on the spectrum between surprise and anger.

"Sorry, sorry!" I tore my hands loose from the circle, backing out of it. They would understand. Soon enough, they would forgive me.

Because we were not going to die here. Not most of us, anyway. It was a fact.

I tore through two more prayer circles and out the chapel doors, sprinting and tripping over rubble that no one had bothered to clean—because we were dying, anyway.

But we weren't. The answer had just come to me, and I'm pretty sure that I was not its origin. It was an insane idea—even cruel, in a way. But it would work. It would work.

I slid between the broken medical doors, then sped past the main desk with all its complicated and currently nonfunctional computer interfaces. It took up almost the entire front portion of the main medical room. Next, I sped past the life support beds, two still occupied, two nearly recovered soldiers looking up to squint at me. I made it to the back wall, where we had piled bodies sixteen days earlier, and shoved the derelict crash cots aside to get to the doors behind them.

"*Tein Eros, tok'sa?*" one of the recovering soldiers asked.

"You okay?" the other asked.

I didn't answer, busy entering my twenty-digit access code into a

keypad. It beeped at me. The illuminated strips around the door next to it flashed from red to green, allowing me to rip open the bio-storage closet and run to a row of locked containers.

Our salvation against the void.

On the bridge, almost invisible in the emergency lights, my father stood at the center console, scanning through communication logs. The holoscreen wasn't working right. It blinked in and out, with lines running through the images displayed above it.

Ellie sat beside another screen, further toward the front of the bridge, detangling a pile of peeling wires, probably trying to solve some power distribution problem. Both she and my father looked over when I pried open the bridge door. It was already propped open enough for a body to slip through, but I was dragging something wider with me. A moment later, Marlo stood up from the helm station, coming to join my father at the center console, with a frown pointed at the thing in my hands.

"Stacy," my father said. "So, just to head off some rumors that have been circulating... Did you shout *holy crap* in the middle of prayers?"

"Yes, I did." I dropped a heavy metal box, about two feet high and three feet wide, on the center console. The force of the drop sent static lines through various holographic images. We were losing power faster than I had realized, focused as I had been on the water and air problems. Maybe the heat would give out first.

"Do you know what this is?" I asked, attempting to shake the brick-like metal box.

My father raised his eyebrows. "A hazmat storage unit?"

"Yeah, yeah," I nodded. "It's designed to store hazardous biological materials for study, or until we can safely dispose of them. But the way it does that... Dad, this is a cryostasis generator."

All the wires in Ellie's hand dropped onto the center console, and only then did I realize she had joined us. Marlo leaned in, across

the console on his elbows, toward the metal box. I waved my hand over one of the console's touch screens, pulled up a holo-image, and flipped through several irrelevant files to a functional map of our ship, explaining: "Medical was equipped with seven of them. I checked, they're all working. And we still have twenty-nine fully functional escape pods that were not damaged in the explosion."

I showed them the specs—over two hundred blacked-out pods stuck uselessly to the escape bays, and twenty-nine with the green *SIDI* label—BelDom for *functional*.

"Escape pods are self-contained, life-support systems," I said, then tried to shake the brick-like box again. "These hazmat units are self-contained, *life-suspension* systems, with their own power supplies, designed to last something like a thousand years. And the best part, the hazmat units and the escape pods were manufactured in the same Be'shon factories, to the same standards, using the same mechanical components, and the same computer hardware and software—which means that, technically, theoretically, they should be compatible. They just need to be patched together."

My father stared at the screen. The rest of us stared at him. "Stace..." His voice trailed off, fearing the implications, fearing the hope. "What you're suggesting..."

"It can't work," Marlo said. He may have figured my plan out as soon as he saw the hazmat unit in my hands. "We're not bacteria. The successful cryo-freeze of complex, living organisms..."

"Yeah, it's complicated," I said. He would not derail me. I had thought through all of it. The implications were horrible, but they were not beyond us. "Cryo-units, real ones—for people, I mean—depend on being able to calibrate each individual pod for a specific person. Even if we had enough escape pods for everyone to have their own, we'd never be able to calibrate them the way cryo is supposed to be. And we're going to have to put three or four people in every pod, which only makes it more difficult. So, yeah, the truth of it is, some of us will die on re-entry. Some of us will be dead as soon as the freeze hits. But some of us will also live."

Ellie and Marlo glanced at each other. My father stared at the green lights on the screen. "What's the mortality rate?" he asked.



I sighed. “*Ee-bee’ah?* It could be as high as fifty percent. But it’s probably closer to twenty-five or thirty.”

“One-third of the crew,” Ellie said.

“Or one person in this room right now,” Marlo added.

My father nodded, not in agreement. Just something to do with his head. He stared at the lights for another moment, then seemed to shake himself out of a trance. “Ellie,” he asked, “can we move this ship?”

She nodded, but had to swallow a few times before she answered. “Yeah... I mean, as Marlo keeps so annoyingly pointing out...”

“Hey!”

“... we have operational thrusters. And if we’re talking about a centuries-long trip drifting on thruster power, with the minimal course correction needed in deep space... Honestly, a well-informed child could write and execute that program. The power requirements would not be worth mentioning, and the chances of anyone or anything just stumbling into our path are, well, practically non-existent. So, yes, *tok’teh pen*, if you’re looking for an accurate, impassionate assessment, then, yes, yeah, it would work, yes.”

“What would work?” Marlo asked, his voice tense.

“The moon?” I asked.

Once again, my father seemed to shake himself from a trance. “Yes. The moon. Even if no one’s there, we know it’s inhabitable...”

“Now!” Marlo said. “That system is light-years away. Centuries on thruster power. Even if this cryo thing could work—which I’m not convinced of, by the way. Sorry, Stace, but I’m not... Anyway, a lot can happen to a world’s survivability over the course of centuries.”

“Can we fix the communication system?” my father asked. “Is it possible? Yes or no. Right now.”

Marlo fixed his gaze on the top of the console, silent and unmoving.

Ellie took a breath, her fingers playing with the random pile of wires. “Maybe,” she said. “Almost certainly n... No.” She let out a breath that sounded like the beginnings of a sob as the wires slipped between her fingers. “No. Unless the laws of physics, and power, and nature, and computer programming all change in the next week, no. No, we can’t. Old wave is the only form of communication we will

ever have. And we..”

Her voice cracked, with wires clattering on the floor beneath her shaking hand. I knew the tremor that had gripped her body, knew the shaking in her voice, knew even the fight to hide it all, to cope, to pretend that the words she said next were not as terrible as we all knew them to be. “We... are not going... to survive... on this ship...”

A knot cut her voice off halfway through the word *ship*. I felt the same knot in my own throat, saw the same knot clench Marlo’s hands into fists on top of the holotable as his eyes glassed over.

“Dad...” I reached for his arm, my other hand still on the hazmat unit. “This will work. It won’t save all of us, but it will work.”

“But to put ourselves to sleep...” Marlo’s voice shook with the same knot that was trying to choke us all. “To sleep inside coffins, lost, maybe forever...”

It was horrific when he put it that way, a horror I had not allowed myself to feel earlier. The one calculation I had not made.

“*Tok’sa, nareh?*” Ellie asked. “What do we do?”

My father paused, staring through the screen and those little green *SIDI* labels that shone over the functional escape pods. Then, slowly, he raised his head.

“Simple,” he said, the last thing any military captain was ever supposed to say: “We vote.”

The dining hall was silent. Utterly, totally silent, as if the ninety-three of us had stopped breathing. As if our hearts no longer beat. In previous meetings, there had been shouting, raised voices, arguments, groans of disapproval. It was all preferable to the silence now.

My father just stood at the front of the room, his announcement made, the situation and my proposed solution explained, the pass-through window gaping into the black depths of the kitchen behind him. The rest of us just sat, staring at him under the dim emergency lights with more than two-thirds of the room looming black and

empty behind our few occupied tables.

Finally, hours later, it seemed, Prentis Serga cleared his throat. "You want us to... *what?*"

My father shook his head. "I never said I wanted this."

With that, the silence broke into shouts that immediately made the silence preferable. At the edge of our few occupied tables, I noticed Irene, all but hidden in shadow. She opened her mouth as if to speak, wavered, then closed her mouth again. The shouted objections continued.

My father raised his hands, speaking over the confusion of voices. "I know. That is why..."

"You know?" Prentis asked above the rest. "Then how are you even bringing it up?"

"Everyone needs to shut up!" Gail Stevensen shouted back in Prentis's direction.

"What are we, a passenger ship?" an engineer named Apperin agreed.

"*Tok'teh pen!*" Once again, my father raised his voice, and once again, it sliced the other voices into silence. "*Tok'teh deh'pen'dehni!* Believe me, *teh'tahni'ninnar-seh meheh-teh idipedzin-ee deheehlzehi'ahl-el, pahsohlnah nishay-ehdz'suseer-ee dehdz-deh'dehni'maysai-el-seh thray-hun-i-nisha'el-ohl-seer...* believe me..."

I swallowed as his words hit me: *The idea of freezing myself inside a coffin in deep space, hurtling toward an unfamiliar world that may or may not even be there in three hundred years...* The words caused reality to bleed once again through my determination. I knew this was right, that it was the only way. But my father was also right. So were Prentis and the other voices of dissent. The prospect was horrible.

"*Ser'tokah teh sahni ee-teh,*" my father said, once again asking that we listen, that we trust him. "I share your skepticism, your horror, your fear. That is exactly why I can give no orders here today. But we are suggesting this because we are out of options."

"*This* out of options, though?" Prentis spoke for the large group of skeptics seated around him. "*Doh'dohkni'mehe-seh-doh*—freeze ourselves for a future that might not even happen, knowing that, best-case scenario, one in three of us will die? Are we really that out of

options?”

“When life support fails, we will all die,” I said, surprised by how well my voice carried across the whispering room. “And yes, *teh'tokah'tahni* when, not if, *when*.”

“The fleet could still be out there,” Emery Calvin, a botanist turned communications officer, spoke up. “Our location was not totally unknown. Someone could still find us.”

“Yes,” Ellie said, her voice muffled because her head was resting face down in her hand. “It’s possible. I’ve done the math at least once a day for over two weeks now. When you consider how far the explosion propelled us from our established flight plan, combined with the likelihood that any ship in the fleet is still out there, our chance of rescue comes to less than one percent, every time.”

“Oh, great, you’ve done the math!” Prentis brought his fist down on the table, sending a visible jolt through Ellie. “Like the math that thirty-three percent of us will die in this freezing plan?”

“You want to talk math right now?” Ellie rose. Seated next to her, Marlo reached out for her wrist, but she jerked it away and kept speaking. “Let’s just compare math then: thirty-three percent versus ninety-nine percent. Tell me, just, which number is bigger, thirty-three or ninety-nine? Which is bigger, Prentis, huh?”

Marlo attempted to tug Ellie back into her seat, while she and Prentis glowered at each other, and my father called for order.

“Stop with the math, the math isn’t the issue here!” Stevensen exclaimed. “*Teh'tokah'tahni*, best-case scenario, seventy percent of us wake up...”

Prentis rolled his eyes. “A hundred minus thirty-three is not seventy, Gail.”

“One-third is an estimate, not a mathematical certainty, Prentis!” Ellie snapped.

“... seventy percent of us wake up,” Stevensen repeated, sending Prentis a silencing look, “two centuries after everything and everyone we have ever known is dead...”

“Everything we’ve ever known is already dead,” Irene said. Her arms were crossed, as her voice carried from the edge of the group. “No, stop and listen. This has to be said, because I have counseled

all of you over these years, and I know many of you will be tempted to vote against this because you hope to return to a galaxy that no longer exists..."

"We don't know that," Stevensen said, to murmurs of agreement. "Some of us still have family out there."

"Do we?" Irene asked. "I haven't heard from mine in six years. And yes, of course, I hold on to the hope that that does not mean what I know it means, but it does..."

"These wars will end eventually!" Ahiz Gill, a weapons specialist, spoke up. "The Be'shon was massive. Fragments of the government have to have survived. Other military ships have to be out there."

"Last we heard," Apperin said, nodding, "Be'shon Security was even rebuilding the colony moons around Acar..."

"We've lost Earth," Irene said.

A numb silence descended over the room. I felt the cold of the void reach inside my body, so strong and so real that I thought my organs might actually shut down. This was the first I'd heard of such a thing, and, from the look on his face, the first my father had heard, too.

Irene wobbled between her feet, uncrossed her arms to wipe her hands over her face, then crossed her arms again. "The notification came in a few hours before the explosion. After that, it didn't seem... relevant to mention. But..."

She shifted her weight between her feet again, and in the pause, Stevensen asked, "What do you mean, we've lost Earth?"

"Earth, Mars, the Outer Planet colony moons..." Irene took a breath. "The entire Sol System communication network just went dark all at once. Communication was spotty before that. There was an interrupted *ayer-eepahnah* order a few days before. And now... Earth is just gone."

I swallowed in an attempt to restore some feeling to the inside of my body. It didn't work. Nothing could ease the numbness that came from this revelation. *Ayer-eepahnah* meant *Do Not Approach*, a military call sign reserved for the most desperate of situations. It meant that the people being attacked knew rescue was impossible, and any rescue attempt would only destroy the rescuers as well.

Irene took another breath. "Maybe Be'shon Sec can rebuild the

Acar colony moons. Maybe some fragment of the Be'shon can survive there. I hope so, I do. But we lost Eeteron the day after all of this started. We still have no idea what happened there, just that overnight, we lost the world that produced most of our ships and most of our weapons, not to mention the second-largest Human population in the galaxy... And now we've lost our Origin World too. Even if Acar survives, it's not a *Human* world. The reality is, with Earth and Eeteron both gone, there's nowhere left for us to direct Human refugee ships, and no alien worlds that we can still call friendly. I wish I could see an end to this where things go back to the way they were—even near the way they were. But that future..."

She rubbed a hand across her forehead, shaking her head. "The chance is not even less than one percent. There is no math that can ever bring us back to the galaxy in which we were born. And knowing you as I do, I know that all of you know this to be true. We are the last embers of a dead civilization, and as such we will die—today, or three hundred years from now. The only question left is how to make the best of the life still in us today, to let the ember die, today, or give it a chance to burn on three hundred years from now. Those are our only options."

The certainty that had gripped me in the chapel returned, bringing feeling back into my numb hands. A hope did indeed burn inside this crazy chance. One way or another, we would die. The void would have us, for a time at least. That much was and always had been certain. But between now and then, there was still time, and in that time, there was hope.

For what, though? I could not stop myself from wondering. Nothing Irene had said, terrible as it was, was really unexpected. Even Earth's loss had become a predictable thing. So what did we hope for? What kept us fighting an impossible war for eight endless years?

Before I could work out any answers, my father cleared his throat.

"Like I said, we're going to vote on this. The command staff will organize some work crews, retrofit an escape pod, and run tests—confirm that what we're suggesting is even possible... In the meantime, I ask you to think about this, pray about it, whatever you have to do. And, two days from now, we will vote."

I tossed in my bed all that night, wandered the halls when I could take my lonely room no longer, ended up in medical, then in the dining room for breakfast.

Everywhere I encountered them, my crewmates whispered. The idea of joining them, in conversations, in meals, in prayers, filled me with an inexplicable panic. I felt myself the cause of something terrible, the same feeling that came over me when I had to sign death certificates—like I was single-handedly nailing each one of them into their coffins. They might never forgive me for this.

In the chapel, everything had seemed so clear, like a miracle even. But as time dragged on, more and more of me wanted to take the miracle back, if only to stop the eyes that now seemed to follow me everywhere.

After breakfast, I met Ellie and a crew of our remaining five engineers in the escape bay, dragging the bio-hazard containment unit with me.

The escape bay was a cavernous room on the outer edge of the back-section hull, with three rows of pod doors stacked on top of each other, three stories high. Scaffold-like walkways and ladders provided access to the upper two rows. The pod doors on the bottom level gaped open at me. Only one was lit up, directly across from the computer control terminal in the center of the bay. I stopped behind the terminal, glanced at the readouts that showed one active pod—our experiment, to prove my plan.

On the second and third levels, Ellie and the other five engineers moved between the dark pods, disconnecting their power units from the ship's generators. There was probably some important engineering reason for this. I didn't ask, focused instead on the way none of the engineers looked at me. I told myself it didn't mean anything, that they were just concentrating on their work.

I didn't believe myself.

Then Ellie saw me and turned to the nearest ladder. She jumped three steps, half floating in the low gravity this close to the outer hull. "So, how do we do this?" she asked.

I tore my eyes from the engineering crew, dropping the bio-hazard stasis unit at my feet. Even in low gravity, it was heavy enough to

make a thud against the metal floor grate.

Each stasis unit would have to freeze three pods, and there was no point experimenting with only one, just to discover it could not do what we needed done. The engineers grumbled when I explained this, apologizing all the while for not explaining earlier. Then a debate arose about whether it was more efficient to have the unit power three pods on top of each other, or three side-by-side. Ellie put an end to the discussion by reconnecting power in the pods on either side of the one already lit up, while we were all still debating.

Then we broke the unit open, pulled up the floors in the escape pods to get to their life support systems, patched it all together with wire and tape.

Wire and tape, the same tools humans had used for centuries. It was all so low-tech that I had to stop myself laughing more than once. On a ship filled with technological marvels, we were patching our salvation together, preparing to survive for hundreds of years inside icy blackness, with wire and tape.

The Frankenstein patch job was a matter of trial and error. First, the pods' power systems would not connect to the stasis unit's batteries. Then their computer systems would not sync. Then the computers cooperated, but only two pods would turn on. Then the computer in one of the pods decided it didn't want to cooperate again...

I could feel the crew's exasperation growing every time we had to twist wires apart and reconnect them. I couldn't help but feel most of the annoyance directed my way, and I had to wonder how many of them would vote against this plan, even if we did get it working.

At mid-day, Ellie snapped at me to go get myself lunch. Feeling that even she was annoyed with me now, I stomped my feet all the way to the dining room, piled turkey and lettuce onto a single slice of bread, and fell into a seat at the same table I had sat at while my father made his announcements.

A group of crewmates glanced over at me from a table away, their conversation humming into silence. One of them was Apperin Jones. Another was Prentis.

"*Tok'ser?*" I asked, staring back at them as they stared at me.

"How's it going?" Prentis asked.



I shrugged, choosing not to hear the accusing irony in his tone. "We're getting there."

"So this might not even work, right?" Apperin asked.

"Is that what all of you want?" I asked, my sandwich forgotten on the table in front of me. "For it to just not work, so we don't have to make the choice at all?"

Apperin dropped her face into her hand as if we had been arguing this point for hours, not seconds.

"The thing is, Stacy, we're not sure you fully grasp what choice you're asking us all to make," Prentis said in a low, dangerous voice.

That was the last thing I had expected to hear. I gaped at him, scrambling to interpret his words, to make sense of them. Finally, all I could say was, "*Tok'sa pen-deh?* What are you talking about?"

No one spoke for a moment. I fumbled for words, for some clue to what they could mean. "Look," I said, grasping at something. "I know the death rate is... But... You realize it will also be random. I have exactly the same odds of survival here as the rest of you."

"That's not what we mean," Prentis said.

Apperin put a hand on his arm, like a physical restraint against whatever he might say next. "Look, Stacy, we get it," she said. "You lost hundreds of *senereh* on your operating tables a few days ago. Your mother just died, *ehl-pehpeh deh*. We understand why you might want to just give up. We do."

"I'm not... giving... This has nothing to do with my mother!" They may as well have opened an airlock and shoved me out of it. I felt the full force of the vacuum fill me. And then a flash of heat began in my stomach and charged all the way into my skull, bringing with it the images of my mother dead in her bed, of laying her body in the coffin pod, jettisoning her into the void.

Before I knew what was happening, I found myself on my feet. Prentis and Apperin stood too, along with half the people at their table, with crewmates at other tables swiveling to watch us.

"This is our only chance of surviving!" I said, loudly enough to be heard across the room. Really, how did they not understand this? How could they even suggest other motives?

"Only if everything is gone," Apperin said. "Only if there really

are no other ships left out there. Only if the Be'shon really is..." She couldn't say the last word.

"You are giving up on the Be'shon," Prentis said. No part of me could ignore the accusation in his voice now. "On our sister ships, our civilization. You're declaring the war lost. And maybe the rest of us just aren't willing to do that yet."

"Hey, come on, that's unfair," someone, I do not know who, called from another table.

I barely heard the supporting voice. Rage burned inside me, threatening to come as boiling water from my eyes. It was all I could do to keep myself from screaming. "I'm not giving up on anything. The facts here..."

"It's okay, Stacy, we get it!" Apperin said, making me angrier still.

I was shaking as I turned to look her in the eye. "If you dare blame this on my mother's death again..."

"You have been through so much in the last two weeks," Apperin said, but she dropped my gaze.

"Only what we've all been through!" I was shouting now. "I am in the same situation as all of you..."

"Really?" Apperin met my gaze again, her eyes shooting daggers into mine. "Because last I checked, everyone that you have left to lose is on this ship with you!"

A shard of ice sliced through me, freezing my rage and leaving me speechless. I groped for a response, for some means of denial, even as the reality, the truth, opened like a black hole inside my lungs. My grandparents were all gone. My parents were both only children. I had no spouse, no children, no aunts, uncles, or cousins out there on the refugee ships or on the scattered Human worlds. There was no one living person that I hoped or prayed or dreamed of seeing again. I had only my father and my mother left.

And now my mother was gone.

I opened my mouth to speak, felt only wordless air move inside me. Was it possible? I wondered. Was I giving up—willing to give up because I had no reason to go on and no one left to fight for?

What was I even fighting for anymore?

"This is our only chance," I said at last. My voice sounded weak,

fragile, and not at all convincing in my own ears.

“You are tossing the entire galaxy aside in a convoluted plan that might not even work,” Prentis said.

“Oh, it will work.” Ellie might have been standing there, watching us, for some time, and I felt a surge of anger at her for not coming to my rescue earlier. “We got the systems synced. Even hooked up another stasis unit just to make sure it wasn’t a fluke. So, yeah, this is definitely a real option—just... to be clear.”

Half an hour ago, this news would have had me punching the air in triumph. Now, I felt nothing but a numb sense of dread coil in the pit of my stomach.

Was I just giving up? Was I maybe even hoping to be one of the third that died? Was that where this plan really came from—not God, not a miracle, but my own selfish descent into nihilism, suicide under the guise of noble sacrifice?

My eyes burning, sandwich left abandoned on the table, I stomped out of the dining room and tore through the dark halls. I needed to get as far away from them as I could go. Which meant crossing the walkway into the front of the ship.

I’m not sure what I meant to accomplish, or why, like an upset little girl, I ran to my father for... comfort, maybe? Or validation.

I’m not sure I even knew where I was headed. Before I realized it, my feet had taken me to the bridge. I ducked through the broken door, ready to shout and complain and quite possibly cry like I hadn’t since adolescence.

Inside, someone was already talking. I stopped, inches from the broken door to listen, like a child caught out after curfew. His voice was tired, a feeling I remembered from exam week at school, but so much heavier than the prospect of having to retake a class or two.

“*Teh’tokah’tahni* Jonothan Eros, again, *nareh*... captain of the Be’shon warship Staynar.”

My father paused, and I caught sight of his back, seated in one of the communication niches on the port wall. He was alone, but the console glowed in front of him, little lights bouncing to show that his voice was being recorded.

“I’m not sure why I’m contacting you again,” he said. “By now it’s clear either that you are not there, cannot respond, or have chosen not to—a decision that I in no way blame you for. We all have to do what we can to protect those in our care right now...”

He paused again, his eyes focused on the wall of the niche in front of him. The image of a family hung there, the officer assigned to that station, a spouse, three children, all smiling. In the shattered destruction of the bridge, among smashed consoles and broken bulkheads and more than a few stray bits of wire, the picture had remained in place.

My father took a breath, looking away from the smiling faces. “We have a way, now, to reach you—your moon—assuming anyone is still there. I’ve just been informed that it will work. There is a price, a steep one. But it’s the only chance we have to survive. And I just keep wondering if survival is... worth it.”

A lump rose in my throat. For a moment, I was sure my father was about to agree with everyone who had just attacked me in the dining room.

But then, he spoke again. “And then I remember the vows I took, half a century ago now, when the universe made sense. As SeeKay scientists, you would have taken similar vows—to hold life sacred, to protect, guard, save... To fight...”

For what, though? I wanted to shout the question, but something, the childish fear of being caught listening without permission, held my tongue.

“For more than a thousand years now,” my father continued, “the Be’shon has been the guardian, the keeper of peace, order... We weren’t always good at it. We were never perfect. Maybe we forgot that at some point. Maybe that’s why all of this happened. I don’t know. But we were there. For a thousand years, when no one else would be, we were there. And I have to believe that is not wholly gone. Because no matter how different tomorrow looks, tomorrow

will still come. There's no stopping it. And the one sure thing is that tomorrow will still need a guardian. And, I realize... I vowed to be the guardian back when everything made sense. And now that nothing does... how can I break the vow now, when the need is greater than it has ever been?"

My father shook his head, seemed to shutter, seemed to remember what he was doing and why he had started this speech in the first place.

"This is Jonothan Eros, the warship Staynar," he said, sitting up straighter. "*En-An-pen'beh*, I am actually talking to someone right now, and, God willing, in the next three hundred years or so, I will meet your great-great-great-grandchildren. Until then, *An-pen'beh en'beh*. May we meet tomorrow, whatever tomorrow may bring."

I left the bridge before he noticed me, found myself wandering the halls with my anger burnt away and nothing but grief left in the ashes. Mourning, I realized. I was mourning for my world, my mother, my crewmates, my own life.

Yes, at the heart of all my grief, my confusion, my anger, was my mourning for myself. I knew it now because I had just heard my father struggling with the same thing. In the black void that surrounded us—the void darker and deeper than outer space alone could ever be—the man, who all my life had all the answers, struggled to define his own identity.

If he had a right to that struggle, then so did I.

I had a life that I had planned, depended on, loved, and it was gone. It was like a living thing that had died and left me alone, an orphan, unsure how now to survive. I had to grieve it. I was right to mourn its loss, because like all lost things, only by mourning could I come to terms with the life that I now had. Only by grieving what could have been could I ever hope to appreciate what now was. My holy book, after all, was filled with laments, with men and women screaming "*Why, God, why?*"

Because only by asking the question, and asking it honestly, could we hope to find the answer.

And, I realized, my crewmates were going through the same thing. They lashed out at me, but it wasn't about me, and it wasn't my place,

my right, or my responsibility to change it. They also had a right to their grief, a need to mourn the lives they had planned, and question the lives now put before them. Like me, they had to ask in order to be answered. And it was not my job to give the answers.

That ability belonged to God, and God alone.

I wandered for the next hour, paused for a while on the central walkway, stared into the stars, then ended up in empty medical. I spent the rest of the day sterilizing already sterile medical equipment, letting my mind go numb, and waiting for a vote that would determine our future.

*An-pen'beh en-beh*, my father said at the end of his recording. He said it because it was the thing one said—good luck, best wishes... Literally, though, it meant, *Go by the way of God*.

Because in the end, we did not control these things, or the choices that other people made around us. We controlled ourselves alone, and then we trusted, each other, and God. We faced our own demons, and we respected the right of others to face theirs. We could do nothing more, and nothing more was required.

And that fact was, beyond all doubt, the hardest thing I ever had to accept.

“Hey Stace? Stacy, where are you? Stacy!”

My head jerked up, eyes peeling themselves open, only to find everything around me very, very blurry. The autoclave was speaking to me, demanding I empty it because the scalpels were cutting up its insides...

No, wait, that was dumb.

“Sta-cy...” The voice had turned singsong, like my mother waking me on a school morning. “Sta-cy Er-os, can you hear me...?”

I blinked, planted both hands on the desk beneath me, staring straight into the green *Cycle Complete* light as it glowed from the autoclave lid. My tel rested on the desk near my right hand. I must have

taken it off to find a more comfortable napping position.

"Sta-cy..." Ellie's voice sang out of my tel.

I tapped at the flashing light on the metal circle and croaked out, "Yeah..." I swallowed to unstick my mouth, then said, more clearly, "Yes, Ellie, *tok'sa?*"

A moment after I spoke, I felt a jolting sensation and tapped through screens on my tel to get to the clock. Had I missed the vote? Was she calling to tell me I'd screwed everything up and slept through a life-and-death decision made unanimously against me?

No, I had almost an hour left until the vote.

"Can you check on the escape bay?" Ellie asked, oblivious to my internal panic. "I thought I powered down all the pods for the night, but I'm getting readings like they're still on. I'm sure they're just phantom readings from our massively screwed-up system, but... It's just... I'm on the bridge, so I'm thinking you're closer..."

"Yeah..." My legs had yet to get the message about being awake. I dragged them under me anyway and wobbled toward the door. "Yeah, *teh'beh'tahni.*" As an afterthought I reached back for my tel, pressing the metal disk against my wrist to stick it there.

"*Seera,*" Ellie said.

In no hurry, I made my way down dark and broken corridors, feeling gravity lessen the closer I got to the outer hull. The escape bay doors slid open for me. I was already reaching for my tel to report that everything was indeed off and silent, when the bright lights inside fully powered escape pods stopped me short.

So, Ellie had left the pods on. And for some reason, she'd seen fit to turn them all on, too. Probably testing the power. I sighed and went to the main control console on the ground floor.

The console stayed dark when I tapped at it. Weird. It had been working fine a few hours ago. I tapped a few more times, then reached underneath it for the master switch.

The screens would not come on.

Did I seriously have to turn twenty-nine pods off one at a time? Rolling my eyes at our broken ship, I went to the nearest lit-up pod and whacked at the control panel beside the open door. The screen lit up, only to beep angrily at me when I tried to initiate the power

down.

"*Tok'sa?*" I asked it, tapped it again, received the same angry beep. "What's wrong with you?"

I walked past two dark, non-functional pods to the next lit-up one, only to get the same response from its control panel. This wasn't right. The ship wasn't this broken.

"*Tok'sa si'edzi?*" I asked, mashing at the touch screen in an attempt to get some kind of response. The panel was fine, just locked out of its own system.

And then the pod door snapped shut.

I had to jump back to keep from catching my hand between smashing plates of metal. It wasn't just that one pod, either. Every door, to every functional pod, had shut.

Escape pod doors did not shut until a pre-launch sequence began. It was a safety feature, and no malfunction could override it. A painful tightness pressed inside my chest. There was only one explanation for this.

A moment of sheer panic had me leaning into the wall beside the escape pod door, waiting to hear the airlocks depressurize, waiting to watch our last chance jettison itself into the void. I swallowed and tried to breathe and squeezed my eyes shut, counting to eight—one breath for every year spent in this war.

Nothing happened.

I opened my eyes. The pod doors were all still shut, but the pods were still there behind them, still lit up. Pre-launch but no launch. I backed away, watching those glowing doors as one watched a poisonous, sleeping animal, afraid to breathe in case a breath might wake the beast.

When several seconds had passed and still nothing happened, I reached for my tel.

"Hey, Ellie," I said when she answered. "So power—to the escape bay—is being accessed from an alternate site. Can you tell me which one?"

"Wait, are you saying power's actually on down there?" Ellie asked.

"Just... tell me which relay terminal..."

"Yeah, *tok'teh pen*, um..." The pause seemed to drag on for hours.



There was nothing I could do but stand in the empty bay staring at the bright little windows in those closed doors. They could launch at any second. The entire universe could end at any second...

"Okay," came Ellie's voice at last. "Looks like control's being routed through override terminal thirty-seven. It's above the escape bay..."

A map icon appeared on my tel. I tapped it to send the file to the nearest screen—a nearby pod's control panel. Knowing the ship as well as I did, I needed only a glance at the map, telling Ellie, "Right, thanks," and ending our call.

I sprinted out to the hall, then up the utility shaft, climbing the ladder past three decks and onto the fourth. The shaft door opened onto a network of scaffolds and ladders. Otherwise, the space was empty, designed to cushion the interior of the ship from the outer wall. I could see across the scaffolds to a backup command relay terminal, just a group of computers near the center of the air cushion. I doubted anyone had used it more than a few times in the ship's life. I sprinted down the metal scaffold, up another ladder, then froze ten feet from the relay terminal, and the man standing there.

It was Prentis, an image of the escape bay on the screen in front of him, each functional pod illuminated by a yellow standby light. Pre-launch status. He was just standing there, staring at the yellow lights, apparently frozen.

What was he doing, deciding for us all, before a vote? Anger flashed through me, sending my feet crashing toward the terminal. If they voted against me, that was one thing. But he had no right to do this. I reached for my tel, to call my father, or Ellie, or security officers we no longer had.

Something stopped me—something that felt like a hand on my wrist, holding me back. *Don't call to help yourself*, a thought whispered, like the non-existent flame that scorched me in the chapel. *Help him*.

Help your enemy.

Pray for those who persecute you—so the holy Scriptures said.

Persecute you. Or undermine you. Or attempt to launch your last hope into the void without your knowledge.

When I hesitated, there on the scaffold ten feet away, he glanced over at me.

I held up my hands, one with the back of my wrist facing him to show that I hadn't activated my tel. "I'm not calling anyone," I said. "Let's just talk."

"Talk?" he asked, as if it were a foreign word.

"*Tokah, doh-ah-doh*, yeah," I said, as if the concept in BelDom might somehow make more sense to him.

He didn't respond.

"What are you doing, Prentis?" I asked.

"You know what I'm doing," he said.

"I know you haven't done it yet."

The yellow lights glowed, illuminating his face as he stared at the terminal. With pre-launch activated, all it took was one icon, one movement of his finger, and everything would be over. But his arms remained limp at his sides. He hadn't really moved at all since I had seen him.

"Prentis..." I swallowed, watching the console, watching his hands. "If you launch those pods..."

"What? We all die?" He rolled his eyes. "I've heard it, Stacy."

I wanted to shout at him, to remind him that he had no right to choose for all of us, that he was being selfish and cruel and just plain wrong. Even my father, who had the right to choose for his ship, knew he couldn't do this.

Something held my tongue. We just stood there in silence, watching the yellow lights, feeling time slip past us. I wanted to say so many things, beat the truth over his head, and demand submission.

I said nothing.

Several minutes passed. I saw him almost speak a few times before, finally, he did.

"Did you even..." His left thumb was on a gold ring on that same hand—the third finger symbol that most Human marriage partners wore. He turned it round and round in some compulsive motion as he spoke. "Did you even know that I was married?"

I had, of course. I had never seen him without that ring.

"You've never spoken about a spouse," I said. "I figured it was not a topic for conversation."

He nodded, watching the ring as it moved around his finger. The

pod launch icons still glowed standby-yellow beneath his hands.

"The day of the bombing, when the Be'shon senate building blew up—the day that started all of this—we had the galactic news feed playing on mute in our living room, weren't really watching it, because... We were discussing plans for our anniversary."

I forced myself to watch him, his face, and not the yellow lights that threatened everything. I forced myself to hear him, look beyond the facts and understand the reasons. It was hard work, especially when I saw his eyes twitch toward those yellow lights. If he reached for the launch icon, I could not move quickly enough to stop him. He had to be aware of that.

"We were going to visit her family," he said, eyes again on the golden ring. "Her family... on Earth."

The mention of our Origin World tied knots all across my chest. I had been born far away and only visited the planet twice. Even so, that world meant something to every Human. And now, everything Irene had revealed in the briefing, and what it must have meant to him, crashed over me.

"I had never been to Earth," he continued. "Still haven't. And then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw the Be'shon senate building on Acar explode." He gripped the ring between his pinky finger and his thumb, slipped it off his finger, and then back on. "And then, suddenly, plans to visit became plans for permanent relocation—and she went. I got her onto one of the first refugee ships. And she made it, too. Back to the family farm in a place called Idaho."

I no longer had to fight to watch his face instead of the lights. His expression, or lack thereof, had mesmerized me. He was not emotionless, but emptied, burned out, slipping the ring on and off now instead of twisting it.

"We kept in contact," he said. "All these years. And now, I guess, even that is gone."

And she might be gone too. We had no idea what had happened to Earth, no idea who or what might or might not have survived, or what they were surviving. We would never know. The gripping, absolute certainty of that uncertainty pulled the void with all its cold endlessness once again into my chest.

“So, doctor...” He looked at me, sudden eye contact that echoed inside my body like a physical blow. “Really, tell me, what am I supposed to do here? I know I keep bringing up the third of us that will die in this plan of yours. But...”

“But that’s not what you’re afraid of,” I said, with the image of my mother’s death bed in the back of my mind. Her dying—the physical fact of it—had never been the thing that I feared, either.

He shook his head, now twisting the ring again. “The thing is, I don’t think—no. I know, somehow, inside myself, that I will be one of those who live. And how am I supposed to do that, Stacy, tell me? *Teh’tokah’tahni en-sa*, so tell me: How do I live on, with everything else dead? The plan, the reason, all these years, was to join her. I fought to get back to my family. So, *sa’tokah teh’sahni*—what is the reason now?”

And there it was, not the question I had been asking myself for two weeks, but the answer. Another asked the question, and the answer was just there. Perhaps it always had been. Maybe I just needed to know I wasn’t alone in asking.

“Prentis,” I said, taking a step toward him. “The reason is the same as it has always been. I’m sure you wanted to return to her. I’m sure you intended to. But if you were fighting only for that, you would have deserted this ship years ago.”

“So what then?” he asked, again my own questions, that I suddenly had answers to. “What are we even fighting for, then?”

“Hope,” I said. He snorted, and I raised my voice. “Yes, Prentis, hope. A very specific hope that the Be’shon has always fought for. The whole reason the Be’shon ever existed at all. Hope that one day, somehow, all our efforts and all our pain will contribute to the making of a better world.”

I crossed the distance between us, and he did not move, did not reach toward the launch icon, did not even glance at the yellow lights. I ignored them too. They did not matter. I reached instead for his left hand, the ring, stopping it mid-twist.

“There is nothing left that you can do for her,” I said, holding onto his hand. “Just like there was nothing left that I could do for my mother. We did not fail them, Prentis. Let’s not fail each other now.”

We ended the pre-launch state, powered the pods off, went down to the escape bay to double-check everything, walked together to the dining room, all in silence. The hour had passed, and we were almost late, last to arrive in the now overlarge room.

Irene, standing at the edge of the occupied tables, saw us enter together. Her eyes narrowed, watching us with a cautious expression. "Everything alright?" she asked, as Prentis broke away from me. He joined his usual table, surrounded by the other dissenting voices, none of whom had joined him in the attempted mutiny, I noticed.

Was that a sign in my favor?

I nodded to Irene. "Just... something we had to talk out."

Anyone could have guessed there was more to the story, and Irene could guess better than most people. But she just nodded to me with a smile that said *tok'teh pen*, and all its implied meanings, as well as any words could have.

I left her to take my own usual seat near the front of the room. My father took his place in front of the dark pass-through window, and the chatter at the tables died away.

"So, um..." My father paused to take a breath, and I saw again the tiredness that I had heard on the bridge—what was that, nine hours ago now?

It felt like days.

"So, if you all have a co-pad," he said, "I can set up a secret ballot, and..."

"Forget the secrecy," Stevensen said, to a chorus of assenting nods and whispers. "Our opinions are our opinions, and there are too few of us left to worry what we think of each other."

My father paused, looking around at faces that showed no objections. After a moment, he glanced at Irene. She nodded, and he shrugged.

"Okay, then, a standing vote. Standard two-thirds majority to carry. I'm already standing, so..." He took a breath, because even certain of the decision, it was a difficult one. "I am for the plan."

"As am I," Irene said. "Also already standing, so..."

The chair creaked beneath me as I got to my feet. No one would be surprised, but it had to be done. "As am I."

Behind me, Marlo and Ellie both rose, holding hands. “As am I,” they said in unison.

“It’s really just selfish, though, isn’t it?”

A part of me had been dreading Prentis’s voice since the meeting began. The icy silence of the void descended over us once again as he spoke from his seat, his left hand with its golden ring resting on the table in front of him.

Prentis’s eyes passed around the room, lingering on my father and Irene, missing me entirely.

“To be unwilling to risk your own life in the hope of saving those around you—selfish,” he said. “To cling to a future that no longer exists—that’s not delusion.” Here his eyes did find me at last. “It’s selfish. And we are not selfish. We are Be’shon.”

And then he stood.

The room waited for it to be a mistake, a misunderstanding, a hallucination—increasing amounts of carbon dioxide messing with our brains. But it was none of these things, and eventually, in silence, the vote went on.

Stevensen was the next to stand. Then Apperin. Then an entire table all together. It was slow, thoughtful. I don’t know how long it took, only that, in the end, all ninety-three of us were on our feet.









# WENAPREEM

## THE FIRST HUNT

SHANNA TERESE



# WENAPREEM

---

From the Latin: *Venatus Primus*

The First Hunt



**A**EREAAL ASSAIN-LUKAN, SIXTEEN YEARS OLD, CROUCHED with one leg sinking into mud. She didn't notice. Or, at any rate, she didn't care. The jeans had already been dirty when she dragged them off a collapsed store manikin to replace her long, white skirt. High above her sinking knee loomed more vital concerns.

The sun was setting, and the shadows got worse at night. That was probably their imagination. They all agreed it was their imagination. And still, none of them could shake the certainty that darkness made this apocalypse worse.

Aereal crouched with her knee in the mud between two brick walls, houses, one with lace curtains in the kitchen window about twelve feet above Aereal's head. Above the crouched heads in front of her, she could just make out the broad street that ran in front of the houses. She strained her ears, listening for shadows on the rooftops above her head, both her hands gripping the rifle that rested across her thighs.

It was a police-issue rifle—the kind brought out for the worst of riots. Her father had taken it from his precinct before rushing home four nights earlier, when the shadow nightmare began. Yes, her upright, law-abiding, by the book, rules are made for a reason, decorated police officer father had stolen a dangerous weapon from his own precinct and given it to his teenage daughter.

That was how completely the world had fallen apart.

There was a shriek in the gathering gloom between two buildings far away. A few members of their group turned to look, but Aereal did not. She kept her eyes straight ahead, strangling the rifle between her hands. She had learned not to look for the shadows. It didn't do any good. It was just scary. *So focus. Listen. Don't look.*

"Okay people..." Bretton Assain-Lukan—Officer Brett to most of their little group—Dad, to Aereal—leaned against the innocent white pickets of an ordinary neighborhood fence. On the other side of the fence was the street, and on the other side of the street stood another deserted house with green painted brick and elegantly draped windows. *Who had lived here?* Aereal wondered for a split second, then reminded herself to focus. Looking at the city around them, wondering about all the people who should have been there, was just as dangerous and distracting as looking for the shadows.

The residential neighborhood around them stretched for almost two miles, ending like most of them did in one of the city's three dozen shopping centers. It was evening. People should have been out in their yards, neighborhood children playing together, parents chatting on the porches, couples pushing baby strollers toward the nearby park.

Instead, the roadway stood shrouded in stillness and silence, porches opened to the streets like overgrown tombs, with no light behind the fancy curtains. Nothing remained of the people who should have been there, except for the occasional shriek—and the shadows.

"So, here's how it's going to go," Aereal's father said, turning to look at the fifteen faces behind him. "We have to cross the street—I know, I know, but we have to. They could come over this roof at any moment, and I haven't seen shadows across the street for a while."

"We just heard a scream," Annie, one of the mothers, said. Her three-year-old son hung on her back, and she pressed his little arms into her chest as she spoke. They had come to the group three days ago, mother and son and an untouched wedding ring, saying nothing about the boy's father.

Everyone knew what that meant. No one asked.

“The scream was not across the street,” Aereal’s father said. “Look, we all know the deal. There’s a police locker two blocks away. It’s the safest place around. Getting there starts by crossing this street.”

Two nights ago, they had been in a community center, an immense brick building about five city blocks to the south. Over a hundred people had taken shelter there, many coming like Aereal and her family from the spaceport after the shadows swarmed it, four nights earlier.

The shadows had already attacked that part of the city, and it took them a while to circle back to the community center. When they did, the survivors from the spaceport scattered. Twenty-one people ended up following Aereal’s father. Sixteen were left in the group now, including him.

“Here’s how it’s going,” Aereal’s father said. “I will cross first, make sure the opposite side is clear. When I wave, you come two at a time. Silent feet like we’ve practiced.”

Annie raised her hand, and Aereal’s father nodded. “Yes, yes, children being carried count as one with the person carrying them. Are we ready?”

“No,” more than one person said. Aereal felt her mother’s hand press down onto her shoulder. Courage seemed to radiate through the touch, transferred into her. Aereal lifted her rifle so that the top of the barrel pressed against her shoulder, muzzle pointed into the sky. She didn’t look at her father as he hopped the fence and darted without a sound across the street. She stared instead straight into one of the white pickets, making faces out of the wood grains, waiting. Waiting. Waiting.

Beside her, her mother rose. Aereal took a breath and rose too. The first pair went—mother and father, each with a child hanging from their backs. They were across the street in twenty seconds, and a group of two men went after them. Next went a nine-year-old girl with one of the gunmen. Then two women, one of whom, Tyren, still wore her white and gold spaceport security uniform. Then Annie, her boy, and the other gunman.

The group thought of them as *men*, anyway. But they were just boys, really. Brothers, Noah and Aaron Vitoran-Smith. Noah was eighteen,

only two years older than Aereal. Aaron was a month younger than her. But they came from a family of sports hunters, which meant they could handle weapons, which made them the group's main defensive line—along with Officer Brett and Aereal.

Aereal watched Noah's and Annie's feet move against the pavement, waiting with her mother for their own trip to the other side. Between the two sides of the street stretched forty feet of sidewalk, grass, open concrete, grass, and sidewalk again. Over the course of one week, these ordinary things had transmuted into a gaping chasm of death and horror. Every open space was like that now.

Halfway across, Annie's foot snagged on a piece of loose concrete, and in that second, Aereal knew what was coming. Noah reached out to keep Annie from tripping, shifting his hunting rifle into one hand. *Haysha*, Aereal thought, the swearword she would never speak aloud with her mother so close.

Annie's stumble was not loud enough to draw the shadows. Probably, they were already on their way. But as her foot caught, and Noah reached out to grab her, two of them came.

One sprang from the roof directly above Aereal's head, another from the roof behind it. They had solid bodies, the outlines of men, but blurred, and far too large, towering over even the tallest man that Aereal had ever seen. They moved faster than Humans could see, literally, taking on the appearance of gray smoke and shadow. Forcing Humans to fight against phantoms.

Beside her, Aereal's mother shouted the warning: "Noah!"

Noah shoved Annie and her son toward the other side of the road, turning as he did toward one of the shadows. He raised his rifle, braced it against his shoulder with his hand under the barrel, aimed, fired. The shot passed within half an inch over the shadow's shoulder, embedding instead into the side of a house. He fired again, this time catching the shadow in its chest. The impact threw it back, roaring.

Across the street, Noah's brother, Aaron, grabbed Annie, pulling her into the space between houses, while Aereal's father fired against the second oncoming shadow. The first shadow let out another roar and threw itself at Noah. He fired, missing despite expert aim. These monsters just moved too fast. Aereal grabbed onto a picket and sprang



over the fence, sliding on loose dirt between the yard and the road.

“Eery!” her mother shouted after her. Was she telling her to come back, to stop, to keep going? Aereal would never know. She steadied herself, took three steps toward Noah and the shadow, raised the rifle to her shoulder. It hummed to life under her hands, laser guides sweeping the street and finding their target.

Officer Brett had his only child at the gun range by age ten. Six years now of bi-weekly target shooting had turned her into something of an expert. And this rifle was so much better than a handgun. It had an intuitive laser targeting system that, when guided properly, made it impossible to miss. The internal computer automatically calculated for movement, wind, the shooter’s stance, air pressure, and other weather conditions.

The difficulty was making certain it knew to aim for the shadow. Aereal had taught the software to recognize and exclude everyone in their group, which meant that she couldn’t hit Noah even if she tried, not without overriding the exclusion first. But if she didn’t focus the guides right, she could still miss her target.

And focusing on the shadows even for a second was not easy. The targeting system glitched three times before Aereal heard the click, telling her it had found its target. At the click, she fired.

The rifle had two settings, *Lethal* and *Non*. *Non-lethal* sent out a nanite scatter net meant to wrap around limbs and immobilize a target. But *Lethal* fired CEPs—*Concentrated Explosion Points*. They were also nanite clusters, designed to penetrate like bullets and create micro explosions inside the target on impact. The point was to kill humanely and instantly, doing just the right amount of damage to accomplish that task.

Aereal had yet to use the non-lethal setting.

The CEPs struck dead center between the shadow’s shoulders. It turned from Noah to Aereal in response, roaring, dropping onto all fours to charge like a gorilla at this new threat. Noah re-aimed at the shadow’s back as Aereal refocused on its front. The rifle hummed, then clicked, and she squeezed the trigger twice in rapid succession. Both shots hit their target, one in the shadow’s shoulder, the other in its stomach.

CEPs were supposed to hit a target's skull, but the shadows were so fast that even military-grade guidance systems weren't good enough. It shouldn't have mattered, really. The micro explosions should have been lethal, no matter where they struck. Headshots were just cleaner. Still, three impacts later, the shadow kept moving.

With the shadow almost on her, Aereal fired again, a point-blank strike to its forehead this time. The shadow squeaked, jerking backward as if someone had just pulled on a cord attached to the back of its skull. Aereal refocused and fired again. The shadow-form melted as the creature's vibrating slowed, proving that there was, indeed, a solid body beneath the smoky outline. It was Human, but also something else, something much larger, difficult to see under the damage the CEPs had already done to its skull. It gave a gurgling, choked half roar, wobbling on all fours with black liquid leaking onto the pavement beneath it.

Another shot came from behind it, Noah's hunting rifle, making a much sharper, less mechanical sound than Aereal's. For the safety of other hunters, his ammunition was designed to stop inside whatever object it first hit. Otherwise, the shot would have passed straight through the shadow and struck Aereal.

Instead, Aereal was close enough to see the bruise, spreading black beneath the shadow's bare chest, where Noah's slug had stopped. The shadow-form was almost gone now, and she could see more black spots spreading like webs through the creature's gray skin—damage caused by her CEPs exploding inside it. She aimed again, fired again, another headshot, then another, then another, and another—again and again and again.

"Okay. Eery... Eery!"

Noah was grabbing her wrist, wrenching her hand away from the trigger. Aereal found herself gasping, hands white from clutching the rifle, shoulder numb from the pressure of it, and the shadow's skull a pulverized mass of black liquid at her feet.

"We have to go!" Noah dragged her by her wrist toward the houses. "We have to go!"

Her mother was waiting across the street with the others by then. Aereal remembered a second shadow and almost turned back to

see what had become of it. Instead, she followed her father, with the rest of their group, through the narrow spaces between houses and yards. They crossed over two city blocks, avoiding the open roads by taking back ways and alleys, with the sunlight dying far too quickly above their heads.

## 6 DAYS EARLIER

It was the third fight she'd had that week with her mother—and it was Monday afternoon.

So, an average weeknight, really.

It started when her mother suggested they go shopping for new school clothes that weekend.

Shopping, such a blatant, transparent lie. Her brainwashed, law-abiding parents just couldn't stand having a child who openly flaunted her ability to think for herself.

And what was she supposed to do, *not* point that out?

If her mother had just owned up to it, that would have been one thing. But when Aereal had the nerve to speak the obvious truth, her mother had actually rolled her eyes. "Freaking gatch, child, this has nothing to do with the whiteout thing!"

*Freaking gatch?* Really? What was her mother doing using whitelist teenage profanities now? Did she really think that would have some kind of effect on her daughter, brainwash Aereal into thinking she was cool, or trustworthy, or something?

"I'm not stupid, Mom!" Aereal said, making the hanging pots ring on their chains above the sink. "Every day it's '*why did you have to die your hair white,*' and '*stop wearing white makeup,*' and now you want me to get new clothes?"

Her mother stood next to the sink, her arms crossed, staring at Aereal with no emotional expression whatsoever, which made sense. She was a government-programmed robotic parental template unit, after all.

Aereal sometimes wondered if that could be literally true. Had the government actually succeeded in producing robot parents? It had to be part of their overall child brainwashing agenda. And her mother never reacted to things correctly. She accepted none of the incontrovertible evidence that Aereal presented her with—no matter how loudly Aereal did the presenting. What except a robot could be so robotic?

“Eery,” her mother said, “you’re sixteen. Bodies have a tendency to change during this period in a person’s life.”

“Oh, come on!” Aereal let out a groan that sent the hanging pans ringing again. “Of all the transparent, lame-ass...”

“If you call me a liar again, *parquie...*”

“I haven’t grown in four years, Mom!”

“You haven’t gotten taller in four years!”

A jet of heat seared up through Aereal’s chest and into her face. “Shut up, Mom!”

“Don’t you speak to me that way,” the parental robot snapped. “Aereal, your shirts are getting too tight. I don’t mean they’re too low cut. I don’t mean a tight style that I disapprove of...”

“You disapprove of everything!”

“...I mean, your clothes are just straight up too small for you. And I’m pretty sure your undergarments aren’t the correct size anymore either!”

“Our underwear was invented by the non-Human fashion corporations to ensure that Humans are always a little uncomfortable and therefore have difficulty concentrating...”

“Dear, if your bras are uncomfortable, it’s probably because you’re wearing the wrong size!” her mother said.

“So, you’ll let me buy all white clothing on this innocent little shopping trip, then?” Aereal asked.

“Yes!” A hint of emotion cracked the robot shell. “If it gets you into clothing that actually fits, that you don’t have to keep pulling up or down or messing with every six seconds...”

“Oh stop lying!”

“Aereal!”

“You’ll get me to the store, and you won’t let me so much as look at

anything that has even a stitch of white..”

The argument spiraled from there, because her mother just kept refusing to acknowledge the clear and obvious truth.

No matter how many ways Aereal phrased it, her mother just refused to hear sense. No matter how many times she tried to explain the purpose of her political protest, her mother just refused to hear sense. No matter how much alarming evidence she brought forward to prove that alien industries were plotting under the Be’shon government to make all Humans prisoners on their own worlds, her mother just refused to hear sense.

But of course she did. Widespread blindness was one of the reasons Aereal had joined the whiteout movement to begin with.

How the Human majority couldn’t see the brainwashing of the industrial and overwhelmingly non-Human-owned fashion corporations was unbelievable. How they just missed everything those corporations did to keep Humans in submission to the cookie-cutter good little non-intrusive Human molds was unbelievable. But they did miss it. They just went along with the non-Human agenda and refused to see how their own freedoms and traditions and choices were being systematically stamped out every single day.

Aereal and the whiteouts refused to be brainwashed, and for that, of course, they were persecuted.

The fight ended with Aereal once again trying to give a much-needed warning about alien oppression while her mother screamed at her to go to her room because she was grounded, again.

Ten minutes later, Aereal lay on her back in bed, staring at the ceiling, pretending to contemplate the latest in a long line of groundings. It wouldn’t last long. Her mother had to go to the grocery store. She knew because she’d overheard the tedious *who’s turn is it to do what chore* conversation between her parents that morning.

Married people were so unbearably boring.

They should be thankful, really, for the fights, the screaming matches, the numerous punishments to keep track of on the kitchen stat-board. *How long Aereal’s grounded for this time* was the only thing more interesting than laundry that ever made it onto that board.

Aereal rolled onto her side, listening for the door downstairs to

open so she would know her mother had left and could watch TV. Her mother would have locked her out of the household entertainment system, but she'd figured out a way around that years ago.

Her parents were so naive. It was hysterical.

Even locked out, though, there was one program she could still watch: *The Feed*, a galactic, constant-streaming news and information channel.

News. Aereal snorted at the thought. It was all just Be'shon propaganda on non-stop repeat, brainwashing Humanity into thinking it still had some say over galactic affairs. But, with her mother taking forever to leave, sheer boredom drove Aereal to wave her hand over the sensors on her bedside table.

The Feed image came on, projected onto the wall across from her because that was the flat surface she happened to be looking at right then. Oh terrific, the gardening slot was on! A bunch of token Humans in pretty dresses and suits sat discussing flowers, as if Humanity had no more pressing concerns.

Like how the BelDom-run industries that owned those pretty greenhouses were selling contaminated seeds to Human farmers, maybe? Aereal had found a very illuminating article—promptly discovered and deleted from her co-pad by her parents—that mentioned something about seeds genetically modified to transform Human farmland into alien-friendly habitats.

Wake up flower-people! Wake up!

Bored and upset, Aereal dozed off before she heard the door downstairs open. In her dreams, she thought she saw a bright flash of light and smelled fire or smoke or maybe ash.

She woke a while later to strange, harsh sounds. The language, she realized. The language the reporters were speaking on the Feed had switched from Human Standard to one called BelDom.

Aereal made a gagging noise. BelDom wasn't even a proper language. It was a hybrid mess cobbled together during the ancient Human/alien wars so soldiers could sort of communicate with each other on the front lines. The anti-Human government that emerged from those wars, the Be'shon, then took the mess of faux-Human grammar and alien words and started calling it their own *official*

*language*. They would force everyone to speak BelDom exclusively if they had their way.

The Feed was galaxy-wide, but it was supposed to broadcast to each world in that world's standard language. Human worlds had at least maintained that much autonomy. So, when the Feed started broadcasting BelDom into her bedroom, Aereal sat up in a surge of righteous indignation, ready to dash downstairs and present yet more evidence to her parents.

But what Aereal saw on the screen, what she pieced together from her scattered comprehension of the BelDom language, was enough to make even righteous indignation pause.

Aereal crept downstairs toward the sound of her mother's voice. She was back in the kitchen, returned from the grocery store, and ordering a car from the planet-wide CarCall service, for some reason. The business day was ending, which made getting an unscheduled car difficult. Aereal heard the computer predicting a thirty-minute wait time.

Her mother didn't appear to be ordering the car for herself. "You hear that, *parquies?*" she asked.

There were only two people aside from Aereal that her mother called by the child endearment term *parquie*.

Aereal peeked around the kitchen door. The screen on the refrigerator door was active, looking in on a familiar living room and two familiar faces.

Aereal glared at the boy and girl on the screen even though they could not see her. So, her mother was calling a car for *them*. Great, Aereal thought with an inward groan. Just what she needed that night—dinner with *them*.

"You know..." her mother said, when the two on the screen had agreed to wait for the car. "Since you have time anyway... Why don't you pack an overnight bag? Stay here tonight? Sound good?"

*No!* Aereal almost shouted. Her idiot cousins, Sean and Mylee, had their own house, their own parents, and even each other. Why did they always have to be invading Aereal's space? Every holiday. Almost every weekend. They even had most of their birthday parties at her house—fortunately, they were twins, so there was only one of those per year. And of course, they got invited to all of Aereal's parties, birthday or otherwise. Her parents never even consulted her about that. They were only two years younger than she was, so she had no memories of them not being constantly in her way.

She couldn't blame it all on them, of course. Sean and Mylee were morons, finished at the bottom of every school grading curve, even though their parents were literal geniuses, and showed zero interest in ever having an original thought. So, naturally, Aereal's parents wished they could have Sean and Mylee instead of their own top-performing, self-possessed daughter.

Aereal knew exactly what had happened here. Her mother had turned on the Feed, seen the same breaking news Aereal had just seen, and immediately called to make sure her niece and nephew were okay. Had she even given her own daughter a second thought? Unlikely.

Aereal turned on her heels and stomped away, making sure her mother could hear her walking all the way up the steps. It wasn't like she needed her mother to check on her, anyway. She wasn't a scared little moron like the twins. The Be'shon administration building had just blown up, on the alien planet Acar, hundreds of thousands of light-years away from her own Human colony world. People like her parents would be all upset, and scare-easies like her cousins would be frightened. But Aereal could think for herself. Aereal knew better.

Less than two minutes after she had slammed her door as loudly as she could, Aereal heard her mother's feet climbing the stairs. The annoying knock at her door came a few seconds later. "Eery?" her mother asked. "You okay? *Tok'sa* ... good... in there?"

Was she okay? Aereal rolled her eyes at the ceiling, then shouted at the door, "Go away!"

"*Parquie...*" her mother said.

"Shouldn't you be checking on the twins again? They've been out



of your sight for about three whole minutes now.”

“*Parquie*, they called me.” Her mother let out a tired sigh—thoroughly unconvincing, of course. “I didn’t even know what had happened until they called me.”

Aereal groaned into her pillow, then threw it at the door. “Go away!”

“You saw the Feed, right? The explosion on Acar? Eery, open the door so we can talk, please.”

“So you can brainwash me into thinking this is a bad thing, right?” Aereal grabbed her other pillow and stuffed it under her head, up against her ears.

“It is a bad thing... And I can tell you’re upset... Aereal...”

“I’m not upset! What do you mean, upset? What are you even talking about?”

“Aereal, please, open the door!” Her mother jiggled the handle, but the lock held. The attempted entry sent ripples of pure fury shooting through Aereal.

“Go away!” she shouted. She grabbed earbuds from her bedside table, jammed them into her ears, and ordered Sidi to activate their noise-eliminating feature.

Aereal trudged last into the dining room that evening. Her fourteen-year-old cousins, Sean and Mylee, were already seated. They looked up as Aereal dropped into the chair across from them, and Sean might have started to wave hello.

“So you’re spending the night?” Aereal asked, her eyes narrowed at them.

Sean turned red.

“What is your problem, Aereal?” Mylee snapped.

“I don’t have a problem!” Aereal said. “You’re the ones freaking out over nothing.”

“Aereal, please, have some respect for the situation.” Her father

had just appeared with a pan of potatoes, which he set on the table. "And you two are always welcome."

Aereal leaned back in her chair, crossing her arms. "Yeah, of course they are. Any excuse to have them over..."

"The government just blew up!" Sean said.

"And I say, it's about time!" Aereal shot back.

"Aereal, enough!" Her mother dropped a pan of baked carrots onto the table with a thud that rattled every other dish. "People are dead. Do you understand this? This isn't some hypothetical thought exercise. Actual people are dead."

Aereal rolled her eyes. "Sidi, exactly how many people die every hour in this galaxy?"

"Sidi, cancel that inquiry!" her mother snapped before the home A.I. could respond to Aereal's request. "If you really can't be decent, then eat in silence. This is not the day to test me."

Of course not, because her perfect, law-abiding world had just been challenged, and she couldn't see that as anything other than horrible. Meanwhile, the oblivious twins scooped heaps of stew and potatoes onto their plates. And her father, who dealt with real crimes every day and should therefore have a clue, was equally useless.

"It is about time that we declared our liberation from our oppressive oligarchy," Aereal said.

"The Be'shon is not an oligarchy," Mylee said.

Annoyance flared in Aereal. Why were these two interlopers even at her dinner table? "And how would you know? Didn't you fail Intro to Politics last year?"

"I did not!" Mylee said. "I just... had to take it twice..."

"Exactly," Aereal said in triumph.

"Eery, eat your meal." Her mother gave her what was supposed to be an authoritative glare, then turned to her father. "Have you heard anything?"

An image came to Aereal's mind, the same image that kept playing over and over on The Feed. The Be'shon senate building exploded. Cars in the air above it swerved away to avoid the flames—some not making it. Except this time, in her mind, her father was there, with the police on the ground, all of them running toward the burning

building, not away from it. Aereal stabbed the prongs of her fork down into a piece of stew meat, hacking it apart. That image was dumb and unreal. Her father and his police force were nowhere near Acar. The police force on Acar wasn't even Human.

Was it real for some other girl out there, though?

Her father shook his head, answering his wife, "Nothing the Stream hasn't said. Honestly, though, I don't think more will come of it. These things happen, sadly. The Be'shon took a hit, but the organization is huge. Their military is spread out across this galaxy. The Be'shon will regroup. They'll figure it out. We shouldn't worry."

Of course he'd think nothing would come of it. They all had to think that, deny that this could change their perfect little world. "Was it Viris?" Aereal asked.

"You do realize, *parquie*, that Viris is a terrorist organization dedicated to the idea that certain forms of life are worth less than others, right?" her mother said.

"That's your take on it," Aereal said.

"No, it is not *my take*. They state as much in their manifestos."

As if her mother had ever actually bothered to read a Viris manifesto. Her mother took everything she knew from gossip and rumors and thought that meant she knew what she was talking about. Aereal wanted to scream at the sheer hypocrisy of it all, but had to content herself with saying, "That's not what they mean!"

"Do I need to show you the pictures again?" her mother asked.

"Oh, you mean the propaganda pictures the Be'shon planted to make us hate anyone who disagrees with them?" The rant flowed out of Aereal, along with the stray thought that throwing her fork at one of the twins might somehow strengthen her point. "Sure, let's see those again! And even if those pictures had anything to do with reality, it's the Be'shon's own fault for outlawing tech-clone creation. Viris are scientists. If they were allowed to pursue their science without all these oppressive Be'shon regulations..."

"Regulations are not oppressive by nature. They keep people safe. Viris is selfish, pure and simple, and if I've managed to impart any decency into you, you'll see that someday!" Her mother no longer resembled a robot. Her face was flushed, with evident anger behind

it, and all of that made Aereal hesitate. Was her mother actually upset about all this?

“We have no reason to believe Viris was responsible,” her father said, which only made Aereal more sure Viris was behind everything. Of course they were. Who else could be? They were the only ones campaigning for truth anymore.

“What are tech-clones, again?” Sean asked.

“Yeah... Are they those mutilated robot things that have skin and hair and stuff?” Mylee asked.

Seriously! Did those two even try to pay attention in their classes? Aereal fixed her cousin’s with a blank stare that lasted several seconds too long. “How are you two the children of geniuses, again?”

Then Mylee said something about Aereal not being smarter than her, which was just straight-up untrue. But before Aereal could prove her point, her father, of course, jumped in to rescue the twins with some lengthy explanation about the evils of tech-cloning that came straight out of the Be’shon propaganda book.

The explanation was tedious—something about how tech-clones were living but non-living things grown in pieces in laboratories and then patched together, and how that somehow made creating them evil. Her mother jumped in with a line about how Viris was trying to overthrow the government in a *cost-effective* way—code for the go-to accusation of laziness. Then, just to make the conversation more stupid, Mylee asked something about making “Human tech-clones”—which was, of course, nonsense since tech-clones were, by definition, assembled parts of different animals.

Eventually, Aereal’s mother fell back on the old tactic of just shutting down the conversation before it had the chance to challenge her own limited, established opinion of reality. Aereal ate the rest of her meal in silence, dumped her plate into the dishwasher without rinsing it, and slammed her bedroom door behind her.

Above the sidewalk, beside a narrow, nondescript and dead-end street, a single pool of blue light illuminated a steel door. Half the streetlamps in the city had been smashed or torn up, but this one stood still, like some guardian angel catching the light from the three moons above.

Their group crouched under the shadow of an industrial warehouse, across the street from the light and the door. "That's it?" Aereal's mother whispered to her husband.

Aereal's father nodded, then turned back, still crouched, to face the group. "Let me get the door open," he said. "Then, Aaron, you and I will sweep inside, right?"

Over Aereal's shoulder, Aaron nodded.

"Eery, Noah?" her father said.

"We guard out here," Noah said.

Aereal's father nodded with a brief smile at his daughter that made her clutch the nanite rifle tighter. "Stay alert."

He looked both ways along the dark street, then crossed, entered a code into the door, and inserted a key. The door opened with a click that sent Aereal's eyes darting over the street, seeking shadows. Nothing came. All was silent under the three moons. Even the air seemed to hold its breath.

Aaron crossed the street next, and both men vanished through the blacked-out aperture. The rest waited, Aereal and Noah at opposite ends of the group, all eyes watching to see which shadows would become more than the balance between light and darkness.

Finally, the silhouettes of two men reappeared in the doorway, waving from inside. Their group scurried across the street in clumps, Aereal and Noah last of all.

There were eighteen police lockers in the city—emergency supply centers known only to officers and hidden away inside unmarked buildings. Aereal hadn't known anything about them. But once the community center went down, her father set out for this place, the

closest of the lockers—the most secure location he knew of.

The locker buildings had to meet a few requirements: no windows, brick exterior, and a single entry point. They were designed to withstand riots and hold high-risk prisoners.

Brick wouldn't stop the shadows. They tore straight through walls like paper, ripped up concrete like play-dough. But they weren't likely to see, hear, or smell people inside a windowless, brick structure, and that made this place safer than most.

Inside the locker, Aereal's mother found the lights. She waited until everyone was inside and the windowless metal door had closed before switching them on. The bright blue seared across Aereal's retinas. For almost a minute, she could do no more than blink.

"So... We should make ourselves comfortable, I guess..." Noah said during that blinded minute.

When Aereal's eyes adjusted, she understood Noah's ironic tone. The room before her was stark and narrow, concrete floor and brick walls, with caged-off storage rooms on two sides, and what looked like a barred cell door gaping open into abysmal darkness. There was nothing in the room where they stood except a single metal desk with a single computer terminal built into its surface. The terminal would be dead, like all the others across the entire planet, it seemed. But still, Aereal found herself drawn to it, driven to touch, to try, to hope that maybe, somehow, it would still blink on.

One of the children got there first, tapping at the black surface with a tiny finger. He tried again even after nothing happened—like they all knew nothing would happen.

"Yeah, it's not intended to be comfortable in here," Aereal's father said. He pointed to the gaping darkness beyond the barred door. "Those are holding cells—three of them. Probably the best place to sleep. There should also be siege supplies in one of these storage rooms—so sleeping bags, camp stoves, food, water, that sort of thing."

"Okay, well..." Aaron slung his rifle into a resting position across his back, nudging Aereal on his way past. "Let's get to exploring."

Over the last several days, even the children had forgotten how to complain. No one whined about being hungry or tired. They just set to work. Aereal turned with Noah, Aaron, and nine-year-old Calley

to the storeroom on their left, propping the door open behind them. Lights flashed on as they stepped inside, showing eight standing rows of lockers about five feet high. They had all been labeled once. But then the computers shut down, and the digital labels went blank.

Weird, Aereal thought. They had the foresight to separate the locks on the doors and the cages from the main Sidi computer system, but not the digital screens or the locks on the lockers themselves.

But then, no one had expected Sidi to go down. They couldn't have. From its network of orbital satellites, the massive A.I. integrated and organized all the information that went in, out, and around the planet—the entire galaxy, actually. How did something like that just... switch off?

Leading the way, Aaron and Noah busted open locker after locker, leaving Aereal and Calley to comb through what was inside. "Well, we have guns," Aaron said, wrenching the largest locker door to reveal a wall of neatly arranged handguns. "Now we just need some rats, and I can target train you, Cal."

The little girl smiled, hanging back against the lockers across from the guns. Aaron sighed and closed the locker. Such a waste, Aereal thought, turning back to the busted door in front of her. Handguns were useless against the shadows.

Meanwhile, Noah had reached the back wall. It was metal, not brick, with an active lock panel, Aereal noticed, a split second before Noah cried out, "Score! Aaron, officer Brett's code..."

"Yeah, yeah, um... No, the last four are eight-five-eight-two."

"Yeah, got it..."

The wall squeaked. Calley backed up into Aereal as they both turned to watch. A rumbled followed the squeak, and then the entire wall slid up to reveal a much larger, backlit locker.

An entire wall of riot gear.

"Gatchin, yes!" Aaron exclaimed, grabbing for the nearest rifle.

"Dad!" Aereal shouted over her shoulder at the other storeroom. Calley stood in front of her with huge, saucer eyes, her back against Aereal's chest. Aereal wrapped both arms around her, calling out again, "Dad!"

A few seconds later, he appeared at the storeroom door, then made

his way between the rows of lockers. He put a hand on Aereal's arm as he passed her, then stopped about a foot away from the brothers and the war-ready wall.

"Look!" Aaron said, extending the rifle toward him. It was the same model as Aereal's.

"Yeah, I knew it was in here somewhere," Aereal's father said.

Aereal moved around Calley, toward the glowing backlit wall. "Do they have extra nanite clips?" The nanites were reusable, but she didn't always have time to retrieve them after a fight.

"These things?" Noah asked, holding a metal rectangle high over his head.

"Okay, leave off for a minute, kids. Everyone, come on, gather in." Aereal's father waved at the storeroom door. Most of their group had already gathered there, drawn to the raised voices and the blue light. At their leader's wave, they moved inside, the mother and father each holding one of their children, Annie with her son on her shoulders, and Aereal's mother, at the back of the group.

"Alright, so this is riot suppression equipment," Aereal's father was saying, motioning at the blue-glowing wall. "Linda, would you take charge of the armor, try to fit as much of it to as many people as you can?"

Aereal's mother nodded, grabbed a large, rolling bin from where it sat against the west wall, and dragged it over.

"As for the rest of it..." Aereal's father continued. "Most of this stuff was designed non-lethal, so scary as it looks, it won't do us much good. But these..." He held the rifle up, muzzle toward the ceiling. "These are the same weapons Aereal and I have. They are military-grade rifles designed specifically for Be'shon security forces. Our police force only has them because they are manufactured on this world. They are extremely powerful, extremely deadly, and extremely dangerous if you don't use the targeting system right. But they're also the only things that seem to make a dent in these creatures. And there are more than enough here for every adult in this group."

"Hey!" Aaron said.

"I'm sorry. Every adult, and the two boys standing behind me," Aereal's father said. "So, everyone's going to take one of these. And



tomorrow, Eery or I will give you the full targeting system rundown and help you program them to exclude everyone in our group.”

“Can’t you just make them exclude all Humans?” Tyren the spaceport security guard asked.

“Yes,” Aereal’s father nodded. “The problem is, the system recognizes the shadows as Human.”

“Those things are not Human,” Annie said.

“Regardless, the rifle’s sensors go on outline and silhouette, so the shadows register as Human. We’ll talk more about it tomorrow. For now, everyone take one. They can’t do anything without the nanite clips, so just use tonight to get familiar.”

Aaron and Noah had already taken it upon themselves to pass the rifles out. Aereal’s mother snatched one for herself and placed it in the rolling cart with the body armor. Annie grabbed hers from Noah and immediately looked down the barrel.

“Yeah, don’t ever do that!” Noah said, jerking the thumb-sized opening up toward the ceiling instead of her face.

“They’re not loaded, right?” Annie said.

“It doesn’t matter. That’s one of those things you just don’t do with guns,” Noah said.

“Why?”

“Just don’t!”

Meanwhile, the father took the rifle Aaron handed to him, slowly, to hold it with one hand far from his body. The mother, however, backed away.

“No. I don’t like guns,” she said.

“Freaking gatch, you did not just say that!” Aaron exclaimed.

“Okay, stop!” Aereal’s father silenced the oncoming battle before it could begin. “This is no time to get into a philosophical debate about the moral merits of firearms,” he said.

Aaron seemed engaged with himself in a one-sided version of that debate. He stood with a clenched jaw, staring up at the ceiling. Aereal’s father watched him for a moment, then turned to the mother.

“This group has lost five people in two days,” he reminded her. “We almost lost Noah an hour ago. From now on, every person who can be armed will be armed, or you leave the group. I’m sorry,

Rebecca, but I cannot compromise on this.”

She glared at him for a moment, then snatched the rifle from Aaron, leveling a finger at each of her boys. “You do not touch these,” she told them, then stalked out of the cage.

Aereal felt a pair of little arms press up against her side, looked down on the blond head, and asked, “Dad, what about Calley?”

“These are way too heavy for her,” Noah said, taking a rifle for himself from the backlit locker.

Aereal’s father nodded. “Yeah, they are. But... Cal, hey...” He crouched, so his head was closer to her level. “What do you want? Would you feel safer with a weapon?”

Calley stood at Aereal’s side, hugging Aereal’s arm. Half hidden there, she nodded.

“Okay. Um...” he straightened up, glancing around.

“There are handguns in that locker,” Aereal said. “But...”

“Yeah, handguns are useless,” her father agreed. “And I don’t think she’s strong enough to properly aim those either... Let me sleep on it, okay, Cal? We’ll figure something out. Right now, Eery, would you get the boys all set up? We found the camp equipment in the other room. I’m going to help there.”

Aereal nodded.

“So, these are really heavy...” Aaron said. Noah stood in a corner several feet away, aiming down the scope of his own nanite rifle.

“Yeah, the balance is way different, too,” Aereal told Aaron. She put a hand under the front half of his rifle, helping him to hold it steady. “It also self-adjusts and self-stabilizes, so it won’t pull when you shoot like you’re used to...”

“Where’s the fun in that?” Noah asked.

“You’ll teach me all about it tomorrow, right?” Aaron said, looking down at the top of Aereal’s head, rather than into the scope of the rifle.

Aereal tried not to smile. “Obvi,” she said.

“Kids, we’re eating,” Annie called from beyond the cage.

“Are they ever going to stop calling us *kids*?” Aaron asked.

“Maybe get into that fight after we’ve eaten.” Noah already had his arm around Calley, headed back to the main room.

## 5 DAYS EARLIER

## DAY 1

School that day was utterly intolerable.

Of course, the Be'shon affiliated education system was, at the best of times, one long, intolerable program of alien-oriented indoctrination.

In *Natural Sciences*, for example, they spent an entire half-semester studying alien biomes, which in no way fit the definition of *natural* for Human beings.

And *Galactic History* teachers spent weeks trying to convince them that Earth's imperial century was evil—skirting over the facts that Earth's conquests had brought interstellar travel, and medical advancement, and occasionally outright science itself to the significantly less advanced worlds that Earth had supposedly oppressed. Without the imperial century, some of the alien races would still be struggling to master fire.

Still, somehow, the brainwashed masses continued to argue that this did not make Humans the most evolved species in the galaxy.

Intolerable as school always was, however, that day was worse. From the invasion of Aereal's cousins at the breakfast table, to having to share a ride with them to school, to the way her classmates looked like zombies whose worlds had just collapsed in on them, it was all just bad. Most of the teachers outright ignored their own subjects and just played the Stream in class.

The Stream rotated between replays of the actual event—the Be'shon Senate building blowing up in their faces again and again—to the standard emotional blackmail images—the so-called victims and their surviving families, memorials set up in the streets, and a lot of crying—to speculative commentary on where this might all lead. They gave scattered reports about Be'shon military actions between demands that Viris be stamped out once and for all, between more infrequent reminders that no one actually knew who was responsi-

ble. One reporter finally dared to suggest that, maybe, the Be'shon had orchestrated everything. He was, essentially, booed out of the studio for his grasp at sanity.

"Oh, come on!" a boy named Silvester, one of Aereal's fellow white-outs, shouted from the back of the classroom.

"That's detention, Silvester!" their teacher snapped—the predictable response, of course. "One hour, after school, today."

The Stream had moved into blackmail imagery again. Aereal looked away, scribbling hash marks into the doodling program on her school co-pad. She would have had something more useful open, but all student co-pads automatically synced to the teacher's when in a classroom—an absolute invasion of privacy, of course. The teacher had locked them to simple, doodle type programs.

"Are they going to attack us?" a girl named Marsha asked in a quivering voice.

Were her classmates really taking the imagery of crying two-year-olds seriously? Aereal wondered. She scratched extra hard at her co-pad, in danger of damaging the stylus.

"No. I don't think so. It's important to watch," the teacher said. A missed opportunity, Aereal thought. If the Be'shon really wanted to sell this, they should probably have their child-brainwashing-units saying that yes, everyone was now in imminent danger of attack. Aereal smirked to herself, then quickly hid it, certain that just smiling could earn her a detention on a day like today.

But the worst part of the day was, by far, History with Mr. Blythe. Everyone knew him to have encoded the Be'shon line into his own DNA. Everyone knew him as the staunch enforcer of the "evil imperial Earth" narrative. Aereal was already apprehensive when she walked into his room, and her apprehension was not disappointed. Thirty seconds in, he was already red-faced, pacing in front of the class, exclaiming about how the Be'shon and all its mostly non-Human, zombie allies were great warriors who would destroy the terrorists.

"And, by warriors, of course, you mean bullies, right?" Silvester cut in.

"Detention!" Mr. Blythe roared. Instead of assigning Silvester

another after-school hour, however, he went on. "All of you. Detention. Out! All whiteouts, go to the detention room, now. Get out!"

Aereal grabbed her bag and filed out along with seven other students, fuming at the injustice of it. She was not the only one.

"The school rules definitely say he can't just mass detention us all," a girl named Terry muttered. "It's profiling, or discrimination, or something."

"Yeah, my dad will get him for this," Silvester said. He tapped his co-pad to a vending machine on their way past it. The advertisement for a new sports drink melted away. A poster of the Be'shon building exploding took the ad's place, under the bright red words LONG LIVE ANARCHY.

Aereal marched along with the other whiteouts in silence, seething, and for some reason, fighting back tears. She had never earned a detention before. Silvester's father had better get it all thrown out so it wouldn't show up when she ran for student body president next year.

If there was a next year. An image flashed through her head in which the school building exploded like the Be'shon had. But that was stupid. It had to be stupid.

Extra homework automatically appeared on their co-pads when they stepped into the detention room—to be completed by the end of the hour. Until completed, the screen was locked to that work. The algorithm was supposed to choose work from whichever class they had the lowest current grade in, which made it all pointless in Aereal's case. All her grades were in the top tier and differed from each other by a matter of decimal points. To make the extra algebra last longer, she triple-checked each step, throwing herself into the numbers and telling herself that, at least, there was no Stream playing in the detention room.

By then, it was lunchtime, then more Stream watching, more dazed, zombie students wandering between classes, more stupid questions about potential attacks on their own planet. More LONG LIVE ANARCHY posters popped up faster than school staff could remove them. By the end of the day, the mainliners had gotten wise and started to fight back with their own, graphic ANARCHY IS MURDER posters.

And then, finally, the bell released them from that insufferable day.

Aereal was out on the school lawn before she remembered it was Tuesday, and hesitated. Student Council met after school on Tuesdays. But the thought of spending another two hours in that building almost made her melt down into tears there on the sidewalk. The detention would probably come up, too, and she'd have to explain, and it was all anyone would think about when she announced her student presidency campaign.

And then, the teacher advisers would probably just make them discuss what they had watched on the Stream all day, anyway.

Aereal had never just skipped anything before. It was, certainly, a day full of firsts. She pulled her bag up higher onto her shoulders and marched down into the school's circle drive, where several dozen cars waited to take students home. Each car had its destination street name displayed across its front window. On some cars, the street name had been replaced by more pro or con ANARCHY posters. One was even stuck flashing between the two, pro one second, con the next. School support staff and a few teachers ran between the affected cars, resetting all the front windows to display the destination street name.

Aereal passed the *Dirk Street* car, then *Crest Street*, then ran into *Panning Street* and stopped short. She double-checked the cars in front, then the cars behind with a rising sense of panic.

"Hey!" she called to a group of girls getting into the *Crest Street* car. "Have you seen *Hence Street*?"

One of the girls shrugged. "I think it just left."

Of course. It was Tuesday. The car would take her if she got into it, but it wouldn't know to wait for her. Aereal circled the entire drive just to make sure, frantic and once again close to tears. She realized during that circle how very much she just wanted to be home, in her own room, in her own bed, complaining about everything over dinner while her mother shushed her. That was all she wanted, just to be home. Really, universe, or God, or whatever—was that really too much to ask at the end of such an awful day?

Come full circle to the school entrance, forced to admit that the car

was gone, Aereal backed into the school wall with a cluster of other whiteouts. Her mind swam through undesirable options. Another *Hence Street* car would arrive as scheduled in two hours. So, did she go to council after all? Did she just hang out in front of school?

"Yeah, unimaginative drones," one of the whiteouts was saying. He gestured at a nearby window. It usually displayed some school indoctrination motto or other, now replaced by an ANARCHY IS MURDER poster. "They obviously just plagiarized my design. Replaced the image and the words, but it's exactly my..."

"Your father *can* get that detention thrown out, right Silvester?" Terry cut in.

Silvester mumbled his assurances, but Aereal barely heard him. She had just caught sight of two kids wandering down the sidewalk together like all the other zombie drones unnerved by the attack on their precious Be'shon. A new option occurred to her, and before she knew it, she was already shouting, "Hey, idiots!"

On the sidewalk, Sean and Mylee turned, rolling their eyes, as Aereal rushed toward them.

"What?" Sean yelled back at her.

Aereal stopped on the pavement in front of them and told the truth: "I missed my car."

"You missed your block car, and we're the idiots?" Sean asked.

He was so annoying, missing the obvious point, as always. "Are you calling one?" Aereal asked. "You're coming to my place, right?"

"We were going to walk home and get clothes and stuff first, actually," Mylee said, reminding Aereal of yet another great injustice, that their home, unlike hers, was within walking distance from school. And still, they were always at Aereal's house. Everything about them was just so unfair.

"Well, can I come with you?" Aereal asked. They had invaded her house so many times that it was the least they could do.

"Well, are you going to keep talking to us in that tone?" Sean asked.

Aereal gave up on the idea of reasoning with them, spun on her heels instead, and marched off down the sidewalk, toward her cousins' house. "Try to keep up, idiots. I need your hands to unlock the door!"

She heard Sean and Mylee muttering together behind her, but did not care. Anything was better than spending the next two hours trapped at school. On the way, she called a car to pick them up from her cousins' house as soon as possible, then started speculating about what snack food might be available in their kitchen.

"So..." Aereal pushed Sean aside as soon as the door recognized his handprint, entering their dark house ahead of him. "I called for a car on the walk here, since I'm sure you two idiots hadn't thought of that yet."

Mylee slammed the front door behind the three of them. "You're the one who missed your own stupid car today."

Aereal dropped her backpack with a thud inside the entry hall. "For your information, I missed it because it's not my usual car, because I usually stay for Student Council on Tuesdays."

"Well, Council wasn't canceled," Mylee said. "Why didn't you..."

"Just shut up already, Mylee!" Aereal was out of patience, and her cousins would try anyone's nerves. "Anyway, the car will take about an hour. You have any food in this place?" She didn't wait for an answer, just turned on her heels and headed straight through the entry hall to the kitchen door.

In the kitchen, she located a bag of chips and a soda, brought both to the kitchen table, and set her co-pad up to watch something on television. Her cousins' internet connection was acting up, though, and the second time her program stopped to buffer in two minutes, she gave up. Bored, she opened the CarCall program to check how much more time she would have to endure away from her own room and bed.

CarCall wouldn't load.

The screen wasn't buffering. It was just... blank...

Aereal's hand froze an inch from the screen, unable to comprehend what she was seeing. She refreshed the page, then again. It just



stayed blank. She tried to back out to her home screen, and the whole device went black.

An icy chill descended over her, accompanied by the images of children crying in fires after the Be'shon exploded. Aereal leaped from her seat, and barged through the door into the living room where she thought her cousins were, saying, "Um, idiots..."

"Stop calling us that!" Mylee shouted with a viciousness that seemed extreme, even for her. "I swear, Aereal, if you call us that one more time, I will grab you by that stupid dyed hair of yours and throw you out the front door. I can. You know I can. And I will. So don't test me!"

Aereal stopped in the doorway and crossed her arms, knowing better than to respond at that moment. Mylee had extreme overreactions to things sometimes, to the point where Aereal was pretty sure something was actually, physically imbalanced in her brain. Only Sean could safely handle these episodes. Everyone else just made Mylee angrier. And fortunately, Sean was right there, standing with Mylee at the living room's main computer interface.

The computer interface was black, like Aereal's co-pad had gone, even though Sean's hand rested on it. Aereal swallowed, sent a glance at Mylee to make sure it was safe, then said, "Guys, then, whatever! There's something weird going on with Sidi."

"Yeah, we noticed," Sean hit the blank screen in front of him, then asked, "Did you have trouble ordering the car?"

Aereal hesitated.

"Gatchin, it's a yes or no question, genius!" Mylee said.

Aereal's eyes darted to the living room window, mumbling something about static and the call cutting off before it had finished. That was not abnormal for the time of day, though. The road outside was more interesting. There was something... off about the way that familiar road looked.

Meanwhile, Sean told the Sidi A.I. to call his parents. The computer's response, "I'm sorry, Sean, that feature is unavailable," drew Aereal's attention away from whatever weirdness was going on outside. Unavailable? Aereal had never known something as basic as a phone call to be unavailable before in her life.

Mylee dropped into a chair, head in her hands. Sean still stood at the main computer interface, staring at it with a blankness that mirrored Aereal's own dull panic. "Check on CarCall," he told her.

Moron! What did he think had brought her into the living room in the first place? "That's how I realized something was up," she said. "It wouldn't give me an update."

A low moan came out of Mylee, rising in pitch to sting Aereal's ears. But the window had drawn Aereal's attention again, distracting her even from her desire to tell Mylee to shut up.

"This can't be happening. What is happening?" Mylee squealed.

"Yeah, you're way smarter than us, after all," Sean said. "You tell us what's going on!"

Images of streets on fire and children crying kept pounding at the back of Aereal's skull, along with Marsha's question about being attacked. And why weren't the other two noticing how weird their street looked right then? Aereal snapped, "How should I know?" then marched over to the front window to get a better look.

Mylee snapped something back at her. But it was Sean's next question that caught her off guard. "Wait, *do* you know what's going on?"

Aereal pushed a curtain further back from the window, staring out, trying to understand why it felt so wrong out there. Or was she just trying to ignore Sean's question? The street looked exactly like it had on the other thousand times she had visited this house.

Behind her, she could feel Sean's suspicion rising, and knew she had to answer him. "It's just... something we talked about once, in *Comp-Tech* class, the first things that would happen if..." She took a deep breath. "What would happen if... if someone set up to invade from orbit..."

"Invade, from... as in spaceships, setting up a blockade around the planet?" Mylee asked.

"I don't know, okay!" Aereal said, with Marsha's question still pressing on the back of her mind. "It just came up in class one day. And Mr. Cowler, he said that, if that happened, if someone did ever try to invade, then the first thing they would probably do—and I don't even know how they could do it, but... They would shut down the Sidi satellites."

"Take out Sidi?" Sean asked.

"That would shut down the planet's entire internet," Mylee said.

"It would shut down our connection to the galactic internet," Sean said.

Aereal rolled her eyes. "Oh, so you were paying attention in your *Comp-Sci* classes!" Insulting him was a familiar action, as easy as breathing, and needed to drive the fiery images and Marsha's question out of her head. It was all absolutely ludicrous. This entire day was ludicrous, and she just wanted it over.

"Aereal, I swear..." Mylee's fingers twisted up in the air like a cat sinking its claws into a ball of yarn.

"Oh shut up. We both know you're not going to drag me out by my hair!"

"No, we both know that I *could* drag you out by your hair!" Mylee made a jump at Aereal, which Sean stopped by putting himself between the girls.

"So, you think someone's up there, in orbit, right now, trying to invade this planet?" he asked.

No insult came to Aereal's mind then. No way remained to drive off the images of fire and crying. Instead of leaving her brain, they mixed with images of alien spacecraft bombers circling over their homes. It was still ludicrous, but it was also there, like the empty computer screen beneath Sean's hand.

Really, why couldn't this day just be over?

"Okay, come on!" Mylee said after the silence had dragged on for quite some time. "No. Come on. We're being stupid. One building blew up—one—on Acar, thousands of light-years away. No one is invading this planet. Why would someone invade this planet? This isn't even Earth! Not even Earth's solar system! I mean, if they were going after a Human planet, they'd go after the Origin World first, right?"

"And who is *they*, anyway?" Sean added, nodding. "We don't even know who *they* is. We don't even know that *they* exists."

"Would you both just shut up!" Aereal said.

"No, I will not just shut up!" Mylee said.

"Aereal, why did you come home with us?" Sean demanded.

She shouldn't have. It had just prolonged the day and made everything worse. If only she hadn't hesitated on the school steps. If only she hadn't missed her block car. She would be home right then, in her own room, and this would all be over. And why wasn't the street outside bothering anyone else? "Do your neighbors ever come home?" she asked. "Most of the lights are still off."

"Our lights are off," Mylee said.

"Why did you come with us?" Sean insisted.

Why did he care? That was a better question. And why was no one paying attention to the street outside? "My house is too far away to walk. I figured you'd be calling a car, and they're hard to get this time of day..."

"Yeah, except you intentionally skipped Council, too?"

"I skipped because I didn't feel like going!" Aereal said. This was none of his business. Why wouldn't he just shut up?

"Are you scared?" Sean asked.

"No!" Aereal turned from the window as anger scorched through her, melting the icy shards left by no internet and whatever wasn't right outside. "No, what happened yesterday doesn't scare me, Sean, because I can think for myself, because I'm not a mindless Be'shon drone. Because I know it's about time someone showed them they can't force everyone to line up and march because they say go..."

"Freakin' gatch, Aereal! Do you believe even half of the crap that you say?" Mylee asked.

"I don't know!" Suddenly, Aereal found those words truer than anything she had ever said before. The only thing she did know, right then, was that yelling felt really, really good. "I don't know what's happening, okay? I don't know who, or why. I want to go home. Okay? That's all. I just want to go home!"

There was a long pause for everyone to catch their breath. Then Mylee turned to Sean and said, "Mrs. Larkin might know."

Aereal took in a sharp, rousing breath and asked who Mrs. Larkin was. As her cousins explained about a neighbor across the street who used to teach them piano, or something, equal parts relief and annoyance flooded through Aereal. Of course, an adult! Someone who had lived longer and probably seen Sidi go down a time or two before and

could tell them exactly how wild their alien invasion speculations were. She shouldn't have needed her younger cousins to think of that.

"So..." Aereal said, interrupting Sean, or maybe Mylee... "We should just go wait for the car over there?"

"Right," Sean said.

Mylee nodded. "Right."

The next thing Aereal knew, they were out in the street, and there was something still not right about it, even from outside. Her father would be annoyed at her.

Her father always dedicated part of their days at the gun range to ambient threat analysis—spotting the thing in the environment that just wasn't right. Aereal was pretty good at knowing something was wrong, but never great at identifying what it was. Now, the street was quiet, but that wasn't all that unusual. Cars flew overhead, casting shadows between the buildings, as always. The only *off* thing she could name was a lack of lights inside the houses. But as Mylee had pointed out, they hadn't turned the lights on in her cousins' house, either.

One house did have its lights on, and Aereal skipped up to it, hopeful, asking if Mrs. Larkin lived there.

"No, this one," Sean said. He led them away from the bright windows to a dark brick colonial set back from the sidewalk by a landscaped grove of bushes and trees.

Aereal stopped short at the gate beside Sean, her hand resting on the picket fence. Beneath overhanging trees, the house took on a disquieting resemblance to the witch's cottage in every fairytale. But instead of bringing that childishness up, Aereal just said, "The lights are out."

"She must be in the back." Sean pushed the gate open and dashed up the porch steps before Aereal could object. But what would she even object to?

Her father had always told her to trust the vague impression *this just feels weird*. He said that women tended to have a better innate sense of this than men, that it was one of their strengths in law enforcement, and always to be taken seriously. But it felt so petty and stupid to tell Sean not to approach his beloved piano teacher's house

because it just didn't feel as right as the house with the lights on.

And weren't they just being stupid about everything right then, anyway?

"This is when her students start showing up," Mylee said, ascending the porch next to her brother. "She has to be home."

Boards creaked under Aereal's feet as she climbed onto the porch. Cars overhead cast shadows between the trees. One shadow, off to the right, actually made Aereal jump, shoving those words—petty and stupid as they might be—out of her: "This feels weird."

"You're the one who was scared," Mylee said.

"Oh shut up, I was not!"

Sean rolled his eyes, opened the outer storm door, and knocked on the wooden inner door, calling, "Mrs. Larkin?"

"Hey, the See-face," Aereal said, pointing to a blank screen next to the front door, the Sidi interface.

"No..." Mylee tapped at it, getting nothing. "They're not connected either."

"Is that why they haven't turned the lights on, maybe?" Aereal asked.

"They should have manual switches. Everyone does," Mylee said, dashing what little sense Aereal had tried to bring into the situation. Didn't Mylee realize that this weirdness needed to be explained?

"Mrs. Larkin?" Sean pounded against the wooden door, making its hinges rattle. "Mrs. Larkin? Mr. Craig?"

"Sean, open the door," Mylee said.

The sharpness in Mylee's voice sent an ice blade through Aereal's chest. It wasn't Mylee's wild freak-out tone, and it wasn't her normal voice either. It was something like the shadow that had just made Aereal jump. She bounded up the remaining two steps to stand next to her cousins, in front of the door.

Sean seemed just as startled by Mylee's tone, and could only stammer, "What?"

"The door. Open the door! We need to get inside!" Mylee shoved her brother over, fell into the doorframe, and grabbed for the doorknob.

"What are you talking about?" Aereal said, even as another innocuous, car-cast shadow made her stomach squirm.

“Miles!” Sean objected—or was he still just too surprised to understand what was happening?

The house was unlocked, and Mylee had already stumbled inside. She reached back, grabbed Sean, then Aereal, pulling them in after her.

“What are you doing?” Aereal asked, torn between the invasion of private property and the relief at being safely inside four walls again.

They had entered a dark hallway with a staircase looming to the right and a double-wide doorway leading into a large room on the left. Relief faded as ambient threat assessment poked at Aereal’s senses once again, telling her there was something not quite right in this space either. The hall was filled with the usual household debris—a shelf for bags beside the door, with a bag on it; a few pairs of shoes beside the closet; co-pad mount set into the wall. And yet, it all felt very empty somehow.

“You can’t just break into our neighbor’s house!” Sean was saying.

“Oh, shut up, it’s Mrs. Larkin!” Mylee slammed the door, pressing her full weight against it and taking several deep breaths. “It’s... Aereal was right... It’s weird out there.”

That statement sounded every bit as stupid and petty as Aereal had feared. And had Mylee just not noticed yet that things were still weird? Aereal wandered toward the doorway on her left, still trying to understand.

“Aereal was right?” Sean muttered, in an incredulous tone that, under normal circumstances, would have had Aereal shouting some very witty insult back at him.

Instead, she stood in the doorway and simply called for their attention, needing answers. “The piano’s here,” she said. “Is this her studio?”

“Uh, yeah,” Mylee said.

Mylee’s disinterest was aggravating, and Aereal snapped back, “But I thought she had lessons right now.”

“Gatch...” Sean, at least, had caught on by now. The piano room was empty, dark, and certainly not being used to teach lessons.

Mylee shrugged. “Her students must have canceled. It’s been a weird day, if you haven’t noticed. What’s that smell, though?”

Smell, really? Now Mylee mentioned it, Aereal did smell cookies baking. And, when she thought about it, that was at odds with the seeming emptiness of the house. But then the twins ruined their own insight by babbling about the smell of raw meat—more of their usual nonsense. In exasperation, Aereal declared them “so weird” and demanded to know where the kitchen was.

Instead of a direct answer, Mylee called, “Mrs. Larkin? Are you in the kitchen?” She moved past Sean, past the looming, dark, and empty staircase, to a door at the end of the entry hall.

Sean followed her, calling for a “Mr. Craig?” whom Aereal could only assume was Mrs. Larkin’s spouse.

Mylee pushed through what turned out to be the kitchen door, apologizing for barging into private property. The smell of baking butter and sugar assaulted them along with light.

“Finally, the light’s on! So where’s she?” Aereal asked.

The door swung shut behind them, leaving them in a warm kitchen with a table, nine chairs, and two trays of sugar cookies cooling on the counter. And still, like the entryway, it felt strangely empty.

“Seriously, what is that smell?” Mylee asked, wrinkling her nose up. A second later, though, she exclaimed, “Sean!”

“What?” Sean froze with a sugar cookie halfway inside his mouth, bit into it, then spoke with a full mouth. “It’s Mrs. Larkin...”

Of all the nonsense. How could anyone think about eating right then?

And what was their obsession with smell?

“All I smell is stuff baking,” Aereal said.

“No!” Sean dropped the cookie. “No, it’s burning!” He sprang around the counter to the other side of the kitchen and ripped open the oven. A plume of smoke blasted itself straight into his face, sending him choking and staggering backward.

“Sidi, fire suppression!” Mylee said.

“I’m sorry, that feature is unavailable,” the computer chirped back at them.

Sean waved smoke out of his face, coughing. “Sidi, turn the oven off!”

“I’m sorry, that feature is unavailable.”



"There's a manual shutoff," Aereal said.

Sean choked and sputtered and forced words out. "Yeah, where's the panel on this model?"

"Side!" Aereal had already darted through the smoke and pried the protective cover off the oven's control panel. She turned it off, then slammed the oven shut again.

"You should leave that open!" Mylee said. "If fire suppression isn't working..."

"No, idiot, if an oven catches on fire, you turn it off and leave it closed!" Aereal coughed as she and Sean backed out of the smoke.

"That can't be true!" Mylee said.

"Of course it's..."

"If it's closed, it stays hot!"

"It will also have less oxygen!"

"So?"

"So things need oxygen to burn, id..."

"Do not call me an idiot!"

"Stop fighting!" Sean shouted at both of them. "The oven's off. The house isn't burning down. The question is, where's Mrs. Larkin and why is she letting stuff burn!"

Mylee crossed her arms and gave Sean a look that probably meant something in psychic twin language. Or maybe the two of them actually just shared a brain. They had never quite seemed like fully formed individuals to Aereal, after all.

Then Mylee started in on the smell thing again, which threatened to drive Aereal insane. She was about to say something when her eyes landed on the counter, the cookie tray.

And then the world just seemed to stop, with burning bodies, and invading alien ships, and Marsha's question all somehow colliding with the insensible things Mylee was saying about raw meat.

"Guys..." Aereal had no words to finish that sentence. She just stood there, staring at the cookie tray, waiting for them to see it too.

Or hoping they wouldn't see it.

Was she actually hoping to be hallucinating now?

And then they were all reaching for each other's hands, backing away from the counter as they stared at it.

"Sean. Sean? How much of that cookie did you eat?" Mylee asked.

"No, there wasn't any on it," he insisted. "There wasn't. I'm sure."

"That's blood," Aereal said. "I'm not seeing things, right? That is blood, right?"

"Seriously, how much did you eat?" Mylee asked.

"There was no blood on the cookie. I would have tasted it!" Sean said.

"Okay. Okay okay okay," Aereal said, grasping for sense. "No, this is good. Okay? Because it makes sense now. She was cooking. She cut herself badly enough to go to the hospital. I mean, there's a lot of blood on that tray. So... she was in shock. She forgot to turn the oven off. Sidi should have turned it off for her, anyway... It all makes sense."

"Yeah..." Sean nodded. "Yeah, it does. It makes sense. Except... You don't use a knife to mix cookies..."

Those words sent electric currents coursing through Aereal even as she tried to deny that they were true. There were explanations. There had to be explanations—ones that did not involve alien invaders and burning homes. But before she could piece these things together, the three of them were somehow back in the piano studio, where enough light still pooled in front of the window to make them feel more or less safe.

"No," Aereal said, forcing herself to breathe. "No, I'm right about this. She cut herself, forgot to turn the oven off, and went to the hospital. That's what makes sense. So... this is what makes sense!"

"Yes, you're right." Sean nodded and looked at Mylee. "We should try one of the other neighbors."

"No!" Mylee retreated deep into the shadows on one side of the window, away from the hall and the front door. That strange, commanding voice that she had used to push them inside the house earlier had returned. For a moment, she was almost frightening. "No. We can't go outside. We're not going outside!"

So Mylee sensed the ambient warnings of danger, too. Aereal remembered the shadow that had made her jump outside, one of the thousands that cars cast daily over her head. While Sean demanded to know what his sister was talking about, Aereal moved closer to the

window, looking out.

And then, raising her eyes from the house across the street to the sky, suddenly, it all clicked.

"Crap." Aereal stood looking into the sky, with her arms frozen at her sides, and her heart racing to beat faster than a heart ever should. "I think she might be right. Oh gatch. Crap. Gatch!"

"What?" Sean asked.

Aereal shook her head, unable to do more for some time, finally finding her voice again. "The shadows, moving outside, between the buildings. You see them?"

Sean glanced out, shrugged. "Yeah."

"I saw them from your window, too. I thought it was just cars moving overhead."

"Right?" Sean said.

"Except there are no cars overhead right now."

She had seen it from her cousins' window. Noticed it again during their run across the street. Combined it with the emptiness of the road and the quietness of the dark neighborhood. Really, how could it have taken her brain so much time to piece together things she had seen all along?

Even so, as Sean looked up, she hoped that he would tell her she was wrong. Because the shadows were real, they were really moving between the dark houses, and something had to be casting them.

Sean did not tell her she was wrong. Instead, a moment later, they were all backing away from the window as if it might swallow them whole. Then Mylee bumped into the piano. A deep rumble came from the strings inside the grand, hollow box, and they all stopped short.

"No," Mylee said, the thing they all wanted to hear, slamming her hand down onto the piano with another melodic rumble. "No, this isn't real. This is our brains playing tricks. This is Sean and me getting three hours of sleep last night, and the fact that we've talked about nothing but explosions and terrorists for an entire day straight now, and us being freaked out. Because I'll admit it if no one else will—we are all freaked by that explosion yesterday. We are. The entire planet is. The entire galaxy, probably. That's all this is. We're making it up!"

"Yeah, and it's all crazy, anyway," Sean said.

"It is, it's crazy," Aereal agreed, with images of invading spaceships in the air where the missing cars should be. But if those spaceships were casting the shadows, she would just see spaceships in the air instead. None of this made any actual sense. Nothing was casting those shadows.

"I mean, the web going down, and weird shadows, and bloody cookies, and... what is it all even supposed to add up to?" Sean asked.

"Right, we are not thinking rationally," Aereal said. "We're making it up. We're taking some weird things and pretending they're all related, and freaking ourselves out."

"We just have to wait for the car, and get to your house," Mylee said.

"Yeah," Aereal said.

"Yeah," Sean said.

And then the ceiling, directly above their heads, let out a loud, grinding squeak. All three faces shot up, all three expecting to see the plaster cracking open and the sky falling on their heads.

Instead, there was another creak, about a foot away from the first. Then another, and another. The three of them came together, holding each other's hands in a tight circle as they stared up at the ceiling.

"It's the wind?" Sean said.

"It's not the wind," Mylee said, with that same disconcerting certainty she had shown before.

"Is Mrs. Larkin home after all?" Aereal asked.

"Or her husband," Sean said.

"But..." Aereal shook her head. "They would have heard us. We weren't exactly quiet."

"Miles, what are you..." Sean reached for his sister as she stepped toward the hall. "Miles!"

Mylee stopped a few inches from the doorway, her eyes fixed on the stairs. Above her head, the creaking seemed to follow her, from the center of the piano studio, toward the top of the stairs.

"Mylee, really, you don't go *toward* the weird noise!" Sean hissed at her.

Aereal grabbed for sense once again. "Oh, come on. It's just one of the Larkins!" But her voice betrayed her, coming out in a whisper.

"It's not." Mylee took a step backward. "It's not a person. It doesn't smell right."

For one bizarre second, Aereal thought she had misheard. "What do you mean it doesn't *smell* right?" she asked. Sean had the nerve to shush her, and she almost shoved him into the piano.

"I mean, it doesn't smell like a person!" Mylee choked over the last word with another, quicker step backward into Sean's arm.

"That's absurd!" Aereal said. "People don't smell people!"

"Since when?" Sean asked.

"Since the beginning of the Human race," Aereal said. This was too much. Her cousins were exhausting and crazy, but never this crazy.

A creak came from the top of the stairs, bringing all their eyes and attention back to it, and to the shadow that appeared against the wall. The shadow that moved, step by step, coming down. Mylee grabbed Sean's arm. "We need to go," she said. "We need to go. Now. Sean!"

"Go where? It's between us and the door!" Aereal hissed.

The shadow stopped. A man's shadow, and then a man's shape, not quite solid, as if all the shadows above the staircase had coalesced into a physical form. Its face, if it was a face, swiveled around. Aereal's heart stopped when she realized it was following the sound of her voice. At that moment, every sense she had, ambient or otherwise, told her the same three things—that the thing on the stairs was alive, that it was somehow intelligent, and that it was there to do them harm.

"Sean. Sean. Sean!" Mylee was shaking her brother's arm.

"Mr. Craig?" Sean asked.

On the staircase, the solid shadow turned to face the piano studio. Its hands gripped onto the rail, and then both legs snapped straight up, knees to its chest, feet balanced with perfect, bone-chilling ease on the wooden staircase railing. It perched there with a snarl, like that of a caged dog breaking from its throat.

*Run*, said the voice in Aereal's head, the one her father said to always obey. *Just run. Now.*

Before she could move, the shadow sprang straight into the doorway, on all fours, circling around between the piano and the back

wall. Aereal screamed. Sean screamed.

“Out, out, out!” Mylee shoved her brother toward the hall, but also several horrifying steps closer to the thing now crouched on the piano room floor.

“Are you insane!” Aereal shouted. She and Sean went skidding backward, away from the shadow and their one and only exit. Could they break the window? she wondered in desperation. Smash through it like in all the action movies?

The shadow rose to a crouch, huge and far taller than any normal, Human man. Sean and Aereal tripped against each other, staggering to keep their feet beneath them. In front of them, Mylee stood frozen there in the center of the room. As Sean reached out to grab her wrist, pull her away, the shadow dropped to all fours again, legs tensed to spring, with two pinpricks of light where the eyes should have been, focused on Sean.

And then Mylee took two steps across the room and screamed with every ounce of strength inside her, “Stop it!”

The shadow froze, legs still poised to spring, arms to the ground. Its head tilted, with those pinpricks of light moving over to Mylee. The snarl became a hiss, the kind one predator uses to warn off another. And then it rose to its full height, looming high above the teenagers with its chest pushed out and its shoulders back.

“Door,” Mylee said, hands shaking and closed into fists at her sides. “Get to the door, now.”

The voice in Aereal’s head had already told her the same thing. The shadow was surprised, or stunned, or something, and they had to go. In emergencies, her father always said, it doesn’t matter why opportunities come. Just take them and go.

So she went, ran into the hall, grabbed the front door. She was out on the porch before it occurred to her that the shadow might not be alone, even inside the house.

Then Sean and Mylee were behind her, and Sean was slamming the front door, and something else was slamming into the other side of it, and the three of them were leaping off the porch into a mad dash for the empty street.

“This isn’t happening!” Aereal said. She felt her sides would col-

lapse under the pressure of running and screaming and fear. "This isn't real. This isn't happening. What is happening?"

"Where are we going?" Mylee asked.

Sean turned back, but before he could answer, Aereal let out a shriek. Another shape had appeared in the road and slammed straight into Sean.

Mylee screamed, too. Everything that Aereal had ever learned about self-defense fled her brain. Desperate, she tried to remember it all at once, and found herself utterly paralyzed by the effort. But then Mylee was saying, "Mr. Hannen?" as if the intruder were, maybe, familiar to her.

"Hey, you're the scientists' kids, right?" An ordinary, middle-aged man, not very threatening at all, stood there in the middle of the street, holding Sean's arm to keep him from falling.

"And our cousin," Sean said.

Aereal was too preoccupied taking in this Mr. Hannen's appearance to acknowledge the introduction.

"Great." Mr. Hannen nodded, releasing Sean's arm. His hands were shaking. One of his pant legs was torn, and his leg was bleeding. These were not good signs, and neither was the mock casualness with which he spoke. "That's good, yeah, um...Your parents home?"

There was something very wrong with Mr. Hannen. Not sure what it was, exactly, Aereal opened her mouth to lie, tell him her aunt and uncle were right behind them, and her own parents, too, and maybe throw in a phrase or two about her father, the armed police officer.

Before she could say any of that, shortsighted Mylee said, "No."

Aereal opened her mouth to salvage the blunder, to say something about their parents not being in the street but back at the house, watching them. But Mr. Hannen cut her off this time.

"Okay. So, um... I don't know if you've noticed, but there's some weird stuff going on..."

"Uh, yeah," Mylee said.

Aereal watched his face, not sure what she was looking for as she said, "There are things. Live things, in the shadows."

"Yeah, so..." Mr. Hannen pointed up the street, behind the teenagers. "That car's been sitting idle for a few minutes. I say we run for it."

Sean and Mylee both agreed. Aereal stood paralyzed, trying to scream *How well do you even know this man?* But no words came out. And then her cousins were running again, toward the idle car. And, well, it was a car. The one thing Aereal knew for sure was that they needed to get out of that street.

It was a standard six-person order-car, a curved bench seat with four safety belts in the back, and two swiveling bucket seats in the front. The bucket seats could face the car's front dashboard if desired, but most people turned them to face the other four seats in the back.

Aereal headed straight into one of the front seats, wanting to be near the controls and trying to remember if she had ever learned how to fly a car manually. Mr. Hannen shoved past her before she could do anything, and got the car working.

Aereal kept her eyes on Mr. Hannen the entire time, expecting at any moment that he would make the car explode, or pull one of those strange shadows out of the front dashboard. The longer she watched him, however, the less threatening he became. He seemed genuinely afraid, like they were, and covering it up with small talk about how they had ended up in the street, and why. The twins were more than happy to discuss this—even though no one seemed to be mentioning the relevant parts. Sean finally got around to saying his piano teacher's house was empty and there was blood...

"And that thing," Aereal said, because she thought someone should bring up the relevant point. The shadows. Why were none of them talking about the shadows? Why weren't they all shouting and screaming and warning each other to stay away from the shadows?

"So you saw one too?" Mr. Hannen ran both hands back through his short, graying hair. "I thought I might be seeing things."

Finally! Aereal thought. But instead of triumph, dread settled over her. Until that moment, the shadow balanced impossibly on the railing was a dream, now become real. He had seen them too.

"What happened to your leg?" Mylee asked. So the twins had noticed Mr. Hannen's leg was bleeding. Maybe they weren't hopeless after all.

"Right..." Mr. Hannen flexed his left leg, then told a story filled with unnecessary details about his evening dinner preparation rou-



tine. Eventually, he got to the point about a shadow jumping over a nine-foot-tall fence, grabbing his leg, and something that apparently felt like being bitten...

"A bite?" Mylee asked. "Like a... zombie?"

Mr. Hannen laughed, which sounded even more forced than his attempts at pleasant conversation. "No. I'm sure I just snagged it on something. But... Weird stuff."

They were quiet for a while. Aereal was full of things she wanted to say, but had no way to put them into words. Perhaps the others felt the same. Then Mylee asked, "Where are your kids?"

With a jolt, Aereal realized she knew the name *Hannen* after all. There were two Hannan-Loyds at school, both years younger than her. Sick knots tangled inside her stomach. It felt like she had just dipped one of those cookies from the piano teacher's house into the blood on the tray and eaten it.

Mr. Hannen shook himself out of a trance. "Um... Sports. That's where I'm going. Back to school, to get them. Then I'll get my wife from work. You can come with me, or I can drop you wherever you want... What?"

At the same moment, the teenagers realized they were staring at Mr. Hannen with three identical expressions. They were not good expressions.

And in that moment, Aereal realized something far stranger. Her cousins were not oblivious after all.

"Mr. Hannen," Mylee said slowly, steadily, to cover the shaking behind her voice. "All sports practices were canceled today. I should be at swim practice, myself."

Mr. Hannen's voice was the opposite of Mylee's, unsteady and sharp. "No. What... What do you mean?"

Mylee leaned forward. Her hands were shaking, and she wrapped them together on her knees. "I'm not sure about Peter. But I saw Donna. I'm sure I did. She was maybe half a block behind us on the walk home."

"You're mistaken," Mr. Hannan said.

"I saw her too," Sean said.

"You're mistaken. She would already have been home when I

got in, then." Mr. Hannen leaned back, eyes fixed to the glass above Mylee's head. "You're mistaken."

There was a cookie covered in blood inside Aereal's stomach. That it was not real made no difference whatsoever. It was trying to come back up as she stared at her cousins and knew the three of them were thinking the same thoughts.

But then, as if cast into existence by some dark Djin, the school lay beneath them. The car sank to meet the circle drive with the school building looming over them, cutting them off from what remained of the setting sunlight. Leading to the front doors, two streetlamps hung suspended above the sidewalk, glaring hot yellow light against the white cement. But every window was dark, and none of the security lights on the building had come on.

And suddenly, Aereal knew one thing with sharp and absolute certainty. There was no living person in that building.

Mr. Hannen reached for the door handle.

"Wait!" Aereal's hand snapped out, grabbing his wrist. "Why are all the lights out?"

"Streetlights are on," Mylee said.

"Don't worry," Mr. Hannen said. "Stay here. I'm just getting my kids. Be right back."

Aereal hated words, hated that she had to say them, rely on them, explain through such a tedious, time-consuming mechanism. Why couldn't what she knew just transfer into his brain the way her cousins' twin psycho-ness always seemed to transfer thoughts between the two of them?

Why hadn't he already worked all of this out for himself, anyway?

"They should have turned the security lights on manually..." Aereal said, explained, hating the need to explain.

"And what about inside the building?" Sean asked. Half a second before Aereal yelled at him, she realized he was agreeing with her.

"I'll be right back. Just hang on," Mr. Hannen said.

"You're not hearing me!" Aereal's hold tightened on his wrist. "Academic clubs were still meeting. The lights should be on."

Mr. Hannen twisted his wrist free as he pulled the door handle. "I'll be right back."

Aereal grabbed at the door with an unpleasant scraping of her fingers against the glass window. "No! Listen to me! Mister—what's his name? Listen. Your kids are not there. Stop! Listen to me!"

Hannen. The name was Hannen. Peter and Donna Hannen-Loyd, lost on the road home, along with a missing piano teacher and her missing husband and all the missing students and teachers that should have been meeting behind brightly lit windows at that very moment. The bloody, imaginary cookie made a bid for freedom inside Aereal's stomach. She choked on air and panic, and the closing door almost crushed her hand.

Mr. Hannen was on the main walk, heading toward the dark doors, almost under the two glaring streetlights. Aereal scooted back on the car seat, staring at the empty school windows, as one or two cars flew by overhead in defiance of the fact that it should have been rush hour. What had happened to them all? The teachers, staff, Student Council? If she had made another choice, stayed for Council, like she should have...

What had happened to all these missing people?

"This is wrong," Aereal said, knees against her chest. "This is really, really, really wrong."

"Sean!" Mylee grabbed her brother's arm and pointed through the car windows toward the school. There was no mistaking the one dark shadow that moved on its own, with no cars overhead or wind to bend the trees. It darted along the wall of the school, faster than seemed possible.

Aereal just froze, all her emergency and self-defense training once again deserting her brain. Sean lurched forward and threw the car door open, shouting, "Mr. Hannen!"

The shadow was on the light post, flying up in defiance of gravity and common sense. A split second before the light shattered, before Mr. Hannen screamed and became just another missing person, Aereal knew what they had to do. She threw herself at the car's front dashboard, pressed her hand down hard on the control screen, then entered the same sequence of commands she had seen Mr. Hannen enter earlier.

The car lurched off the ground. From the corner of her eye, Aereal

saw Sean hanging out the door. For one gut-wrenching second, she was certain he would tumble out. She was too far away to reach him, but still tried. Mylee pulled him back inside first.

With that danger past, Aereal found a mass of shadows all around them, appeared from nowhere, moving on their own, swarming up toward her. Something slammed against the side of the car, knocking them several yards over in the air. Mylee screamed as another thud landed against them. Aereal knew it was too late, that she had waited too long, that they had been stupid to land at all.

Then the car rose. Whatever clung to it fell away, and a moment later, they were safe in the sky once more.

Mylee and Sean were on the floor between seats, gasping for breath. Aereal fell back against her bucket seat, away from the front dashboard and its glowing lights.

“What have you done?” Sean exclaimed, reaching, again, for the door. In-flight security locks kept the door closed, but for a moment, Aereal was sure it would open to pull the shadows inside with them.

“Mr. Hannen... we can't just leave him!” Sean said, tugging at the handle.

Aereal's anger at him, his apparent inability to comprehend what was happening all around them, was blinding. It was almost as powerful as the fear she felt when she thought he would fall out the car door and be lost. “He's dead, Sean!” she shouted. “Don't you get it yet? They're all dead!”

## DAY 5

Aereal forced her eyes open, reaching for the rifle above her head, her only defense against deafening screams and creatures that tore straight through steel and concrete to find her wherever she hid. Her hand closed around the cold metal, instant relief, safety like a barrier between her and the shadow on the staircase.

Where were her cousins? Had their father kept them safe?

Everything was silent around her, the stillness of a dozen people sleeping in the dark, all together, inside an open holding cell. Peaceful. Calley lay squished into the sleeping bag next to her, warm despite the freezing cement beneath them. Aereal's parents were a few feet away, Noah and Aaron a few feet in the other direction. Aereal shifted as far onto her back as she could without disturbing Calley. For a while, she lay with the little girl against her left side and the hunting rifle held to her right, staring at the plaster ceiling above her head.

In the back of her mind, shadows roared against a breaking light, casting darkness over a man named Hannen and his missing children. But the streetlight became a series of glaring fluorescent lights, and the shadow was now ripping up the plastic waiting room seats in the spaceport where people died. She watched as two shadows tore a man in half, aimed her rifle over the seats, squeezed the trigger before the click. The rifle kicked back against her shoulder with an angry beep, refusing to shoot, and Aereal sobbed in response, water blocking her eyes and closing her throat. Long white strands of hair stuck to her face, impossible to wipe away. She couldn't see through them. But nothing she was seeing made sense, anyway. Nothing had made sense since she walked home that night with her cousins.

Where were her cousins? Had their father kept them safe?

In the sleeping bag, five days later, Aereal squeezed the barrel of her rifle. The ceiling had come down very close to her face, and she took a deep breath, exhaled, blowing concrete and water pipes back up where they were supposed to be. She waited another few seconds to make sure Calley was still fast asleep next to her, then carefully removed herself from the sleeping bag.

She took the rifle with her to the bathroom, leaned it against the wall beside the sink, turned on the water, and sunk her face into its numbing cold. After a few seconds, when the cold got too cold, she opened the cabinet beneath the sink, found standard toiletries—soap, shampoo, towels, a scissors.

She was looking for hairbands, a hair tie, pins, anything that would keep her hair out of her face. She had been looking for these things for three days now, and tore the cabinet apart now in her desperation,

bottles rolling all across the bathroom floor.

Didn't any police officers have long hair?

Annoyed, Aereal sat back, cross-legged, glaring into the empty cabinet, until her eyes fell on something she had tossed onto the floor earlier. After two seconds, she grabbed it, grabbed a clump of her hair in her other hand, and sliced away.

She kept cutting, scissors snapping so fast that she expected to take off a chunk of her ear. In her mind, a shadow melted, smoke becoming flesh and blood—black blood pooling under its skin as the nanites exploded and the light left its yellow eyes.

They were alive, these shadows. They weren't zombies or the undead. These things that tore men in half in front of her eyes were living creatures with skin and blood and lungs and hearts and brains...

The scissors sliced through empty air and Aereal jumped, startled by the sharp sound the blades made so near her face. Clumps of white hair lay on the floor all around her, sticking to her jeans and shirt and skin, tossed wildly like shrapnel from the breaking windows in the spaceport.

Oh, freaking gatch, what did she actually look like now?

With a start, Aereal leaped to her feet, desperate to get to the mirror, only to stare in horror at the mangled hack job she had made of her head. Her hair was all different lengths, no strands longer than her shoulder, some above her ears. And she couldn't even see the back. Desperate, Aereal pulled pieces around, trying to cover—but what could she even cover? It was all just bad.

A snicker came from the doorway, and she spun to face it, finding Aaron with his hands up in surrender. "Sorry... But, you look..."

"I look like a shattered window," Aereal said.

"Descriptive."

Aereal rolled her eyes. "It was getting in the way of my aim."

"No, I totally get why you'd cut it, um..." He pointed at the scissors still hanging from Aereal's hand. "You want some help?"

"Yes!" Aereal handed the scissors over, faced the mirror, then reconsidered. "Have you ever cut hair before?"

"Nope." Aaron sliced off one of the longer chunks with a sharp,

decisive stroke. "Have you?"

"Obviously not."

They stood in silence for a moment, just the sound of the scissors, until Aaron said, "I thought whiteouts weren't supposed to cut their hair."

"Yeah, well, shadows aren't supposed to be alive or eat people, either, so..."

Aaron nodded, eyes on his work. "You think that's what they're doing?"

Aereal tried to swallow away the image of bloody cookies on a bloody tray. Cookies she had eaten and then almost thrown up.

Weird. She hadn't eaten the cookies. Sean had, and then swore there was no blood on it. She hadn't even touched one. She knew that. And still, the nausea it left inside her was so very real.

Aereal swallowed, her hands gripping the rim of the sink. "I've seen it," she told Aaron. "Them... eating..."

"Yeah," Aaron said, slicing at her hair, "I guess I have too."

They stood for a while with only the sound of the scissors between them. It occurred to Aereal that this should feel weird, standing in a bathroom in the middle of the night with a boy's hands in her hair. A boy she had met five days ago at that.

Had she really not known Aaron five days ago? That, weirdly, was the only part of this that actually felt weird.

"Well... It might be slightly, sort of not as bad..." Aaron took a step back, surveying his handiwork.

Aereal raised one eyebrow at his reflection, hovering over hers in the mirror. "You know you've only cut one side, right?"

"Right, right. Just..." Aaron's hands snapped up to the other side of Aereal's head, scissors opening. "Just getting my bearings."

The noise of blades slicing through hair just above Aereal's right ear was deafening. "Hey, watch it!" she said, flinching to her left.

"Hold still!" Aaron said. "I've been skinning deer since I was eleven. I'm not going to cut you."

"I'm not your dead dinner!"

"Hold still!" But he moved more carefully after that. Aereal watched his reflection in the mirror, the only sound the snip of blade

against blade.

"So, I don't get it, though," Aaron said after a pause, frowning at her head. "How does a whiteout know how to handle guns so well?"

Aereal rolled her eyes. Here it came, another ignorant whiteout stereotype.

"I thought you were all opposed to people enforcing rules and such," Aaron said.

"First off, we're not whiteouts. We're conscientious objectors..."

"Objecting to rules and the enforcing thereof." Aaron's tone was light, joking, and saying nothing Aereal had not heard before. Still, she felt her face flush.

"Objecting," she said, "to the entrenched brainwashing used by certain governments to keep people from taking responsibility for themselves and exercising their own independent thought. I know how to handle guns because that is my choice, and no one has the right to take that choice away from me. It has nothing whatsoever to do with being an objector."

"Well," Aaron shrugged, snipping hair at the back of Aereal's neck. "I don't get it."

Aereal jerked away, turning to face him. Her hair would just have to be good enough.

"What's not to get? The Be'shon parades out its supposedly democratically elected leaders, talking about peace and tolerance and fairness, all while the largest military force in the history of anywhere claws into every corner of this galaxy, waiting to enforce whatever arbitrary rule the Be'shon sees fit to make up next. And when all of a sudden they don't get their way... Well, I mean, we're living it! Someone finally challenges them, and the very next day, their goons drop people-eating super-monsters on us!"

"Wait..." Something dark and cold had come into Aaron's eyes. The scissors, gripped in his right fist, suddenly looked like a weapon. "You think the Be'shon brought those shadow things here?"

Not much could render Aereal speechless. Since the day she started talking, she always had a comeback. But not to something this shocking. Of course the Be'shon had sent the shadows. Who else could have? There was literally no other explanation that made any



kind of sense.

Before the shock could pass, they both heard a shrill, wailing scream—like a child being dragged away by that thing she had always known was in her closet at night. More voices followed, confusion, a few startled shouts, with that first shrill scream going endlessly on and on.

“Calley!” Aereal spun on her heels, running full out down the concrete hall, back to the holding cells.

Inside the open cell, half their group had converged over Aereal’s sleeping bag. Sobs came now inside the scream, with grownups shushing and soothing as best they could, all the while terrified of what the screaming might bring.

“Calley! Calley!” Aereal shoved—well, she wasn’t sure who—over to slam her knees into her sleeping bag. She pulled the sobbing child to her, whispering about needing to say calm and quiet.

Calley curled in on herself, crying into her knees. She had been in that position three days ago when Officer Brett’s flashlight found her beneath a porch, blood all over her hands and clothes. Aereal was the one who took her to the bathroom in the community center, scrubbed and scrubbed at the clothes until the sink was permanently stained pink, wrapped Calley in the towels rented out in the pool while they waited for her clothes to dry.

Apparently, no one thought to grab their suitcase full of spare clothing during the apocalypse.

In a holding cell in a secret police riot locker, three days after they found her, Calley sagged against Aereal’s arms, no longer screaming, choking between sobs. “You... were gone...”

“I was just in the bathroom. You’re having nightmares,” Aereal said. Why had she needed to take care of her stupid hair in the middle of the night? Really, why had that been so pressing?

Aereal squeezed Calley tighter, until her body stopped shaking and her breathing returned to normal, tears drying on her face. The rest of the group eased back into their own sleeping bags. Aereal caught a smile from her mother—the approving kind of smile that Linda had not given her daughter in quite some time. It felt warm, and welcome, and also patronizing and weird. Too much to process

after everything else that week. Aereal tried to turn her thoughts to other things, tucking Calley back to sleep.

## 5 DAYS EARLIER

### DAY 1

A ray of light, one of the last from the dying sun, sliced through the car's windows, as if trying to hide the shadows, the dark buildings, the lack of traffic, and all the lights that should have been on. Aereal slid off her seat and onto the floor, head between her knees, succumbing to the thing that had been building inside her for half a day. Ever since Mr. Blyth had put them all in detention, she had wanted to do one thing and one thing only. And now, at last, she did.

Aereal didn't know how long she sat on the floor of the car crying. She knew only that she was right, that all those people in all those dark houses, everyone supposed to be behind those empty school windows, her cousins' piano teacher, and two kids named Hannen-Loyd were dead. All dead. Dead.

The thought was so insane, so overpowering, so unbelievable and cruel and wrong that she could not even feel all of it. Her emotions were not big enough to handle the reality of what she knew. So she felt and did not feel, and cried, and that was all.

Eventually, Mylee asked, "Where are we going?"

Aereal had almost forgotten they were in the car with her. She had certainly forgotten that the car was going somewhere, and that she herself had input the route. Or, she was pretty sure she had correctly input a route. "My house," she said. "It's ten miles away. Maybe..."

For one moment, her emotions were big enough to feel everything. Then, those feelings snapped, like an armadillo, rolling into its shell as the predator approached. They were just in the car, and she was feeling without feeling. Nothing more needed to be said.

All three of them got up onto the seats, looking down at the dark but familiar city below.

As the miles passed, they saw a few lights, then more lights, homes glowing bright and warm, then the buildings of a shopping district, all lit up as it should be at night. Aereal dared to breathe, then stopped herself. The armadillo shell closed and would not let her think those thoughts about her room and her bed and the warm kitchen with dinner waiting. And her mother...

The shell would not let her see her mother most of all.

Before long, though, a familiar street appeared beneath them, all aglow under intact streetlights. The words forced themselves out past her shell. "It's still here." Aereal trembled as she spoke, hands pressed up hard against the glass. "It's still here."

The car descended between lit-up buildings onto the sidewalk directly in front of Aereal's house. Sean slid over to the door, but did not open it. Aereal almost called him a scared idiot, but she couldn't move, either. If they walked into her house, and found it empty, with bloody cookies and a shadow on the staircase...

The front door of the house ripped open, and then Aereal's mother charged through it, down the porch and onto the lawn, waving both arms in the air.

"Mom!" Aereal sprang past Sean and out of the car, across the sidewalk, and over the lawn, straight into her mother's arms. The mother who was solid, and real, and warm, and everything else that a child needs when monsters come to life inside her closet. Forever might have come and gone there on the front lawn, inside her mother's arms.

And then forever shattered. Her mother was pulling her and the twins up the porch and into safety at last.

"Brett!" Aereal's mother shouted up the stairs. "Brett. I have them. They're here!"

Aereal's father came down the stairs, and immediately, all sense of safety went up in smoke. He had a large, black duffel bag in each of his hands, and Aereal knew one of those bags very well. He stored it inside a locked case in the master bedroom, and it left that case every Tuesday and Thursday evening, when he took his daughter to the

firing range.

"They have a car?" he asked, tearing the smoky remains of safety into bloody shreds. "Kids, thank God you're okay! Did you bring a car?"

Her parents wanted to get back in that car now?

"Yes. *Parquies*, come get a bag. We have to go." Aereal's mother was already halfway down the front hall, headed for the kitchen.

Mylee followed her aunt, asking about her own parents and not getting an answer. Aereal's father reached for her, and she collapsed against his side—another warm and real thing to drive off the monsters in her head.

And not just in her head.

"Where are we going?" she asked. "Do you know what's out there?"

"Yes," her father said, with his arm around her shoulders.

Aereal's eyes were on one of the duffel bags, dropped beside the door, with shapes inside that she knew so well. If he would just give her one...

A wild thought occurred to her—the image of herself, charging up the circle drive toward school and shooting every one of those things that had pounced on the car earlier, like some action movie heroine.

But how could she even shoot them? What would she even aim at?

"Aunt Linda..." Mylee came from the kitchen a step behind Aereal's mother. She took a bag when Aereal's mother shoved it into her hand, but didn't seem to notice it was there. "Aunt Linda, stop! Look, we heard what our mother said to you last night. Sean and I, we were listening. She said to come to the lab..."

Wait, what had happened last night now? Why was Aereal always the last to know everything? By what sense of justice did her interloping cousins know more about what went on in her own home than she did?

"I know what your mother said. There's no time to discuss it." Aereal's mother plowed straight past Sean, grabbing her co-pad from the staircase railing on her way.

"The car is still on the curb," her father said. "You go first. *Parquies*, follow her. I have the rear."

*Can I have a gun first?* Aereal wasn't quick enough to say those

words aloud. Her father had opened the door, and her mother had stepped out...

And then stepped straight back inside.

The door stood open, blocking Aereal's view of the outside. She had no idea what was happening, until he spoke her mother's name.

"Linda."

It was her uncle's voice, the twins' father. His hand reached out beyond the edge of the door to snatch the co-pad from her mother's hand. When he held it up to his still-hidden face, Aereal saw a split-screen. Half of it displayed five shuttle boarding numbers. The other half listed the trip itinerary—shuttles off-world to the passenger ships in orbit, traveling to the stations in Jupiter's orbit, in the Sol system, and then to Earth.

Her parents had always talked about visiting the holy sites on Earth someday. But it was always just that, *someday* talk. Never serious. Aereal had never expected to see the Human Origin World in person.

"April will be disappointed," the twins' father said. April, the twins' mother, who had apparently been at the house last night and said something about their secret research lab.

"You aren't," Aereal's mother said.

The twin's father sighed, shoving the co-pad back into his sister-in-law's hands. "What disappoints her disappoints me. But you're right. I came for my children, not you three."

The twins? He had come to take the twins? Aereal made an involuntary lurch toward her cousins, only to feel her father's arm constrict around her, holding her back. Why? There were five tickets in that Earth trip. They obviously meant to take the twins with them. They always took the twins with them. Every vacation. Every holiday. The twins were always with them. And in that moment, Aereal knew that it could be no other way.

She could have it no other way.

But then, as her father held her back, Aereal caught a glimpse out of the window beside the door. What she saw there made her mouth drop open. It was insane nonsense to match everything else that had happened so far during that awful, endless day.

“Let them come with us,” her mother was saying, pleading, because what stood out there on their front lawn made pleading necessary. “They’re just kids. You and April have to stay. I get that. But they don’t. You know we will take care of them.”

The twins themselves clearly agreed. They stood together behind Aereal’s mother, with expressions to match the thoughts in Aereal’s head. But the thing on the front lawn, the dozen soldiers in body armor with gun drones hovering overhead, made anything more than pleading impossible.

It also made no sense. Since when did her uncle command a private army? He was a genius scientist locked his entire life inside a laboratory.

“You won’t make it, Linda,” the twin’s father said. “If the things on the ground don’t get you, the ships in orbit will. No one is leaving this planet.”

Aereal’s heart stopped as her mother asked to be let go and her uncle gave her the decisive, “Not with them,” answer. *The things on the ground*, he said. He knew about the things on the ground. He came with a private army against the things on the ground. None of this made sense.

And there *were* ships in orbit.

And then, to everyone’s surprise, Mylee spoke. “Okay, so where are we going? The lab, right Dad?”

What was she doing? Of all the things that night, this was the most unreal. Mylee taking the lead on something. Mylee pulling her brother out the door, into a swarm of soldiers that should not exist. Mylee agreeing to leave Aereal’s house behind.

An absence filled the house as the twins left it, as they got into their father’s car and flew away. This was not supposed to happen. Bloody cookies and shadows balancing on railings were not supposed to happen, either. But this was really, really not supposed to happen. It violated the natural order of things, undid a certain future, caused paradoxes fit to rupture the entire space-time continuum.

They could not be going to Earth without the twins. It just wasn’t possible.

The looming absence almost made Aereal glad to leave her house.

Her uncle's absurd private army scattered as she ran down the lawn and into the car that no part of her wanted to enter again.

From the same seat that Mylee had occupied earlier, a half dozen bags scattered now on the floor, Aereal watched her father set a course on the dashboard. She felt numb, unable to comprehend anything that had just happened, the twins' absence least of all.

"Did Aunt April really say to go to the lab?" she asked as the car rose into the air.

But to what end did she ask it? Was she asking her parents to go there, follow the twins? Was that still an option?

"Aereal!" Her mother seemed to awaken from some kind of trance. She did a double-take, looking around at her daughter as if she hadn't seen her yet that night. And then her hand seized Aereal's with a bone-crushing pressure. "Eery! Thank... we thought... we tried to get a car, to get you from school, but... we thought... afraid..."

"I wasn't at school," Aereal said. It felt like such a long time ago, lingering on the school lawn, following her cousins home. "I skipped Council. I just... I wanted to get home." A lump rose in her throat with a glance at the packed bags scattered beneath them. "But... I missed the block car. And then Sean and Mylee were walking to their house, and I just went with them."

"Good." Her father's quiet voice resonated from the front bucket seat. "You were safer with them than anywhere, probably."

The image of Mylee shouting in the piano studio, of the shadow pausing when she did, flashed through Aereal's mind. "Why?" she snapped. "Mom, Dad, what is going on? Those soldiers? What are those things? Were they there to stop those things?"

"No," her father said. "They most certainly were not there to stop those things."

"Brett..." her mother said cautiously.

But he shook his head, said, "No more," and looked straight at Aereal. "Those things in the shadows... I saw a few at the end of my shift and came straight home. Those things are tech-clones..."

"What?" Aereal asked.

"...designed and built in your aunt and uncle's lab."

"What?" Aereal's voice could have shaken the car off course. "No.

Aunt April and Uncle William are not building *tech-clones* in their lab. They're illegal!"

But then, why would the Be'shon feel compelled to follow its own rules? And it did explain... everything.

Those few words explained absolutely everything.

Except, Aereal realized, why they were flying to the spaceport and not to her aunt and uncle's lab as instructed. Aereal was halfway to asking that question when her mother spoke.

"There's a lot, Eery," she said. "And we will tell you everything—that we know, anyway. But I want you to get an accurate picture of it all. And that explanation will take time. Right now, we have to concentrate on getting off this planet."

A shudder ran down Aereal's spine. "Uncle William said..."

"We have to try," her father said.

Her parents gave each other a psychic look that could have rivaled the ones passed between the twins. In it, Aereal got the distinct impression that time was not the only barrier to the story they had to tell. There was something in that story more world-shattering than a vanishing internet and people-snatching shadows. Something they didn't want her distracted with.

Because this horrid night was not over. Because they thought she might have to fight. What else could a bag full of guns headed somewhere other than a shooting range mean?

That bloody cookie she had never eaten threatened to come up yet again. The spaceport had appeared beneath them, and just the thought of landing again was enough to turn her stomach. Aereal aimed a kick at the one black duffel bag. "And how do you expect to get *that* through spaceport security?" she asked.

"I'm a thirty-year, decorated police officer, Aereal," her father said. "It comes with certain privileges. Especially on nights like this."

Because no, the night was not over. Really, it had just begun.



"I miss real food," Noah said, seated cross-legged on Aereal's left. On her other side, Calley nibbled at the stale protein bar like a squirrel rationing nuts. How something that started out with the texture and consistency of cardboard could go stale, Aereal did not know. At some point during the decades forgotten inside metal lockers, however, it had.

Most of their group had remained in the cell after waking, seated or lying in sleeping bags. Quiet conversations drifted around them, held in the concrete walls and steel rafters. Aereal's father had disappeared, back in the munitions storeroom to inventory the guns, she thought. Her mother had brought the bars in, and starving as they all were, most found themselves, like Calley, nibbling and no longer overly eager to eat.

"Our mom makes amazing breakfasts," Noah said. "Pancakes..."

From his seat on Noah's other side, Aaron held his half-nibbled bar between two fingers, eyes studying the floor. "Maple syrup and butter," he mumbled.

"Like, real maple?" Aereal asked.

Earth trees didn't grow well on Eeteron, something about the sun being a millionth of a centimeter further from the planet. The trees they had were genetically modified replicas, and purists swore their fruit and derivatives like syrup did not taste the same. The same purists insisted everyone call it *maple-like* syrup, too.

Aaron's free hand constricted into a fist as he stared at the floor.

"Dad has friends on earth," Noah said.

Aaron wasn't looking at Aereal, and a moment before she could find that strange, her father walked into the holding cell. He leaned his nanite rifle against the cell door and called for everyone's attention.

"My wife and I," he said, as the group turned and rose to face him, "have been discussing where we think we should go next."

"We can't stay here?" one of the boys asked. The question provoked a general, agitated murmur. The boy's father put a hand on the

boy's back and said, "This place is more defensible than any we've been in before."

"It's defensible, yes." Aereal's father nodded.

"We'll run out of food," Annie said. She spoke softly, but the words carried in that stone room.

"And water," Aereal's mother said. "The water coming out of the pipes is already contaminated. It's not dangerous yet, but it will get worse."

Silence fell as they all took these words in, found themselves smothered inside them, defeated by their own physical needs. They were too far from any shopping centers to venture out and bring food back—if there was anything left in the shopping centers to bring back at all.

"What we need," Aereal's father said, "is a defensible location with stockpiles of food and its own, clean water supply."

"That exists?" Annie asked.

Aereal saw her father hesitate and suddenly knew what he was going to suggest.

But it was her mother who spoke. "My sister was a biological engineer working in a blacklist lab tied to the Hospital Main research complex."

"You want to go there *now*?" Aereal snapped. None of their companions could understand her tone, or the incredulous look she gave her mother. But her parents would understand. Aunt April had told them to come to that lab. For days, they had ignored her request. And now that the world had fallen apart—*now* they were willing to go?

They still hadn't told her the story they had promised days ago. Monsters and fights to the death had driven it from all of their minds.

"The Main Hospital?" Tyren asked, missing, or choosing to ignore, the unfolding family drama. "In the city center? That's miles away."

"Yes. But no further than we have already traveled," Aereal's father said. "And now, we have these." He touched the nanite rifle that leaned against the open cell door. Aaron and Noah both glanced at theirs, lain beside their battered hunting rifles.

"We don't know how to use those," Rebecca, the mother against gun violence, said. She still eyed the weapons like talismans of evil.

“Which is why, today, before we make any decisions,” Aereal’s father said, “I propose we dedicate ourselves to target practice.”

## 6 DAYS EARLIER

### DAY 1

“Aereal! Eery! Look at me! Eery!”

It was her father, grabbing her arms and pulling them away from her head. “Hey! Hey! I need to go help. Look at me!”

He was leaving her. Aereal grabbed him by the shoulders, as the waiting room around them erupted into pandemonium, clinging through fabric, skin, and muscle, into his bones. He couldn’t leave her. He had to stay.

Ten minutes earlier, they had passed through security, duffel bag full of guns in hand. The security guard looked at the bag’s contents as it passed through the scanner, looked at Aereal’s father, looked at his profile on the screen next to the scanner, and waved them through. He smiled at Aereal as she passed, a nice smile, fatherly. And there were two boys about Aereal’s age in the booth behind him, whispering together, pointing at the scanner screen as the arsenal passed by unstopped.

The security checkpoint led into a waiting room. Rows of plastic seats stood facing windows that overlooked the underground launch structure. Here, rockets sat, hidden inside their launch tubes, waiting to take off. If Aereal had ever been in a spaceport before, she might have found it strange that none of the rockets seemed to be taking off. But she hadn’t been in a spaceport before, and the room around her was strange enough.

The waiting room was overcrowded, like the check-in lines had been above. Near the security scanner, a chokepoint hallway led toward the launch structure, and the overfull room was spilling into

it, despite repeated reprimands from the flight attendants on duty.

“There, seats!” Aereal’s mother proclaimed in triumph. She nearly twisted Aereal’s wrist off in her haste to claim two newly vacated seats near the back wall.

All the way on the other end of the waiting room, the security guard had left his booth and scanner, answering a call for help from the struggling flight attendants. “Back!” he shouted, waving a baton to clear the chokepoint hallway. Meanwhile, brought to a halt by the security guard’s departure, the endless line jostled against a closed, transparent barrier. There were several shouts and more raised voices, drawing Aereal’s attention. And then Aereal froze halfway into her seat, as a shadow appeared above the heads in line.

And then, pandemonium.

“Aereal, hey, I need to go help.”

She was shaking her head, clinging to her father’s arms, unable to remember time passing. A shadow appeared above the security scanner, and then she was behind the row of plastic chairs, with her mother dragging guns out of a duffel bag, and her father holding her arms.

How had those shadows gotten in? And why was it so different here? In the houses, everything had been quiet, slow, people just disappearing. Here, it was all screaming and stampeding feet inside brightly lit rooms. Aereal had never been in the middle of violence before, but the sounds were unmistakable, cascading down from the levels above them, appearing with the shadow above the security scanner—as if the two had caused each other.

“Yes, yes, I’m going. I need you to stay with your mother. Here, take this...” Her father was replacing his shoulders with a gun, cold steel against her hands. “Take it.”

Aereal was still shaking her head. She was familiar with this weapon, had read all about it on posters during idle moments at the shooting range. The thought of actually holding one was... impossible. “This is a riot gun...”

“Yes. It’s already set on lethal. You point it at the target until it locks—you’ll hear it click—then shoot. Hey, hey!” He put a hand around her neck, under her jaw, forcing her to look at him. “You can

do this. I would not give you this weapon if I didn't think you could handle it."

Then he was gone, running toward the security checkpoint with the duffel bag arsenal open and basically empty on the floor behind their seats. Aereal crouched there with her mother, watching over the back of the seats like everyone else who had caught on and taken cover. Screaming still echoed down from the levels above. The security barrier shattered, followed by a stampede of feet through the checkpoint, gunfire, and a roar that sent shards of glass through Aereal's nerves.

The first creature appeared on the wall, literally—climbing across the wall around the corner from the security hall. Even under the bright lights, it looked like bodiless shadow, or smoke maybe—a spirit monster conjured by the dark witches of lore and legend. For a moment, Aereal thought she was imagining all of it.

And then the shadow flung itself down from the wall, into the stampede. Two more shadows had appeared, six feet from Aereal's row of chairs. She watched them tear a man in half, aimed over the seats out of sheer panic, and squeezed the trigger before the click. The rifle kicked back at her shoulder with an angry beep, refusing to shoot. Aereal sobbed in response, water blocking her eyes and closing her throat. Long white strands of hair stuck to her face, impossible to wipe away.

Six feet away, one shadow turned toward the sound of Aereal's rifle, spraying blood as it moved, like a dog shaking off water. It rose from the half corpse at its feet, roaring—

And then something happened.

The outside world dropped away, moving Aereal and her rifle and the monster into a dimension all their own. The screams faded, along with the memories, the questions about her cousins' fate, the blood in the cookie tray. There was only her and the shadow and the certainty that one of them was about to die. It was Aereal, or it was this creature. There was nothing else. Time itself had stopped moving around the two of them and the rifle that would decide which of them got to live. And either way, it was about to be over.

Aereal blinked, sucked air into her lungs, aimed again with the

rifle balanced between two seats. “You can do this,” her father said, even though he wasn’t there. He was somewhere else, out in the security hall, probably being ripped apart.

Aereal’s finger moved on the trigger, but she forced herself to stop before squeezing, to wait inside this bubble where time did not exist. The shadow slouched toward her, reaching for the noise behind the plastic chairs. She held her breath, held her finger, listened—listened... listened...

Then click, then squeeze, then shoot...

## DAY 6

In the street outside the hidden police locker, they set lookouts on the rooftops, then set debris as targets. Aereal’s father gave them a general lecture about the nanite rifles, then told them to pair off. Aaron headed over to help Annie, and Aereal ended up partnered with Noah.

Noah got the hang of the rifle in about five seconds, and after that, it was just target shooting for the two of them. Between shots, they spoke about hunting, compared neuro-absent deer clones to tech-clones, with Aereal forced to agree that they were different things. The conversation wandered to school, which sent prickles up Aereal’s spine until she changed the subject back to hunting. That topic brought them to the shooting range and when Aereal’s father had started teaching her there, which brought them to Noah’s mother, who had apparently taught him to shoot. Her family, it turned out, were the hunters, not his father’s.

A deafening silence fell at that, echoing of smashed lights and bloody cookies and plastic seats ripped straight out of their welded bases. Noah held his rifle past its target-lock click and had to wait for it to reset.

“They might still be alive, you know,” Aereal said, watching the end of Noah’s rifle, waiting for a shot that never came. “Your parents.”

Noah's finger remained motionless, poised over the trigger, his eye watching down the scope. "Doesn't really matter, does it?" The rifle slumped from his shoulder, then rose again, all under Aereal's blank and startled gaze.

"I mean that..." He shifted the rifle against his shoulder, finger still over the trigger. "If they are alive, they're doing what they can to make whatever this world is now better. And if not, then they're at peace. Either way, doesn't really change what I have to do now. And doesn't change the fact that I will see them again, at the resurrection."

"When the universe is remade..." It was a call and response, learned in her parents' church long ago, drilled in through repetition until the words lost meaning—or maybe gained meaning. For a moment, Aereal stood mesmerized inside the words, as if some witch had cast a magic spell over the speaking of them. *At the resurrection, when the universe is remade.*

Aereal took a breath, shaking herself from the sudden and inexplicable trance. "You're Be'shon church," she said, eyes on the end of Noah's rifle.

The shot finally came, spewing millions of nanites from the rifle faster than the Human eye could see. They exploded inside the brick wall across from them with a shower of rock dust. "You are too, I thought," Noah said.

Aereal shrugged, raising her own rifle to her shoulder. She had no intention of shooting, but aiming gave her something to do with her hands. "My parents are. I gave up believing in fairytales a long time ago."

"Oh, right." Noah's hand went over the barrel of her rifle, pushing it down so he could step in front of her, toward the pock-marked wall. "The whole whiteout thing. With your hair all chopped off, I almost forgot." He tugged at Aereal's sleeve with a playful smirk, then jerked his head toward the wall. "Show me how to recover the nanites again?"

"Yeah." Aereal followed him. Another shot rang out on her right and she turned, saw Aaron and Annie hi-five as the brick wall in front of them coughed dust. Annie smiled at them over Aaron's shoulder. It was the first time Aereal had ever seen her smile. Aaron glanced over

Aereal's head at his brother, then away.

"Eery?" Noah said, tugging her sleeve.

"Right..." The nanite port sat in the butt of the rifle, and she showed him how to detach it, then how to hold the two-inch cylinder so it would communicate with its microscopic machines to pull them back inside. "Um..." she asked, with another glance over at Aaron and Annie. "Is Aaron avoiding me?"

Noah shrugged, reinserting the nanite port into his rifle. "Maybe a little."

"Why?"

Aaron shrugged again. "Your father's calling us in. Come on."

## 6 DAYS EARLIER

### DAY 1

In the spaceport, it took five shots to bring that first shadow down. Every shot seemed to carve more of its body out of the smoke, until a real, flesh and blood creature stood before her at last.

It looked something like a gorilla and something like a Human, and something like neither or both. It was hairless, and at least seven feet tall, with no visible gender features—except that its size, severe bone structure, and lack of fat tissue perhaps made it look more male than female. Beneath its skin, as it loomed over her chairs, Aereal saw black web-patterns spreading from the five black holes where her CEPs had entered. Its blood was black, not red.

It fell with a deafening thud, attracting the attention of the second shadow. The second paused while ripping entrails out of a man's body, then rose over its broken meal, roaring. Aereal fired again, and again, and again, until it too had dropped.

But there were more now, so many, many more. Aereal's mother grabbed her arms and pulled her away from the seats as half a dozen



shadows swarmed down from the walls two yards away from them.

"How will Dad find us?" Aereal asked, steadying herself against a wall, waiting for the click. Four shots rang out this time before the shadow turned solid and smashed into the floor.

It looked even more like a person than the first two. That had to be a trick her mind played, but her mind played it well. A hairless, genderless Human with gray skin and a gorilla's face lay at Aereal's feet. She gagged, staring. It was twisted and wrong and it... It looked like a person...

How, by all sense of right and good, could it look like a person? "How will Dad find us?" Aereal asked again, the nanite rifle hanging at her side.

"Live first, worry next," her mother said, pulling her toward a second chokepoint hall. It connected the waiting rooms to the departure gates, sealed at the gate end in a clearsteel wall. Could those things get through clearsteel too? They ripped regular steel apart like paper, so why not?

But clearsteel wasn't steel at all. It looked like glass, but was forged from crystal-like alloys on an alien world, used to build spaceships because it could withstand the extreme conditions of interstellar travel. So maybe, just maybe, they would be safe behind it.

Everyone in the waiting room, it seemed, had the same idea. Three dozen bodies surged through the chokepoint, running full speed, carrying children, screaming, tripping. Aereal's hair flew into her face, and she tried to shake it away, her hands full with the rifle, cursing inside her head. A single scream, higher pitched than any of the others, sliced through her ears and pulled her to a halt there in the center of the hall. With shaking hands, she turned, legs bent, feet shoulder-width apart, rifle aimed over the crowd, eyes searching through the scope. "Where's Dad?"

A shadow roared in answer, crawling across a wall, around the corner, and into the choke hall—like a demon from the horror movies. Aereal waited—*aim, lock, click, squeeze*. Her shot knocked the shadow back, almost tearing it from its impossible grip on the wall. And then another shot rang out over her head, the sharp *clip-clip* of a handgun. She saw the bullets hit, but the shadow didn't seem to feel them. It

jumped from the wall into the screaming crowd, grabbed a woman by her hair, and ripped her head clean off her body. Aereal's knees gave out, tripping into the floor, with her mother's hands grabbing her up and away.

And then rifle shots joined the handgun. The shadow staggered, dropped over the woman's body, snarling like a dog burying its bone. Aereal was back on her feet, heard the hum of another weapon like her own, saw her father, saw CEPs hit the shadow's head as bullets from three projectile rifles struck it too.

"Through, through!" someone shouted as feet thundered through the chokepoint, behind the clearsteel barrier that they could only hope would hold.

Aereal saw the security officer who had smiled at her earlier holding the door open. Then the teenage boys appeared, both armed with hunting rifles now, standing guard at either side of the hall. The crowd crashed into Aereal and her mother, bringing her father with it. More shadows surged behind them, crawling through what was left of the waiting room, chasing stragglers as they fled.

Aereal's father pushed her and her mother through the clearsteel gate. He stopped next to it with his rifle aimed above the still coming stampede.

"You have any more of those?" the security officer asked, jerking his chin at the nanite rifle.

"Unfortunately, just the one I gave her," Aereal's father said, firing at the click.

"Well, at least your kid can shoot," the security officer said.

"So can yours." The hunting rifles went off as Aereal's father spoke, dropping a shadow from the walls. The last stragglers were almost through.

"Boys, go!" Aereal's father ordered, sending Aaron and Noah through the gate.

Aaron and Noah.

She hadn't known their names then.

Three shadows slammed into the clearsteel half a second too late. As their smoky outlines pressed against the transparent barrier, Aereal glimpsed their solid forms—the mutated, gray gorilla things

they became when they died. The things that looked almost like people...

They slashed at the barrier, roared at it, slammed against it with all of their thudding, crushing weight, as if trying to prove once and for all that yes, despite appearances, they were solid, flesh and blood creatures.

But what *were* they? Her parents called them tech-clones—but what did that even mean?

At the time, no one stopped to find out. Fifty people stampeded down a narrow service staircase, like cattle in the old slaughter farms. Cold night air struck Aereal's lungs, as somewhere below a door opened.

And then they were outside, in an underground structure open to the night sky, under the towering launch-way lights, in the vast field between launch tubes.

Enclosed walkways connected the building to the launch tubes, and passengers were not allowed outside them under normal circumstances. They looked like worms now, those walkways—giant worms winding their way down from the doors in the spaceport, across the field, to the launch tubes. Those were giant cannons, hundreds of them, positioned at regular intervals along the field, some angled up toward the sky, ready to launch their shuttles through the atmosphere, others lying on the ground, waiting for returned shuttles to be ferried back inside. It was all a grand mess of steel and concrete, towering, behemoth structures throwing their shadows against the blazing lights, every shadow alive, every wall moving...

And then something really was moving. As they stampeded down onto the launch field, another stampede crashed toward them between worm-like walkways and looming tubes. Aereal raised her rifle, felt it bruise her shoulder as her hand shook. And then her father's hand went around the barrel, pushing the rifle down.

People emerged from the shadows, most wearing uniforms, baggage handlers and pilots, no one in regular travel clothes.

"Get away from the door. Go! Go!" The voice, the sharp urgency in it, stung Aereal's ears. She turned back the way they had come, rocking on her feet, to see the security guard from above waving the last

of their stampede down into the launch structure. The two boys with their hunting rifles stood like sentinels on either side of the door.

“Geoff!” Another voice sliced across the merging groups of spaceport staff and travelers. A man dressed in another white and gold security uniform pushed through the crowd, stopping under a pool of light from the lamp above the door. His eyes darted to Aereal and the two boys—armed teenagers in a spaceport. “What is going on? I know Sidi’s down, but no one’s answering the radios now either.”

“Yeah, because we might be the only ones still alive.” Geoff, the security guard from above, slammed the door behind the last survivor. There were three deadbolts in the door, and he engaged each one.

Meanwhile, the other guard’s eyes went wide. “What?”

“This planet is under attack,” Aereal’s father spoke from her side. His hand was still around the barrel of her rifle, and turning white. “There are creatures, made in some lab somewhere—must have been. They appeared in certain parts of the city a few hours ago, about the same time Sidi went down.”

The officer’s eyes narrowed at Aereal’s father. “And you are?”

“Police. Off duty.”

“Nader, he’s telling the truth.” Officer Geoff had come over from the door, his sons with him. “There are things, creatures, literally tearing people apart up there.”

The other officer’s eyes had fixed on the two boys behind Geoff, with rifles held at rest across their bodies. “Did you use your position to smuggle firearms into a secure area and then use them to arm children?”

“Nader, focus!” A woman in a white and gold uniform had appeared at his side, followed through the crowd by half a dozen more white and gold uniforms. She gave Officer Nader a condescending eye roll before turning to Officer Geoff and Aereal’s father. “Creatures? What are you talking about, *creatures*?”

Officer Geoff shook his head. “It’s hard to describe. We can’t actually see them.”

“Oh, so ghosts then,” Officer Nader said, crossing his arms with a scowl.

“Stop it!” the female officer said.

"No, they just... move really fast," Officer Geoff said.

"Um..." Another man pushed through the gawking, breathless crowd toward the group of officers, holding his hand up like a schoolchild who wasn't sure the teacher would approve of his question. He wore a dark blue uniform, and Aereal's brain scrambled to catch up. Blue... What did blue mean...?

"So," the blue uniform said, "if we're under attack..."

Pilot. It was a pilot's uniform. He was a pilot.

"It's somewhat dangerous without Sidi," he said, "but we can override the autopilots, launch manually..."

"No." The female officer shook her head. "Thank you, Alex, but whoever did this is just waiting for us in orbit."

Officer Nader rolled his eyes. "Tyren!"

"Freaking gatch, Nader, catch up!" Officer Tyren snapped. "The tower has been blind for an hour—*our* interstellar observation and control tower has been blind for an hour. It's independent of Sidi, and still, it is down, like Sidi is down. That doesn't just happen. Someone did that, on purpose!"

"She's right. There's a blockade in orbit and it will prevent anyone from leaving," Aereal's father said, his hand devoid now of color as it gripped Aereal's rifle. "We thought that might not be true, but now I'm sure it is."

"And how do you know all of this?" Officer Nader asked.

Before Aereal's father could answer—whatever his answer might have been—a screech ripped through the crowd around them. Sixty people staggered away from the spaceport building and the door they had just come through. Aereal spun around, tearing her rifle from her father's grip and expecting to find the door shattering open with shadows streaming through.

Under the glow of a light high above, the door stood motionless, dead bolted shut in three places. All around her, people continued to stagger back, dismayed, horrified shrieks echoing off the steel launch tubes and walkways. Heart pounding in her throat, Aereal turned her face up to the spaceport waiting rooms just in time to see a headless body slam into the window almost directly above her head. A jolt ran through her. The rifle slipped in her hands as she rocked back-

ward on her heels and almost fell. An arm caught her, even as an arm was torn from the headless body above. Sickening yellow bone stuck out between torn strips of muscle, with something dark and almost shapeless dragging it back and away from the window—like dogs dragged their chew toys.

More bodies slammed against the window above, some missing pieces, some alive and screaming, some missing pieces and alive and screaming...

Aereal's father moved toward the bolted door. "We have to get up there," he said.

But Officer Geoff put a hand across his chest, stopping him. "No," he said. "We don't."

A look of understanding passed between them, and the security officer continued. "Tyren, you go too, and anyone else who wants. There are service shafts out of the launch area that go straight to the streets. They should be easy enough to break open from the inside. Go, get the civilians out. But... The control tower may be down, but our security tower is still active. Anyone who wishes to stay with me, we will try to contact the tower and get as many other people out alive as we can."

"There might not be anyone left alive up there now," Officer Tyren said.

"My wife was on her way to join us here after work." There was a finality in Officer Geoff's words, universally understood and unquestionable. "She might still be on her way. She might be up there now, because I told her to come here. Either way, I am not leaving. But you two are."

"Dad..." Aereal could not remember which brother had said it. It might have been both of them.

"You're leaving," he said, final and absolute. "Get out. Survive."

They decided as a group to go to the lab. Some grumbled more than others, but they all seemed to understand when it came to it—they couldn't stay in a hidden police locker eating stale crackers and drinking poisoned water.

So they packed up, moved out, children in groups between armed adults. Aereal's father took point, telling the four other strong shooters he needed them in pairs, two in the middle, two at the back. Aaron was suddenly in the back row with Tyren, which left Aereal shouldered to the middle, with Noah.

Not that she minded being with Noah, but the weirdness from Aaron was really getting, well, weird. In front of them, the street door opened, her father checking that everything was clear outside, then beckoning them out.

Noah swung his hunting rifle over his head and shoulder, the nanite rifle now in prime position across his chest. He and Aereal marched out in step together, half the group in front of them, half coming behind.

"So..." Aereal glanced back, saw Aaron holding Calley's hand, and her voice almost broke. "Why is Aaron mad at me?" They couldn't be mad at each other. This was all such a stupid waste of time.

"Because you said the Be'shon was responsible for all this," Noah said. They came out into the street, blinking against daylight.

"Well, they are!" Aereal said, when the temporary blindness cleared from their eyes. "Obviously!"

Noah squinted down at her for an uncomfortable half-second. "How do you figure that, exactly?" he asked.

Aereal took a breath and launched into a review of the facts they all knew. She listed the oppressions of a power-hungry cluster of entrenched bureaucrats who had ruled unchallenged for centuries and thought they had the right to decide the fate of every single man, woman, and child in the galaxy. They were rich and privileged and mostly nonhuman and owned the news outlets—literally owned

them. And scientists on their payroll created the Sidi A.I. as a galactic babysitter to spy on every world and collect all their personal data so they could compile blackmail files on every single person. And when a group of Humans finally dared to challenge them, they responded by releasing cannibal shadows into the galaxy to teach everyone a lesson about their own ultimate power.

Aereal was particularly proud of that last part. It was her own personal theory, and for days she had honed it and rechecked it, and could safely say now that it fit flawlessly with all of the facts.

It was perhaps her best speech yet, and by the end of it, they had crossed four city blocks. Aereal took a triumphant closing breath and turned to Noah, only to find him smiling like someone whose kid sister had just told him about butterflies being fairies in disguise.

“So, let me get this straight,” Noah said. “The Be’shon government building is blown up, on a non-Human planet, twelve thousand, nine hundred and eighty-two light-years from here, and the Be’shon’s response is to attack *this* planet—where we manufacture most of their weapons and warships—with people-eating monsters?”

“They didn’t just attack *this* planet!” Aereal said.

“Ah.”

How was he not getting this? It was the most obvious thing in the universe. “They just attacked everyone! They’re trying to make everyone bow to them.”

“And, so, where did the shadows actually come from? Because they’re not any species we know of, so that leaves a certain kind of genetic engineering that the Be’shon outlawed something like five hundred years ago.”

Aereal expected this kind of thing from her parents and her teachers. But she really had thought Noah could think for himself. Was he too just another Be’shon drone? That thought made her nauseous. “Since when do entitled politicians follow their own rules? They probably outlawed the whole thing in the first place so they could be the only ones doing it!”

“Right, okay...” Noah said, still smiling like an amused elder brother. “And it doesn’t make more sense that whoever attacked the Be’shon would also attack us? I mean, it’s not like we manufacture



eighty-seven percent of all Be'shon military equipment... Oh wait, we do."

Rage seared through Aereal, turning her face bright red. "Shut up! You're not listening to me!"

"Oh, I'm listening," Noah said. "You're just wrong."

Aereal stopped walking, fixed him with a glare more intense than Concentrated Explosion Points, then marched away, face burning. How could Noah be one of *them*? How could she still be alone, here, in the apocalypse, with proof of everything she had been saying for years literally crawling on the walls around them? Was everyone really just that brainwashed? The Be'shon had attacked them, abandoned them, left them to watch shadows rip people in half and eat them. Good governments didn't do that.

If the Be'shon was so good, then why wasn't it here to defend them?

"Aereal... Eery!" Noah jogged up behind her.

"I'll talk to you when you're ready to think for yourself!" Aereal said.

"Hey, look..." Noah reached for her arm, was shaken off, but stayed in step with her. "Whatever's happening, I don't think any of us can afford to be mad at each other right now. So can we just... not be?"

Not mad. He wasn't mad at her. Aereal took a breath and managed to nod. Maybe she just hadn't explained it well enough. Ten hours of sleep over three days would hurt any person's communication skills. She'd try again sometime, and he'd get it when she could explain it better.

"You know, my dad was Be'shon Sec," Noah said, breaking into her thoughts.

"What?" Aereal stammered.

"Yeah," Noah said, eyes forward, hunting rifle on his back and nanite rifle in hand.

"Your father's a security guard at the spaceport!" Aereal said.

"Yeah, *now*." Noah shrugged. "He was born on Mars. And he was recruited into the Be'shon security academy at—my age, actually. Then he spent a decade traveling the galaxy until he was assigned here. It was supposed to be three months, but he met my mom, extended his assignment, and eventually resigned. Oldest story in the galaxy,

right? Anyway, so, yeah, that's why Aaron's mad at you..."

They walked in silence for a while with all kinds of unpleasant things seething in the back of Aereal's mind—like cockroaches inside walls. She couldn't see them, could pretend they weren't there. But she knew they were.

After a while, Aereal's father called for them to stop. In the awkward silence of crouching on their knees, fighting to keep cockroaches behind the mental walls, Aereal asked, "But you're not mad at me, though?"

"No," Noah said. He hesitated a moment, then shrugged. "Look, I'm never going to agree with you that the Be'shon did this. But... none of the people here, right now, in this group, did this to our planet. None of us. And as much as we might want to know who started it, and to point fingers, and blame something, all of that really is the absolute least of our problems right now. No matter who started it, if we're going to survive, it's together." He held his hand out to her then, crouched on the deserted sidewalk and waiting for the road to clear ahead. "From here on out," he said.

Aereal took his hand. The cockroaches scurried away from her mind, with a clutter of blame and self-assurance clearing behind them. Maybe she didn't need to be right. Maybe not everyone thought about things the same way she did, and maybe that didn't make them stupid. That may have been the first time in her entire life that such a strange thought occurred to her.

"From here on out," she said.

DAY 9

All things considered, their journey to the lab was as uneventful as it could have been. Two nights without sleep. Three shadow attacks. No one lost or killed or left behind.

By the second night, Aaron had apparently decided to forget whatever had upset him. He and Aereal spent several hours entertaining

Calley with a tragic attempt at making shadow puppets with their hands.

In the city center, under a forest of skyscrapers, they found no signs of life. Even the shadows, it would seem, had abandoned this place. Broken cars sat useless at the curbs, doors pulled down and windows smashed in most of the buildings they passed. The shadows had come through as they came through the spaceport, destroying and leaving nothing behind. No bodies. No bones. No blood.

Where did it all go? Was it possible that they ate everything?

The destruction seemed to follow the main streets, like a wave sweeping through, braking at last against the Hospital Main complex. The hospital skyscraper stood, empty and dark, above a cluster of overrun research buildings. Aereal was just beginning to wonder where her aunt and uncle's lab might actually be located, when her parents stopped over a large hole in the ground.

It was a stairway, leading down into darkness, with the bunker doors that had once covered it torn clear away. Aereal took a step backward, bumped into Aaron, and told herself to at least pretend to be brave.

"Wow," Tyren said, leaning over the hole. "I passed this door a hundred times when my mom was hospitalized here. I thought it was a storm shelter."

"That's what you were supposed to think," Aereal's father said. He stepped down into the blackness, with only the scope on his rifle lighting the way. Aereal's mind flashed to that first shadow on the staircase ages ago. For several seconds, she stood above the darkness, unable to move. But then Calley was there, with her arms around Aereal's waist, and getting her out of the open and into some semblance of safety was all that mattered.

The staircase seemed to go on forever, and nothing met them but more darkness at the bottom. They stood holding their breath, listening for anything and everything.

Then Aaron clicked on his flashlight. The wide beam traveled over Aereal's head and around a vacuum, dispersing useless into the vast space around them, until it caught on a shadow. A massive gray form, rising off the floor, stopped Aereal's heart. Then she realized it was

fixed in one place—and made of stone. But what was it? Why would anyone put a giant stone growth in the middle of the floor?

“And... yes...” Aereal’s mother spoke from somewhere behind and to her left.

A mechanical hum swept through the room, and then Aereal was blinking as lights flared on all across the ceiling. Something clicked, then buzzed, then became a rush of gurgling water. Aereal blinked, willing her eyes to adjust, with Calley clinging around her waist and Noah’s voice in her ear. “Whoa...”

Aereal blinked one last time and found herself in a vaulted room, all stone and concrete. The floor was colored marble, arranged to form intricate, geometric patterns. A reception desk lurked off on one side of the room, with chunks gouged out of it. Nearby stood chairs much like the ones in the spaceport, ripped up and smashed the same way she imagined those chairs were too now. On the wall opposite the reception desk stood several dark doorways, all open or half open, the look of which made Aereal squeeze Calley tighter to her side.

In the center of the room, a free-standing fountain, more than large enough to swim in, had come back on along with the lights. Water cascaded down three tiers into a reservoir at the bottom. It gurgled and splashed, almost singing a pleasant, soothing song that echoed off the rafters around them.

Except, the water was red...

Acid stung the back of Aereal’s throat as she stared at it, clutching Calley tighter. The bloody cookie she had never eaten tried to come back up to join the red water. She tried to convince herself it was an optical illusion, a reflection, a trick of light. Anything other than what it was. There were no bodies in the room, no blood on the floor, or in those gouged-out holes at the reception desk. It was like the neighbor’s house all over again, like she and her cousins had just stumbled into a place that seemed abandoned and empty, the neighbors just gone... except for blood in the cookie tray...

Aereal swallowed, only to gag on the bile at the back of her throat.

“Well, we’ll have to do something about that,” her mother spoke from behind her, her eyes too on the fountain.

“Those things have been here,” Rebecca, the mother, said.

"How do we know they're not still here?" her husband asked.

Aereal's father shook his head. "We don't."

That was the truth of it, which none of them could argue against. They never knew where the shadows were. Nothing was safe.

"We do know they move in circles," Noah spoke up. "It takes them a while to come back to where they've already been."

"Yes, true." Aereal's father grabbed for that spark of hope and held it out. "In any case, we all need sleep. Linda?"

"Those rooms." Aereal's mother gestured at the wall opposite reception, the dark doorways that made Aereal want to shrink and run away. But her mother had already started toward the dark openings.

The rest of the group followed. Out of morbid curiosity, Aereal threw a glance at the fountain as they passed it, half-expecting to see the source of the red tint—bloated corpses like in the movies. But there was nothing. Just water colored red. Blood on the cookies.

The shadows ate their victims. They'd all seen it.

One of the dark doorways opened into a room. It consisted of four blank walls and nothing more, just large enough for all of them to spread out on the floor. What was its purpose? Aereal wondered, then didn't care. She thought she heard Noah volunteering to take first watch. Then she was curled up with Calley in her sleeping bag, grateful for oblivion.

## DAY 10

When Aereal woke the next morning, she wondered at how easily she had fallen asleep the night before. She was in a strange place, exposed behind unlocked doors, with super monsters lurking in every shadow and a fountain raining blood twenty feet away. Yet she fell asleep instantly and did not dream. Was this all just that normal now?

"We need to search this place," her father said, over tins of various

meats and beans—their only breakfast option.

“How big is this...” Ben, the father of two boys, crushed an empty tuna fish tin in his hand, then tossed it at the wall. “What even *is* this place?”

“It’s a research lab,” Aereal’s mother said, poking at cold beans with a camp spoon. “Theoretical genetic research, mostly. Privately funded and off the books.”

*Privately funded?* Aereal’s head jerked up in surprise. Her aunt and uncle were SeeKay—the Be’shon’s scientific division. They were not privately funded. She was sure of it. And yet, now she thought of it, she couldn’t remember when she had been told so.

“This is a secret laboratory?” Rebecca asked, dismayed. “You brought us to a secret... How do you even know about a secret...”

“My sister worked here, as I said,” Aereal’s mother reminded them.

“Aunt April...” Aereal stammered. Images of her uncle with a private army on her front lawn resurfaced for the first time in days. “They worked for a government lab...”

“There will be time to get into all of this later,” her father said, with a pointed look at Aereal. It was the car ride to the spaceport all over again. They were never going to tell her the promised story.

“Right now,” her father continued, “we brought you here because, as large as this place is—and yes, it’s big—but from what I understand, there is only one way in or out, the staircase we just came down. And that can be blocked up if needed.”

Annie shivered. “Those things can tear through anything.”

“Except clearsteel, it would seem,” Ben said.

“There are also a lot of places here to hide, if it comes to that,” Aereal’s mother said. “And they’re equipped with their own water supply and food stores.”

Her father nodded. “But before we get into any of that, we need to make sure the place is empty. So, groups of three or four, I think. One group can guard the entrance while the others explore.”

No one seemed overly eager to enact this plan. Rebecca grumbled the most, insisting that her children were not going anywhere until they knew everything was safe. Shadows were the least of it now, she said. A genetic research lab? How did they know there weren’t

dangerous and terrible things just lying around, waiting to be picked up and infect them all with some deadly bio-toxin? No one felt like arguing with her, so her family ended up on guard below the stairs.

The rest of them hesitated, eyed each other, eyed the fountain as it cycled its red water. There was one open door, clear at the other end of the reception hall—just an ordinary door in the center of the wall. At some point the night before, they had all seen it. And now, they all watched it like children searching out specters in the dark. The rest of the doors, on the eastern wall across from the reception desk, led into dead-end rooms. But this door, the empty black frame gaping into the darkness beyond... They could all sense it. If they wanted to go any deeper into the lab, it was through that door.

"You know, crazy Beccy's not totally crazy here," Tyren said, leaning toward Aereal's father. "I mean, a genetics lab... Couldn't there be... I mean, viruses and what not..."

"There could," Aereal's father said, then shrugged. "But, if it's released and airborne, we're probably already infected. And for everything else..."

"Exercise some basic common sense," Aereal's mother said, hoisting a backpack onto her shoulder.

"Oh, so, don't touch the little bottles with the red skull and crossbones on them?" Aaron asked. Aereal snickered.

"Exactly," Aereal's father said, clicking his flashlight on. "Okay, so... groups of three or four, obviously split the kids up between groups. If you find anything useful—power cells, a way to communicate, any hint that this place might still be connected to Sidi, or any other A.I., for that matter—please, please take note and report back. As Aaron just so helpfully reminded us, stay away from anything marked poison, because it almost certainly will be actual poison. And if you run across any shadows..." His hands tightened around his rifle, holding it up across his body. "God speed. Alright. Let's go."

As one, they headed for that one open door. Aereal's father went through first, the scope light on his rifle sweeping over gray concrete walls, steel piping. The fallen door wobbled beneath his feet as he stepped over it to enter the hall beyond. With many a deep breath, the rest of the group followed him in.

The concrete muted the sound of water in the lobby fountain. As that sound faded, Aereal began to hear water from somewhere else, dripping, slow and steady, like the heartbeat of time itself. She could not see the source. The half dozen roaming beams from their flashlights and rifles showed only bare cement walls, an unfinished, industrial ceiling, and a single hall that led off in two directions, east and west.

“You couldn’t have gotten the power back on in the rest of this place?” Tyren asked, studying the wall in front of her as if it held answers.

Aereal’s mother shook her head. “There’s no master control for the entire building. We’ll have to switch every breaker as we find it.”

“Splendid,” Tyren muttered.

Why was her mother answering these questions? That should have surprised her a lot earlier, Aereal realized. Knowing about breakers and power and how to reanimate dead buildings... *My sister worked here* could not explain that knowledge.

“Okay, let’s get this over with,” Aereal’s father said, shifting from one foot to the other. “I will go... left, I guess...” He turned and set off walking, followed by Aereal’s mother and about half the group.

Perhaps it was adolescent defiance, a thirst for independence lingering even in the apocalypse, that made Aereal turn and march off in the other direction. Tyren and a few others had already gone that way, too.

As they walked, the sound of dripping water grew steadily louder until they came to its source: a door—if such a word were sufficient. It looked like a bank vault, pushed open wide enough for a very large person to squeeze through. Giant hydraulic hinges, once embedded into the concrete wall, were pulled out and bent out of shape. Water dripped from the hinges, slowly, one drop at a time. *Drip... drip... drip...*

“Did *they* do that?” Noah spoke from Aereal’s shoulder, his scope light focused on the broken hinges. Aereal understood the awe in his voice. Each hinge could have fit her entire body inside it. The hydraulic pressure behind them must have been enormous.

And that hadn’t stopped the shadows.



“What else could have?” Tyren asked.

In a burst of recklessness, Aereal moved to the dark opening and slid through. “I’ll check this,” she said, voice steady, heart thundering inside her chest.

What was she doing, running into a pitch-dark room with nothing but a scope light? That light made literally everything look like a moving shadow. Aereal swallowed, struggling to breathe, to keep her finger from squeezing the trigger over and over again. Her light bounced around the room too quickly for her to make anything out.

“Okay. You kids be safe,” Tyren called from the other side of the door. Calley had remained glued to Aereal’s side, and the brothers followed her too.

Noah’s scope light fell and lingered on some much larger, much more expensive-looking versions of the microscopes they used in school biology classes. “What is this, some sort of lab?” he asked.

“This whole place’s a lab, bro,” Aaron said.

Aereal could hear Noah rolling his eyes. “Yeah, I know. I meant...”

“Shush!” Aereal’s light shot around the wall. “Listen!” She thought she had heard something, the hint of a roar, or maybe a whimper. But in the silence that followed, there was only the dripping of water outside. Aereal swallowed, her hand shaking so hard the rifle rattled.

“You hear something?” Noah asked, his voice tense as his light swept in opposite arcs with Aereal’s.

“I thought I did, but...” There was only the water, drip after drip, like a clock, like the heartbeat of time. And it wasn’t like the shadows to make them wait.

How screwed up was that? Aereal mused. She now knew what was and was not normal behavior for near-invisible, cannibal monsters.

A few more moments passed in silence, scanning the dark room, revealing the ghostly images of equipment too sophisticated for Aereal to name. Finally, Aaron spoke. “Hey, Cal...”

Calley’s arms were wrapped around Aereal, so Aereal could feel Aaron tugging at her shirt sleeve, pulling her away. “Help me find the breakers.”

Calley stepped away with him, the warmth of her body replaced by a vacuum at Aereal’s side.

“What will they look like?” Calley asked, with hints of a normal child’s curiosity.

“It’s probably this little box on the wall—or, I’m hoping that’s still what it looks like in fancy places like this,” Aaron said.

“And what does it do?”

Aaron and Calley set off exploring the walls. Their question-and-answer session faded into background noise. Aereal and Noah moved into the center of the room, then parted ways, weaving between workbenches, their scope lights sweeping over broken chairs, lab equipment, tables, looking for...

What? Aereal wondered. After all the death and chaos of the last week, what were they even looking for now? Bodies? Monsters? Poison? A little magic box that could somehow end all the bad things that had happened?

Aereal smiled to herself. Yeah, that would be great. Maybe God could send them a little box with the magical solution to this mess hidden inside.

Aereal stopped moving, boots squeaking against the marble floor, shocked by the thought that had just passed through her own head. It had been a long time since she had thought about God, except to poke holes in the faith and church that her parents still forced her to attend. But once she had believed, or thought she had, anyway. And oddity of oddities, she found herself smiling as her mind fell back into the familiar. *Okay, God, she thought, like a child teasing an old friend. Okay, if you’re real, and care at all about this crazy mess—that has to be at least partially your fault, by the way... If you’re real, go ahead and drop a little box down from heaven right now with the magical solution in it. Come on.*

She actually swept her light around the room then, actually imagined that she heard something rustle, or drop, on the marble floor. Then a second later, she was rolling her eyes, still smirking to herself. *No? Thought not.*

Aereal shifted the butt of her rifle up higher on her shoulder, raising the light. It caught against a shiny surface, another workbench, but tilted at a forty-five-degree angle instead of flat to the ceiling.

A computer interface.

Aereal hurried over to it and tapped at the shiny, black screen. Nothing.

So that was it. No help from God. No help from technology. Maybe they really were just screwed.

“Okay, and let there be light!” Aaron proclaimed from not so far away. Was he intentionally quoting the bible? Aereal wondered.

The lights flashed on, causing Aaron and Calley to appear next to the wall only a few feet away from Aereal. A loud hiss rang through Aereal’s skull. A pair of yellow eyes seared across her skin. And then, something that felt like a hand, with bones as strong and jagged as the stones beneath a cliff, closed around Aereal’s ankle and ripped her feet out from under her. Her shoulder smashed into the stone floor and the rifle clattered away—all before she could scream for help.

In the split second that followed, Aereal felt herself dragged toward the wall, and toward the heat of a body that stank like rotting meat. Her heart skipped beats, hands groping for her fallen rifle, sliding through something wet and sticky and sickly warm. She kicked, heard a crunch, and felt something give.

“Noah!” Aaron shouted. Calley’s shrieks went off like lightning in the marble room. Aereal kicked again and again, rolled in the horrid, sticky wet until somehow she had kicked her way back to her feet, with the rifle in her hands, her skin and clothes stained black.

Blood. It was their blood.

Aereal gagged, turning her rifle on the thing still grasping for her ankle.

The creature, crouched and hissing beside the eastern wall, was all wrong. It was alive, but they could see it, every jagged bone beneath its gray skin, every red and black stained tooth with bits of what she could only assume was Human flesh clinging between them. The skull was something between Human and gorilla, bald, with almost non-existent ears and long, horrible fangs. One side of the skull was smashed flat, black still oozing from unseen wounds beneath its skin. Black lines faded in through the yellow of its sunken eyes. And its legs were just... gone. Aereal thought she could see bone protruding from at least one of the empty hips.

She had less than a second to take all of this in. The monster's eyes flashed between the three Humans near the wall, quicker than heartbeats, and Aereal could see it calculate—not intelligence, just instinct. Programming maybe. Find the weakest. Strike the weakest. By the time the second heartbeat came, it had lunged at Calley, black fingernails like claws slicing into her arm, dragging her to it.

Something—deeper than fear, deeper than hate—flared inside Aereal. She let out a wild yell, bringing the butt of her rifle down onto the creature's wrist. It released Calley and scuttled backward, hissing and spitting, disappearing through yet another dark doorway at the back of the room. A trail of black blood from its missing legs lay smeared over the floor behind it.

"No, Aereal, wait, there might be more..." But Noah's sensible warning was lost on her. She charged ahead, blindly, into the hall, after the bleeding thing.

This hall was not pitch dark. Blue security lights ran in a single, continuous strip down the left-hand wall, just bright enough to see without the scope light. Just bright enough to aim. Aereal planted her feet, willed the dark, wild, fearless thing that had risen inside her back down, aimed, fired. The nanite round struck square in the back of the creature's skull, and it dropped, a reek of blood and oozing tissue on the floor.

Footsteps rushed after her, slowed, halted. She felt someone standing over her shoulder, and somehow, after only a week in his company, knew that it was Noah. Then Calley's arms wrapped around her waist, squeezing, face buried in Aereal's side. Aereal let her rifle fall to her other side, wrapping her arm around Calley's shoulders.

Another pair of feet came down the hall. "There's nothing else in that room," Aaron said, shoes crunching to a halt next to his brother.

"It was already injured," Noah said, eyes on the broken remains of the monster. "The others must have left it behind to... die?"

"Or something." Aereal moved over to the body, poked at it with her rifle. It lay still, lifeless—if *life* was the right word for what animated these ghastly things. She had smelled them before, a stench like she always imagined corpses must have, rotting blood and meat. But they had never lingered long enough to get a good look at the

shadows after killing them. The stench of rot from that body, in that confined, concrete hall, almost made her vomit—the smell, and the way its skull now resembled the chocolate pudding she had eaten for lunch a few days ago. Aereal gagged, backing away.

“So...” Aaron’s scope light bounded over Aereal’s, into the hall beyond them. “We should see if this leads anywhere, right?”

“Yeah.” Noah shouldered his rifle, pointing his light ahead even though they didn’t really need it, and took the lead. Aereal nodded, feeling sick to her stomach and wanting nothing more than to get away from the corpse. With Calley again wrapped around her side, she followed Noah, Aaron taking up the rear.

About a yard down from the lab, they encountered a series of doors, solid metal, windows in the tops, too close together to lead into rooms. “Hey Cal,” Aaron said. “Let’s see what’s in one of these.”

“There’s no power...” Aereal turned to find Aaron’s fingers already digging into the crack at one side of a door, tugging back, trying to slide it open.

“Come on, Cal. Put your weight into it.”

Aereal was sure that Aaron did most of the work, but Calley mimicked him, and the door slid open inch by inch.

“Yeah, open the creepy doors in the creepy tunnel in the creepy secret lab. That seems totally safe,” Noah muttered from Aereal’s shoulder, dragging a smirk out of her.

As the door opened, a blue light went on behind it. A steel chamber came into view, empty, about large enough for one person to stand inside. Aereal’s light reflected back at her when she pointed into the chamber, revealing some kind of transparent barrier still between them and the interior.

“Glass?” she asked.

Aaron tapped at it with the end of his rifle, getting a dull clunking noise instead of the sharp click of metal on glass. “Clearsteel, I think.”

“Is this an incu-chamber?” Noah asked, a suspicious gleam in his eyes.

“A what?” Calley asked.

“An incubation chamber,” Aereal said. “Scientists use them to grow neuro-absent—brain dead—animals for research, sometimes

full clones.”

“I thought clones were usually grown in surrogate mothers,” Noah said, then raised his eyebrows at Aereal’s surprised expression. “What? You’re not the only one who reads up on stuff.”

“What’s a surrogate?” Calley asked.

“When you’re older,” Aaron said, giving the clearsteel barrier a parting tap. “Whatever they grew in these won’t do us any good now.”

“There might be some meat growing that we could eat,” Noah said.

“Sure.” Aaron shrugged, wandering off down the hall. “Do you know how to get things out from behind impenetrable barriers without a computer to unlock everything? Because I guess I dozed off during that unit in *Comp-Tech*.”

“Hey, hold up!” Aereal threw an arm out, catching Calley before she stepped right on something on the floor. The streak marks on the floor were hard to see in dim light. Aereal might not have noticed them at all if she had not just seen something like them. They resembled the streaks of blood following that horrid creature as it dragged itself into the hall. She looked up, meeting Noah’s gaze, seeing the same conclusions and questions forming in his mind.

Aereal felt sick again. “Is it...?”

“Theirs.” Noah nodded, kneeling down. “Yeah, it’s too dark to be Human, even dried.”

“Okay, so...” Aaron grabbed Calley’s wrist, pulling her behind him and toward the wall. “So, everyone be on the lookout for another of those wounded things.”

“It might be the same one,” Aereal said, shining her light back down the way they’d come. “Yeah, look, the trail goes back to that lab, I think.”

“Okay, well, that’s something of a relief,” Aaron said.

“Where do they take the bodies?” Noah asked the question they had all been avoiding for days. “I mean, I know we’ve all seen them... but... the clothes, jewelry, blood even, do they just...”

“Eat everything,” Calley said, in a quiet, empty voice that spoke of a time before they found her—things that she would never tell, not even in all the years that followed.

"Except their own, apparently," Aereal said, with a kick of her foot toward the mutilated remains on the floor behind them.

"Oh, so even insane sadistic monsters are too good for straight-up cannibalism." Aaron gripped his rifle tighter. "Guess everyone has to draw the line somewhere..."

"Not everything, maybe, though..." Something glossy had just glinted off Aereal's scope light. She knelt to retrieve a rectangular piece of plastic, about the size of her palm, from the floor in front of one of the closed incu chambers.

Her blood turned cold when she turned it over, utterly numb and trapped on her knees in front of that sealed chamber.

"An I.D. key?" Noah asked. When Aereal didn't move, he leaned down over her shoulder, reading off the name on the card. "William Primtar-Assain..." His voice faltered at the last name, drawing the syllables out like death bells in the air. "Assain..." he repeated.

"My uncle," Aereal said. For a while, they were all just there, just silent, with no coherent thoughts to form into words. Death had become an ever-present numbness, the moment of silence its only witness.

There was something about the door, the incu-chamber, above where the card had fallen. Aereal clenched the card in her fist, and then her hands were clawing into the cold metal door, straining to slide it open like Aaron had earlier. There was just something about the chamber. She had to see, had to get in, had to...

"Aereal, what are you..." Aaron's question vanished into creaking metal as the outer barrier slid back. The blue light flipped on inside, framing... revealing...

"Oh freakin' gatch," Noah whispered. "Aereal, are you... Eery..."

But Aereal had taken off, running back down the blue-lit corridor, into the lab, sliding on black blood and catching herself on the workbench, then running, still running. The same wild thing that had captured her mind and body when the creature grabbed Calley had captured her again, stealing the air from her lungs, making her run, making her scream.

"Mom!" She shouted the word with reckless abandon. The hall outside was all lit up now. Maybe Aaron had tripped those breakers

too, or maybe someone else had. Aereal barely even noticed the difference. "Mom! Mom! Dad! Mom!"

A stampede of feet came to answer her.

"Eery!" Noah's boots crunched into the hall behind her. "We're all right!" he called to the stampede coming toward them. "None of us are in danger, or anything, I don't think..."

"Aereal, what is going on?" her mother asked, cutting through to the center of the crowd.

The frantic thing in Aereal's chest was hardening, turning now into something that resembled anger. Silent, she turned on her heels and stomped back the way she had just come, slamming into Noah on her way.

Linda Assain-Luken looked at Noah with a bewildered expression. "What?"

Noah shook his head, realized he was holding the I.D. card now, and handed it over. "We, um... I don't know..."

"William..." Linda said, with her husband now leaning over her shoulder. The whole group was already following Aereal, through the broken hydraulic door, into the lab.

"And... something else... You just have to see," Noah said. They followed a trail of blood through another door, over an already half-decayed corpse, holding their hands to their noses against the smell.

"It's dead, don't worry," Noah muttered in passing.

Aereal could hear everything they said and every footstep. Each noise made her angrier. She passed the first open incu-chamber, then stopped in front of the next open one, shooing Aaron and Calley away with a glance.

Her mother's mouth dropped open. "Oh my..."

"Did you know they were here?" Aereal stabbed her finger at the chamber, the coffin, the two bodies inside, frozen like relics in some twisted museum. "Did you know they were here?"

A hundred things had flooded in on Aereal the moment she saw those blue, frozen faces. She had thought about her cousins every day for a week, but had never once allowed her mind to wander into speculation. For a week, she had not allowed herself to wonder what had



happened to them after their father took them from her house. And then their father's id card was there, on the ground, in a hall smeared with blood. And then they were there, frozen in cryo-stasis behind a clearsteel wall. It was a discovery that brought instant relief and all-consuming horror—her cousins frozen in living death, safe and trapped, inside this dreadful place.

"Did you know?" she screamed at her parents. "Is this why you brought us here? Did you know they were here?"

The crowd fidgeted, exchanging whispers, almost as interested in the answer as Aereal was. Her parents exchanged a glance.

Then Aereal's mother nodded. "Yes, *parquie*," she said. "They are why we came here."





THE BOY WHO  
FADED

SHANNA TERESE



# THE BOY WHO FADED

---

THE FIRST TIME I STOOD IN LINE, MY MOTHER HAD ME eat cake, five of them, smothered in a white frosting that tasted like pure sugar. I knew, even then, that they weren't quite normal, that she had baked something else into them. But the secret of what that might be was kept from me.

I remember two other boys poking their heads in the door and asking why I wasn't out to play. My mother shooed them away and commanded me to keep eating. I obeyed, because she was my mother, and I was seven, and I trusted her. I ate until my head hurt, and even water couldn't take away my thirst, and I knew that if I moved, I would throw up.

By then, it was time.

Holding my stomach, I marched out with the rest of the children. We lined up in one long row in the center of the village's main road, watching the dust blow at our feet, staring at the whitewashed, box-like houses across from us. Each identical, two-story stone house watched us from its four evenly spaced front windows.

Between the buildings was only rock and dust, the same rock and dust that made up the streets, the rock and dust that laborers like my father carved out of the quarries every day. The communal gardens were at the edges of the town, far outside our view from the main street. Nothing grew without help in the rocky soil. It was all just dust under a bright blue sky, and whitewashed houses, and each other in the street, and people watching from the windows and porches and rooftops—either remembering or dreading their own turn in the street.

Smaller children glanced through those windows, questioning their parents, and maybe just beginning to realize that one day, they would stand here too. Children in the between ages, who didn't line up this year, but would next year, passed quickly by on bikes or run-

ning feet. Many called in teasing voices to their friends who stood in line, jokes told to hide our fear. Some called to me, but the cake churned in my stomach, and I couldn't return the jokes.

Before long, the adults shooed all the younger children inside their houses, but the spectacle was too interesting to just ignore. Windows stayed open, and whole families came up onto their flat roofs to watch. The sun blazed down on our arid little town, glaring off the heads of the men returning from the quarries. My father would be one of them, coming down the street toward our house. We lived right on the main road, so he would duck into a neighbor's house, stay out of the way. No one stayed out on the streets when they came. No one except those kids who had to stand in line.

They came like clockwork, their aircraft hovering over our heads, blades beating the air to keep them up there, ripping up the dust at our feet as we cowered below. Cowered, and waited.

I'm sure their arrival was impressive, but at the time, all I could think about was my stomach, and it took all my energy just to keep the cake down. I barely even noticed the Wards descend from their ships, medical bags in hand, carrying the needles they would stick in our arms. The liquid was green in the syringe. If it's yellow under your skin, they take you away.

But no one ever turned yellow.

No one had been taken from our little town in a hundred years.

The Wards looked Human, and they were, of course, mostly. But they all had the same glowing metal patch on the side of their necks. And it meant something. I was seven and so had only just begun to wonder what it meant, or why the Wards were taken away from their families, why they were different. They wore the colors of whichever Within they served, and there were more than a dozen Within. People whispered that the Within didn't always get along with each other, and the Wards did bicker with each other as they moved down our line.

The Wards were meticulous. They didn't bother to ask our names, because people lie. They just scanned us—fingerprints and eyes, checking us off the one master list synced in real-time all the way up to the Within Court. No one could avoid the test. We were all regis-

tered at birth, and they knew exactly who was supposed to be in this line.

They worked slowly, keeping tabs, double-checking ID scans, making careful and descriptive notes about exactly what color our skin turned after the injection. Why these were necessary, I didn't know. We all knew what color they looked for. Each note had to be signed by three different Wards, working for three different Within.

Apparently, the Within trusted each other about as much as they trusted us.

Few of the Wards spoke to us, but some did. The woman who injected me actually smiled. She wore a black uniform with gray side panels, neatly fitted to her body. We had all memorized the colors in school, so I should have known which Within she belonged to, but his name escaped me right then. It was probably the cake, trying to come back up.

"Just a little prick," she said, poking the needle through the skin on my wrist. It was cold. Strange that I remember that. Not pain, or nervousness, or fear. Just the coldness of the metal sliding under my skin.

We had to wait a moment. The nice woman held my arm and smiled, while a man in a blue and black uniform scanned my eyes, and another man, whose uniform was two tones of green, made annoyed faces at the ground.

Up close, I could see the patches on their necks more clearly. It looked like the metal extended beyond the patch itself, under their skin, in a fractured, asymmetrical web pattern that might have been made by a very dizzy spider. It reminded me of the sea monsters in the stories, with tentacles reaching out to ensnare their prey.

After a moment, the nice woman rubbed my arm. "Friction helps it go faster," she said. It was nice to have someone explaining, even if the motion of her hand against my skin made me feel like throwing up again.

"Don't talk to the Unmade!" the green man huffed.

She turned on him with sharp gray eyes, accented by the darkness of her uniform. "Stop me then!"

"Would you two both stop?" the third Ward mumbled, packing



away his scanning equipment.

The nice woman looked down at my arm. "Well, it looks like..."

I will never forget the way her voice stopped, just cutting off into the air, like a vanishing puff of smoke. For a moment, we both saw yellow, before it darkened into an amber strip beneath my pink skin. The woman took a deep breath.

The green man leaned in. He had seen it, too. "Fader?" he asked.

"Looks like." The woman nodded.

"Really?" The man with the scanner leaned in over my arm, too. The air above my head was getting very crowded. "I just see amber now. Would you say honey, or maple sap?"

"Honey," the other man said, taking an image of my arm with the co-pad.

"Put him down as negative, but make a note," the nice woman told him.

"I'm negative?" I whispered.

The nice woman smiled at me. "That was a bit startling, wasn't it?" She patted my arm, right over the amber-honey strip of color. "Some people fade from one color to another. It usually means nothing. The end color is the important one." With one last, reassuring smile, she and the other two Wards moved on.

I had to stand there until everyone had been tested. Standing upright with my stomach in knots was like swimming upstream with a weight tied to my leg, but somehow I managed it. Fear, probably. And the adrenaline kick from an almost positive test. I focused on the only distraction available—the tests still going on around me. Two children down from me, I heard my friend Sebaste, arguing with her testers.

"And what if I don't want needles being jabbed in my arm?" she demanded.

Fortunately, she had ended up with the nice woman, too, who assured her, "You'll barely even feel it."

"Stop talking to the Unmade," the green man said.

"Stop telling me that, or do something to stop me," the nice woman said.

"Fingers," the Ward with the scanner ordered Sebaste.

She rolled her eyes even while dropping her hand onto the co-pad screen. "This is so unfair. I don't want to do your stupid test."

"We all take the test," the nice woman said, sliding the needle into Sebaste's arm.

My friend made a show of wincing, then howled with an unreal amount of pain. The green man huffed in exasperation.

"Eyes," the man with the scanner ordered.

Sebaste turned her face up, scowling. The Ward scanned her large green eyes, and then she stuck her tongue out at him.

"That's it!" The green man lunged at Sebaste, but the nice woman slammed her arm across his chest, stopping him.

"She's a scared child! We all were once." She turned and smiled at Sebaste. "Please relax. We're almost certainly not taking you."

"They took you," Sebaste spat out. "They stuck a needle in your arm and took you away."

"And it is our honor to serve the Within," the green man growled.

"Oh, be quiet, you," the nice woman snapped at him. She took Sebaste's arm and rubbed it as she had mine. "They did, that's true. But here's the thing, *parquie*: In my town, kids got taken almost every year. It was well known we had the Trait. Here..." She shrugged, looked down at Sebaste's arm, and started rubbing again.

Sebaste hesitated, and when she spoke again, it was in a quiet, small voice, "Is it bad, being taken?"

The woman waited a moment before speaking, and in years to come, I would realize that meant something. "No," she said at last. "Not really. A little sad, maybe, to leave home. But not bad." She removed her hand from Sebaste's arm and nodded. Where I had a honey-colored stripe running from my elbow to my wrist, Sebaste's skin was dark red.

"Yeah, that's a negative," the nice woman said.

"Beets, or radishes?" the Ward with the scanner wondered aloud.

"I'm writing beet," the green man muttered.

Then they moved on.

That was the first time I lined up, when we were seven, the day my mother made me eat five cakes, and I spent the entire night throwing up. They would come again when we were nine, and again at eleven. They came every year, actually, on the same day, but only kids ages seven, nine, and eleven lined up. Each time, my mother made me eat cake, six the next time, seven the final year. I could eat cake and nothing else for the whole day before the tests.

She and my father fought about it.

“Our son does not have the Trait, Mattenda!” I heard him screaming at her from the kitchen, while I stuffed cake number two down my throat. “This is all useless superstition!”

“No, this is science,” my mother said. “I know what those tests are based on. I know what I’m doing!”

“Ebraeus doesn’t have the Trait!” my father shouted.

“His grandfather had the Trait!” my mother shouted back.

“No, his grandfather had a positive reaction. They sent him back. False positives happen. And then he fathered you, so there is no way he could possibly have had an active Trait. Those with the Trait can’t have children—how does no one in your family remember this?”

“I would have tested positive if my parents hadn’t done this to me!”

“No, you wouldn’t have, Mattenda. Because you do not have the Trait. Ebraeus does not have the Trait. Your father did not have the Trait! You are torturing our son for no reason!”

But my mother kept feeding me cake, and I kept obeying her, because I had seen my arm turn yellow, and for an instant, I had believed they would take me away.

An instant was too long.

It happened again every time, positive yellow melting into a honey-colored amber. Every time there was the startled pause, the eyes of the Wards widening in shock. And then nothing happened.

Maybe my father and the nice Ward from my first test were right. Maybe it was just the way my body was. The Wards even had a special word for it. When I looked up my own identity file, it was all there, under the TEST STATUS column: *Fader*.

The label drew my eyes to it no matter how many times I saw it. I

knew they were watching me more carefully than the others because of that one word, but the label itself didn't seem unusual. The fact that they even had a label meant it wasn't unusual. Right?

But then again, maybe my mother was right. Maybe the sugar, and whatever else she put in those cakes, really did do something to throw off the test. Maybe that was why I kept testing almost positive. Maybe it really was a false negative—a thing unheard of. But if there were false positives, false negatives had to be possible, too. I just wasn't willing to take the risk, so I kept eating cake.

And for all his bluster, my father never stopped us. Looking back, I think he was just scared enough to believe in this one superstition, if only for a day every year.

The cake and my fading positive weren't the only constants in our tests. Sebaste argued with the Wards every time, getting worse with age. At nine, she squirmed so much they had to insert the needle three times. At eleven, she actually ripped her arm away, stepping backward out of line. Her tester, with the needle in one hand, hit her across the face with the other, before pulling her, dazed, back into line.

I was standing next to her that year, and my arms moved at my sides, seconds away from striking the man who had hurt my friend. But my stomach, churning with sugar, rebelled at the thought of moving. I nearly threw up there in the street and that, together with my almost positive tests, would have led to disaster. So it was probably fortunate that my stomach would not let me follow my instincts. Fighting the Wards only led to bad things for all of us.

After our third test, we were free. If the Trait did not manifest by age eleven, they said, it would never manifest at all. For the rest of our lives, we would watch seven, nine, and eleven-year-olds lining up every year, as constant as the turning of seasons. But we would never do it again.

The next morning, at sunrise, Sebaste and I celebrated this milestone by biking out two miles to the Old Quarry. They had decommissioned it fifty years earlier. By the time we were born, it was just a series of sunken pits in the dry earth, filled with the rainwater that fell four or five times a year. Sebaste and I swam for most of the day,

joined by other kids who had the same idea.

"I'm sorry he hit you," I told Sebaste as we sat on some rocks above the glistening water.

Sebaste turned up her chin. There was a bruise running from above her cheekbone to her jaw on the left side of her face. He hadn't seemed to hit her that hard. But clearly, he had, and it confirmed certain facts we kids were slowly learning about the Wards—that, to start with, they were a lot stronger than us. The bruise was almost as red as the stained skin from her injection. There had never, in three tests, been any doubt about Sebaste being negative.

"Whatever. He was stupid," she muttered.

"Why fight them?" I asked. It made no sense to me, especially given her obviously negative tests.

"Because it's not fair and they have no right. To threaten to take us away from our families like this, it's..." She kicked the water, sending glittering silver drops across the sunken pit.

She sounded like her father. I heard him sometimes in the town hall, railing against the injustice of the Within. "Who are they?" he would shout. "What gives them the right to command our obedience? To demand our children as sacrifice? Who are they to make decisions for us? What do they know about our lives, about what is best for us and for our children?"

When I was young, his anger moved me, as it moved the hundreds who came to hear him, as it moved my mother.

I never understood my father's quiet resistance to these meetings, or the arguments he would have with my mother when they thought I was asleep. Obviously, I thought, freedom was a good thing, and to demand our own freedom from an oppressive government, which threatened every year to take us away from our families and turn us into grim-faced Wards, was not only a right, but a responsibility.

I admired Sebaste, then and always afterward, for her ability to put these thoughts into words. She got the talent from her father, and I came to see it as a superpower to rival those possessed by the Wards.

I was so clumsy with words myself.

As I grew, in the years after our last test, I saw a gulf grow between my parents. Sebaste's father and what he said had a lot to do with it. Maybe everything to do with it. Their fights became more frequent and eventually spilled over into daylight.

When I was thirteen, my father left for the first time. He was only gone four weeks, staying with his sister, who lived two blocks away. Even so, it shook me.

I had never been an emotional child, or a talkative one. My mother liked to joke that, in the delivery room, instead of screaming the moment my lungs hit the air, I had lain back and thought it over for a while before making my first noise. However fictional that story might have been, it did sound like something I would do.

The first time my father left, though, it felt like I was always crying. I ran every day to my aunt's house, just to make sure he was still there. I tossed and turned through the night, so much that my mother spent many hours at the foot of my bed, trying to coax me to sleep.

"Everything will be all right, Ebraeus," she said, over and over again. "This won't last. I promise. This isn't forever. I promise."

By age thirteen, however, I had begun to suspect that my mother might not know everything after all.

So I cried, out behind the school building after classes ended, between the supply doors and the trash collector, my bike discarded in a heap a yard away. So Sebaste found me, as she always somehow managed to find me. She sat beside me and talked, like she always talked, non-stop, telling me that my parents would definitely be fine, that she couldn't even imagine a world where they didn't work things out, that everything was okay. She talked until I put my hand around hers. With another girl that might have seemed awkward, but this was Sebaste.

"Can we just sit?" I asked.

"Okay..."

Asking Sebaste to just sit was like asking a drowning animal not to swim. She fidgeted, messed with her hair, tugged the ends of her sleeves until they began to fray. But she did it. For me, she really tried.

In the field behind the school, younger children played *Wards*, a game we all learned in infancy. None of them were old enough for

the test yet, and maybe that was why they did it, to come to terms with fears they didn't even know they had yet.

Two little six-year-olds, the oldest in the group, marched down a wobbly, fidgeting line of four- and five-year-olds. They poked their arms with sticks, shouted out "negative" and "positive" for the whole town to hear. There was yelping and squealing from the kids pulled out of line after their "positive" tests. Giggling, pretending to be afraid, they were dragged off to another section of the dusty schoolyard.

One of the six-year-olds launched into a speech, or a six-year-old's version of a speech, pronouncing their fate sealed. He waved about a bigger stick, dubbing the "Wards" like a king dubbing knights in our storybooks.

"And now I will give you your powers!" he said. "You can make things float. And you can make me do stuff with your mind. And you can be super strong..."

Wards didn't actually have such powers. This was the stuff of fairytales and child fancy, and it made me smile beneath the tears still drying on my face.

"And what can you do?" one of the children who had not been chosen shouted across the yard.

"I zap people and give them powers, obviously!" the six-year-old with the stick replied.

"I have super strength too!" one of the positive children jumped up and tackled the one with the stick.

"No, no!" The boy with the stick pushed his attacker aside. He leveled the stick at her. "No! Girls don't get super strength! You're..." A mischievous light came into his eyes. "You're After!"

Sebaste's eyes narrowed. "After?" she asked.

"He means *Avatar*," I said. I'd heard some of the little ones mispronouncing it that way before.

Meanwhile, the small children had begun to chant, clapping their hands together like a chorus of crows. "Af-ter! Af-ter! The group rushed forward to grab the chosen girl.

"Are they aware it's genetically impossible for a woman to be an Avatar?" Sebaste asked.

"Um, they're six," I said.

"Move off! Move off!" the boy with the stick said. He waved his stick in the girl's face and commanded the others, "Bring the holy war paint!"

Someone had a marker. Someone else had chalk. They bickered for a while over which to use, both reaching for the girl's neck, and pushing each other off. Finally, the marker won. "Don't get it on my shirt!" the girl shouted at them as they began to draw.

"Silence, Afters don't talk!" the boy with the stick said.

"I mean it, not on the shirt!" The girl wiggled as the cold tip of the marker hit the skin on the back of her neck.

"We're not getting your shirt!" the boy behind her said. He drew several black wavy lines up the back of her neck, large enough to be seen under her ponytail, then stepped back. Though too large, they looked a lot like the fractured web under the skin around the Ward's metal patches. Odd, that the little ones could be so accurate about this one detail.

In the Wards, that broken web was the metal patch, reaching for contact with their nervous systems. We had learned that in our classes, years after I first saw it. But what was it in the Within? I did not know yet. It was, I realized then, an ominous detail to leave unmentioned.

Still clapping in rhythm—well, as close to rhythm as four, five-and-six-year-olds could—still chanting "*After*," the rest of the children admired their friend's work on the back of their other friend's neck.

"And silence!" The boy swept his stick through the air. The clapping and chanting stopped. "You have the holy war paint," he said, then dropped onto his knees, head bowed, repeating words we knew from the stories of kings and knights and castles. "All hail the Within!"

"All hail the Within!" They all dropped onto hands and knees, faces toward the ground, except the girl with the lines drawn all over her neck.

I noticed Sebaste's face then, turned to the children with menace in her eyes.

"It's just a game," I told her.

"Games are practice for what we become as adults," she said.



I knew she got that line from her father. And the thought of her father dragged me back to my own parents. I almost cried again, but instead tightened my hand around Sebaste's, watching the little ones play at a game that was all too real.

During the four weeks of their first separation, my mother stopped going to meetings. By week three, I found them talking quietly on our porch. During week four, he came inside a few times.

I caught whispers of their conversations, moments of laughter, and of tears, and of deep, devoted honesty. It was in those days, watching my parents beg for each other's understanding, that I came to understand the truth of love. Love was not a feeling, or an agreement. It was not even happiness. It was this never-ending conversation, going round and round in circles and willing something new to happen. It was wearing each other down, slowly, day by day, because each was willing to be worn down, willing to give up a piece of their own self, willing to compromise themselves to keep the whole intact. To keep us intact. Because we were better together, even if together we had to give something up.

That was love.

Then, after a month, my father was back, and for a year things were better than ever, even after my mother attending the meetings again.

But, eventually, the arguing started, followed by long walks alone, followed by a toothbrush missing from the bathroom we all shared.

"You know you had no part in this, Ebraeus, right?" my father said on the morning we sat on the porch, his bags packed for a second "visit" with his sister.

"I know, Dad," I said.

"I love you. And I love your mother too, I do." He chuckled, mashing dirt pebbles into the wooden boards at his feet. "It's crazy how much I love that woman."

“I know.” I did know. All the fear I had experienced with his first absence had burnt away. No matter how much they argued, my parents always came back to each other.

My father sighed. “We just disagree on so many things, and sometimes, when you’re in the middle of a disagreement, it’s like being in the middle of the desert. You can’t see your way back to town. You have to get out of the desert, up higher, to find the way home.”

“And that’s why you go to Aunt Mora’s?”

“Being apart helps us remember.”

I nodded.

My father sighed again. “I really hope you and Sebaste have an easier time of this. She’s a lot like your mother, you know. And you are a lot like me.”

It was the first time anyone had ever said it out loud—what I already knew everyone in town expected. Marriages were assigned, officially, by the town council, but this was a formality. Most often, people chose their spouses, and the council just signed off on it.

When the council did step in, we had learned to trust them, and we had also learned to see the signs for ourselves. The town council used a fluid set of compatibility rules to match people up when they had to. And these rules had never been secret. We all knew what to look for in a spouse, how to compare and match our own personalities with someone else. So even when partners selected each other, the town usually anticipated their choices.

At fourteen, I had sensed it for a long time already, the whole town, nudging Sebaste and me toward each other, just as they had once nudged our perspective parents toward each other. I knew we were compatible. We had been friends since our earliest memories. I could, of course, say that about most fourteen-year-olds in town, but it had always been different with Sebaste. We went out of our way to spend time together, and we shared secrets that I shared with no one else. I trusted her. I admired her. She trusted and admired me. And I did love her, as a friend and, at fourteen, as the beginnings of something else.

We were also what the adults called complementary opposites, the kind that made for balance in a family. I knew all of this, long before

that day, when my father spoke about it on our porch. But still, those were the first words spoken of it, and the only words, for many, many years.

When I was fifteen, our town got a new priest. Every town had one, and they always came from the outside, assigned by the Within to towns far from their birthplace. My grandfather had been one of them, a stranger, which was why my mother could fear I had the Trait, even in this town where no one had been taken in a hundred years. But my grandfather had died a few years before my birth, and his successor was unmemorable, more interested in his model ships than any spiritual duties—at least as far as a child could tell.

Our new priest was young, like my grandfather had been when he arrived. He shook the congregation on that first Sunday, by declaring that our magistrate had to choose between attending Sunday Call and continuing his affair with the postman's wife.

Once the air cleared, and all the offended parties had wandered, muttering, back in, he shocked them again by declaring that the placement of the altar furniture was not of paramount theological importance. This time, some of the mutterers did not return.

But I liked the priest. For one thing, I thought he was probably right about the magistrate's behavior. A lot of us did, we just hadn't wanted to say anything.

I liked that the priest just said things, the stuff we all thought but made excuses to keep to ourselves. He spoke up when he thought something was wrong. That was what I liked about Sebaste, too.

Well, one of the things I liked about Sebaste. One of the many, many things...

Unfortunately, one of the things the priest spoke up about was Sebaste's father. Sebaste started calling him a Within sympathizer, and I learned to keep quiet about it when around her. Around the priest, however, I thought I could talk about it.

“Of course I think we should have rights,” he said, while I helped him, one spring, plant his vegetables in the community garden. “But, Ebraeus, the Within just are not as cruel as some people here want to believe.”

I dug holes with a spade in silence, six inches deep, to support the growing root systems of the priest’s little tomato plants. I had begun to wonder about these things over the last few years, torn between my parents, who both seemed to be right at different times.

Sebaste and her father insisted we were treated unjustly, but I found it difficult to see any hard evidence of the injustice. We were happy, after all, and well-fed, and aside from the tests—which were always negative—the Wards left us alone. No one in our town had ever even seen a Within, except the magistrate, and probably some of the quarry overseers, and this new priest. And none of those people were part of the growing movement which spoke against the Within Court. I had even asked Sebaste, in one of my braver moments, how her father could think he was so oppressed if he could openly gather people against our oppressors.

That conversation had not gone well for me.

“My problem is not with what is said, but how it is said,” the priest told me, transferring tomato seedlings into the holes I left behind. “I think you’re old enough to understand that difference now.”

I nodded, even though I wasn’t sure.

“I do not agree myself with everything the Within do,” the priest continued. “But most of the Within that I have met are trying to do what is best, even if they’re not always right about what the best actually is.”

“Why do they take children from their families?” I asked. This was the one thing I could really and wholeheartedly agree with Sebaste about. It just seemed so cruel. “Why not leave the Wards with their families, train them there?”

“To be honest, I don’t know,” the priest said with a sigh. “I choose to believe they have a good reason. Perhaps I choose to believe because I cannot stand the cruelty of the other option, but it is the choice that I have made.”

I hesitated, then said, “You know, my skin turns yellow, at first.”

He looked at me, his eyes narrowing.

"It doesn't stay yellow," I said quickly. I thought about mentioning the cake, and my mother's suspicions, but couldn't.

"Ah," he nodded. "You're a Fader."

"You've heard of that?"

He turned back to the plants with a shrug. "They're rare, but not terribly rare. It usually means nothing."

And there was that word again, the same word my first tester had used: usually. What happened unusually, I wondered. "It's just..." I shook my head. "For a second, every test, I..."

"You thought you would be taken," the priest said, kindly, as he scooped soil around the delicate roots.

"If I had been, and you had been our priest then, what would you have said to my mother?"

"I would have encouraged her to have faith."

"In what?"

"In God's love. In a plan and in ultimate justice. It is what I say to all those who face things they cannot control."

"But what if she *could* control it? Could change it? Would she be wrong to try and keep me?"

"I'm not sure it's a question of right and wrong so much as a question of best and worst," the priest said. "Your mother might try to fight the Within, but doing so would kill you, and her, and your father, and who knows how many others."

"But she could change things for others, maybe."

"Maybe. Probably not. And besides, would that change really be good?"

"I think it would be good for kids to stay with their families."

"And always be outsiders?" the priest asked. "With talents and abilities their own families do not understand and might even come to fear? You do know what sets the Wards apart from the Unmade, right? I know you've never seen it, but you must have learned..."

"Of course. But shouldn't their families always love them?"

"Ideally, of course. But we live in reality. And, again, I don't know why the Wards are taken away. But I think it must be to protect them, or us, or all of us, from something more than just being outsiders."

“Then why wouldn’t they just tell us what it is?” I asked.

The priest shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“And that doesn’t bother you?”

“Of course it does. I’m Human. But I have accepted it. And no, before you ask, I do not know if that acceptance is good or bad, or best or worst. It is simply the decision I felt I needed to make.”

I fell silent, wondering. I wanted to explain to him what my mother thought, that I might very well have an active Trait, and that if I did, the difference between Wards and Unmade couldn’t actually be all that great, or dangerous, or whatever the reasons might be. But I couldn’t tell. I felt deep down that I had to keep the secret. I hadn’t even told Sebaste—although a part of me was pretty sure she’d figured it out. And besides, my mother might be wrong about me, anyway.

Maybe the very fact that I was the same as everyone else proved her wrong. My father certainly thought so.

The priest sighed. “I’m not saying taking the Wards away is a good thing, Ebraeus. I’m not even saying it’s right. I’m saying it’s at least possible the Within have a good reason for doing it like this. And even if they don’t, one of the few things I know for certain is that God’s way calls for patience, and for peace—especially in things beyond our control.”

The more he spoke, the more right Sebaste sounded in my head. To take children from their families, to hold them against their will, could not possibly be right. And if something was wrong, we should change it, just like teachers made us change our wrong answers in school. Sebaste was right. It was unfair.

“Didn’t Jesus say he came to the world to bring a sword?” I asked.

The priest smiled. “Of course, your mother would be one to force you to actually read and not just take my word for things.” He chuckled. “And you’re right. But we’re not the ones using that sword—did you notice that? We are told that others will use the sword against us.”

“And we can’t fight back?” I asked.

“It depends.”

“On what?”

“On which way is more loving.”

I did a double-take, dropping the spade into the dirt. “What?”

The priest smiled again. “There is only one sure path, Ebraeus. The selfless one. The path of love. Nothing can stand in the way of love. You, I think, see daily proof of that. I’ve noticed that your parents disagree on just about everything.”

But they always found their way back together, because they loved each other, and they both loved me. I hated how quickly my desire to disagree with him began to melt.

“So, what, we’re supposed to love the Within, even when they take our children?”

“Yes,” the priest said, without apology. He took a moment to bury another plant, gently transferring the fragile roots from his hand into the fertilized dirt. “I hope you know by now that love is not a feeling. It is not a choice either, not really. It’s a will. A stubborn, irrational, unreasonable will, which sees the reality of something, and says I will love, anyway. This is how God loves us, why God never gives up on us, though we are as tiny to him as these plants, and more prone to evil than anything else in this universe.”

“Okay, fine,” I said, though I wasn’t sure I agreed. “But shouldn’t we love our families more...”

“No,” the priest said. He hesitated, then continued, more gently. “I understand how right and natural that trap feels, but it is a trap. True love is infinite, and it is impossible to love someone more than you love someone else. You can love them differently, and some people will be more important to your life than others. But you either love or you do not. There is no scale.”

“Don’t we have a duty to protect our families, though?” I asked.

“We have a duty to care for those whom God has given us to care for,” the priest said. “We have a duty to seek justice and relieve suffering, and our families, as those closest to us, are the people that we are most qualified to help. But protecting what belongs to us, at the expense of other people, has started most of the tragedies in Human history. These people that we love are not worth more than other people, they are simply more important to our own personal lives. To choose them over others is not love, but selfishness.”

I thought about this conversation during school War Games the next day.

Sebaste excelled at War Games. She excelled at most classes, but especially this one. She was small, but wiry, and had the eyes of a sniper. She was a little bit terrifying, too, as she sank one bullet after another into the very center of the target. I stood in the shooting range booth next to her, holding my own gun with a sense of limp inferiority, as she ejected her empty clip, reloaded, and executed the reset target all over again.

"That's ridiculous," she said, when I told her what the priest had said. "Of course, we don't choose our families because we're being selfish. We choose our families because we care about their lives and don't want to see those lives end."

"I think he agrees that's why we *protect* our families," I said. "He's talking about choosing one life over another." I raised my own gun, aimed through the window next to Sebaste's, took a breath, and shot. A hole appeared in the third ring of the target. Not my worst shot.

Meanwhile, Sebaste had emptied another clip. She set the gun down and turned to me. "Let me put it this way," she said. "If you were to choose to die, rather than let your mother die, how exactly could that be selfish? You're still choosing one life over another." She loaded another clip, and fired nine shots in a row, all landing within centimeters of each other in the center of the target.

I thought about her point while working through the next two clips, the number we were assigned to go through that day. There seemed to be a difference, and by the time I had moved on to hand-to-hand practice, I had worked it out.

If you chose to die in place of someone else, you were still losing that person. In fact, you were losing a whole lot more than just that person. So the whole selfishness thing couldn't come into play at all, because you were literally sacrificing yourself. And what the priest said still held true. Whether you were sacrificing yourself for a stranger or for a family member didn't matter. In either case, you were choosing someone else's life over your own good, and that was selfless, no matter what. Only love could make you do such a thing.

Love, or hubris, I realized, distracted by the sight of Sebaste lock-



ing her legs around the neck of a sparring partner twice her size. He threw her about like a rag doll, but she just held on until he passed out.

Yes, hubris could cause one person to die for another, too. The more I thought about it—pinned to the floor by my own partner because I just didn't care—the more certain I became. And hubris was a kind of selfishness. So even the act of sacrificing one's self could be selfish. My head was spinning, and not just from lack of oxygen.

That day, I decided these things were just too complicated to be worth thinking about. My father had the right idea. Just don't get involved. Just live a good life, be kind to people, and love your family. Be fair, and do the best you can. What more could even God expect of us?

I wished I could be like Sebaste, who believed there were answers. But around the corner from every decision, all I saw were problems and contradictions. So I stopped worrying about it. I stopped trying to choose between my mother's opinion and the priest's. My tests were over, so, whether I had an active Trait or not, I would have no more contact with the Wards, no contact with the Within.

Until I had my own children and would have to decide whether to feed them five cakes or not. That thought troubled me for a while, but I put it off too. I reminded myself that even if my grandfather had the Trait and had passed it on to my mother, and even if she had given it to me, my wife would have to have it too for there to be any chance of our children getting it. And my wife would be someone from this town, untouched by the Trait for a century.

In fact, I was pretty sure I knew exactly who that someone from this Town would be.

And there was no sign of the Trait anywhere in Sebaste's family history. No one from outside had ever married into her family, which meant no variables, no surprises. She was as Unmade as they came.

It happened on the day I first kissed Sebaste.

We had gone together to the old mine, dragging our bikes along between us, arguing about the upcoming party.

"If you want to ask me, just ask me!" Sebaste shouted, at the high point of the argument.

I was so annoyed by then that I couldn't see the dust billowing around our feet, or the red sun bearing down. I had stopped seeing anything, in fact, aside from the way Sebaste's black hair billowed out behind her. "I did ask you, like five times now!"

"No, you said 'If I planned to go and didn't have someone to go with already...'"

"Right, because if you were already going with someone..."

"Why would I already be going with someone, Ebraeus? Think!" Sebaste shouted.

Think about what? The dust beneath me had turned red as I ground the front tire of my bike into it. We hadn't made any plans yet, and other boys liked her. Why wouldn't they? Sebaste was strong and sure of herself and pretty... Sebaste had really pretty hair...

"So going with me is a last resort then?" Sebaste exclaimed, for about the fifth time during that argument. It made no more sense now than it had the other four times. None of this made sense. My father had prepared me for arguments about religion, and the Within, and Unmade rights, but this was just crazy. Maybe this was why the council refused to issue marriage assignments before age twenty-five. Maybe women weren't so crazy when they got older.

I could not understand what had upset her. This party took place every year on the night after the Test. It was a chance, in some towns, for families and friends to say goodbye to those who would be taken, and in our town, a celebration of the fact that no one had been. Sebaste and I had been going to this thing together since the night after our first test.

Well, unofficially going together. Without mentioning it to each other, one of us would usually wait for the other outside our houses, or we would just meet up on the road. Why couldn't we just keep doing that?

"You're being ridiculous!" I told Sebaste, because it was the only

thing that came to mind, and I needed to say something to stay in the argument. And besides, she *was* being ridiculous.

"Oh, so I'm just ridiculous then?" Sebaste was still shouting, but I could hear the threat of tears in her voice. "Of course, I get it! Why would you want to go with someone ridiculous?"

No, not crying! No one had ever taught me how to deal with crying! "Hey, I'm sorry," I said automatically, with no idea what I was apologizing for.

We had reached the old, flooded quarry, and Sebaste dropped her bike with a heavy bang. She ran to the edge and sat, feet hanging high over stagnant but inviting water. "I just thought," she said, fighting to keep back the tears. Maybe crying scared her as much as it scared me. "I thought, since we're nineteen..."

Since we were nineteen, meaning the courtship prohibitions no longer applied, and we could officially start doing things together, as a couple. That was why we couldn't just meet up anymore, why I had to ask, why she had to agree, why the world would never be the same again. She was still being ridiculous, but, grudgingly, I did start to get it.

"Everyone expects us to go together," Sebaste said.

"Um... yeah, obviously." I sat over the edge next to her, still very annoyed. What, did she think this was news to me?

"Everyone expects us to be married the minute we turn twenty-five. Or, well, you turn twenty-five." She couldn't help it, I supposed. Even in the middle of all this, she couldn't help but jab at me for being a whole thirty-seven days younger than her. My father told me to ignore it, because I could turn it back on her when we got to be about sixty. So, I ignored it.

"I know," I said.

"I just wonder," she said, twisting her hands around each other. "Sometimes... I wonder... Do you even want to be with me?"

*Did I want to be with her?* That had to be the stupidest question I had ever heard in my life. I had never considered for a moment that I wouldn't be with her when the time came.

She turned to me, with the large green eyes that could disarm anyone standing against her, now so... scared. "You never talk about it,

Ebraeus.”

I didn't. I never talked about the future, or mentioned how much I was looking forward to aging out of the courtship prohibition, or how much I was looking forward to turning twenty-five. I had never told her, or anyone, about all the class periods I spent just staring at her hair, or how listening to her talk, about anything, was my favorite thing in the world, or...

I never said any of these things. And how could she know if I didn't say them? She couldn't read my mind. Why had this never occurred to me before?

“Of course, I want to be with you, Sebaste,” I said. It sounded so weak, but it was all I could say. I swallowed and found myself twisting my own hands together. “Do you... want to be with me?”

Her head snapped toward me again. The fearsome green eyes were back, as I knew them, without fear, or tears, or anything but total and complete self-assurance. “Of course,” she said.

So that was when I kissed her, because it felt like the right time for it, or, more likely, because I wasn't thinking right then at all. And it was perfect.

Well, perfect and awkward. Well, perfect and awkward and terrifying and... perfect. For exactly one second of our lives, everything was perfect.

“Ebraeus,” she said, a few seconds after we pulled apart.

My head was fuzzy, and I could only mutter, “Yeah?”

“Ebraeus!” She grabbed my wrist, pulling me up. “Ebraeus, those aren't testing ships.”

My eyes followed her shaking finger. It was about the time when the ships came to deposit the Wards and their needles. We could sense their approach by some instinct, like the coming of night and day. But she was right. Something about this approach felt different.

Dotting the skyline between us and our red sun, I counted sixteen black specks, descending fast toward the town. Sixteen ships.

There were usually seven—at most.

And worse, only some of them were the hoverers that we normally saw. At least half were different, designs we may have studied once in school, but never seen in person.

"Are those x-atmo ships?" I asked, pointing as a few sleek black cruisers shot over our heads. They were designed to leave the planet's atmosphere, transport Wards to and from the Within Court.

"They're from the Hub!" Sebaste launched herself at her bike. I followed. All down the sunken mine, others caught on too and raced for their own bikes. Dust billowed out behind us in a deadly swarm as a dozen young people peddled harder than they ever had in their lives.

My heart thundered as I went, shouting at Sebast's back, "What do you know?"

"Keep going!" she shouted, breathless.

"Why is the Court coming here?" I asked, horror and disbelief at war with certainty inside me. "What did your father do?"

She didn't answer.

We ground to a halt on the edge of town, on the rise, over which we could see just about everything that we called home—the Call House, city administration, the main road, and all the identical white houses. Two extra-atmosphere cruisers had already landed in the main street where the testers lined up. The rest of the cruisers circled high above us, with the hoverers hanging themselves about a hundred feet over our heads, like vultures and flies.

We had seen this pattern before. Cruisers above, hoverers lower overhead, troops landed in the town. We had seen this in our history lessons.

"We should hide," one boy, a few years younger than Sebaste and I, said. He recognized the assault pattern as easily as we did.

"Where, the desert?" I asked.

Sebaste dropped her bike and sprinted down into town. I didn't know what the others would do, but I had to follow her. We ran down the center of the main street, soon coming up against a swarm of people running in the other direction. All the children who had lined up for the test had scattered, their parents pulling them back into houses and barricading the doors. Sebaste asked about her father at every familiar face, receiving only hushed looks, shaking heads, and orders to run. I asked for my mother. The response was the same.

As the crowd grew too dense to pass through, I grabbed Sebaste's arm and pulled her back against the house of an elder couple who

had often fed us cookies and lemonade on hot summer days. “What did your father do?” I demanded.

Sebaste yanked her arm free. “I don’t know!” Her eyes were burning with water beneath the green fire.

Marind, one of our friends, poked her head out of the next door. “Hey!” she called, waving a hand into her house. “Come on!”

Sebaste would have stayed on the streets, but I dragged her into Marind’s house, then helped our friend bolt the door.

“I’m not just hiding here!” Sebaste shouted at us.

“What good can you do out there?” I asked.

“Come on.” Marind led us to the staircase at the back of the house. “We can see from the roof.”

Out on the flat white roof, with assault cruisers and probably five hundred Wards hovering above our heads, I had never felt more exposed, not even during the tests, not even when my skin flashed yellow. But we were not the only ones whose curiosity kept them from remaining safely indoors. Half the town had come to their roofs, families holding each other, watching the scene unfold below.

The Wards tore through houses and workplaces, registries in hand. They knew exactly where they were going, and they dragged very specific people into the streets. They were the people we all expected to see, including my mother and both of Sebaste’s parents.

By the time we made it to the roof, almost a quarter of our adult citizens had been dragged into the main street, lined up as the children lined up for the test. The Wards pushed them down to their knees.

All the Wards wore black and gray, the colors of one specific Within. I thought of the nice woman who had first tested me and Sebaste. Was she down there now, dragging my mother and my neighbors from our homes?

“It was a protest,” Sebaste whispered. “He told me it was a protest.”

“What exactly did they do to protest?” I asked, my eyes on my mother. Simple protests usually earned sanctions, lost wages or decreased resources for the entire town. This seemed extreme, even if all the Within horror stories were true.

One of the landed cruisers opened. I prepared myself for another

wave of Wards, but something else came out—one man, dressed all in black under a long, black coat. Sebaste gasped, seizing my hand to keep her balance. I went numb, unable to tear my eyes away.

He was a large man, a few decades past middle age, but still strong as one much younger. And even from a distance, we could see, up the back of his neck, black lines like a broken spider's web, following the pattern of nerves that spread out from his spine. This man was not a Ward or anything else seen in our little town for a hundred years.

This man was Within.

"Why would one of them be here?" Marind whispered.

"Dad, what did you do?" Sebaste's voice came out choked, desperate, and all I could do was squeeze her hand.

The Within, unreal as he seemed in our dusty streets, paced down the line of kneeling men and women. His voice boomed out across our housetops, calm and completely in charge. "Who is your leader?"

No one moved. The Within reached the end of the line and turned to walk the other way, hands folded behind him, long coat flaring out around his feet. "Only one need die today," he said. He planted his feet, weight on one heel and one set of toes, then snapped himself around with military precision, to face the line. "Name your leader."

Again, no one spoke. No one moved. The Within asked one more time, to the same response.

Then it happened, so quickly I wasn't quite sure it had, until I saw my mother face down in the street. The Wards had moved, somehow, without anyone seeing, timed together like the spokes of a machine, one blade into every neck in the line. Sebaste screamed and launched herself forward. She would have leaped straight off the rooftop, if I hadn't grabbed her around the waist and held her there.

The rooftops and the streets all echoed Sebaste's yell. There was a surge of feet from every direction. I don't know where the weapons came from, but some of our people suddenly had them, and the town exploded in a hail of bullets and knives and fists.

The Wards moved faster than the bullets. I think we had forgotten, in this little town where the tests were always negative, exactly what Wards were capable of, why they were in charge to begin with. After that day, those who survived would remember. They moved

as parts of one body, connected by the metal patches in their necks, commands routed through the Within as the very forces of nature seemed to bend around them, and all so much faster and stronger than the rest of us.

I lost my grip on Sebaste and could only follow her out of the house and into the crowd, with Marind screaming for us to come back.

“Hide!” I shouted at Marind, and followed Sebaste.

The streets were pure chaos. I knew Sebaste would find a weapon at some point, and that the Wards would tear through her, leaving her in the street like my mother, and almost certainly my father too, by this point. I couldn't let that happen, so I grabbed her, dragged her into an alley, between the trash bin and the brick wall of a house. She struggled, but I held on. I was so much bigger than she was that all her skill with guns and blades and hand-to-hand combat could not help her in this moment when I really tried to hold her there, begging her to stay with me, to stay alive.

After a while, she stopped struggling, and after even more time, she stopped cursing at me. We stayed there hidden in the alley, until all the sounds of fighting had died away, and we knew that half our town, at least, was dead. We stayed even longer, until the Wards found us and dragged us out. Bodies covered the streets, people we had known all our lives, young and old and in between. “Don't look,” I told myself. But of course, I did.

They loaded us, the survivors, mostly children, onto ships. Sebaste and I sat close together, holding hands, fighting off the nausea, dread, and tragedy through the comfort of each other's skin. The cargo hold of an x-atmo ship was long, hollow, and empty, packed now with still-living bodies from our town.

There were so many questions I should have been asking, like where they were taking us, and what would happen then. But my brain could not hold the questions or focus long enough to consider answers. I kept seeing the Within, the back of his neck, held in the grip of a subdermal spider.

There was something inside the Within, we all knew. Something mechanical, and ancient, controlling the Human Avatar. Most of the children taken after the tests became Wards. But we all knew, all



whispered, about the few who became Avatars—the children lost to the Within. I shuttered, gripping Sebaste’s hand harder.

Still, it was the only thing I could think about, the only thing I allowed myself to think about, with visions of my parents and friends and the parents of friends all too close to the surface of my mind.

Hours passed inside the hold, until a violent tremor ran through the ship. Fragmented as my brain was, I realized we were leaving the atmosphere. The younger children whimpered and cried, held by older siblings and the few adults who had survived.

“We should all be prepared,” one of these adults spoke up when the shaking stopped. He was an overseer at the quarry, who dealt with the Court, so we could trust him to know what he was talking about. “They are going to split us up, reassign us to other towns. These doors will open, and there will be several lines on the other side, walled off from each other. It will be a lot like the lines we herd cattle through. Each line will lead to a specific assignment, so if you wish to stay with someone, make sure you both get into the same line. From there, they shouldn’t rearrange anyone. They want this to go as quickly as possible.”

Following these instructions, with murmmers and whimpers, groups started forming. Sebaste and I sat still, hands joined.

“Whatever happens, we stay together,” I said.

Sebaste nodded, her face set on the opposite wall with a frightful determination. “We’re getting married, the day you turn twenty-five.” They were the first coherent words she had spoken since the rooftop.

We felt the ship dock with a rumble that had the little ones whimpering again. The cargo doors opened with a burst of orange light, and before we could see anything, Wards, in many different colors, were herding us out, shoving us to one side or another.

I saw the lines the overseer had mentioned looming ahead. Huge metal sheets extended from the concrete ceiling to the concrete floor, cutting us into almost twenty black tunnels. Sebaste and I clung to each other, expecting at every step that something would tear us apart. But the overseer was right. The Wards clearly wanted to get this over with quickly. They didn’t interfere with the groups we made

of ourselves, as long as those groups kept moving. Within a minute, we were all through, traveling in herds down our narrow tunnels.

At the end of the mostly unlit tunnel, we saw light above a scanning station. Wards stopped each person, identifying us. One held the scanning equipment, for hands and eyes, just like during the tests. Another sat behind him at a computer, reading our files as the scans triggered them. Half a dozen more Wards stood in the narrow space behind the scanning station and a closed door, which they opened and shut again behind each person who passed the scan. All the Wards wore black and gray.

I suddenly understood the number of tunnels. It had looked like almost twenty. It must have been sixteen. The sixteen different Within. We had ended up with the black and gray, the same Within who had presided over the execution of our town.

Hosea. Its name was Hosea.

Sebaste was shouldered ahead of me through the scanner. I didn't let go of her hand, even as they made her step through, our arms stretched to their full extent, but still connected. They scanned me, fingers and eyes, with the same indifference they gave everyone, and began to wave me through.

Then a hand lashed out. "Wait," a voice behind the computer said. My heart stopped beating. Sebaste turned, jostled in line, as the steady progression through the scanner ground to a halt behind me.

The Ward at the computer leaned toward the one with the scanner. "He's flagged," he said, eyes on me. A split second before he said the word, I knew what it would be. "Fader."

Sebaste's hand gripped mine, holding on through skin and bone. Our eyes met, and we knew. We both knew.

The man with the scanner looked at the idling guards behind him and told them, "Take him back."

Then Sebaste was screaming, and the Wards came. They ripped our hands apart, and one lifted Sebaste into the air, to carry her, kicking and screaming, down the tunnel. I clawed and kicked to get to her, but they dragged me off, through another door beside the scanner. It closed between us, and the last thing I saw was her black hair, flying around her face as she screamed for them to let me go.

"I think I know him." A woman's voice slid into my darkened thoughts. And she sounded somehow familiar. "Yes. Ebraeus, the Fader. I think I administered his first test."

My eyes opened, just as slits. I lay on my stomach. I had probably been struggling, and they had probably knocked me out. I didn't remember any of that. I didn't remember much except Sebaste, flailing in the air as they dragged us apart. But I knew I would have been struggling to get back to her.

I was on my stomach, shirtless, on some sort of cot. It was padded, with crisp gray sheets. The room around me was dim, made of the same concrete and steel mixture as the floors and walls that we had encountered after leaving the x-atmo ship. A faint orange glow came from the lights. I was still on the Hub.

Was Sebaste still here? Could I get back to her? I tested my muscles and found I couldn't move so much as a finger.

"I really thought he was negative." The woman's voice came from above me, to the left, near the back of my head.

"Two more groups of testers thought the same thing," a male voice replied, from the same direction but further away. "And, given the circumstances, your failure in his childhood is fortunate."

I blinked to clear my vision. Something large loomed a few feet away from my face. It looked, as I blinked, like another bed. And the bed was not empty.

"What made them think to test him again?" the woman asked.

"The intake guard noticed, besides the Fader label, his mother was marked as a leader in this rebellion. She was also the town's quality control tester for biological and hazardous materials. If anyone knew how to get a false negative..."

"Yes, of course. I must say, there is some providence at work here."

I blinked again and found a man on the bed across from me. The man. The one who had come from the ship, who had paced in front of my kneeling townspeople. In front of my mother...

He wasn't the man who was speaking. He lay as I lay, motionless on his stomach, shirtless. I could see almost his entire back, bare to the orange light, covered in a tangled pattern of black lines. They started at the very base of his spine, following it up, stretching out

along the pattern of nerves beneath his skin. They spread away from the spinal cord like the branches of a tree.

A woman came into view around the top of my bed. She looked different, older certainly, but more than just that. Her hair was down now, in long, red sheets streaked with gray. The well-fitted jacket was gone, to reveal bare arms in a gray tank top. She looked so ordinary, this nice woman who had been so comforting during my first test. This woman who had just killed who knew how many of my townspeople. I wanted to lunge at her, to take her throat between my hands and squeeze as hard as I could. But I couldn't move.

She stopped at the head of the other bed and stroked her fingers through his hair. "How long does the Avatar have?" she asked.

What had happened to the Avatar? I stared, trying to work all of this out. There might have been a wound in his neck, and there were a few deep bruises on his side. The blood pooling beneath his skin was substantial, I realized. A few of his ribs might have been broken.

A male Ward came around the foot of my bed. "The injuries were grave," he said. "The Within has already sensed it and begun to recede. An hour, at most."

The woman's hand moved, from stroking the Within's hair, to rest gently on his shoulder. Had we done this? I wondered. Had we actually injured the Within himself—or its Avatar, at least?

"What are the chances?" she asked, with soft wonder.

A tray on wheels stood beside the Within's bed, and the male Ward pulled it, creaking, over to where he stood. "Of finding a replacement? Exactly one in a hundred and sixty-seven," he replied with indifference.

"One in sixty-seven, and when we need him, he appears. This feels like..."

"Fate, yes, you've said." The man took a bladed object from the tray. "We should do this. Things go smoother before people catch on to the transition."

"Are we the only ones who know the extent of these injuries?" the woman asked.

"Many people saw him carried back into the cruiser. I'm sure rumors have spread. Which is another reason to do this quickly."

And then it hit me. They had realized who I was, what I was, and who my mother had been when the scanner brought up my file. They had taken me out of line, taken me from Sebaste, to test me again. And it had been positive. It always should have been positive. My mother had been right all this time.

I was one of them.

I was a Ward.

The woman placed a hand on the Within's back, lightly, like the skin would break if she pressed too hard. The male Ward took his bladed object with him to the other end of the bed. It was long and cylindrical, with a blade on one end and a hook on the other. What were they doing? And what did it have to do with me?

"Goodbye, father," the woman said, a tiny whisper. The blade glowed in the man's hand as it sank into the skin at the base of the Within's spine.

The tree, etched along the Within's back, retracted like a spider, drawing all its legs into its body with breathtaking speed. Every fragile line slipped back into the man's spine, then down to the cut at its base. The male Ward spun the instrument around, slipped the hook through the cut skin, lifted something out, and dropped it immediately into a shallow dish with a muffled plunk. A second later, the heart monitor flatlined, and the male Ward shut it off.

The Avatar was dead.

"Sixteen seconds," the woman said. I didn't see a clock or a watch. Was she counting in her head?

The man lifted whatever he had taken from the Within out of that shallow dish. It glistened, as a liquid shinier than water dripped from it. Cleaned of blood now, I could see a slender, flat piece of metal, about the length of a long screw, and the width of a finger. The Ward dried it against a towel, holding it with the claw of that instrument, and never touching it to his skin.

"Twenty-five seconds," the woman said. They both moved toward me.

I wasn't just a Ward.

I was an Avatar.

I really, really tried to move then. Everything inside me screamed

and lunged and thrashed about, trying to get free. But my body stayed still. The woman's hand slid onto my back, just like she had touched the dead man on the other bed. How long ago had that man actually died? How many years had he existed as that thing?

How many years would I?

"Forty-two seconds," the woman said. There was an edge to her voice—not fear, exactly. Knowledge, that they were up against a time limit. What would happen at the end of it? Would the Within die too? If I could just have held them off for that long, would I be free?

I felt a blade slide into the skin at the base of my spine. There was no pain, but the pressure of it, the knowledge of it, seemed somehow worse. I summoned all my will against the drugs inside me and tried to move. I wasn't ready for this, to die, even with everyone I loved dead too.

Sebaste.

Sebaste wasn't dead.

Sebaste was out there, waiting for me. This couldn't be real. This wasn't supposed to happen.

I was supposed to be with Sebaste. Everyone knew it, had known it, for years and years and years. We were supposed to be at the dance right now, our first official appearance as a couple. We were supposed to date for six years and then get married. We were supposed to move into one of those little white houses, and make it different from all the others and have children, and watch them grow up, and see our grandkids, and slowly get old together. For one blinding second, my future as it should have been flashed in front of me, from our first kiss above the sunken mine to the moment we died, holding each other's hands, surrounded by an enormous family.

Except we could never have had children. People with an active Trait could not have children. With that thought, the fantasy dissolved. Eighty or ninety years that should have been went up in smoke, never to be.

I was robbed. She was robbed. Of a future that my own genes made impossible to begin with. Because my mother had been right all along.

Because I had an active Trait.

I was a Ward.

I was an Avatar.

I was...

I felt wire fingers snaking up my spine, extending themselves like the branches of a tree. A million, million tiny machines, connected in an unbreakable, wireless network, embedding themselves into my nerves. There was no pain, just the feeling of smoke stirring under my skin.

I had felt it all before.

The wire fingers wrapped themselves at last around my neck, a delicate and comforting net. The nanites continued through my body. Only around my spine were they in high enough concentrations to be seen through the skin, but they spread to every nerve, fusing there, becoming part of me.

Efric's voice came from somewhere above me. "An anti-paralytic should be safe now."

*Efric.* Weird. I hadn't known his name a moment ago.

A needle went into my neck, and then I could move. I flexed my muscles before attempting to sit up, carefully, one group at a time. There was a woman in my mind, with beautiful black hair. I had to find her.

Another woman stood in front of me as I sat up, her face hopeful and wary. "Father?" she asked.

"Azkin," I said.

Oddly, I had forgotten her name, too.

No. That was the wrong word. I had not forgotten. I had not yet known.

She had tested me my first time. She had been kind, and comforting, even to... To her... The woman... Sebastian... No, that was a boy's name...

"I'm sorry," Azkin said. "This transition will be particularly confusing."

Beyond her, there was another bed, and on the bed a body. The dead body. I got off my own bed, bracing myself against it for a moment to test my legs. Then I walked, two steps and a pause, then three more steps, until I stood over the body. "Pallos," I said.

"I'm sorry," Azkin said.

"It was a pulse cannon," Efric said. "Straight to his chest. Ruptured lungs, spleen, liver... more broken ribs than whole ones. Heart damage, too."

"We couldn't save him," Azkin told me, a quiver in her voice.

Him? Not him. Me. Not me, but him. How odd, to put my hand on my own back, to feel the need to mourn myself, to say goodbye.

But I had done and felt all of this before.

"He felt nothing?" I asked.

"Not after the blast, I promise," Efric said.

"He never woke up," Azkin said.

There was a woman. She had black hair, and she was lying face down in the street... No, those were two different women. One was dead. I had seen one die.

"I'm angry," I said, without that emotion or any other in my voice. I lifted my hand from Mellard's back, studied my skin, the familiar prints, all so new. "Why am I so angry?"

"You should rest," Efric said.

But I turned to the other, the one I knew would answer me. "Why am I angry?"

Azkin took a breath. "I am so sorry. Please forgive us. We had no choice..."

The answer came before she could finish speaking. It just took a while for the wires to connect, for knowledge to cycle down from the Human's brain, and fuse into its new, second nervous system.

"You inserted the Within without my permission?" I didn't fully comprehend my own words. There was a veil of smoke hanging between me and myself, as biology and technology continued their merge.

"There wasn't time." Azkin was pleading. "We would have lost you."

I turned, trying to work things out through the burning smoke inside my mind. "It will pass," I assured her.

"We have to ask, father," Efric said.

"Your name." Azkin nodded. "What is your name?"

*Ebraeus.*



That word came first. But there were so many others. They all twisted up my spine with their smoke fingers. *Ebraeus*—but that was only the last. And only one seemed to name them all.

“Hosea.” I turned to her and knew in her face that I spoke correctly. “I am called Hosea.”





