The Void Between

by Benjamin Secino
Chapter Twenty-Five
Chapter Twenty-Six
Chapter Twenty-Seven
Chapter Twenty-Eight
Chapter Twenty-Nine
Chapter Thirty
Part One

“What people believe prevails over the truth.”
--Sophocles, The Sons of Aleus
Falling. No walls, no ceiling. No stable floor. Nothing to grab, no way to break the fall. Worse, no end. They could see no bottom to the fall, just as they could see no beginning.

They were all falling, all three of them. All of them. But the two hardly seemed to notice. For the two, everything was normal. They had always been falling, and the fall was no longer remarkable in any way. They hardly felt a thing. But for her, standing between the two, the fall was everything. She could feel nothing else. The fall was all there was for her. And it terrified her.

I’m sprinting through the forest, swerving between trees, desperately trying to get out. I can see the black smoke in the sky through the leafy canopy. I run faster. The noise comes again, even louder than before, and the ground jumps beneath my feet. I stumble, nearly falling forward, but catch myself just in time to stand up and collide at full speed with a low-hanging branch. It catches me in the chest, and my feet continue moving forward as my upper body comes to a dead stop, and I fly through the air before falling and landing hard on my back. I cough and sputter, pain searing in my ribs, but then I hear another blast and the ground bucks again and I’m back on my feet and running.

The elevator fell. Not quickly, not uncontrolled, not plummeting to smash into shrapnel at the bottom of the shaft. As far as the two were concerned, nothing was wrong. Everything was working well. Everything was normal. But for her, standing between the two, the experience could not have been any more different. For her, everything was wrong. She was falling, and she knew without any hesitation that she would never get used to this, that this would never be normal. It terrified her to know that the two, the two things standing on either side of her, would do anything to prevent her from ever climbing back up. They were there to ensure that her fall was permanent. They terrified her. And so she hated them. She had to, she had no choice but to hate them. She was being buried alive under hundreds of feet of steel and cement. And these two things, standing there, guarding her, they were the ones shoveling the dirt. And so she hated them.

I sit down in the dirt, cross legged. Across the stream from me, a little ways into the treeline, is giant boulder, covered in a thick blanket of moss and lichen. This layer is so thick in places that I can barely see the rock below. This boulder hasn’t changed at all, not in all these years. Nothing touches it. Not the world, not the rain, not the wind, not politics, not tragedy. This rock has remained stable. I close my eyes, and enjoy being able to listen to the forest around me. The tops of the trees in the quiet wind, the stream below me. Nothing can replace this spot. And nothing can take it away.

The metal box of the elevator continued to fall down the shaft. Inside, the two guards waited in boredom. For them, their job was nothing more than a welcome alternative to another tour of active duty. They were grateful for the job, and glad to get away from the front lines, but escorting prisoners to and from cells was not an exciting task. Their current errand had promised to be slightly more interesting. As far as they knew, she was the only one of her kind in the whole building, and they’d never seen
something like her so close before. Given their expectations, they couldn’t help but be disappointed by what they saw. She was nothing special. Her eyes were weird, they thought, but other than that she hardly looked unusual in any way. Not even her ears. They had grown bored of her almost immediately.

She stood between them, a few inches in front. To the guards, she seemed to be staring down at the floor, unmoving. In truth, she was staring past the floor. She was looking down, trying to see the hole she was falling into. But the floor gave no hint. She shifted her gaze slightly, looking at her wrists. They were held together in an X-shaped piece of metal, left wrist crossing over right wrist, both palms facing her stomach. Her wrists themselves were immobilized and trapped against each other, but her fingers could still move freely. She hated the way the metal felt. She hated the fact that the metal existed. She hated the elevator. And she hated the guards most of all. She had to hate them. She had to hate everything. She was too afraid to ever stop.

I walk slowly through the tall grass, taking my time and enjoying the afternoon sun. The grass comes up well past my knees, but I can still run through it if I try. This is what I used to do. I love to run. But in the past few years, I’ve learned to always walk when I’m this close to the edge of the city. Someone running usually has something they’re running from, and I’ve been taught through experience that there’s nothing like running away from the city and toward the forest to grab a patrol’s attention. Sometimes I’m willing to risk it for the joy of movement, but today I don’t have much time before I have to be back home, and I don’t want to waste another second of the afternoon talking to the stävnemā fen mes. So I take my time, climbing slowly through the field and up the grassy hill that marks the beginning of the forest.

The guard to her right coughed, clearing his throat. It was a quiet noise, but she hated him so much that it was almost more than she could stand. No, she decided. It was more than she could stand. It might have worried her, in any other situation, that such a small thing could tip the balance. But not at that moment. She hated them too much. It was worth it, she thought. She didn’t care. She looked down at her wrists again, moving her center of balance forward onto the balls of her feet. She began to take slow, deep breaths, filling her lungs and then letting it all out.

There’s a large, concrete-walled checkpoint where the west road exits the city, and all traffic going in and out comes to a stop here. The checkpoint was erected a few years back, during the third heightening in security. I used to dislike it. The stävnemā fen mes do a fine job of getting people through quickly, so it’s never been much of a hassle. But for a long time, I just disliked the entire idea of more checkpoints. I was already dealing with the patrols, and didn’t want anything more. But recently, what with everything in the news, I’ve come to see it in a new way. What’s an extra minute here and there, if it helps make us all that much safer?

After a few deep breaths, she took one more lungful of air and held it in briefly. She hated the guards more than anything. She repeated this to herself. More than anything. And then she started moving. She let the air out in a blast, using the exhale to power her first attack. She twisted at the waist, bringing her right elbow up and back, aiming straight for
the first guard’s nose. Because her wrists were bound together, she was able to combine her left arm’s strength with that of her right. The point of her elbow landed just below its target, hitting the bottom of the guard’s nose as well as his front teeth. It was enough. It might not have been a clean hit, but she still felt the the guard’s nose bend and crack. The guard’s head was forced back, hyperextending his neck, and he fell against the rear wall of the elevator. She was already moving on. The moment her elbow had connected with the first guard’s face, she began reversing the direction of her swing, so that her hands now arced down toward the second guard’s gut. She connected. He doubled over, gasping, bringing his head low enough for her to turn around and jam her right knee up into his forehead. The blow sent the guard stumbling backwards, arms flailing blindly. Before the guard could recover, she was lunging forward and making a grab for the weapon tucked away in the holster on his right hip.

I’m standing in the middle of the street in the warm afternoon, making sure that my hands are clearly visible. Even as the group of four stävnemā fen mes makes its way toward me, I take the opportunity to notice and enjoy how the heat in the pavingstones radiates its way up through the soles of my shoes and into my feet. It’s a beautiful afternoon. Warm sunlight, cool air, even a slight breeze that comes and goes every now and then. I’m looking forward to reaching the forest. On a day like this, it’ll smell rich and smooth. Only a few more patrols to pass before I get there. This is my third. I’ll be at the checkpoint soon, and then I’ll be out of the city. I don’t have to be back until curfew.

The weapon slide from the guard’s holder more easily than she had expected. It only took half a second, and then she was holding it in her hands. The way she’d grabbed it, the barrel of the gun was facing down and the handle up, so she couldn’t reach the trigger yet, but the gun was hers now. She drew it up and slashed the metal barrel across the top of the second guard’s skull. He’d just begun to react again after the blow to his forehead, but now he fell back against the wall. Quickly grabbing his shirt collar with her left hand, she yanked the guard forward and twisted around him, placing him between herself and the first guard. In the same movement, she managed to get the loop of her cuffed arms over his head, using her left arm to hold him by the neck. Still sprawled on the floor, the first guard was only then pulling out his weapon with his right hand. His other hand was clamped over his bleeding nose and mangled mouth. The prisoner dragged her stunned hostage to the opposite elevator wall, holding him between herself and the first guard. She’d turned over the gun by now and was holding it by the handle. Finger on trigger, she pressed the end of the barrel into the second guard’s jaw, peering around his head to the other guard. From his place on the floor, the first guard had his weapon pointed and aimed now, but couldn’t fire without risking his co-worker. For a split second, all three of them froze.

And then the elevator shook to a stop with a quiet ding!

I close the front door behind me, head spinning with new knowledge about glue. I never thought that such a simple thing could take so much time and effort to create. It’s absurd. There are different glues for different woods, different glues for different applications, different glues for different styles, and they all have to be hand-made in small, precise batches. Or so my father says. It gives me a headache. But I have the rest of the afternoon off, and I intend to get as far away from glues as possible. I hop down the front
steps, looking up the street to the right and left. Other than a patrol much farther along, it’s mostly empty. I turn left, and start making my way to the edge of the city.

The prisoner and both guards turned and stared as the doors slid open. There was a man standing just outside, in a uniform similar to those worn by the two guards. A look of shock crossed his face. There was a brief instant when all four of them were frozen. And then time started again, and the newcomer reached for his weapon as the prisoner twisted her human shield around to half-cover against both the first guard and this new threat. She also changed the aim of her gun so that its barrel pointed squarely at the newcomer’s chest. She pulled the trigger. Or, she tried. The trigger wouldn’t move. She yanked on it, trying desperately to fire the weapon, but it refused to go off. She stared at the gun, confused. The others quickly realized what was happening. Her hostage, fully alert again after the blow to his head, jerked forward and ducked suddenly out of her grip. She might have been able to stop him, but she was too distracted by the useless handgun. As soon as the guard was free, the newcomer opened fire. Three echoing explosions sounded, following immediately one after the other. The first bullet hit the prisoner in the left thigh. The second lodged just above her left elbow. And the third managed to skim her forehead, taking away a chunk of skin and bone. She lost consciousness instantly. She fell.

As I move through the dining room on my way to the front door, I pass by a small statuette, sitting on a window sill. This is my favorite sculpture in the entire house. It’s made from white marble, with small black-and-gray lines and spots running through it and over its surface. The whole thing stands no taller than a foot and a half, but is so intricately carved that I can count individual scales, can watch as the marble water boils and churns below the tail. It’s a statue of a jumping fish.
Chapter One

It’s not hard to hate them. It’s not hard. All I have to do is try. I think of all they’ve
done. All they’ve done to us. The burned hopes. The torn ambitions. The lies of a better
society. A society together. It’s not hard to hate them. It comes naturally. It’s as simple as
breathing.

But, on some days, I can hardly seem to catch a breath.

When I wake up, I notice two things. First, I’m in an unbelievable amount of pain. My
left arm and leg have shooting wires of electricity racing up and down their lengths,
cracking and bursting. The wires are spreading out from two small areas that I can pinpoint
exactly, feeling them as clearly as if they were whistle blasts in a quiet room. The bullet
hole in my thigh is painful, but it’s not as frightening as the one near my elbow. There, it
feels as though the bullet hit bone, cracking it off in shattered chunks. I feel like I have
shrapnel in my elbow, and I’m afraid of what might happen if I move my arm. Neither of
these wounds, though, can come anywhere near the blistering gash on my forehead. As far
as I can tell, it extends from my temple to right above my left eye. It feels deep, burrowing
miles into my skull, but can’t be deeper than half a centimeter. Any deeper than that and it
probably would have killed me. The bone there aches like nothing I’ve ever felt, and my
entire head throbs from bones being rearranged by the force of the hit. I groan, but then the
pain skyrockets and I’m forced to stop. I lie quietly for several minutes, trying hard to
breath without mo

Because surely I’m in a hospital bed. Some doctor has wrapped up my injuries, and is
feeding me a steady stream of pain killers. Soon, they’ll be ready to stitch me up and regrow
the bones in my forehead and arm. So why aren’t the pain medications working?

This is when I make my second observation. I try to open my eyes, to look around
and see my hospital room. Maybe catch the attention of a doctor. Tell the doctor to give me
more medication, because obviously I’m not getting enough. But I can’t open my eyes. I’m
not surprised that I can’t open my left eye. It’s right underneath the gash, and it’ll probably
be swollen shut. But the right eye should be able to open. And I know that it can, because
when I try opening it, I can feel it responding. The top and bottom eyelids are just held
together somehow. I try pulling them apart again, and strain for several seconds before I
hear a crunching sound and I’m able to open my eye enough to see a thin sliver of the
world. This is when I realize that I’m not in a hospital. I’m not in a bed. I am, in fact, glued to
a concrete floor by a dried puddle of blood.

I’m lying on my right side, splayed out chaotically against the floor. Limbs aren’t
quiet positioned they way they should be, arms and legs pointing out at jumbled angles. My
wounds aren’t wrapped in any way, and have bled down over my body. A lot of the blood
was sopped up by my clothes, but enough reached the floor to form a shallow pool. When
the pool dried, it formed a kind of glue, hardening around whatever was in it. My right eye
isn’t quite in the pool. It’s about half an inch above it. But from tiny, careful movements of
my cheek and face, I can feel the crusty glue grinding on my skin. My head is coated with
the stuff. The gash on my forehead must have bled a lot, and it all ran down to the floor,
painting over my eye and face in the process.
I don’t spend much time wondering why I’m not in a hospital. It’s what I’d expected, but it may have been unreasonable to presume that the humans would do the kind thing for me. Instead, I try distracting myself from the pain by wondering how long I’ve been unconscious. A while, obviously. Long enough to bleed, to stop bleeding, and for the blood to dry. But not long enough to heal. Judging from how I feel, the bullets are probably still lodged in my arm and leg. They haven’t even been expelled yet. From this, I’m able to guess that it’s been under a day. In three or four more days, then, I’ll be back on my feet. Not walking yet - that’ll take a few days extra - but at least I’ll be hurting less. Feeling as I do right at this moment, a future without pain sounds like pure fantasy, something that could never come true. But I know it will happen. Soon, within just a few days, I’ll be able to sit up without passing out. Soon. I know it’ll be better soon. But I want it to be better now.

I close my eye and try to think. This is almost impossible. My brain feels like it’s coated and clogged with a thick rubbery foam. Nothing much can get in, the stuff inside isn’t working properly, and even less can get back out. And then there’s the pain, calling my attention away from useful ideas. Perhaps because of this challenge, I put all my energy into coming up with thoughts. Admittedly, “all my energy” isn’t much to work with, but I need something to focus on other than the pain. For the first time in years, I find myself wishing that my parents had been able to afford more and better alterations. I’ve heard of one, a high-end alteration, very expensive, that allows you to consciously turn down the amount of pain you feel. It’s pure luxury. I’m sure it’s mostly used to make couches feel more comfortable, but I’d give almost anything to have it right now. I’d sell my soul to hurt even a little bit less.

I need a goal. That would help. If I had something I could aim towards, some goal that I wanted to achieve, then that might help draw my focus away from my half-dead body. This has worked before. Having a goal got me out of the ash and into the forest. My goal then was major, but for now, anything would help out. Something small, something that I could achieve. That’s what I need. After a moment of considering, I decide that I want my head to come off the floor. That’s a fine goal. A bit high-reaching, maybe, but it’s something that I both need and want. Ultimately, I’ll need to find a way of getting my entire body unstuck from the floor. It’s disgusting down here, and also degrading. Getting my head free from the mat of dried blood is a good place to start.

In my mind, I count to three, then give my head the smallest of tugs. Instantly, the gash on my forehead explodes with pain, so sharp and cutting that I almost black out. It echoes for many minutes afterwards, ringing and pulsing. I hold my breath and try to wait it out. It goes on and on, only gradually fading back down to the baseline. I slowly let out the breath, wondering painfully if I’ve bitten off more than I can chew. Maybe it’s a bit presumptuous to think that I can get my head unstuck.

I hear myself think this, and I almost laugh. Since when is it presumptuous to get my head off the floor? This has to be one of the least ambitious goals I’ve ever heard of. It’s so basic, in fact, that it’s almost comical. My head’s stuck to the floor. Ha ha. I can’t get it up. Ha ha. It’s very funny. Painful, but what a joke.

No. I’m getting my head up. That’s all there is to it. There’s no way I’m letting myself fail at something this simple. I close my working eye, and count to three again. One, two, three. I start pulling.
My foot gets tangled in a knot in the tall grass and I trip, falling forward to the
ground. I hit the grass with only a feeble attempt at catching myself. I lie on my stomach,
gasping for air. A few feet ahead of me, Reyin jogs to a stop and looks back.

“Are you all right?” she asks. When I don’t answer, continuing to pant, she steps
carefully over to me and kneels in the grass. She repeats her question. “Void, are you all
right?”

My mother looks down at me. For a second, she’s silhouetted majestically against
the sky, and I think to myself how unfair it is that she’s not considered beautiful. She isn’t,
at least not in the traditional sense. I personally have always thought of her as beautiful, but
her face and body are a bit too short and stocky for perfectionistic standards. At the time of
her birth, alterations for beauty hadn’t yet been fully refined. I see women younger than my
mother walking around Alaseel, women born into poor families able to give them only half
the alterations Reyin received. But these alterations, few though they are, are more
modern. I see these women, and they’re tall, with straight, long hair, perfect points on their
ears, flawless skin. I see them and I always turn away slightly, knowing that I’ll never get to
look like them. I take more after Reyin. This, to be honest, is part of the reason why I think
it’s unfair that she isn’t seen as beautiful.

As her daughter, I inherited her dark brown hair - hers is straight, I got the slight
wave in mine from Estas. I’m about her height, a few inches under six feet. Our eyes are also
similar. Dark brown. I wish I had her ears - round everywhere and with a clean point in the
back - but, sadly, I take more after my father here. His points aren’t quite so sharp. What I
am pleased to get from Estas is my overall body type. We’re both very slender, but strong,
whereas my mother’s strength is more visible. Her entire body seems to be coated in a
thick buffer of muscles. I like the way it looks, but it gives her a slightly squat appearance,
something that immediately disqualifies her from perfect beauty. She doesn’t care. She’d
rather be strong than ornamental.

I myself am no ornament. I’ve known this for almost my entire life. No one has ever
called me beautiful. But when I compare myself against people with similarly few
alterations, I’m proud to be unusually strong, fast, and agile. Compared to Reyin, though, I
can hardly do anything at all. I lie in the grass, choking down quick lungfuls of air. My
mother looks at me, and for all her concern, I can tell that she doesn’t understand. I can’t
blame her. It’s not her fault. It’s my firm belief that in her entire life, Reyin has never once
experienced an oxygen debt. She’s first generation altered, and her parents pulled out all
the stops. Every alteration that was available at the time, they all got funneled into her. She
can run all day through the grassy hills surrounding Alaseel, going for hours and hours
without once becoming winded. I, on the other hand, cannot. This always worries her. I
think it makes her feel a bit guilty, too. I think she regrets not being able to afford for own
her daughter the same alterations that her parents so easily afforded for her. She was able
to give me the basics, but not much beyond that. Just affording a child to begin with sent my
parents into deep debt. Nothing was left over for pricey add-ons. Still, I’m not as badly off as
other “chance children” I see. Alterations fade out rapidly from the gene pool after they’re
added - many are completely gone within two generations - but I lucked into a fair chunk of
my mother’s abilities. Not all, but enough to set me apart from most people in our income
bracket. The only real physical flaw I was born with was a small hole in my heart, and that
was easily patched up by the doctors. I’m strong, but I can’t always keep up with my
mother. Reyin tells me, and tells herself, I think, that I might grow to develop some of her
stronger traits. I don’t know if I believe this. Reyin peers down at me, where I’m still panting on the ground, and repeats her question again. “What’s wrong?” she asks.

I shake my head. I can’t talk yet, but I want her to know that I’m fine. And I am. Really. I’m just tired. Tired and winded. And I think I have the right to be tired. After all, we’ve been running up and down grassy hills for almost three hours now, and we must be at least twenty miles out from Alaseel. When she invited me to come look at the tree she’s using as a model for her latest commission, I had no idea it would be so far away. If I had, I might not have come.

Reyin’s a sculptor. She works almost exclusively with stone, but will occasionally use wood if a client insists. I’ve sometimes wondered about her choice of career; low-paying, with unsteady employment. With her education and family background, not to mention the fact that she was born in Aiohn, she could have chosen to become anything. Instead, she decided to spend her days wrestling rocks into shape. This seemed strange to me for years, until I realized how much she hated her childhood. Reyin is not just the first generation in her family to be altered, but the first generation for the entire idea of alterations. She was one of the first children ever born with selected traits, and was studied extensively for years. Her parents were from old wealth, and their families had been living in Aiohn for centuries. They could afford such an expensive commission-child. I don’t think Reyin ever got over the idea that she was, in her own words, “designed.” She could have had any career she’d wanted, but instead she left Aiohn and came out to newly-settled Alaseel, where she trained in one of the oldest arts. She became a sculptor. A good one, too. Our home is filled with little pieces she’s made. I like the realism she brings to her work, but also her surprising imagination.

Her most recent commission is from a rich businessman. He wants a life-sized stone tree. At first, Reyin was annoyed by this order. The night after she met with the client, she ask me in a disgusted tone of voice why, if he wanted a tree so badly, he didn’t just go out and buy a real one. Why was he making her build something so big and complicated, with so many fragile stone branches, all with the nasty habit of snapping under their own weight? She was annoyed, but he paid a large sum upfront, so she’s giving it a try. She’s been working on it for months, trying to find ways to prevent the branches from cracking. She’s taking a break from it today, and she asked if I wanted to see the tree she’s basing the sculpture off of. I’ve seen pictures, but she said the real thing is much more impressive.

When I get enough air back into my lungs, I wave my hand at her. She still looks worried. “I’m fine,” I wheeze. “Let’s just stop here for a minute.”

With that, I flop onto my back and stare up at the sky, my chest continuing to heave. My mother hesitates for a moment. Then she begins walking back and forth over a patch of grass next to me, flattening it down. When there’s a space cleared, she lowers herself to the ground and lies there, with about a foot separating the two of us. She seems to wait uncomfortably for a second or two, rustling the grass with small, anxious movements. Then she opens her mouth and draws in a half-breath, hesitates, and then speaks. “Do you think you can go just a little bit farther?” she asks. “The tree’s not far from here.”

Oh, I’m sure it’s not. Maybe just another mile or three, and then we’ll turn left into the forest for another mile or so. We’ve been running over the grassy plane, parallel to the treeline but a few hundred feet away from the edge of the trees. It’s easier to move quickly out here. Most of the trees at the outer edges are young and thin, but the trees get older deep inside. None of them are ancient - Alaseel is too recently settled for that - but the
forest is still a beautiful place to wander. To our right, nearly unbroken until the horizon, is nothing but a sea of grass. It’s amazing to see. Other than the gentle hills, it’s all flat, and gusts of wind are always blowing across the tops of the grasses, making them dip and weave like waves on water.

I decide not to answer Reyin’s question. I instead work on breathing and panting, which she takes as answer enough. “All right,” she says gently. “We’ll just wait here, then.”

Reyin relaxes back onto the ground, then rolls onto her side and uses her arm to flatten down a patch of grass sticking up between the two of us. She lies back down again. I’m slowly getting my breath back, but still feel nauseated and I place both hands over my stomach. I close my eyes for a second, then open them again. The sky’s so beautiful today, I’d hate to miss it. And out here on the plane, the sky seems to go on forever. It’s massive. Gradients of blue in all directions with very few clouds. Not that I mind clouds. I don’t. I never have. Not even when they’re carrying rain. I know plenty of other people who gripe about the weather, but it never bothers me. Even so, without clouds, the sky has an undiluted feeling to it, in the same way that water looks more pure if it has no air bubbles in it.

Next to me, I hear my mother take another breath. “You’re sure you’re all right,” she says, more question than statement.

I nod. “Yes. I’m sure.” I keep my voice neutral, pushing back my slight annoyance at being asked so many times. I shouldn’t be annoyed at all. Reyin never fusses over anything, anything at all, except for me. She never worries, she never frets, except when my health is involved. I think it goes back to her regret at not being able to afford more alterations for her only daughter. She loves me, and can’t stand the thought that her choice of career might have let me down.

Reyin sighs. There’s a quiet breeze hissing through the grass around us, a near-constant rustling and shifting of the green stalks. It’s quiet, but my mother’s voice is so soft when she speaks that her words are nearly lost in it. “As long as that’s true,” she says.

I black out at least three times before I get my cheek unstuck from the floor. Ordinarily, it’d be simple to tear my head loose. The dried blood offers hardly any resistance at all, only tugging at my skin in the smallest of ways. But, however small, it’s enough. Every tiny movement of the skin on my head sends the gash in my skull bursting with pain, and it doesn’t stop throbbing for many, many minutes afterwards. The hardest part of all is working my hair free. My hair’s over a foot long, and has pillowed out against the floor, an ideal configuration for being glued to the cement. Worse, every time I pull on my hair, my scalp moves. This is how I end up blacking out so frequently.

Each time I wake up, feeling my forehead pulse feverishly, tasting a disgusting must in my mouth, I give serious thought to just giving up and staying attached to the floor. After all, there’s not really much good in getting my head unglued. The rest of my body would still be trapped. I’d still have to wait a few more days before I’m healed enough to sit. Also, I tell myself, the floor isn’t all that bad. It’s not as if it’s uncomfortable. How much less pain would I be in, really, if I were lying on a soft bed? The floor in and of itself is the least of my problems.

But every time I decide to give up, I begin to feel something worse than a headache. I begin to feel afraid. Fear makes sense right now, I suppose. I don’t know where I am. I don’t know what’s going to happen to me. I don’t know what kind of room I’m in, nor how long
I'll be here. I hurt everywhere, and I'm stuck to the floor. The fear that comes from being so powerless and isolated, so ignorant and damaged - it's crushing. It's far worse than the gash. At least the pain from that wound isn't *inside* my head. The fear is so strong that it overpowers any other motivation for wanting to be free of the floor. I don't like admitting this. Acknowledging my fear seems like a bad move, as if thinking about fear will somehow make it more true, more real. I'll have to deal with it if I acknowledge it. But I'm not stupid, and I know perfectly well that the other for freeing my head is bogus. It makes no sense.

Distract myself from pain by aggravating a head wound? Stupid. By this reasoning, I should break my legs the next time I get a papercut. That'll distract me for sure. Even so, I don't want to think of myself as being afraid. I'd much rather believe that I'm verging on boredom than drowning in panic.

With that thought, I start lifting my head up off the floor. With my cheek unstuck, I can get up about a half-inch before I meet resistance. That's when I feel my hair starting to pull against me. Slowly, as gently as I possibly can, I begin the careful process of moving my head higher, millimeter by millimeter. If I go slowly enough, then not as much force gets transferred to the gash on my forehead. That's the thinking, anyway. In reality, almost exactly the same amount of force gets transferred, and the pain bursting from the gash is equal to the pain I'd feel if I were to suddenly yank at my hair. Still, going slowly allows me to build gradually up to the pain. It increases bit by bit, and I learn to adjust to each level as it comes. This helps me to avoid blacking out. I take frequent rests instead, dropping my head back down to the floor and closing my working eye until my head stops throbbing so violently.

I don't know how long it takes, but eventually most of my hair is free of the blood-covered floor. I lift my head up and look weakly around. Having my head elevated like this is extremely painful, but I'm desperate to know where I am. My working eye blinks crustily around at the room. The very first thing I notice is that, much like the floor, the room's ceiling and walls are made from concrete. There are no windows in the eight-by-ten room, and only one source of light. This comes in the form of a light bulb mounted in the middle of the ceiling, surrounded by a heavy wire cage. Along one side of the room is a metal bench, built into the wall with triangular supports that form an angle between the bench's outer edge and the base of the wall. The bench is about six and a half feet in length. From this, I guess that it's supposed to double as both seat and bed. At one end of the rectangular room, the end nearest to my head, are a sink and a toilet. I can't quite decide what color the outside of the sink is, but it's certainly not the clean white that it may have been originally. This sink is just a simple basin mounted to the wall, with its pipes showing underneath as they run downwards and then kink back sharply and plunge into the wall. The toilet, even seen from this angle, is nothing short of repulsive. Like the sink, it's color varies from surface to surface, as different discolorations rise and fall from prominence.

At the other end of the room, closer to my feet, the wall is dominated by a large metal door. It's just as tall as the room is - maybe seven to eight feet - and is painted a kind of red-brown that's both dirty and self-important. The door has a small panel built into it at head height. I assume that this panel can be slide aside by someone on the other side of the door, and that this someone can then peer in on the contents of the cell. Under the panel, about halfway down the door, is a concave rectangular opening; a small box-like duct that passes through the door. It's about a foot wide and maybe half a foot tall. On the ledge of this duct, I can just make out the rim of a bowl. From the angle I'm at, I can only see the
underside of the rim, but the sight fills me with excitement. In my mind, there’s only one thing that could be inside. Food.

I’m in far too much pain to be hungry, despite the fact that I haven’t eaten in several days. Even so, I enthusiastically sniff the air. I smell the sink and the toilet over everything else, cloying and filthy. Under this, there’s the tang of my blood and the acidic scent of the disinfectant gel that still clings to my skin. Then there’s the smell of my new clothing: a repulsive orange jumpsuit that glares at me with startlingly bright and intrusive color. The material smells crisp like washing chemicals. There’s also the less easily defined smell of the room in general, musky and heavy. Each room is unique. This room smells like it’s been sitting by itself for far too long. It needs an airing. I can even vaguely smell the metal of the bench and the thick paint on the door. The only thing I can’t smell is the food in the bowl. It’s strange, but I don’t give too much thought to it. The food could be covered up, or shrink wrapped, or something like that. There could be any number of reasons why I can’t smell it. But it’s there. I know it is. What else could the bowl be doing there? Bowls hold stuff. Simple as that. This bowl is holding food. There can be no doubt.

This bowl of food offers a convenient second goal. Getting it should be challenging enough to keep me occupied for some time, and being rewarded with a meal sounds perfect. I’m not ready to go for the bowl yet, but it’s something for me to work toward. I look over my body, trying to assess the damage to my arm and leg. The orange sleeve over my left arm is coated in dried blood, but I can’t see the wound itself. I can see, though, that my left hand is a sickly gray color. Seeing it, I realize that I can’t actually feel my fingers. I try moving them, and am only able to get my index finger to twitch slightly. The others remain paralyzed. It’s disturbing to see my hand like this, but I’m not too worried. It’ll heal soon enough. Even if my arm had been blown completely off, I’d only have to wait a few months before I grow a new one. The same thing goes for my leg. After all, I come from a lower middle-class family, not a destitute one. I do have some alterations. I don’t think my leg is as badly injured as my arm, so I’ll probably be able to use it fully within a week or so. It feels as though the bullet in my leg missed the bone, only tearing through muscle. I can’t tell if the bullet is still in there or not. Either way, I have complete faith that I’ll walk again.

For a moment, I wonder what I must look like. I’m covered in blood. My left arm is mostly dead. My hair is matted and filthy, my left eye is fused shut, my right eye is crusty and swollen, and my right cheek feels like it’s covered in sores from where it was glued to the concrete. I must be gorgeous. Strange though it is, I’m bothered that I look this way. I have an excuse for my appearance - I was shot three times - but lying here like this doesn’t boost my self-image. I know that this is a stupid thing to worry about right now. I’ve got bigger problems than image. At least, I tell myself, at least my head isn’t stuck to the floor anymore. I laugh silently. What a failure I am.

I gently lower my head back down, feeling it throb and pound as if my brain were trying to push its way out of my skull. I’m exhausted. I close my eyes, meaning only to rest for a little while. But instantly I feel myself falling asleep, even through all the pain coursing over my body. Healing has always wiped me out. I’ve never been injured this badly before. But even for cuts and scrapes, healing is always tiring. With three bullet wounds, it should be no surprise that I’m going out cold. And maybe, just maybe, I’ll be in less pain when I’m asleep, and, when I wake up, I’ll have healed more. And then I’ll go for that bowl. Doesn’t that sound good.
“Void.” My mother looks over her shoulder at me, but doesn’t slow down as she walks quickly across the terminal. “Watch your mouth,” she says. “You’re smiling.”

I duck my head, trying and failing to get my face under control. “Sorry,” I say quietly. I am, too. I’ve never liked letting my emotions get away from me. It’s not polite. But there are times, like right now, when it’s just so hard to stay even. My mother, father, and I have just passed through customs and are on our way to a passenger ship that’s going to whisk us off to Aiohn. This is my first trip off-world, and I’ve never seen the capital city in person before. It’s hard to keep from smiling. My father’s walking next to Reyin, and I’m trailing a bit behind the two of them. Estas glances at me, and I think I see corners of his mouth twitch slightly. He turns to Reyin.

“I think it’s all right. It’s just this once,” he says to her. Reyin looks at him with some combination of confusion and mild horror. This subject, more than anything else, is what divides my mother from my father. Reyin, rejecting most of her upper-class roots, decided long ago that almost all traditions are a waste of time and energy. She abandoned them at the same time that she moved to Alaseel. The strict rules governing sleep habits. The need to wear at least one white garment at all times. When it comes down to it, the only tradition she respects and actively maintains is that of emotional control. I can almost never tell exactly what my mother thinks of something, or how strong her opinion is. In almost any situation, she has a knack for keeping her face blank and unreadable and polite. It’s only when she’s really disturbed that I can get a glimpse of what’s going on inside her head.

Estas is almost the exact opposite. His family was extremely poor, to the point where the only alterations he received were the mandatory, government-sponsored kind. The rest of his traits were pure chance. He came out strong and handsome despite this, but he’s always wanted more status than he was born into. Toward this goal, he subscribes to almost all traditional values and behaviors with near-fanatical devotion. This is one reason why he became a fletcher, something that he sees as one of the oldest and “noblest” of all careers. But, by some fluke of chance, the one tradition that Estas does not put much stock in is emotional control. He was raised with open emotions, being able to smile and laugh whenever and wherever he felt the urge. He’s never given this up. In an otherwise mostly-harmonious marriage, this is a common point of friction between Reyin and Estas.

My mother looks at him. “Making something rare does not also make it acceptable,” she argues. “We don’t want to encourage bad habits.” Here, she turns around again and looks at me pointedly. Luckily, I’ve just managed to get my mouth to cooperate by tightly clenching my jaw. My father shakes his head.

“A single exception doesn’t form a habit,” he says. “Besides, no one but you will notice.”

The terminal we’re walking through is a massive, open structure, with arcing windows and a ceiling designed as a series of barrel vaults, all studded with ornate coffer. The windows let in so much light from outside that there’s barely any need for the interior illumination, which comes in the form of bright yellow globes suspended on thin cords that stretch from the ceiling to about sixteen feet off the floor. People are everywhere, talking to each other and rushing to catch their ships. Most people have their luggage with them. Reyin, Estas, and I all have large rolling suitcases, which we pull along behind us. There’s also a large number of stävnemā fen mes here, walking around in their blue-and-white suits of body armor. They’re all carrying weapons, the same way that all the travelers are.
toting luggage. The stāvnemā fen mes always travel in groups of four. Their rifles and handguns make them stand out from the crowd just as much as their suites of armor and their air of unquestionable authority. They're not stopping anyone in the terminal, but we all know that they could. At the moment, they're just here to keep an eye on things. They're just here to make sure we're safe. Reyin looks around at the crowd. "Everyone will notice," she says. "We're in public. Give them some credit, please. They're not blind. But that's beside the point. Void has a problem with control, and we don't want to encourage her."

I hear this, and suddenly it becomes a bit easier for me to stop smiling. I really don't think it's my fault that I'm not as good at overcoming emotion as my mother. I've always suspected that a few of her alterations were designed to carve out a bit of her emotional core. I don't think she feels things as strongly as I do, so she has less to fight against. It's not fair that I'd be held to the same standard. It makes me feel bad that I fail so frequently, at least when measured against Reyin. I know she loves me more than anything, but it's hard sometimes, knowing that I'm physically and mentally weaker than she is, and she'll never fully comprehend how I could be the way I am. She doesn't experience the weaknesses, so she doesn't understand them. That's all it comes down to. This often puts Estas in the position of acting as a proxy, arguing for me whenever Reyin asks for more than I can provide. I feel guilty for so often putting him between us like this, but he never seems to mind. He loves me that much. Estas listens to Reyin's argument, then argues back. "I don't think it's a bad thing," he says, "that our daughter smiles every now and then. I'm glad she's happy."

"It's not polite and you know it. Why are you pushing this?" Reyin sounds truly annoyed now. She very rarely gets like this. She usually keeps her emotions completely under wraps, except when she's under a lot of pressure or is worried about something. Right now, she's got both of these triggers. We're headed to Aiohn for a couple of reasons. First, there's a sculptor's convention happening in a bit less than a week. Reyin's always wanted to attend a convention of this kind, but has never been able to get the necessary travel permit. The only reason she was able to get the permit this time is that her younger sister died about a month ago, and the funeral is being held the day before the convention. Reyin's family, rich and powerful as it is, has secured three travel permits, one for my mother, my father, and myself, on the condition that Reyin attends the funeral. I think she hated her sister, but I'm not entirely sure. Reyin never talks about her. She never talks about her family in general, really, but I think she harbored a special animosity for her sister. I've never even heard her sister's name. I don't know how she died. Reyin didn't tell me. Yet, somehow, my mother's family wants her at the funeral so badly that they were willing to bribe a few officials for travel permits. It must have been very expensive for them.

Reyin doesn't want to see her relatives again. She hasn't said so out loud, but it's been obvious for weeks. Ever since she found out her sister was dead and that she had to attend the funeral, she's been in a bad mood. I think she's dreading the way her family's going to treat her. Everything I know about them is skewed through my mother's lense, but I'm nonetheless certain that they don't respect her choice of career, husband, home city, or lifestyle. And she's going to be listening to all their comments in just a few days. It's no wonder, really, that Reyin's in such a bad mood.

We're now standing in waiting area alongside a rail track built into the terminal floor. A small train is supposed to come along any minute now, taking us to a shuttle that
will ferry us into orbit, where we'll board the passenger ship itself. The train's running a bit late. My mother looks up at a clock on the terminal wall. Her mouth creases when she sees it. "We’re behind schedule," she announces. "We need to be on the shuttle in less than twelve minutes. We're late."

Estas steps in, literally as well as metaphorically. He takes a step closer to his wife, so that he's standing right next to her. He's a handsome man, tall and slender. His hair is unfashionably wavy, but I think it looks just fine. I like the color of his hair. It's dirty blond, and in some lights almost looks coppery. His face is open and kind, two traits that are very rare to see. Secrecy and elegance are usually preferred. There's something else about Estas' face that's rare. There are crinkle lines around his eyes. Almost no one has these. I attribute them to his generous smiles. "We've got plenty of time," he says. "The train is a bit late, but it'll get us there. Don't worry. It'll be fine."

"I'm not worrying," Reyin says. She sounds almost insulted, and she pulls slightly away from Estas. My father looks at her, and then he does something that I've never seen anyone else do in real life. He raises his left eyebrow way above his right, holds it there, and stares at Reyin. My mother hates it when he does this. The entire open humor of it rubs her the wrong way, and he only ever makes this face when she's being unreasonable. It's his way of dealing with it.

"Don't do that, Estas." She turns away from him.

"Don't do what?"

Reyin exhales sharply, and she wets her lips with her tongue. "That thing you do with your eyebrows," she says. "You know I don't like it. So stop. We're in public."

Estas holds the pose, but clears the rest of his face, adopting an innocent and blank expression. "I'm not doing anything with my eyebrows."

My mother glares at him in silence. "I'm going to go stand over there," she says after a moment, pointing to a spot about sixteen feet down the track. "I'm not standing next to you when your face looks like that."

Estas nods thoughtfully, still holding his left eyebrow aloft. "Good idea," he says. "If you stand over there, nobody'll think we're married." Reyin glares at him again, and then she turns away and walks with her suitcase to stand farther down the track. She doesn't look back at either of us. Instead, she starts a study of the wall on the other side of the rails. Estas looks over at me. The eyebrow's still up. "You know," he says, "that your mother's just worried. She doesn't mean any of it, and she loves my eyebrows."

I can't help it. A smothered chuckle fights its way into my mouth and, finding my jaw tightly clenched, shoots out my nose. I'm grinning widely now. There's nothing I can do. I'm always a bit embarrassed when my father gets this way, but I know he does it partially for my benefit. The more stony and distant Reyin becomes, the more immature and enjoyable Estas becomes. It's as if he's compensating for her. It's extremely impolite what he's doing, but it's a lot of fun to be around. It makes me feel guilty and rude, but I always enjoy it. I'm wrestling my face back into submission when Reyin speaks up from where she stands. "You know I can still hear you. And so can everyone else."

I don't know who the "everyone else" she's referring to is. The terminal's very busy, but we're the only ones standing at this point of the tracks. Reyin's hands are clasped behind her back, and she's staring straight ahead at the wall in front of her. There's a poster above the tracks there, a picture of our flag waving heroically at the top of a tall mast, with hundreds of devoted citizens gazing up at it in reverence. I've never felt that kind of
reverence for the flag, but I kind of like the way it looks. It's simple. A crisp white field, punctuated by a sky blue shape, like a tall and narrow rhombus with sharp points at its top and bottom. Unlike a true rhombus, though, the points on the right and left sides of the shape have been rounded out. I like the design. I think it's pretty. Estas turns to face Reyin, and gives her a slight bow. "I would certainly hope so," he says.

He has no shame. None at all. My mother closes her eyes and clamps her mouth shut. Estas looks at me again, and then nods in her direction. "Let's go join your mother," he says. I beam.

A horrible, horrible itch. I've never felt anything like it. I've expelled things before, but never an entire bullet. And as my body works to push the chunk of metal bit by bit out from the muscle in my leg, the itch approaches agony.

On the whole, I've felt surprisingly well since I woke up. The pain from my leg, elbow, and head has subsided to a dull, fiery throb. It's bad, but it no longer feels life-threatening. I'm on the mend. This isn't to say that I feel confident that I could move any part of my body without screaming yet. I can't even open my left eye. It's still fused shut. But by this point in the healing process, I'm starting to believe that at some time in the distant future, I won't hurt like this anymore.

Still, this future can't come soon enough. Especially where the itch is concerned. I can feel the bullet worming its way up through the muscle and the skin, shoving aside nerve fibers and blood vessels. It's terrible. Even more so than straight-on pain, it draws my attention to it like a massive, crackling bonfire on a dark and cloudy night. It's what woke me up. I've only been aware of it for a few minutes, and already I think it'll drive me insane. I squeeze my right eye shut and grit my teeth. No good. There's no ignoring it.

I'm desperate to make the itch stop. So desperate, it turns out, that I'm willing to try something crazy. My left hand is closest to the wound, but I can't use that arm. The elbow joint is so badly damaged that it hasn't even begun the process of expelling the bullet yet. I could use my right arm, though. It'd be difficult, and probably really, really painful. Also, I'm always supposed to let my body expel things on its own. I'm not supposed to step in. I could damage things even more. But, still.... If it could stop the itch....

In the end, I don't have much choice. The itch is that powerful. Trying not to move any other part of my body, I gently raise my right hand into the air. It's impossible to keep my body completely still as I do this, and a sharp twinge emanates from my left elbow in response. I freeze, and wait for the flair to die down. I'm lying on my right side, which means that reaching my right hand over to my left thigh is a bit of a stretch. I pick my head up so I can see what I'm doing, and then I carefully - carefully - reach toward the itch. All three bullet wounds shriek out in an angry reply, making it far more difficult to breath than it should be. I grab hold of the orange fabric of the jumpsuit at a spot just a few inches from the hole in my thigh. The suit a standard size, so it's pretty baggy on me. This helps. With extreme caution, I pull, twist, and turn the fabric, navigating the thumbnail-sized hole in it until it's directly over the impact site. I can feel the bullet sticking up out of my skin, and it electrifies as the fabric rubs against it. Then, with a few more carefully planned tugs, I maneuver the hole so that it falls right over the bullet. It fits perfectly. And it should. That hole is how the bullet got in.

I can see the bullet now, poking through the fabric of the jumpsuit. It's a simple, shiny cylinder, smooth and whole. I got lucky. If it'd broken apart, the fragments would
have been far more difficult - and far more painful - to remove. I let go of the fabric. Even
the slight pressure of the fabric pushing against the bullet is painful. It’s not quite like the
pain that poured from the gash in my forehead when my scalp moved, but it’s equally
threatening. The pain isn’t sharp, but it promises something far more deadly if disturbed.
On the plus side, irritating the wound makes me notice the itch less. This, more than
anything else, is what convinces me to go through with my plan. I stretch a bit farther. My
head’s really pounding now from being elevated for so long, but I try to look past it. I’m
doing a fairly good job of keeping my left elbow steady and unmoving, but, no matter how
hard I try, the fragments of bone in the joint grind together with even my smallest move.
It’s enough to make me gasp.

But then I can finally reach all the way to the bullet. I hover my thumb and forefinger
on either side of it. I grab it, applying no more pressure than a falling hair. Instantly, I feel a
ray of nerve pain jolt down my leg and shoot up my spine. I stop breathing entirely. I’d jerk
away, or at least go into a spasm, if I weren’t so frightened of knocking the bullet. Then I’d
be in real trouble. Before I can rethink this, I get a firm grip on the smooth metal surface of
the bullet and pull. I scream. I didn’t know I was a screamer. I never scream. Just once
before. And that wasn’t from physical pain. But I scream now. Loud, long, shrill, the whole
thing. Then, in my mind, still screaming, I feel a wall racing toward me, then hitting me,
then pushing me backward, feet sliding over smooth ground that offers no more purchase
than ice, hurtling toward a cliff. The wall pushes me up to the edge and beyond, so there’s
no more ground, no more anything. I’m falling.
Chapter Two

They were always a strange couple. Few people could understand why they got married. “After all,” I used to imagine our neighbors saying to themselves, “he certainly didn’t marry her for looks. And after all,” they’d continue, “she certainly didn’t marry him for status.” In a quiet city like Alaseel, these things got noticed.

Estas was charming and handsome. His hair was too wavy for “perfect beauty,” but I don’t know anyone who would have questioned his good looks. He was good at his craft, the best and only fletcher in the city, attracting a steady trickle of sentimental customers, all yearning for the days when a bow and arrow was used in place of a laser rifle. His specialty was making racks of gorgeous arrows, racks designed for easy mounting on walls. They were made for show. Everything he crafted was functional, but Estas knew perfectly well that almost none of his arrows would ever get used. I think it bothered him sometimes. But he loved what he did, and he wasn’t about to stop.

He told me once that he first met Reyin on a collaborative project. Some snooty customer had commissioned a set of stone arrows from her. Apparently, having actual arrows didn’t inspire enough of an “ancient atmosphere” for this patron. Estas and Reyin worked together on it, and they kept seeing each other after the project was finished. Estas was several hundred years younger than Reyin, but that didn’t matter to either of them. Age isn’t much of a barrier anymore. Not since alterations began. Technically, a good-quality alteration is supposed to prolong life indefinitely. People can still die, and they do, but never from old age. Reyin was going on eight hundred thirty-two when she and Estas met. Long-life alterations have been mandatory for some time, and Aiohn pays to have them spliced into each new child. This has always struck me as one of the greatest gifts a government could give its citizens.

But while Estas might have been a charming and rising craftsman, his background was dirt. We haven’t had official classes in the empire for thousands of years, but financial resources and family history are still widely used to determine someone’s worth. Marrying someone of lesser status is extremely rare. It goes against all traditional values. But, Reyin was never much for tradition. She married him anyway. It cost her a fortune, but she married him anyway. Aiohn doesn’t forbid these kinds of marriages, but it does hand out fines. To get a marriage license, couples have to go through genetic testing. If the tests show that future offspring might be unhealthy, then the marriage is discouraged. It took almost half a century for my parents to climb out of debt after those fines. That’s how poorly matched they were, at least from Aiohn’s perspective. Judging from the fines and what their tests showed, I should have ended up with some severe deformity. Two heads, or something like that. My mother would tell me every now and then how lucky I was to have been born normal and, apart from my heart, healthy.

Most people thought that my mother was crazy for marrying Estas. And most people thought my father was a snake for chasing after someone he didn’t deserve. But they loved each other. Almost no one realized this. The neighbors didn’t like us. I knew it whenever I saw them. They looked at my parents, and they saw one person who had thrown away their birthright status, and they saw someone else who had been born onto the bottom rung and who deserved to stay there. Then they saw me, and they didn’t know what to think. Was I worth the respect shown to my mother’s class, or the disrespect shunted toward my
father's? Or was I somewhere in between? They couldn't figure it out. After a while of this, I decided not to care. So what if our neighbors didn't like me? I didn't like them, either.

After much work, I'm sitting with my back against the wall. My left leg is stretched out in front of me, my right leg bent upward, left arm cradled in my lap. My leg's feeling better, but it still hurts to bend or move it. Compared to this, my arm's way behind in the healing process. Even slight movements of the joint are agony. I don't have a good way of measuring time in here, what with the light in the ceiling always staying on and nothing else ever changing. But it's been about a day since I pulled the bullet out of my leg, and half a day since I pulled the bullet out of my arm. It might have been longer. Or perhaps it's only been a few hours. I can't be sure. My arm still hurts like nothing else from having the metal fragment yanked out. I can't wait for it to heal. But at least it doesn't itch anymore. If anything, the itching was even more acute in my elbow than it was in my thigh. I needed it to stop. And as my elbow gradually recovers from the damage I did to it, I'm starting to slowly feel improvement. Even the gash in my skull is doing better. I can open my eye a fraction, and the pounding's gone down. It only hurts if I do something stupid, like get my hair caught between my back and the wall and then bend my head forward, pulling on my scalp. Then it hurts.

In my right hand, I'm rolling around the smooth shapes of the two bullet. They were both sticky when they first came out, covered in clear-yellow plasma. They grow cleaner as I roll them between my thumb and fingers, twirling them around and balancing them on my palm. They're a light golden color. The bullets are shaped like small domes, terminating in dull points. They're no longer than the top joint on my little finger. Such small things. From size alone, I never would have guessed that they could cause so much damage.

Suddenly, I hear a loud metallic clang! I jerk around to face the door, and see it beginning to slide open. I freeze, closing my hand around the bullets. The door slides into the right hand wall of the cell. It makes a rough grating as it moves out of the way, the metal of the door grinding against an unseen track. Outside, two guards in uniforms are standing in the hallway. One of them is right in front of the open door, and the other one is just a few feet farther back. The one standing in front jerks its thumb at me. “Up. Let's go,” it says. “The Lieutenant wants to see you.”

I stare at the human. It's a disgusting creature, and I hate it instantly. It's got little specks of stubble sticking out all around its face and neck. Under its chin is a bulbous sack of pasty skin hanging halfway down its throat, a sack filled with fat and wormlike blue veins. Its voice seems to burble with each and every word. It's as if there's so much fat in the creature's body that it's begun to melt under its own weight, and the melting fat is pushing its way up into the creature's esophagus and filling its lungs. It's disgusting. The human's eyes are stupid and animalistic, no spark of intelligence in them whatsoever. And its pupils. Round. They have round pupils, the humans. Round, just disks of black. There's nothing special about them, no beauty, no elegance, no mind. The creature is disgusting. And the other guard is no better. It's not as fat as its companion, but it's still human. I hate them both. I don't respond to the request. The human steps forward into the cell. “Come on,” it says, gesturing. “Let's go.”

I consider ignoring it. I wonder what would happen if I do nothing, offer no reply, no acknowledgement. It might be interesting. But I decide against this. I've very rarely disobeyed a direct order. It's not something that comes naturally to me. So, I curl my body
forward, away from the wall, and use my right leg and arm to push myself upwards. I use my left leg as little as possible, trying to let it hang limp. My head wound pounds as my blood pressure changes, but, all in all, the gouged bone on my forehead isn’t a big problem. It’s healing well. The biggest issue is my left elbow. I was cradling it on my lap before I stood up, but this is no longer possible. I support it with my other arm, and lean against the wall, feeling sick. There’s a reason I wasn’t standing before. Am I going to vomit? I hope not. That sounds like it would hurt. My leg’s not ready to support my weight yet, and my elbow is toxic with renewed pain.

The guard reaches behind its back and takes something off its belt, a metal apparatus that unfolds into an X-shaped arrangement of short tubes. The tubes have hinges running down their sides. There’s also a small, rectangular box built into the side of the device. It has a slot running across it, next to a miniature screen. I’ve been in these handcuffs before. The guard asks to see my hands. I hesitate. Putting my hands out would require bending my elbow. But the guard starts to advance toward me, and I realize that it’s about to grab my wrists, which would be much, much worse. Quickly, I offer up my hands as best I can. The metal tubes snap shut around my wrists, with my right hand going under my left. As soon as I’m secured, I bring my hands in close to my stomach, still trying to cradle my elbow. It feels like it’s been infused with white-hot shrapnel. I struggle to contain the scream in my throat.

I’m led out of the cell and into the hallway. There, I’m ordered to walk in front of the guards, the three of us forming a tight triangle. In truth, I’m not walking. I’m limping. Hard. Any pressure on my left leg is excruciating. For as much of each step as I can, I stay with my weight planted firmly over my right leg. Even so, I soon feel something wet dribbling down my thigh. The wound is bleeding again.

The guards direct me down the hallway. This is the first chance I’ve had to look around, and I gladly accept. I don’t like being totally ignorant of my surroundings. The hallway is long, with several hundred feet between its termination point at a concrete wall and its start at a distant intersection. It’s maybe sixteen feet wide, has a twelve-foot ceiling, and its walls are studded with red metal doors. These doors look much the same on the outside as they do on the inside. The only difference is a small control panel off to the left of each door. There’s also a sign next to each door frame, a rectangular piece of metal painted the same red as the doors themselves. There are a series of characters on each sign, painted in thick black lettering. I can’t read the signs. The human alphabet never made sense to me, and after years of neglecting practice, I’ve forgotten it. I’m actually surprised that I still remember their language at all. It’s not as if I’ve been practicing their Standard with any regularity. It’s just stuck with me. At any rate, I don’t need to read the signs to know what they’re for. It’s obvious. They’re only cell numbers.

When we reach the intersection where the hallway crosses paths with another corridor, we turn left. The hallway continues on the other side of the intersection, but this new corridor seems to be the central channel that runs through the entire area. It doesn’t have any cell doors built into it, but branches off into new hallways on either side every few dozen feet. We keep straight, coming eventually to the point where the corridor comes to an end at a far wall. By the time we get there, I’m shaking and covered in sweat. I feel horrible, and even my head is starting to hurt again. There are more doors here. Unlike everywhere else, these doors aren’t metal, and they aren’t painted red. The one that we’re walking toward is made of light brown wood, and has a frosted window set into it. There’s
a small plaque next to the door with more characters on it, but I don’t pay much attention to this. It’s no use to me.

The first guard orders me to stop, and goes ahead of me to knock on the door. I stare at the frosted glass. The window is so opaque that I can barely even tell if the room past it is lit or not. I realize that the window is not a real invitation to look inside the office. It’s just a show of transparency. The guard knocks, and a second later I hear a voice inside the room telling us to come in. The guard opens the door, and I’m ushered inside.

The main piece of furniture in the room is a large wooden desk, solid and brutish. It’s piled high with loose paperwork and files, and there’s a computer monitor poking up through the debris. In front of the desk is a set of two chairs. Over on the right hand wall of the mid-sized room is a short bookshelf. Only the bottom shelf is filled with actual literature, and these are binders, not books. They’re probably regulations or something like that. The other shelves are home to countless small knickknacks, everything from a tiny potted tree that looks mostly dead, to a fist-sized statue of a faceless human holding an umbrella, to a few upright bullet cartridges, to a glass paperweight, to a smooth rock with blue-green tones. There’s also a small glass-fronted case on the bookshelf, standing upright with a black felt background. It’s a display case, showing off a single purple medal.

Behind the desk, a human male is sitting in a high-backed leather chair. I recognize the figure immediately. I barely had a second to look at it when I was in the elevator, but I’ve only been shot once in my life. I’m not forgetting the creature that pulled the trigger. It’s in a gray uniform like the other guards, and has close-cut, black hair. I can see that the creature was strong once, but has gotten out of shape as time has passed. Its face is expressive - wide, with heavy eyebrows and surprisingly alert eyes. I wouldn’t have expected to see eyes like these on a human.

The guards maneuver me over to one of the chairs and sit me down in it, then quickly strap my ankles to the chair. I hadn’t notice from across the room, but there are two thick straps on the front legs of the chair, and the guards use them to fasten me in place. The man behind the desk waits patiently for them to do this, then quietly tells them to wait outside. They salute, and leave. The man stares at me. As best I can, I stare back. It’s hard when I’m hurting this badly, but I give it a try.

“You look horrible,” the man states after a few seconds. I don’t say anything. I know he’s right. My hair’s matted, uncombed. There are flecks of dried blood clinging to it. My face is swollen and dirty, and my left eye can open no wider than a squint. I’m wearing an orange jumpsuit that’s covered in crumbling brown scabs. ‘Horrible’ doesn’t even begin to describe it. The man blinks, and another few seconds pass in silence. Then I stop trying to stare at the human, and instead look over at the bookshelf. I look at the faceless statue. It’s holding the umbrella out in front of it, and the umbrella is halfway between extended and folded. Frozen in time as it is, I can’t tell which way the umbrella is going. Up or down? I look back over at the human.

“Where am I?” I ask. My voice sounds slurred even to me.

The man blinks again, and then slowly starts to inhale as if coming out of a trance. “You know,” it says, “You’re the first elf I’ve ever actually talked to. Face to face, that is.” It squints. “I’ve seen elves before. On tour. I even got a few shots off. But I think you’re the first one I’ve ever actually hit.”

It’s looking at me, contemplating me. Or studying me. “Where am I?” I ask again.
It shakes its head. "You’re all freaks, you know that? Each and every one of you. Just look at you,” it says, gesturing at me. “I shot you just two days ago, and already you’re up and walking again.” It gives its head a quick shake and spreads its hands slightly, as if conceding a point. "I mean,” it continues, “You look horrible, but you’re up and walking. That’s not natural. You’re a freak.”

The last word is said with such a clear and sharp point that it sounds obscene. As if the word were the greatest insult ever devised, and certainly the greatest insult ever spoken aloud. I try to ignore it. “Where am I?” I ask.

The human taps the desk with its forefinger. “And the thing I hate most about you elves is, you think your freakishness makes you somehow better than us. You think,” it continues, “That because you’ve mutated yourselves beyond recognition, that you’re better.”

I clench my right fist. I try my best to segregate my emotion into the one hand. I do everything I can to hide my anger. I don’t want to give the human the pleasure of seeing it. I wish I was better at hiding emotion. “Where am I?” I ask.

The human gives its head a definite shake. “But you’re no better,” it says.

I look at it for a moment, trying to keep myself under control, trying to convince myself that I want to stay under control. It’s a losing battle. “I’m not an elf,” I say. “I’m an önä mälhā. And I may be a freak,” I continue, “but at least I’m not a coward.”

I pause, looking for a reaction. I don’t get much. A spark of interest, maybe, but no more. I want more. So I continue. “You’re all cowards,” I say. “All of you. And you think that your cowardice makes you superior. You’ve been too afraid to make the leap and improve yourselves. We weren’t afraid,” I say. “We had the courage to improve. You didn’t.” I pause, staring at the man and clenching my right fist. “Now look what I can do,” I say. Then, leaning forward in the chair, I reach out with my arms and open my right hand over the desk. The two bullets fall to the wooden surface with soft clinks, and the metal objects roll around in misshapen circles. “And you’re only human,” I say.

I wait for a response. The human looks at the bullets, and then glances up at me. “You’re a freak,” it says.

It sounds a disgusted. That’s not the reaction I’d wanted, but it’s close enough. At least it’s unsettled. I look straight back at it. “Where am I?” I ask again.

The human pauses, not saying anything. Then it does something that surprises me. It leans forward and scoops up the two chunks of metal, holding them between its thumb and forefinger. It holds them up and looks at them closely. The human is still studying them when it starts speaking. “You,” it says, “Are on the negative-fourteenth floor of one of the most secure prisons in the sector.” Suddenly it stands up from its chair and starts toward the bookshelf. “I don’t know why they sent you here,” it says as it walks. “Usually...” it rearranges a few of the small items, clearing a space. “They send things like you to the camps. They don’t send elves to human prisons.” It plops down the bullets on the shelf. It takes a step back, and then reaches forward and straightens one of them. It continues speaking as it does this. “I personally don’t think it’s fair to the other inmates to have an elf in here. What message does that send to them? That we’re equating them with you? Oh, no. That’s not fair.” By now, it’s satisfied with the arrangement and heads back over to the chair behind the desk. “These murderers deserve better,” it says as it sits down, looking at me again.
I’m distracted by my arm. Reaching forward to drop the bullets on the table shifted one of the bone fragments. I’m having trouble seeing straight. I wish I could come up with a decent response, but I’m too stupid right now. “Who are you?” I ask.

The human nods at me. “My name is Lieutenant David Souza. I’m the warden for the negative-twelfth, -thirteenth, and -fourteenth floors. I am in charge here.”

I gratefully seize on this small opportunity. “Were you in charge when I attached your guards?”

The human seems to consider this for a moment. Then it says, speaking slowly, “Do you know why that gun didn’t fire?” I blink. No, I don’t know. I assume it was jammed. The human smiles. “The safety was on,” it drawls.

I feel my chest deflate. The safety was on! That’s all? It wasn’t a jam. It wasn’t some high-tech security system, designed to let only guards fire the weapon. It was just the safety. The safety was on. I feel devastated. I failed because of a small detail. Such a tiny thing. It was only a safety. Across from me, over the paper-strewn desk, the human adjusts itself in the chair. “You ask me if I’m in control? I think you need to ask yourself the same question,” it says. “I’m not worried that you’ll give me any more problems,” it continues, “because you don’t have any idea what you’re doing.”

“I can learn,” I say quietly.

The man shakes its head and scrunches up its face. “Naaah,” it says. ”They say you can’t teach an old dog new tricks. And you…” It breaks off eye contact with me and reaches forward to ruffle through the many sheets of paper on the surface of the desk, pulling out one sheet in particular. It reads it, then looks back at me. “…Void…” It puts the piece of paper back down, having apparently just learned my name. “You are the oldest dog I’ve ever met.”

It pauses. I can see that it’s waiting for a reaction. I’m glad to disappoint it. I’m so distracted by my left arm that I’d hardly know an insult if it poked me in the nose. If anything, I’m still wondering if the human was acting just now. Did it really not know my name? The human squints at me again. “You are a dog, aren’t you?” it says. It sounds as if it’s just discovered something. A shameful secret. “Or,” it shrugs, “Close enough, at least. You have all the rights of a dog. You’re not a human. You don’t have human rights. All you have are animal rights.” It pauses, taking a second to study me. Then: “I could kill you right now, and the only consequence would be a bit more paperwork. It’d probably take me…..” It shrugs. “Forty-five minutes to fill out. An hour, tops.”

It’s such a bizarre statement that I’m not sure how to respond. Did the human just threaten me? Then why is its tone still so civil? Going only by the creature’s voice, it could be talking about anything. We could be discussing the time it takes to mow the Lieutenant’s lawn. I shake my head, confused and angry. “Why did you call me here?” I ask.

The man leans back in the chair and looks me in the eye. “I want to make it very clear,” it says, “That I’m not going to tolerate any misbehavior. I don’t like the fact that they put you in here. I deserve better than you. It’s not my job to look after animals. You belong in a camp, not here. It’s an insult. I don’t want you here. I want you gone. And I don’t really care how that happens.” It stops and clears it throat. “So this can go one of two ways. First, you sit quietly in your cell and rot, and I can ignore you. Or, I can kill you. Frankly, the second option sounds like more fun. But as you can see,” it gestures to the paper-strewn desk. “I’m a fan of paperwork. So for now I’m letting you live. But if you give me any reason, any reason at all, I will burn you, and I will bury you.”
It looks at me. It waits for a response. Something to show that I’m afraid. And of course I’m afraid. I’ve been afraid for what feels like years now, since before I even entered the forest. And look where I am. I’m fourteen floors below ground. I’m badly wounded. I’m being held in a human prison with no hope of escape or release, and now I have a sadistic animal gnashing its teeth in front of my face. Of course I’m afraid. But what am I supposed to do? Give up? Die? No. I hate the human too much to die. I’m too afraid to give up. “Is this what makes humans so great?” I sneer.

“No,” it says, shaking its head. “Just me. Other people wouldn’t have the nerve.”

What a fool, I think. *It believes that killing takes courage?* I hate this creature more with every passing moment. Before I speak, some part of me realizes that I shouldn’t be fighting back here. I should bow my head and accept anything that comes my way. Truly, I have no power here. The human could do anything to me. Sitting quietly would be rational. But fear isn’t rational. “I don’t think you can kill me,” I say.

The human’s big, expressive eyebrows come together. “No?” it asks. “Why’s that?”

“Because you’ve already tried,” I say, “And you’ve already failed.”

The human smiles broadly, its mouth full of teeth. “Would you like me to try again?”

I stare at it. I hate that face. I hate that face so much. “Only if I have a fair chance of killing you,” I say.

When I hear these words come out of my mouth, I’m shocked. I didn’t mean to say that. I’m not in control of my body. I’m too afraid. I’m just acting and doing, saying whatever comes to mind. The man’s eyes narrow. It still has a smile spread across its lips, but it’s not quite so wide anymore. Instead, the smile is more of quiet amusement. It’s enjoying this. “Mmmm...,” it says. It stretches the sound, half growling, half purring, thinking. It’s studying me again. I hate its eyes. They’re intelligent, but they have no light. “No,” the human finishes. “That’s not a fair exchange. My life is worth more than yours. Would you take someone else instead?”

I blink. Someone else? That has to be the most disgusting thing I’ve ever heard. “What gives you the right,” I ask, “to risk someone else’s life?”

The man laughs. “It says in your file that you killed ten people. What gave you the right to do that?”

“I had every right,” I answer immediately.

The Warden shakes its head. “I’ve already told you, Void. You have no rights. You’re not even human.” I glare at the creature. I’ve never been more proud to belong to a different species. The human glances over at the bookshelf. It considers for a moment, rubbing its thumb against the side of its forefinger. “It’s an interesting offer you make, though,” it says. “I’ll see what I can do for you. Guard!”

It addresses this last word to the closed door. The door opens and one of the waiting creatures looks inside. “Sir?”

The Warden gestures toward me. “We’re done here. Please put this animal back in its cage.”

The guard nods and enter the office with its partner to unstrap my ankles from the chair legs. The Warden maintains eye contact with me the entire time, leaning forward so its elbows are planted on the edge of the desk. My leg screams as I stand up, but I do everything I can to keep my face neutral. I don’t want the human to see that I can be hurt. As I’m led out of the office, I can feel its eyes on my back, and I wait until I’m outside with
the door safely closed before I let myself go back to limping. The effort nearly brings me to tears.

The two guards lead me through the hallways, past rows and rows of red metal doors, until finally we come to a stop. The first guard steps over to the control panel built into the wall next to the doorframe. It takes a card out of a shirt pocket. The card is attached to a thin wire, which spools out from a small drum as the guard swipes the card through a slot in the panel. A red light flashes twice, then turns green with a beep. The guard returns the card to its pocket just as a loud clang sounds from the door, and it begins sliding open. The second guard grabs my shoulder and marches me into the cell, telling me to sit on the bench. I’m only too happy to comply. My leg’s aching and pounding, and my head’s gone fuzzy. I’m exhausted. Dizzy. I fall backwards into a sitting position, and the second guard swipes its card through the slot in the handcuffs. A red light next to the slot blinks twice, turns green, there’s a beep, and the cuffs pop open. The guard takes them with it as it leaves the cell. The door shuts. There’s another clang, the door’s lock sliding back into place. And then all is quiet.

I close my eyes and lean my head against the wall. I feel terrible. I’m sick to my stomach and my jaw can’t stop jittering. I wait for it to subside, but it doesn’t. I can’t decide what I should be thinking right now. Should I be ashamed for letting the human so easily goad me? Stupid. That mistake could get me killed. Or Should I be proud that I stood up for myself? Stupid. We’ll see where that gets me.

I sigh, breathing in deeply through my nose and then letting it all out. What should I do? How am I supposed to respond? I find myself wondering what Reyin would do here, or what Estas would do. I think that my mother would tell me to take it all one thing at a time. She’d tell me to calm down. To control myself. I’m sorry, Mother. I can’t.

But for all that Reyin’s advice would be useless to me, I’m sure that Estas would have been unable to advise me at all. The future always frightened Estas. For all the joy he took from life and all the smiles he repaid it with, there were some things that never stopped worrying him. The future. Change. He was usually happy inn the moment, but the thought of tomorrow was a dark and frightening concept for him. Especially after First Contact. I could see his fear on his face, in his movements. I could smell it on his breath, in his sweat. I could hear it in his voice. I’ve believed for some time that this fear was one of the reasons he became a fletcher. A traditional career. Safe from the future. Safe from change. Untouched by time. He could deny that the future was happening. I loved my father. But maybe part of the reason why he refused to control his emotions was because he was unable to. It wouldn’t have been his fault. He was unaltered. He only had the basics. It wasn’t his fault. It’s not my fault, either. I do fear whatever’s coming. I can’t help myself. I hate it. I hate the fear. I hate the Warden. I hate its skin, I hate its clothes, I hate its face, I hate its breath. I hate it so intensely that I can nearly convince myself that I’m proud of what I did. I stood up for myself. I made an impression. I should be proud.
Chapter Three

It’s a straight walk from my school in the municipal district back to my house, cutting through Alaseel’s central park. On most days I go directly home after school. But today I walk around the park, passing through the market district. It’s mid-afternoon on a warm, sunny day, and I know that the streets there will be crowded with people. This is my favorite way of experiencing the market district, in the middle of a crowd. It’s one of the few things that can tempt me away from a stroll through the densely-forested park.

Alaseel is divided into three districts. There’s municipal, residential, and market. All the planned cities are arranged this way, the three districts built as the wedges of a circle, with a large park in the center like the hub of a wheel. It’s an old design. It predates the finalization of the Empire, when cities still needed to be defended. Building a city in a circle decreased the length of the outer wall. It was efficient. Now it’s tradition.

I walk down one of the streets where vendors have set up their carts and stalls in front of the buildings, transforming the wide road into a narrow alley. The other pedestrians shrink the road even farther, filling every possible space. There’s barely enough room for a single lane of foot traffic now, and the street is loud with talking and yelling. The buildings on either side of this scene tower over the walkers and the vendors, but they top off after only seven floors. We’re too close to the park for anything taller to be legal. Buildings right up against the park have a three-story limit, and full towers are permitted only at the outermost edges of the city. This allows the park to be filled with sunlight even in the early morning and late afternoon. This is another example of Aiohn’s wise rule.

I walk slowly past the merchants. There are stalls selling food, selling cookware, selling clothes, there are stands for toys, appliances, antiques, novelties, glassware, shoes, books – anything and everything that anyone anywhere might want, need, or crave. Almost all of the stands are made of wood paneling, mirroring the buildings around us. There’s no law in Alaseel that requires buildings to use wood in their design, but the vast majority do anyway. It’s only the exteriors, of course. The internal structures are made of sturdier materials. But on the outside, it’s always wood. Huge glass windows, spreading from floor to ceiling, have wooden accents; Automatic doors are made from deeply lacquered planks. It’s all an illusion. It’s part of our tradition. Stone is also heavily used, but not as widely as wood. The entire city is wooden. This aesthetic is taken even further in the city of Aiohn, where they have specific laws governing the facades of buildings. Everything is required to match with the original construction, now many thousands of years old. When I visited Aiohn a few years ago, it felt like I was stepping back through time. Everything looked original, right down to the doorknobs. Even here in Alaseel, which was only settled a few hundred years ago, I can still see the past reaching out all over the city.

There’s a kiosk on my right with a man standing in front of it, advertising his array of flutes and wind instruments by playing a vibrating, whistle-like tube. The man has a worn and sunburned face, attesting to the fact that he spends much of his time outdoors. Everything about him, from the wrinkles around his eyes to the curls in his hair to the age in his hands, speaks to his unaltered state. But he plays well, and he nods at me as I go by. I smile back. It’s not a gesture that I’d usually do, but he’s so clearly unaltered that I feel comfortable with it.
Here and there in the crowd I see the white-and-blue body armor of stävnemā fen mes. These soldiers patrol all over the city, but are especially common here in the market district. The crowds are so thick that there’s always a need for someone to keep an eye out. The whistle-player pauses as a patrol goes past his kiosk, and he bows formally toward the armored figures. They don’t even glance his way. But I understand why he’s being so careful. I know from my father that the licences to set up booths and stalls here are extremely hard to come by, and they can be revoked for almost any reason. Losing his kiosk would probably bankrupt this man. He starts playing again when the stävnemā fen mes have passed, the vibrating notes of the whistle buzzing gently through the air.

I push my way through the crowd. I’m closer to the residential district now, and the streets are especially thick with shoppers. But when I cross the line between districts the crowd thins out almost immediately. No vendors are allowed to set up here, and the streets quickly reassume their full width. The contrast between the bustling chaos of market and the quiet side streets of residential is sharp. It’s so silent here that it almost feels like stepping into a ghost town.

I’m close to my home now. My parents worked hard to buy a house near market so they could sell their goods. Reyin doesn’t do street vending, but she does sell to several galleries. Estas own a small booth with a friend of his, a painter by the name of Ahlem, and they use it on alternate weeks. Estas sells most of his arrow racks this way. The rest are usually commissions.

I pass the wood-paneled houses, my boots thudding softly on the pavement. My mother has never liked my choice in footwear. She calls them ‘ugly worker boots.’ I call them ‘functional.’ Typically, Reyin agrees with me when it comes to choosing function over fashion. I care about my appearance, of course - more than most people know - but I’ve always refused to sacrifice comfort for image. Reyin’s this way, too. I got this trait directly from her, in fact. But for whatever reason, she doesn’t like it when I wear boots. She wears boots all the time, but for years she insisted that I wear flimsy, laceless shoes that were nothing more than glorified slippers. They were always falling off, and they made running impossible. I couldn’t stand them. How was I supposed to get anywhere when I was always worrying about taking a step and realizing that my shoe came off eight feet ago? After years of pushback, Reyin has given up on her crusade. I’m sure I disappoint her. I don’t think she wants me to end up the way she did.

There aren’t many people on the streets in this part of residential at this time of day, and all other traffic is kept underground. There’s a massive network running underneath the city, offering trains and shuttles. I don’t take the underground very often, preferring to walk, but when I do I always appreciate the architecture of the tunnels. They’re formed into high vaults, some painted to look like blue sky, others using projectors to show the actual clouds outside. The underground is one of the few places in the city where wood is not part of the design. Even so, like everything else in the Empire, the underground is built for show.

I’ve arrived at my house and I jog up the front steps. My parents are always home by now, so I don’t bother getting out my key. I turn the handle on the wooden door and walk in. As soon as the door opens, I hear the sound of the television. We always keep it on, day and night. Aiohn likes to encourage its citizens to be informed about events and politics, so there’s a special tax break for households that keep their televisions on and tuned to the state-run stations. We’re allowed to turn the volume down low, but never all the way off. Usually, my parents like to keep the TV quiet. But right now, the volume is turned up.
Someone must be watching. I take off my boots and put them on the mat next to the door, then walk over to my room and drop my bag on my bed. I'm opening it to take out today's work when I hear my mom from across the house.

“Void?” she yells. “Is that you?”

“Yes,” I yell back. “I’m home.”

“Void, come in here!” This is Estas. He sounds like he's also in the sitting room, the same place as Reyin. “Come in here right now!”

I hesitate. I'm holding the bag open, wondering if I have time to clean it out and get it ready for tomorrow. But I can hear the urgency in my father’s voice. I almost never hear that. And I can't remember the last time my mother raised her voice to greet me. I leave the bag lying on my bed and walk out of my room. The television gets louder as I approach the sitting room, and now I can clearly make out the voices of the two anchors, Tain and Mahdtroh. They're talking quickly about something. I pass through the doorway and see my parents. They're staring at the television, and are standing in the middle of the room instead of sitting on the couch. Estas glances around as I enter. There’s a peculiar expression on his face. What is it? He’s tense, but I can't tell if he’s excited or worried.

“Void, come here,” he says. “Watch this.” He turns back around to the TV. I step farther into the room, going to stand next to my father. And then Estas says something deceptively simple that changes the universe forever. “They found life.”

I've been staring at the bowl for hours now. It's right there, in the small boxy space built into the door. I'm sitting on the bench, and the bowl is only a few short feet away from me. The bowl is on top of a plastic tray, next to a plastic cup. I'm hungry. I haven't eaten in days. And healing has consumed the last of my reserve of energy. ‘Hungry’ doesn’t even begin to describe it. I'm ravenous.

It should be simple, then, for me to stand up, walk the short distance to the door, grab the tray and the bowl, sit back down, and eat whatever I've been given. It should be simple. It isn’t. I've been staring at that bowl for hours, but I can't muster the courage to stand up and take it.

My legs work. Technically. I can walk. I proved that when I made it all the way to the Warden’s office and back. But when I sat down on the bench, my leg started to seize up around the site of the wound. It happened almost immediately. Before I knew what was happening, it felt as though the muscles in my left thigh were trying to tear themselves apart, struggling to rip free of the tendons and pull away from the bone. The muscles must not have reattached right, must not have knitted together properly. The pain is frightening. Not just the excruciating level of the pain, but also the knowledge that I can do nothing to stop it and that my leg could, at this very moment, be destroying itself forever. It’s the helplessness, the reminder of how powerless I am. I don’t have control over anything. Not even my own body. My leg has gone rabid, and there’s nothing I can do about it.

The more I stare at the bowl and think about how powerless I am, the more frightened I become. On some level, I want to laugh at myself. Look at me. Just look at me. I’m afraid of everything. I’m afraid of where I am. I’m afraid of the creatures surrounding me. I’m afraid of the future. And now I’m even afraid of my own leg. Look at me. Look how weak I am. And to think that I used to believe I was strong. For my entire life, I've held the firm belief that I was stronger and more brave than the people around me. I'd imagine myself facing dangerous situations, doing whatever needed to be done. I thought I was the
strong one. Yet here I am. I’m cowering on a bench, frightened of my own shadow. Of my own leg. I don’t like this new person I’m becoming, this person I already am. I don’t respect her. Look at her. Just look at her. She’s powerless in her own body, and she’s frightened by the entire world. Look at her. Laugh at her.

I clench my right hand into a fist and focus on stopping the cramp in my leg. I can see the muscle of my quad vibrating under the fabric of the orange jumpsuit, quivering and spasming in fits and jolts. When my leg first started spasming, I tried massaging it, but that only seemed to make matters worse. The pressure made my leg hurt more, and it did nothing to calm the muscles down. I quickly stopped. But besides massaging it, what else can I do? I stare at the bowl. It’s so close. It’s right there. Right there! How can so few feet become so many miles?

I feel tears beginning to sting in my eyes. I can’t tell if they’re from the pain or from shame. I wipe them away quickly with my right hand. Even though I’m alone, I don’t want anyone to see me cry. I don’t want to see me cry. I can’t be like this. It’s too shameful. I’m not like this. I can’t be. It’s too frightening to even consider the fact that I really could be this weak. I close my eyes. No. I refuse to be like this. I have to get the bowl. I don’t have a choice. I’ll just have to pretend that the action is fueled by some inner strength, and not by fear. Fortunately, it’s an easy lie to swallow. I’ve swallowed worse. I can believe in this one.

With this thought, I take a deep, shuddering breath and use my right arm to push myself off the bench. My leg shrieks as it straightens, howling like a wounded animal. I hear a whimper escape my throat. I fall forward against the opposing wall of the cell, using my one good arm to hold myself upright. I sway. I close my eyes and balance on my right foot, keeping my left leg as steady as possible. This hardly helps at all. And I need both legs to walk. I’ll need to put my left foot down soon.

Gradually, I ease my foot onto the floor. I can already feel my leg giving out, and it doesn’t even have any weight on it yet. With slow, careful movements, I ease my way toward the door, using the wall for support. It feels like hours before I’ve reached the door. My head swims. But there it is. The tray. It’s right at my fingertips. I look down at it, my vision blurry. The bowl is a grayish plastic, made with bits of red, blue, and black plastic melted into it as random dots. It’s supposed to be decorative, but it only makes the bowl look like it needs a wash. Inside the bowl is a shapeless gray mush. A porridge or something. Even from so close, I still can’t smell it. The cup is also gray, and is part-way filled with water. It looks like some of the water has evaporated since it was first poured. There’s a plastic spoon on the tray, too. Also gray.

My forehead is pounding in time with my heartbeat. I can feel the individual veins throbbing. I grip the tray with my right hand and pull it off the shelf. It can’t weigh more than a pound or two, but to me it feels heavier than the entire world. I carefully turn around. The water sloshes in the cup, but the water level is so low that nothing spills. I slide along the wall toward the bench. My right hand shakes under the weight of the tray.

Finally, the bench is directly behind me. All I have to do is sit down. I lean backwards, lowering myself with my right leg as slowly as I can. Under normal circumstances, I should be able to make it. I should be able to sit down. But none of this is normal. After only lowering a few inches, I lose my balance and find myself in freefall. I land hard on the bench, and my head cracks backward into the concrete wall. I grunt, the groove in my forehead blistering with pain. My vision darkens. The next thing I know, I’m listening, blind, to the sounds of plastic dishes falling to the floor.
The dark red cloud slowly clears from my eyes. I look down, feeling my heart drop. I'm still holding the tray. But the cup is rolling in an arc on the floor, and the bowl has landed upside-down next to my foot. The spoon has skittered off to a far corner of the room. I freeze, staring at my meal on the floor. My leg is still spasming. My mind is blank. All I do is stare.

Then, slowly, I put the tray down on my lap and lean forward until I can reach the bowl. I close my hand around it and do a kind of scooping motion, running it along the floor as I turn it over. The mush has been sitting on the shelf for so long that it has hardened into a single, solid block. It slides out of the bowl and sticks to the floor. I plunge my fingers into the mush, grabbing as much of it as I can and putting it back into the bowl. I sit back upright. I'm breathing heavily from exerting so much effort. Placing the bowl back on the tray, I use my fingers to shovel the mush into my mouth. It's dry and tasteless, but I devour it quickly. My whole body is shaking.

When I finish, I sit back against the wall. I look down at the spreading puddle of water on the floor. Some of the water has reached the dried blood in the middle of the cell, and they combine together to form a crusty paste, full of floating brown specks. The water also pushes against the leftover scraps of mush, but the two stay separate without combining. Apparently, water and mush don't mix well.

I snort, a lopsided smile breaking over my face. I don't know why, but this thought is unimaginably funny to me. Water and mush don't mix! I start laughing. I imagine someone running up to me, full of excitement. “Have you heard the news?” They ask. “Water and mush don’t mix!” It’s hilarious! I’ve lost most of my food, I’ve lost all of my drink, and I’ve learned that water and mush don’t mix! I continue laughing. It’s a weak, gurgling sound, almost asthmatic, and it echoes around the cell. The movement claws against the wound in my head, but the pain only makes me laugh harder. Water and mush don’t mix! My left thigh is ripping apart. I’ve lost a bucket of blood. I’ve just had my first meal in days, straight off one of the dirtiest floors I’ve ever seen. And, most importantly, water and mush don’t mix. I laugh long and hard, enjoying the way the sound echoes off the walls, making it sound as if I’m surrounded by friends, all laughing with me.

I close my eyes. I feel empty. There’s nothing in my chest. It’s as if I’ve been turned into a wire cage, my broken skin stretched tight over the cutting metal. Water and mush don’t mix. I’m still laughing when I fall asleep.

Clang!

I jerk awake. I’m immediately aware that I’ve been asleep for a long time. Hours. Is it tomorrow already? I feel relief swell through me as I realize that my leg has stopped cramping. The muscles feel exhausted and worn out, but no longer are they on fire. I have a crick in my neck and my shoulders are tight from having slept while sitting upright, but overall I feel like an entirely new person.

I look over at the door. It’s sliding into the wall. At first, I can’t see who’s on the other side, but then the doorway is clear and I see the Warden standing in the hallway. It has its hands clasped behind its back, and it’s wearing a hat now. Gray, like the rest of the uniform, with a shiny, black brim that juts over the Warden’s forehead. The human’s eyes go first to the mess on the cell floor. “Oh, that’s disgusting. I hope the paint’s okay,” it says. I glance down at the floor, almost despite myself. It is disgusting. The mush looks like a weird gray splatter now, parts of it clumping, other sections having been spread by the now-evaporated water. The blood
is as thick as ever. The human wrinkles its nose. This is probably a reaction to the blood. “Is all of that yours? God. You’re a mess.”

“Why are you here?” I ask. My words slur together. My mouth is still numb with sleep. I push myself farther onto the bench, sitting up straighter. I wince as my leg twinges.

“I have good news,” the Warden says, taking a step inside the cell. “I was looking through a few procedural manuals, and I realized there’s no rule preventing convicts in solitary confinement from having exercise periods.” It toes the dried bloodstain. The scabbed blood breaks into pieces, quickly disintegrating into a rusty powder. I stare at the human. I feel stupid. I don’t understand what it’s saying.

“So,” it continues, “I’ve decided that in an attempt to encourage positive behavior from you, I am going to privilege you with a daily exercise period. You’ll be able to stand up, walk around. You’ll be joining the members of floor negative-thirteen. I’m sure you’ll get along just fine. You might even make some new friends.”


“No. Not necessarily. On paper, I can make a strong case for integrating you into the general prison population. I have plausible deniability if anything should happen.”

I blink. Am I still asleep? “You are trying to kill me,” I say slowly, the truth of this statement only beginning to dawn on me.

The human shrugs again. It drags a chip of scabbed blood over the floor with the tip of its boot. It steps on the scab, grinding it into dust with its heel, watching me for a reaction. “We’ll see what happens,” it says. “You start tomorrow.” Then it turns around and leaves the cell. The door slides shut behind it. The lock clangs. I stare down at the crumbled blood, lying in a powdery pool on the floor. My father was right, I think blearily. No good has come from contact. Or, as I heard him call it once, from the Great Collision.

There’s a small holo set up on a table at one end of the sitting room. The floating image is about two feet wide, far smaller than many other televisions I’ve seen. Through it, I watch as Tain and Mahdtroh spell out the story of how the Empire of Aiohn made contact with an alien race. Standing next to my parents, I’m amazed by how calm the two anchors are. It’s almost unnatural. Even just listening to them, I feel like I’ve finished a four-mile sprint. I feel winded by sheer, undiluted fascination. I stare at the holo, my eyes wide.

A few weeks ago, the anchors say, a research station orbiting a minor planet at the edge of the Empire detected an unusual radio signal coming from a distant part of the galaxy. The signal was too organized to be natural, but the researchers were unable to decode it. At first, it was assumed that the signal was coming from a group of smugglers or outlaws, from an illegal base on a moon or planet. This wouldn’t have been the first time that a group of ingrates tried unsuccessfully to break away from the Empire.

The stävnemä fen mes sent a craft to investigate the signal. But instead of a smuggler’s den, the anchors describe the discovery of a large-scale mining operation on a dwarf planet. Our craft was intercepted, they say, by a large, military-style ship of unknown design. The details of the narrative get a bit foggy at this point, but the anchors are clear enough in saying that we quickly realized that we were dealing with a brand-new, previously-undiscovered species. As Tain says to the camera, this is the first species we’ve ever come across that did not originate on the planet of Aiohn. Mahdtroh agrees with him. She adds that this is by far the most important scientific discovery in centuries. To me, this
sounds like an understatement. We’ve just learned that we’re not alone in the universe. As far as I’m concerned, this is the most important scientific discovery ever.

Tain and Mahdtroh tell us that even as they speak, the Empire is working to build communication channels with the aliens. They say that we’ve been successful in communicating basic mathematical concepts and principles. We’ve also communicated the structure of a hydrogen atom. Soon, we’re told to expect more complex communication.

And that’s it. That’s all the information we’re given. The anchors start talking about the news in loops, going over and over the same basic facts. We’ve found life. We’re in contact. More to come. They say almost exactly the same thing each cycle. It doesn’t matter. Reyin, Estas, and I are hooked anyway. We watch the news together for over an hour, having the facts seared into our heads. We never sit down. We hardly even move. We’re each too shocked.

During one cycle, Mahdtroh mentions that we initiated contact a few weeks ago, but the Empire has only now deemed it safe to release this revolutionary information. It’s taken this long, she says, because the facts had to be sorted and organized. Aiohn didn’t want rumors flying, she says. Incomplete or inaccurate information can be dangerous things, we’re told, so Aiohn decided, in its wisdom, to wait until more was known. We should keep listening to this station, she says, for the official facts of the discovery.

And then Tain jumps in, and the cycle continues. We’ve found life. We’re in contact. More to come. We’ve found life. We’re in contact. More to come. Over and over again. It’s mesmerizing. Although next to nothing changes with each cycle, I find it hard to look away for even a second.

At one point, I glance briefly at my parents. Reyin, as ever, is impossible to read. She looks tense, but I can’t tell if this is from anxiety or awe. Estas is easier. I couldn’t fully understand his expression before, but now it’s as clear as breaking glass. His response is etched into every line and angle, every fold and curve of his body. My father is afraid. I’ve never seen him like this before. I’ve seen him become nervous, but never genuinely frightened by what he’s hearing. It makes me anxious to see him like this.

I look back at the holo, the cycle of news continuing. We’ve found life. We’re in contact. More to come. Again and again. As the holo pumps me full of this news, I can feel with every nerve in my body that nothing will be the same after today. Alaseel won’t be the same. Aiohn won’t be the same. The universe won’t be the same. I have no idea if this is a good thing or a bad thing, but I know for a fact that everything around me has just changed. Because we’ve found life. Because we’re in contact. Because there’s more to come.
Chapter Four

Skreeee! The handle on the faucet turns slowly, the metal grinding against itself. I stand expectantly in front of the sink, waiting for water to appear. The sink remains dry. Then I hear a *chug-chug-chug-chug* sound reverberating from the pipes. A moment later, the spout regurgitates a dribble of brownish, rusty liquid into the basin. It splatters, painting the sink with another layer of grime. I wrinkle my nose. This water smells horrible. The pipes are still making a chugging sound, like a beast burping air out of its gullet. Another dribble of liquid comes out, and then the sound gets quieter and the liquid comes more quickly. It’s still brown. It takes several minutes for the liquid to transform from dissolved piping into actual water.

I wait until the water runs clean enough for me to see through. Then I wait several minutes more. Finally, I fill one of the drinking cups I’ve been given with water. I hold my head over the sink and pour the water over my head, scrubbing at my hair. I’ve hated having dried blood caked on my scalp, and I’m disgusted by the crunching sound my hair makes whenever I turn my head. I’ve finally healed enough to limp over to the sink, and I’m grateful for the chance to clean myself of the grime.

My hair hasn’t been washed in so many days that the oil is thick against my fingers. I pick small scabs and pieces of grit from my hair. My eyes are closed and I feel the water run over my face drip from my nose and chin. I wish I had soap. I settle instead for repetition, rubbing at individual strands of my hair until they give up their oily texture.

I wash my face next. I carefully dab at the wound on my forehead. The skin has sealed over the gash, but the bone has yet to fully regrow. There’s a long rut on my forehead, like a scar that’s grown inwards instead of swelling outwards. It’s painful to the touch, but it’s bearable if I avoid direct contact.

I remove the jumpsuit and use my hands to scrub at the rest of my body, taking away the sweat and dried blood. Now that the cramping has stopped, my left leg is healing well. The skin has closed, and I’ve regained most of the range of motion. It doesn’t have much strength yet, but this will come soon. My elbow is taking longer. The joint itself healing rapidly, but the bone fragments that are caught near the joint are slow to dissolve. Ideally, the fragments would have been removed by a surgeon soon after the injury. That would have removed several days from the healing process.

When my skin is as clean as I can make it, I turn my attention to the orange jumpsuit. I fill the sink with water and scrub at the filthy fabric, trying to remove as much blood from the material as possible. There’s nothing I can do about the two holes in the fabric. And even after many minutes of rubbing, I can still see the brown outlines of bloody patches. It’s better. But the jumpsuit still looks like someone was murdered in it.

*They will rip me to pieces.*

I scrub again at the fabric. I think the meal I just ate was dinner. It’s hard to tell. The meals are all the same, and I don’t have a good way for telling time. But I assume that the Warden came to my cell soon after breakfast time. That’s how it feels. When he left I realized that there was a new meal waiting on the shelf in the door. If that was breakfast, then it’s now nighttime. Tomorrow is coming quickly. I wring the jumpsuit over the sink, inspecting it. Still bloody. I wet it again and resume scrubbing.
The humans will rip me to pieces. I know they will. Tomorrow, the Warden will throw me in a crowd of human criminals. I don’t expect to survive the hour. I pull the jumpsuit out from under the faucet. I’ve been rubbing at it so long that I can feel the fabric starting to thin in places. The stains are still there. I sigh. I don’t want to die ugly.

I turn off the faucet and lay the jumpsuit out on the bench, hoping to let it dry a little before I put it back on. As the sink slowly drains, I catch sight of my reflection in the dark, strong-smelling water. I rake my fingers through my hair. My hair is cleaner now, but it hands in thick, tangled ropes. I have no comb. I stare down at my face. Those are my eyes. Brown, with vertically slit pupils. My face is still swollen around my left eye, softening my cheekbones. They’re soft enough already. They’re not beautiful. I turn my head and see my ears, their points more rounded than those on other women I see. I don’t want to die ugly. This feels very important to me all of a sudden. I understand that I have no hope of surviving tomorrow. The thought of looming death frightens me, but it doesn’t disturb me in the same ways as the concept of still being ugly when I go. I’ve had this fantasy for most of my life that someday, someday, I would become more beautiful. I believed with all my heart that it would happen. And now it won’t. I don’t even have a comb.

The humming alarm next to my bed drags me into the waking world. I swat at it with groggy coordination, finally hitting it and shutting it off. I stare up at the wood panels on the ceiling.

_We’ve found life._

That was the last thought to go through my head last night as I crawled into bed, and it’s the first thought to come to me in the morning. I look around the room. I’m amazed by how ordinary it all seems. My bookshelf is where it always is, filled with the same combination of books and tiny statues gifted by my mother. The bureau is sitting next to it, same as always. It’ll be filled with the same clothes as yesterday. No change to be found. But I know for a fact that everything around me is different today, as surely as stars burn in the sky. The bookshelf has changed. The statues have changed. Even the bed I’m lying on is fundamentally different. Yesterday, each of these objects existed in a universe inhabited by Aiohn and nothing else. Today, they exist on a world that shares the galaxy with something new.

I get up and start the day. I eat breakfast. I get ready for school. I leave the house, saying goodbye to my parents. Reyin bids me goodbye the same way she always does, wishing me a good day in a crisp voice. It’s Estas who acts differently. He walks over to me and gives me a hug. I’m so surprised that I don’t return it. Even for my father, this display is unusual. When he lets me go, he smiles at me. But it’s not his regular smile. It’s different somehow. Estas, I realize, is afraid to send me out the door.

On my walk to the municipal district, I notice that similar changes have come over many of the other pedestrians. Some, like my mother, are unreadable. They keep their eyes fixed ahead of them, saying little, keeping politely to themselves. In general, these people look to have heavier alterations, and to belong to the upper class. This is the group I try to imitate. There’s a different group that seems to bounce around the city as if their feet are an inch above the ground. Twice, I see members of this group smiling to themselves when they think no one is looking. But then there’s the third group. These are the people who walk quickly through the streets, clutching tightly to their bags and avoiding eye contact. It’s daunting to see so many frightened people moving through the streets.
At school, classes have an entirely different feel. In lectures, students are quieter, and some of the professors look flat-out stunned. Hallway conversations have cut back, except for short bursts here and there. I overhear the words ‘aliens’ and ‘life’ more times than I can count.

I walk the fastest route home after school. As I open the wooden door, I hear my father’s voice. “Void? Is that you?” he asks.

“Yes, I’m home,” I yell back. “Is there anything new?”

“No. The information is the same.” This is the my mother’s voice. “But they’re doing some interesting analysis. Come watch with us.”

I drop my bag in my room and walk to the back of the house. My mother and father are both here. They’ve brought down a solid wooden table from their workrooms upstairs. They’re each seated, working on their current projects while they listen to the news. In the holo, Tain and Mahdroh are interviewing a well-dressed man with soft brown hair. He’s talking about probabilities. He talks about the number of stars in the galaxy, the percentage of stars orbited by planets, the likelihood that these planets are in the habitable zone. I walk in just as he saying that, given the numbers, finding life was more or less inevitable.

My parents pause in their work as I come through the door. Reyin is holding a piece of fine-grit sandpaper. She seems to be in the process of putting on the final touches to an abstract marble sculpture. It’s a little over a foot tall, and looks like a long, curving rope, thicker in the middle and tapered at the ends, curling over and under itself in an elegant knot. Reyin doesn’t do much abstract work, but for the past few months she’s been fascinated by knots and loops. Estas is also doing some polishing, rubbing down the veneer he applied last night to a set of arrow shafts. The veneer always has to be polished between coats. On a normal day, they’d both be upstairs, busy in their workrooms. I’ve never seen them work in such a distracting setting before. Estas will sometimes put on some quiet music, but Reyin always works in silence.

My father stands up from his seat as I enter, putting down the rough cloth he’s been using. “Void! Welcome home!” he says, walking over to me. Before I know it, he’s wrapping me in a hug again. He holds me for several seconds, by the end of which I have my act together sufficiently to weakly hug him back.

“Hello,” I say. It feels strange to hug my father. After he steps away, I glance over at Reyin. Normally, she’d be on my father’s case immediately, saying something about how vulgar excessive emotions are, or telling him not to embarrass me like that. But she stays quiet this time. She’s turned her head to look politely away, giving us privacy. Other than this she doesn’t comment. Estas smiles at me and invites me to sit with them. I accept, and leave the room to get my bag. I have work to finish for tomorrow. I return to the sitting room with the bag over my shoulder. I get a chair from the dining room. I sit next to Estas and work on differential equations while he polishes more arrows. We all listen to the repeating story of how the stāvnemā fen mes discovered the alien mining operation, guarded by a military-style spacecraft of unknown design. I feel a twinge of sadness for my father. He’s polishing arrows. I’ve never seen Estas as denying the times before. Maybe a little sentimental or nostalgic, but never in outright denial. Despite myself, I see this now.

I’m lying on my back. My right arm hangs over the side of the bench, fingers trailing on the floor. I’ve just returned my dinner tray to the boxy shelf in the door. Gray mush again. It never changes. The meals are all exactly the same. It’s almost ironic that something
so constant could be my only way of measuring time. There’s no night in this room. The caged light bulb is always on. There’s no noise from outside, and nothing else ever happens.

The unwavering overhead light and the resounding silence create a strange illusion in the cell, expanding time near the present but contracting it farther away. I never seem to be moving through time, but lunch comes seconds after breakfast, and dinner arrives seconds after lunch. It’s as if I’m riding a train through a featureless landscape. When I look out the window I seem to be sitting still, even though the train under me moves at a lightning pace. Slow down, I beg. I’m not ready to arrive.

Clang!

I sit up quickly, nearly falling off the bench. Already the door to the cell is sliding open. Outside in the hallway are two human guards. I recognize them. These are the two guards that took me to the Warden’s office. The fat one is still standing in front of its companion, apparently in charge. It occurs to me that, because they’re so much like animals anyway, I might as well start referring to them as such. The fat one is the Alpha. That much is clear. The other one must be a Beta.

Alpha steps into the cell. “Hands,” it burbles. I stand up, offering my wrists. The human pulls out the folded set of handcuffs, giving it a snap to unfurl it. It clips the cuffs onto my wrists. “Right,” it says, stepping back. “Come with us.”

I’m directed down the hallway. Alpha and Beta walk behind me like before. We turn onto the main corridor, and I see the shining metal doors of the elevators ahead of us. There are five of them, lined up in a row. When we reach them, Alpha leaves his place in the formation and moves ahead, walking toward a small black box mounted on the wall. The human presses the pad of its thumb against the face of the box. A second later, the black surface has turned into a screen with two buttons showing on it. The human selects the lower one. The button lights up a dull red color.

The three of us wait for the elevator to arrive, standing in the triangular formation. Behind me, I hear Alpha and Beta start a quiet, bored conversation. They’re talking about a piece of paperwork that Beta needs to complete. Alpha’s saying that the form easy, that they don’t care how you fill it out so long as it’s done. Alpha says the form takes ten minutes to do. Ten minutes, tops. No problem. Beta shrugs. Paperwork never takes just ten minutes, he says.

The elevator doors open with a ding. The conversation cuts off, and the two guards shuttle me inside, following me into the small space. They keep a bit of a distance, though, and they keep their eyes trained on me the whole time we’re descending. They must know what happened the last time I was in an elevator. The metal box slides down its shaft. It’s quiet. I can hear the breathing of the two humans. Suddenly, I speak. “What time is it?” I ask.

“No talking,” says Alpha. They don’t answer me. I didn’t think they would. I was just hoping.

The elevator comes to a stop, and the doors open. Past them, I see a concrete-walled chamber, maybe fifty-six feet wide by twenty-four feet long. At one end of the chamber is a small metal door with a control panel next to it. The door is painted a dark blue. There’s a sign next to the door, but I can’t read it. I don’t even try. At the opposite end of the chamber is a second door. This one is much larger than the first door, more of a barricade than anything else. It takes up most of the far wall, stretching from floor to ceiling and spreading almost eight feet wide. It’s made from a study metal. It was once buffed, but the door has
lost most of its shine after years of use. There’s no control panel next to it, just a boxy intercom with a camera on top.

In the chamber itself is a small crowd. Guards in uniforms are milling about, talking, some congregated around a water cooler that’s been placed in one corner. I don’t see any other prisoners. Some of the guards turn and look at me as Alpha and Beta walk me out of the elevator. I see a range of reactions come over their faces. Some seem curious, others resentful. I see disgust, too. None of them looks pleased to see an ônä mālhā. Some of them turn back to their conversations after glancing at me once, but others follow me with their eyes.

“Hello, elf,” a voice says. I look, and see the Warden walking toward me. It has its hat on again, black brim flashing in the overhead lights. “Big day,” it says. “Are you excited?”

No, I’m not. I’m terrified. But of course I’d never say this. “What time is it?” I ask.

The Warden shrugs. “Who cares? Let’s get on with it,” it says. Then it glances over at Alpha. “Uncuff her. We don’t need those anymore.”

Alpha steps in front of me, sliding its card through the slot in the handcuffs. The light blinks green, and the cuffs release. For the briefest of moments, I think about making a grab for the human’s gun. I’d remember the safety this time. I’d shoot the Warden first. Then Alpha, then Beta. Then anyone else in the chamber who tried to come near me. I’d kill all the guards if I could. They’re all human. They’re all equal.

Of course, the chamber is packed with guards, each armed with a gun of their own. I’d be riddled with bullet holes before I could count to three. There’s no way I’d actually accomplish anything. There have been times when this wouldn’t have mattered to me. When violence was result enough. Like when I was pushed into the elevator for the first time. Or when I was in the forest. There’s not enough fear in me right now to blot out my terror of death. Just enough to nauseate me.

Alpha takes the handcuffs off my wrists, and the Warden gestures that the two guards can leave. Alpha and Beta salute, then head over to the water cooler, leaving me with the Warden. It jerks its head at the barricade. “Right this way,” it says.

Almost despite myself, I turn and take a step in that direction. The Warden walks next to me. And then I feel the Warden’s hand touching my upper back, pushing me gently forward. I recoil from the touch. My hand stands on end. The touch feels vulgar in ways that I hardly understand. But the human keeps its hand there, pushing me.

When we get to the barricade, the Warden speaks into the intercom. There comes back a staticy reply. I can’t make out the words, but the Warden seems to understand it. The response is followed by a loud electric buzz, and the barricade begins to open. The massive door splits along a thin seam running down the middle, the two halves pulling away from each other. The Warden doesn’t wait for them to fully open. When the gap is still only a few feet wide, the human adds pressure to the hand between my shoulderblades, and walks with me into the space beyond the door.
Chapter Five

Humans. The room is thick with them. They’re the first thing I notice as the Warden pushes me through the barricade, stepping with me into the massive room. And it is a massive room. Huge and open, with no interior walls to break up the space, oversized columns rising a dozen feet or more to bridge the gap between the concrete floor and the high ceiling. The room is set up as a gymnasium. A jogging track circles the perimeter, a path of blue rubber that’s marked out into five lanes. It looks as though three laps on this track would make a mile. There are dozens of humans walking and running on the track. They’re all wearing orange jumpsuits like mine. Many of the joggers look over as the door opens. They stare at me. Even more eyes come from the area inside the track, where the floor is separated into a large court with white lines painted on the concrete, and a gym with exercise machines and long racks of free weights. Here the crowd turns en masse, attention attracted by the sound of the giant door. I feel myself shrink under the weight of a hundred pairs of watching eyes. They’re all male. All of them. It hadn’t occurred to me to wonder what gender the humans I’m joining might be. Maybe I’d assumed that I’d be placed with other women. Apparently not. My chest tightens. I’ve never trusted groups of men. And now, seeing so many of them, all in one place, all staring at me, is almost enough to make me stop breathing.

The Warden removes its hand from my spine and reaches into its jacket. It pulls out a small, beige, rectangular object with rounded corner. It’s maybe four inches long and half as wide. The object lights up in the Warden’s hand as it passes its fingers over the screen. The Warden clears its throat, then taps a button that’s appeared on the screen. Overhead, I hear a two-note melody burst down from the ceiling, emanating from unseen loudspeakers. When the Warden begins talking, its voice can be heard in every corner of the room. “I’ll keep this brief,” it says. Even more of the humans pause in what they’re doing and look our way now. We have almost every face in the room. “We’re being joined today by a special guest,” the Warden continues. “She’ll be staying with us for a while, so I’d like you all to make her feel welcome.”

A crowd is starting to gather a few dozen feet away. I can see confusion on many of the faces. They don’t know what’s going on yet. They don’t seem to have realized that I’m an ōnä mālḥā. I even see some humans whose faces show frightening enthusiasm. These humans seem perfectly happy with locking a lone female in a room with a swarm of males. I’m disgusted by these looks. I’m disgusted by these humans.

“And I know what you might be thinking,” the Warden says. “But it doesn’t matter how you personally feel about elves. I want you all to treat Void here just as if she were your equal. Treat her like a fellow human.” I hear a rustle go through the crowd at the mention of the “e” word. Elf. Up until this point, there had still been a few people running on the track, a few humans who had continued to lift weights. This activity all stops now. I feel the tone of the crowd change. I watch as the leers transform into something much more lethal.

The Warden puts its hand on my spine again. I tense my shoulderblades, trying to pull away from the touch. “I will remind you,” the Warden says over the loudspeaker, “that the first-offense punishment for anyone caught fighting during the exercise period is one week in solitary confinement. This rule also covers fights with non-humans. Be sure you
make the correct choice. That’s all I have to say.” As the Warden ends his short speech, I feel him push me forward slightly. Not hard enough to send me sprawling. Just enough to make me take a false step forward toward the gathered inmates. The Warden turns around in the same motion, walking back through the open door. I hear the barricade sliding shut behind it. I don’t turn around to watch. I’m too busy looking out at the hostile crowd.

I’m reminded suddenly of an old story I heard in school. It dates back to when Aiohn was a city-state, struggling against its neighbors to expand into an Empire. During the early stages of the conquest, one of Aiohn’s generals realized that the most effective way to probe an army’s defenses was to send a small contingent of troops to attack the enemy head-on. Watching the response to this attack allowed the general to better plan the major assault. To a man, every soldier in the probing contingent would be slaughtered, but the tactic allowed the general to reduce the overall casualties suffered by their force. I asked my professor who the general would assign to the suicidal probe. Criminals, my teacher said. They were paid well, and offered full pardons on their return. The general could afford to be so generous because only a rare handful of the criminals were alive after the battle to collect their reward. It was an efficient plan. Effective. Aiohn did not rise to prominence because it was larger than the other city-states, or because its warriors were fiercer. It rose because it was willing to make sacrifices. This story sounded justifiable when I heard it in lecture. But now I’m the sacrifice. Now I’m the criminal being thrown at a hostile army.

The barricade closes with an echoing boom. The humans stare at me, and I stare at them. Some of the inmates quickly turn away and return to their activities. Some. Not many. The majority of the room is focused exclusively on me. I drop my eyes to the floor and start walking to my left, slowly at first, but more quickly when no one moves to stop me. I hear several of the humans call out to me, but I don’t look at them, and none of them steps forward yet. I angle away from the mob, keeping as much distance between us as possible. In getting to the rubber track, I have to step over a yellow box painted onto the floor around the barricade. I know without needing to be told that this box marks the closest that anyone is allowed to get to the giant doors.

As soon as my feet touch the track, I start walking more quickly. I can still hear the humans calling out to me. I try to ignore the harsh sounds of their voices. I think I hear footsteps behind me now, following me, but they’re not close. Miraculously, no one seems to want to make the first move.

My leg shakes under me but I suppress my limp. I will not look weak right now. I will not look like an easy mark. Using only my eyes to look around, not turning my head, I notice that the human walkers and runners have left the track. It’s only me now. Maybe this is a good thing, I think. I can’t be hurt if everyone avoids me. Or maybe the joggers are just smart enough to know how dangerous it can be to venture near the focus of so much hatred. Me. That’d be like a bug purposefully wandering into the burning sunlight of a magnifying glass.

I’ve almost reached the middle of the room’s long wall. I still hear the calls and the whistles. But no one’s attacked me yet. I’m amazed that I’ve made it this far. As soon as I have this thought, I see a large human step out onto the track twenty feet ahead of me. My stomach drops. This human is huge. When did bears learn to wear clothes? Reflexively, my pace slows.

“Walk with me.” I jump. A second human has just appeared next to me. It doesn’t look at me, but continues walking forward, toward the goliath. I jerk away from the second
human, backing up and retreating. Why didn’t I hear it coming? I suppose I was too
distracted. I turn around, and start walking quickly in the other direction.

After just two steps, I stop cold. Twelve feet away, a third human moves onto the
track, flanked by two more of the mountain-humans. The human standing in the middle of
the two beasts is an inch or two taller than I am, with close cut, dark brown hair. I know
immediately that this human is in charge here.

“Elf,” the dark-haired human calls out. I don’t respond. Instead, I glance over my
shoulder. The first giant has moved closer. I don’t see the other one, the smaller one, that
walked past me. “Elf,” the dark-haired human calls out again. I turn to face it. “We don’t
want you here,” it says.

I look over the two behemoths on either side of the speaker. Both are at least six-
foot-three, and the one on the left could even be as tall as six-foot-five. Both are heavily
slathered in muscle. They’re big, sluggish-looking, and stupid. Human, through and through.
I swallow a glob of saliva that’s rapidly forming in my mouth. I’m terrified, of course, but I
feel almost blank. I’m having trouble believing that this is truly happening. “Elves don’t
exist,” I say. My voice is quiet. “I’m an ōnā mālhā, and my name is Void. Don’t call me an elf.”
I hear these words exit my mouth, and I realize that I’m either very brave or very drugged. I
need to stop talking. Don’t argue with this creature. Arguing with humans is what got you
here, remember? Stop talking.

The human with dark hair raises its eyebrows. “I’ll call you whatever I want,” it says.
“You’re an elf, and we don’t want you here.”

I swallow again. Why am I salivating so much? And with so much spit filling my
mouth, why is my throat so dry? “If you can open that door, I’d be happy to leave,” I say,
amazing myself with how quickly I’ve broken my resolution.

The human shakes its head. “I don’t think you understand,” it says. “We don’t just
want you gone. We want you cleansed.”

Unconsciously, I reach up with my right hand and rub the tip of my right ear
between the pad of my thumb and the side of my forefinger. Then I realize what I’m doing
and I put my hand back down. Cleansed. What a disgusting word. “I can’t help you with
that,” I say weakly.

The human takes a step forward. It’s followed by the two giants. “We don’t need
your help,” it answers. “We don’t need your permission.” The human stops walking, and
gestures the others to continue. “You should never have come here,” it finishes.

The three beasts start moving towards me. I don’t which one to look at. My head
spins rapidly on my neck, trying to keep all three of them in sight at all times. It’s a hopeless
task. They have me in the middle of a circle. I give up on whirling around and focus entirely
on the tallest one. I bend my knees slightly, struggling against the pain in my left thigh. I
know that good balance isn’t going to help me right now. But I can hope? I feel my pulse
racing, my fear expanding and seeping through my veins like mercury. I’ve never died
before. I don’t know how. I don’t want to learn. But I can’t fight them all. Injured as I am, I
doubt I could even fight one of them. There’s nothing I can do. The beasts continue closing
in.

“Bruce! How you doing? I saw you on the court a little while ago. Those were some
good shots you were pulling off. Have you been practicing? It shows! It really does! You
were doing a great job. Keep up the good work!”
I freeze. So do the humans. This random outburst of chatter is so unexpected that it takes us all by surprise and we look reflexively around at the speaker.

The human who came up to me a minute ago is approaching the group, smiling broadly at everyone. It seems to be aiming its chatter at one of the behemoths, a lumbering beast that’s nearly big enough to cast a shadow over an entire solar farm. The beast looks dumbly at the human. But however stupid its gaze might be, it’s not hostile. This surprises me. Why are the humans permitting this interruption? The speaker keeps walking closer, still smiling, and thumps the beast warmly on the back as it crosses into the circle. I shy away from the human as it gets near me. It comes to a stop a few feet to my left. It doesn’t even glance at me. I stare at it, wary but dumbstruck. The human is a few inches shorter than me, with sandy, light-brown hair that’s only a few inches long. Some of the other humans here are wearing their jumpsuits with the sleeves rolled up, but this human has elected to leave its sleeves rolled down. I can tell from the way the fabric falls around its shoulders that the human next to me is no weightlifter. It doesn’t look weak, but it lives on an entirely different planet of strength than the walking sides of muscle that surround us. It’s face is soft and open, and there’s something in its body language that suggests confidence. It raises an arm and points jovially to another of the beasts, the one that previously stood to the right of the human with dark hair. “Marcus!” it says. “I haven’t talked to you in a while. How’s it going? How’s your wrist? Any better?”

The speaker nods. “Good,” it says. “I’m glad to hear that. I hope it keeps improving.” The speaker smiles again, then turns to face the human with dark hair. “Hello, Michael. How are you?”

The human with dark hair - Michael, I suppose its name is - glares at the speaker. “What are you doing?” it asks quietly. Its tone is deadly.

The speaker shrugs. “Oh, I was just walking around,” it says, “and I thought I’d join the conversation. Is that okay?”

By now, I’m completely confused. This interruption is so out-of-place. And this human is acting as if everything were fine and good. This is such a non sequitur that all I can do is stare and listen. The human Michael seems just as surprised as I am, but is handling it better than me. At least it’s still able to come up with things to say. “No,” it spits. “Get out of here.”

The human next to me nods, pursing its lips as it thinks about this. “Sure, sure,” it says. “But can I talk to you first?”

The human Michael is looking at the speaker with so much anger that I half expect it to spray venom from its mouth. “No,” it says simply. Then it gestures to one of the behemoths, saying, “Bruce, take Zach over to the court and make sure he stays there.”

The beast takes a lumbering step forward, but its target, Zach, turns around and faces it with a stern expression. "Bruce, you stay right where you are," Zach says. "I just want a word with Mike."

The beast pauses, and seems torn for a moment. It glances up at its master. The human Michael ignores it, glaring again at Zach. "Don’t call me 'Mike,'" it says.

Zach smiles and nods. "Alright," it says. "But can I talk to you?"
The human Michael shakes its head. "No," it says, slowly and clearly so there can be no misunderstanding. "I'm busy," it explains. Then it gestures again at the beast. "Bruce, I told you to take Zach away and make sure he stays put. Why is he still here?"

Out of the corner of my eye, I see the beast look down guiltily. It pauses like this for a second. I'm amazed. What's going on here? I don't understand. The beast lifts its head again and resumes its advance. Zach turns and looks at it, tilting its head like a disappointed parent. "Bruce..."

The beast lurches to a stop, looking furtively between Zach and the human Michael. Then, much to my surprise, it seems to shrug and steps back a few feet. Zach smiles kindly at the creature. "Thank you," it says. Then Zach turns around to face the human Michael again. "I know you're busy," it says, "But I need to talk to you. It's important."

The human Michael just stares. It looks stunned to find that one of the behemoths might be more loyal to Zach than to itself. It looks stunned and very, very angry. For a long moment, it just looks at Zach, a complicated and ugly expression tightening over its face. The human Michael glances quickly around at the three beasts. Then it points to a spot on the track a little ways from the circle. "Step over there. Now," it hisses at Zach through a clenched jaw. Zach nods deeply, almost bowing, and starts walking over. The human Michael glares around at the three creatures. "If she moves, kill her." The human Michael turns around and paces over to where Zach is already waiting.

I look around me, feeling the stares from the beasts. They've moved in a bit closer, and I know with absolute certainty that they'll have no hesitation to carrying out the orders. But for now, at least, they seem to be staying put. I don't know what Zach's trying to do here, but it looks like it's bought me a few extra seconds. Does this help me? Maybe not. But I feel a little surge of hope. At least I'm not dead right now. That's something. And maybe I can work to keep it this way.

Just as I think this, the human Michael arrives next to Zach. Without missing a beat, the human Michael draws back his arm and punches Zach in the face. "What the hell?!" the human Michael yells. The sound echoes around the room. Zach stumbles backwards. The beasts in front of me don't flinch a muscle. Zach stands back up, holding its hands out by its sides and ignoring the small cut on its left cheek.

"Think about what you're doing," it says. Its voice is calm, and I can tell from its body language that it's not talking about the punch.

The human Michael towers over Zach, sticking a finger toward its face, hissing, "I know exactly what I'm doing! Stay out of this."

"You already have four violations," Zach continues. It's undaunted. "If you kill her, you're looking at a month in solitary."

"Who cares?!" the human Michael storms. "At least I'll have killed an elf!" Its words thunder between the concrete columns. I'm sure you could hear it all the way across the cavernous room.

"Keep your voice down. You're making a fuss." Zach looks around, perhaps noticing that half the room is watching them.

"I will not keep my voice down!" the human Michael yells. It jabs its finger behind it, toward another section of the room. "Now go back to the basketball court and wait until I join you."
“No.” Zach shrugs and shakes its head. The human Michael’s face contorts.
“What do you mean, ‘no’?”
“I mean ‘no.’ I’m not leaving.” Zach’s voice is still perfectly calm and quiet. “And I’m not letting you kill her.”
The human Michael stares. “Why do you care what happens to an elf?”
“She hasn’t done anything wrong,” Zach says, gesturing toward me. “I don’t want you to kill her.”
“She’s an elf!” the human Michael says, agast. “You heard the Warden! He practically begged someone to kill her.”
“And since when do you do what Souza wants?”
“Since it’s also what I want. Why do you care so much?”
Zach spreads its hands out again. “Michael, please leave her alone,” it says.
The human Michael stares at Zach for a long moment. It can’t understand what it’s hearing. “We’ve both seen the videos,” it says, questioning. “We know what elves are like.”
“We know what some of them are like.” Zach replies. “But we’ve never met this one. We don’t know what she’s like.”
“She’s an elf!” The human Michael’s frustration is written all over its body. “They’re all monsters!”
Zach shrugs again. “I don’t believe that,” it says. The human Michael pulls back an inch or two. It looks confused, as if it’s not quite sure if it should believe its ears. Then its voice gets quieter.
“Are you siding against me?”
Zach rolls its eyes. “I’m not siding with anyone. But I’m not going to let you kill her.”
The human Michael nods slowly, a new expression creeping onto its face. “You’re siding against me.”
“No, of course not,” Zach says. His voice changes. It’s much softer now. “I’m right here with you.”
“You’re choosing an elf over me.”
“No, I’m trying to help both of you.”
“What did I do?”
The question hangs in the air for a moment. Zach sighs. “Nothing. It’s fine.”
“But you’re siding against me?”
Zach laughs. Now it’s the one getting frustrated. It holds its hands up. “What do you expect me to say? That I’m leaving you for an elf?”
“Are you?”
“Don’t be an idiot. Of course not.”
“Don’t call me an idiot.”
“Then stop acting like one. I’m not leaving you.”
“But you’re siding against me?”
Zach stares at the human Michael. Then its gaze wanders up the wall while its mouth works silently, trying to find a reasonable answer. “If that’s all you can see here,” Zach says eventually, “then, yes. Is that what you want to hear?”
The human Michael stands still for a moment, then slowly takes a step back. There’s a complex expression written on its face, but I can’t quite identify it. The human Michael shakes its head. “That’s the last thing I want to hear,” it says.
It continues staring for a moment longer, then turns away to face my direction and the group of humans surrounding me. It calls out to them. “We’re done here,” it says. “Let’s go.”

I think I see a look of disappointment flare across the faces of at least two of the behemoths, but none of them disobey this time. Almost as one, they move away and head for their master. As they reach the leader’s position, I see the human Michael lean in close to Zach and whisper something. I can’t hear what it says, and Zach doesn’t respond. Then the human Michael gives one last look at me, full of hate and loathing, and it walks away, back toward the gymnasium court, trailed by the three beasts.

At this point, I’m not thinking anymore. I don’t know how or why any of this has just happened, and analysing it isn’t getting me anywhere. Instead, I just stand where I am and wait to see what happens next.

Zach watches as the four humans move away. I can’t read its expression. Then, after a few seconds, it glances shyly over at me. I stare at it, and it looks away again. Then Zach clears its throat and opens its mouth, but doesn’t seem to have anything to say so it shuts it again. A few more seconds pass in silence before it tries a second time. “He’s not always like that,” it says. “He just doesn’t like elves much.”

I don’t say anything. The human’s assertion seems like an understatement to me. ‘Not liking something much’ isn’t a big commitment. That’s like the relationship I have with spicy foods. But do I want them annihilated? No. My feelings aren’t that strong. I’d have to hate something - truly hate something - to want it cleansed. I don’t say anything, though. Zach clears its throat again. “I’m Zach,” it says. “I think I heard Souza tell us that your name is Void. Is that right?”

Still I don’t say anything. To be honest, I’m not really listening. I’m busy trying to decide what I think of this human. Obviously, I don’t trust it. It’s a human. I could never trust it. But did it just save my life? I think so. I have no clue as to why a human would act so strangely, but doesn’t the act count for something? Normally, I’d say yes. But this is a human. I know what they’re like. And they’re all the same. They’re all monsters. I could never trust this thing.

Zach nods its head, glancing down at the floor a few feet in front of it. “Look,” it says, “I don’t know who you are. I don’t know why you’re here. But I don’t care. It doesn’t matter. I think everyone deserves a chance to…” it trails off, not finding the right words. “...To have a chance,” it finishes weakly. “All right?”

It says the last part defensively, as if expecting me to attack its philosophy. I don’t. I suppose it could have been better stated, but I’m still impressed. Impressed and confused. It’s a human saying this, after all. I’m listening to a human talk about fairness and the reservation of judgement. How does that happen? It’s a human!

I still haven’t said anything, and Zach gives me a funny look. “Can you understand me?” it asks.

“Of course I can,” I say. “I’m not stupid.”

Zach holds up its hands, palms toward me, a gesture of peace. “I never thought you were,” it says. “I was just asking.”

It lowers its hands and exhales. It pauses again for a moment, apparently not knowing what to say next. When it finally continues, it does so while making sure to avoid eye contact. “You may not realize this,” it says, pointing to the space on the track where the human Michael was recently standing, “but I just saved your life. So if you could-”
“I do realize that,” I say, cutting the human off. It looks at me, a bit surprised. “Right,” it says. “So... so you must also realize that I want to help you.”

It stares at me, and I stare right back. “Why should I trust you?” I say.

The human blinks. It’s quiet for a second, then it coughs. It looks down, then back up. “Do you understand what I just did for you?” it asks. The volume of its voice the same as before, but its tone is nowhere near as calm. “I just saved your life by trading in all of the influence I’ve gained in the last six years and all of the favors that I’ve ever earned. I’m also pretty sure I just dumped my boyfriend. Would it kill you to be polite to me?”

I take a deep breath, trying to think straight. “It’s right, I think. I should be more polite.” “All right,” I say. “Why should I trust you, please?” I emphasize the last word, making an effort to soften my expression. Zach throws its hands up in the air.

“Because I just saved your life?”

It has a point, I think. But it’s human! How could I trust a human? After all they’ve done to us? After all they’ve done to me? I look away from Zach, glancing toward the rest of the room. There are still dozens of pairs of eyes pointed in my direction. Each one of these watchers is a threat. I know this. They’d kill me in a moment. But what about the human standing in front of me? It saved me. I have no reason to push it away, other than the shape of its pupils. Still. I need something more. Something I can hold onto and repeat to myself, reassuring myself that the next time I turn away, a knife won’t appear in my neck. I look at the human. “What time is it?” I ask.

"What?” Zach’s confused.

"What time is it?" I ask again. "What time of day?"

Zach still looks puzzled, but it answers despite this. "I’m not sure," it says. "Probably around one thirty in the afternoon. Why? What does that have to do with anything?"

I don’t respond immediately. I glance down at the floor, and then over at the swarms of humans milling around the floor of the gymnasium. Out of them all, I realize that the human standing in front of me is very possibly the only one that doesn’t want me dead. And Zach just answered my question. No one else was doing that. "Alright," I say. I try to sound certain. I don’t feel certain. "That will have to be good enough."

"Good enough for what?" Zach doesn’t understand.

"I can work with you," I say.

His eyebrows go up slightly, though not in anger this time. Instead, there’s a touch of sarcasm. "Oh, good," he says. "I’m glad you’re so flexible."

Flexible. Hardly. I feel more like the antique wooden bow that my father showed me once. It belonged to a friend of his, a part-time fletcher who was also a collector of old archery equipment. The bow was beautiful and intricately carved, and its wood had darkened and gained richness over the course of its long life. It was unstrung when he showed it to me, and my father explained that the bow was actually useless now, and could never be strung again. It had spent so many years drying into one position that if it were bent, it would snap and splinter like a glass rod. I suppose that’s how I feel. I’ve only met humans in person in the last few weeks, but I’ve been watching them and their atrocities on television for years. Suddenly deciding to trust one feels physically painful. Flexible. Me. As if.

"Well..." Zach lets out a puff of air. "Since you’re so trusting, how about we take a walk?"
It points down the track with an outstretched arm. A moment later I find myself walking slowly alongside the human. I still keep a few feet of distance between us. There’s no reason to be too trusting. Still, it’s not lost on me that Zach chooses to walk on the inside of the track, between me and the rest of the gymnasium. He’s using his body as a physical barrier. He saved my life, and he means to keep it saved. And, yet... still. Still, I can’t look at it without focusing on its round pupils. No matter what he’s done for me, it’s still human.
Chapter Six

“I don’t want you to become a fletcher.”

I look up at my father from across the table we’re sitting at. It’s nighttime, and the workroom is quiet and still. There’s a small window high up on one wall, and it’s cracked open a few inches. I can smell the night air through it. It’ll rain tomorrow, I think.

I’ve always liked sitting in this room. It’s small and comforting, with a wooden floor, wooden ceiling beams, wood-panelled walls, and the wooden table at its center with two wooden benches, one on either side. The walls of the room are lined with shelves and pegs, holding tools and supplies of every shape and kind imaginable. Estas does almost all his work in here, from carving arrow shafts, to crafting the heads, to shaping the fletchings. It’s quiet work for the most part, and years ago I started the habit of doing some of my schoolwork in here, sitting across the table from my father. Tonight, I’m working on matrix manipulations. I have a pad of digital paper in front of me, the most high-tech thing in the whole room. To be honest, the quiet environment is only an excuse for me to work here. Any room with a closed door could give me quiet. But I choose to come here every night because I love watching my father work. There’s something immensely pleasurable about becoming a spectator and watching a pair of hands that knows so well what to do. It’s calming to watch their intelligent movements as they gently wrestle the raw materials into form. Right now, Estas is applying a kind of lacquer to an arrow shaft. The shaft is just a rod at this point, and it doesn’t have its head or fletchings attached yet. Those will come later. The arrow is part of a set of two dozen that was recently commissioned by a client. It’ll take about another week before my father finishes this project. I blink at him. I didn’t really hear what he said. I was thinking about other things, and we don’t usually talk in here. “What?” I ask.

“I don’t want you to be a fletcher,” he repeats. “I don’t want that for you.”

I blink again. The nighttime air and the heady math have combined to make me feel groggy. I don’t understand what he means. “All right,” I say, choosing to take the path of least resistance.

“I mean it,” Estas presses. “I want you to have a future.”

Now I’m totally lost. “I thought you liked fletching,” I say, hesitant. For my whole life, I’ve always heard about how much my father loves his work. He revels in the intricate detail and elegance of his craft, and until this very second I had no idea that he had any reservations about it whatsoever.

“I do,” he says. “But archery has been obsolete for thousands of years. The only reason people buy my arrows anymore is because they can’t stand the thought of moving into the future. I get fewer customers every year. I want something better for you.”

I nod slowly, still not following his line of thought. Why is he talking about this? First off, I’ve never said that I wanted to be a fletcher. I don’t. It’s just not my dream. I haven’t decided yet what I’m going to specialize in at school, but it certainly won’t be this.

Second, I don’t understand why my father would be bringing up this topic now. Why tonight? It feels like it’s coming straight out of the blue. Because I’m so confused, all I can think of to say is, “Okay.”

Estas is concentrating hard on what he’s doing, and isn’t looking up at me. He’s holding the arrow with a specialized pair of tongs as he coats it in lacquer, one of an army
of instruments he has lined up on the table. I've always been impressed by these tools, ever since I was tall enough to see them on the tabletop. Each is polished to a mirror finish, and the gleaming pieces of metal are arranged in perfectly ordered rows. Everything is where it should be, nothing is out of place. "So I don't want you watching me anymore," he says.

For a brief second, I pause. I can't have heard that right. That wouldn't make any sense. "What?" That's all I can come up with.

My father closes his eyes and exhales through his nose, lowering the arrow shaft down toward the table. But when he opens his eyes, he's still not looking at me. "I don't want you watching me and thinking that fletching is a great thing to go into," he says. "I'm not going to take that chance with you."

I stare at him. "But I don't want to be a fletcher," I say. "That's not why I come here."

Estas shakes his head. "I can't take that chance," he says. I'm speechless. I can't believe this is happening. Out of nowhere, with no reason at all, my father has just told me that I'm not allowed to spend time in his workroom anymore. None of this makes any sense. He's been acting strange the past few weeks, ever since the news came in that life had been discovered, but this is taking things to a whole new level. I open my mouth to say something, to protest, to come up with some reasonable argument that will make this entire thing blow over, but Estas beats me to it and starts talking again. "In fact," he continues, "I've been thinking about this, and I believe it would be best if you were to hold off on specializing for a little while."

I can't believe my ears. This is all so sudden. Where is this coming from? Never mind the fletching stuff. Why wouldn't he want me to specialize? Sure, I don't know what I want to go into yet, but I know for sure that I want to go into something. How could I just hold off? That's insane! There are plenty of things that I wouldn't mind at least trying. "Why shouldn't I specialize?" I ask, voice rising.

My father sighs, and looks up at me for the first time. When he does, I see a potent emotion filling his face and his eyes, an emotion that I've seen boiling inside him for the past several weeks. Fear. Estas is afraid. "Everything's changing, Void," he says. "It's changing so quickly. We've found life. Can you believe that? We've found alien life. And over the course of the next few years, who knows how things are going to change? In sixty-four years, things might be so different that we wouldn't even recognize the street outside our door." Estas takes a deep breath. "Career fields will be created and destroyed, and right now no one is able to predict which ones will survive and which ones will die." He pauses. "So I think it'd be a wise move if we simply waited a few years, just until we know more. Eight years should be plenty for-"

"Eight years?!!" I'm practically yelling. "You want me to wait eight years before specializing?" This is crazy. This is absolutely crazy.

"I don't expect you to agree with this," Estas begins, keeping his voice calm and even. "But I think-"

"I don't agree with it," I say firmly, cutting him off again. "I can't wait eight years to specialize. Everyone else my age will be starting their careers by then, and I won't even have begun training. And what do you expect me to do in the meantime? Lie around and waste my life?"

Estas is looking away from me again. "I know this won't be easy, but I think it's necessary," he says. "In eight years, we'll know more about what's happening, and we can make an informed decision."
“No!” I yell. “This is ridiculous! I can’t wait! That would make no sense!”
“Void, you’re not listening to me.”
“Yes, I am,” I say. “And I’m not waiting. There’s no way I’m going to put my life on hold for eight years.”
“Void.” He says my name quietly, but somehow there’s enough force in it to stop me cold. “There’s no decision for you to make here,” he says. “You will remain unspecialized until we know more. That’s all there is to it.”
I’m horrified. I feel like an ice cube is being shoved down the back of my throat. I can’t believe this is happening. “No,” I say. “I refuse. I’m specializing. I’m not waiting.”
“Yes, you will wait,” Estas replies. “I’m going to stop paying for your education, and I won’t start paying again until I’m certain you’ve chosen a field with a long life ahead of it. At that point, you’re welcome to go back to school.”
“I’ll pay for myself!” I say. “I’m not waiting!”
“How will you pay?” he asks. “With what money? You have no savings, no job. The kinds of jobs you’re qualified for could never cover the expense. You can’t afford to pay for it alone.”
“So I’ll borrow! I’ll pay for it somehow.”
“Who will lend to you?” He won’t give up. “You don’t have any history of credit. Banks won’t even talk to someone like you, not these days. Void, you don’t have a choice here.” Estas looks me straight in the eye. “You’re just going to have to be patient and wait a little while. It’s for your own good, you know.”
I stare at him. I’ve never felt this way about my father before. I’ve never been this angry. Estas has always been there to help me before, to prop me up and walk with me to where I needed to go. But not anymore. I stand up so quickly that the heavy bench I’m sitting on flies backward and tips over, landing on the floor with a crash. I just stand there for a moment, staring down at my father. He’s not looking at me anymore. He’s looking at his tools, reaching out a hand to straighten one of them that I knocked out of line. Already, the pure anger I felt from just seconds ago is changing and shifting, leaving me feeling hurt and helpless. I don’t know what to do. So I leave the room, grabbing my school work from the table. I run downstairs, heading straight for my bedroom. I slam the door behind me, hurling my school work toward my bed. I want to scream. This is all so wrong. I hold my head in my hands and try to breath deeply, in and out. In and out.
I walk slowly backwards until I reach the closed door, and I lean my head up against it. I feel awful. I feel sick. I feel so weak, unable to think, unable to move. Gradually, I slide downward until I’m lying on the floor with the top of my head brushing gently up against the base of the door. My bed is less than a dozen feet away, but I don’t care. I don’t care at all. I stare up at the ceiling through half-closed eyes. The wooden ceiling beams are thick and strong, strong enough to carry anything. The whole ceiling is made of wood. The whole house is made of wood. It’s traditional.
Within seconds, the ceiling beams begin to blur, becoming more and more abstract until they’re reduced to nothing but dark smudges of color. I’m crying. I’m ashamed.

The cell walls are painted just the right color. The floor and ceiling, too. They’re all painted the same shade of blue-gray, a light wash of brushwork. It’s the perfect color, optimized to the utmost. I’ve never seen such a perfectly chosen shade before.
The paint is perfect because it syncs with the mission of the cell, the mission of confinement and sensory deprivation. The cell is silent, mostly odorless, and uniformly lighted. To cap it off, the walls, ceiling, and floor are painted just the right shade to become invisible if stared at for long enough. They disappear. They simply vanish. I stare at them, and after an hour I wonder if I’ve gone blind. It’s a strange sensation. It’s not as if anything is missing from the walls. It’s that nothing was ever there to begin with. The walls are disturbing in this way. I don’t like them. I feel as though they could drive me mad.

So instead of looking at the walls, I’ve chosen to stare at the light bulb. It’s right smack-dab in the center of the ceiling, forcing its bright glow down on everything else. After staring at it for so long, it’s become obscured by a soft purple cloud, a puff of color that livens up whatever I look at next. If I stare at the bulb and then glance at the sink, then, just like that, the sink becomes shrouded by the most wonderful shade of purple. If I look at the bulb for a shorter period of time, I get a florescent green cloud. And when I close my eyes, the green cloud stays with me, hovering in front of me no matter which way I turn or look. It’s like magic.

I have no right to be so bored. I should be grateful that I can still breathe. Going into the gymnasium, I had no expectation of ever coming out. I still don’t know what to think of Zach and what he’s done for me, but at least I’m alive. After I decided to let him help me, we walked around the track in silence for the rest of the exercise period. He tried now and then to start up a conversation, but I always politely shut the conversation down. When he asked me where I came from, I told him I came from Alaseel, and went no further. I’d offer one-word answers to his questions, and it didn’t take him too long to get the hint. I wasn’t trying to offend him. I am grateful to him. I am. But he’s a human, after all. I can’t just talk to one of them. It’s too strange. I kept thinking about the forest. About the leaves crackling under my feet. That was the last time I’d been surrounded by humans. When I was walking with Zach, the feeling of having returned to the forest was so strong that at one point I could have sworn one of the massive columns holding up the gymnasium ceiling had grown branches and leaves. When I looked at it, it was just a column, of course. I’ve escaped the forest. It’s only the company that’s remained. Pity. Why couldn’t the trees stay, and the company go?

When the exercise period was over, a loud voice boomed over the loudspeakers in the ceiling, telling the inmates to line up in front of the entrance. Zach and I stopped walking and watched the humans line up from a safe distance. After a while, the barricade slid open and the guards started bringing groups of humans through. There was a pair of guards that peeled off from the crowd and started walking my way. I recognized them easily, even from all the way across the room. Alpha and Beta. Who else? Zach said goodbye to me and headed over to join the line. I didn’t say anything back. Again, I didn’t mean to be rude. It just didn’t occur to me to say anything until he was too far away.

Alpha and Beta whisked me back up to my cell, where I’ve been sitting ever since, trying to make some sense of what happened. It’s been a few hours, I think. It should be late afternoon by now. Only a few more hours until dinner. Dinner. Zach said the time was around one thirty in the afternoon. This means I had been completely wrong in my earlier guess of the time. I’d thought it was night. It was barely past morning. I feel more grounded now that I know when I am. Already, I think. Already I owe him so much.

My thoughts are interrupted by a distant rumbling sound. I recognize it immediately. It’s the food cart. I stand up from the bench and absently start pacing back
and forth across the cell. I must have misjudged the amount of time that’s passed since the
exercise period. It’s strange, though. Usually I get it wrong in the other direction. I usually
think that more time has passed than actually has. I suppose this goes to show how
preoccupied I am.

The rumbling cart gets closer and closer, pausing regularly as it makes stops in front
of other cells. These pauses are the only way I know that I’m not the only prisoner being
held on this floor. I never see the others, I never hear them. I can’t even smell them. But the
cart always makes several stops before it reaches me, so I know there must be other
prisoners down here.

When the cart gets close enough I stop pacing and stare at the door. Finally, I hear
the cart creak to a stop right outside my cell. The panel at the other end of the food shelf
slides open, and a tray is shoved through. The panel slams, and the cart moves off. I don’t
even see the hand that’s responsible.

I start approaching the tray, but even before I’m halfway there, I know something’s
wrong. I can smell it. Normally, I can’t smell the food I’m given. But the odor from this tray
hits me like a wall, radiating and pushing me back like a loudspeaker with its volume
cranked too high. I crinkle my nose and wince. Ugh! It’s foul. What is this stuff?

Cautiously, trying to breath out more than I breath in, I approach the tray. Like
always, it’s loaded down with a spoon, a cup, and a bowl. But inside the bowl, where there’s
usually a mound of gray mush, there’s now a suspicious bulge of… what? It’s like nothing
I’ve seen before. It’s a stack of purply-red gelatinous cuboids, drizzled in a watery, dark
brown liquid. Gingerly, I poke the bowl with a finger. The creation jiggles. It undulates back
and forth, swaying in time to some slow beat. I’m sickened. Where’s my mush? I want my
mush. I never thought I’d say this, but compared to the atrocity I’m staring at, the mush is
an absolute delicacy.

I hear the cart again, traveling farther away now. I call out. “Guard!” The cart doesn’t
even pause. I try again, louder this time. “GUARD!”

The cart rumbles to a slow and reluctant stop, then I hear the muffled sound of
footsteps approaching the door. A few seconds later, a panel on the door slides open,
making a small window at head-height. Through it, I can see a bored human face with a
bulbous nose spattered with spotty red patches. The human looks in at me. “What?” it asks.
It sounds annoyed.

I lift up the bowl so the human can see it. “What is this?” I ask.

The human hardly even glances at it. “Meat soup,” it says. “It’s a rare treat.”

Liar, I think. First off, the stuff in the bowl was clearly never alive, so it can’t possibly
be ‘meat.’ Second, the watery sauce it’s drizzled with could never be honestly referred to as
a ‘soup.’ Finally, I don’t think there’s a person alive who would be happy to receive this
bowl, so it’s not even a ‘treat.’ I do, however, sincerely hope that the guard is right about it
being ‘rare.’ I think all of this, but all I say is, “Could you take it away? It smells.”

The guard looks at me. “That’s your dinner,” it says.

Hardly. I wouldn’t eat this even if I were starving. It goes beyond the obvious ick
factor. Now that I know what it’s supposed to be, I have a better reason for not eating it.
When the Empire of Aiohn was still confined to just one planet, it ran into a problem; As the
population expanded, resources became scarcer and scarcer. Food shortages became
common. In response, the Empire outlawed the production of meat. It took too much
energy and space to produce meat, even if it was grown artificially in labs. Resources could
be better spent on vegetables, fruits, things like that. Over time, not eating meat has become a part of our culture. Even today, with the Empire spread over dozens of planets and systems, giving us all the space we need, vegetarianism is a part of who we are. We never question it anymore. I've never tasted meat. In fact, I've never even seen it. Looking at the bowl, I think I still haven't.

“I'm not eating it,” I say. “You can take it.”

The guard shrugs. It doesn't seem to care. The panel slides shut and locks, and then the human opens the door to the food shelf and removes the tray. The door closes again. I hear footsteps moving away from the cell, pausing, then being joined by the rattling of the cart. I stand in front of the door for a moment, then go back to sit on the bench. Another milestone, completed. Another meal, done. I'm hungry, but I feel good. I wish I'd thought to drink some water from the cup before that was taken away, too. Oh, well. I'll be fine. At least now the cell has some hope of smelling normal.

I close my eyes and fold my arms over my chest, settling in for the long hours of tedium ahead of me. It'll be a while before the next meal gets shoved through the door. Until then, all will be silence.

It's quiet. It's the middle of the night, and the entire city seems to be asleep. The house is quiet, too. The back of my head aches from where it's been pressing down against the wooden floor for so many hours. I've hardly moved since I came in here. I fell asleep after a while, but I've woken up again. My face feels crusty in the places where my tears dried, and I rub at my cheeks with the heels of my palms. Even though it's dark in my room, I see perfectly well. A crack of light from a streetlamp shining through the curtains covering my window, hitting the wall and scattering throughout the room. It's not much, but it's more than enough for me to see by. My eyes have always been good. Like my mother's. I've been awake for a few minutes, but I still haven't moved, no matter how uncomfortable the floor is. Maybe I'm too tired. Or maybe I'm too immature and upset.

I hate this about me. I've always hated it. I watch my mother, and I see how she always remains calm and even. No emotion, no expression. It must be wonderful. I can only imagine. I try to suppress my emotions. I try. Outwardly, I can sometimes manage to do a fairly decent job. But inside the confines of my head, they're just as strong as ever. Inside my mother's head, I imagine that there's only ever calm. No fluctuating, untrustworthy emotions. No happiness, perhaps, but no depression, either. No sadness, no fear. I'd take that. I wouldn't care if I lost happiness so long as sadness was taken as well. I'd prefer to just have calm. Permanent, unshakable calm. I hate how I can get depressed or frightened. It hurts, and it always feels as like it's my fault. Even now, I feel guilty on top of everything else. I feel guilty that I'm reduced to lying on the floor and rubbing dried tears off my cheeks.

Slowly, I stand up, leaning against the closed door for support. I look around the room. Immediately, my gaze is drawn to the crack of light filtering in through the window. It lands right on top of a beautifully carved wooden rack that's mounted to the wall. My father gave me that rack. He carved it himself, and he gave it to me as a gift. Long time ago. It's an arrow rack. It holds aloft the many arrows that Estas has given to me over the years. They're all his finest work. Each is gorgeous, is perfect. He'll do that. At random times, he'll come up to me and give me an arrow. When he finds a new design that he likes the look of, or a new style that's caught his eye, he'll make an arrow and present it to me. It's sweet. It
always reminds me of how much he loves me. And he’ll always smile as he stands in front of me, right hand hidden behind his back. And he’ll ask me to guess what he’s holding. And I always play along. I guess that he’s holding a hairy bug. A frying pan. One of Reyin’s statuettes. I’ll guess anything that comes to mind, and he’ll give his head a solemn shake and produce the arrow. I can’t explain it, but each and every time I’m always thrilled. They’re all beautiful. He won’t give me anything that’s not perfect. And I’ll thank him and he’ll beam at me and then we’ll go on with our days. I love this short ritual. It always makes me happy.

I cross over to the wall and stand in front of the rack. Gently, I reach out and lift the top arrow. I bring it closer to my face, examining it, admiring it. It truly is a beauty. The shaft is dark brown, and twining up it is a lush green vine, blooming with leaves and life. I like the style Estas chose to paint this arrow in. He left much of the fine detailing out of the decoration, instead painting only elegant lines and curves. The lines suggest the spirit of a vine more than they depicting the physicality of it. They leave room for the imagination to step in. Somehow, this abstractness makes the image all the more vivid and bright. From the end of the arrow, the fletchings match the color scheme of the shaft. The feathers are striped brown and soft yellow, cut sharply and perfectly. At the other end of the shaft, the arrow’s head gleams, even in the dim light of the room. It’s engraved with a series of arcing lines, continuing the essence of the pattern painted onto the arrow’s shaft.

I move my hands to either end of the arrow. I softly clasp the polished head in my left hand and cradle the exquisitely arranged feathers in my right. I’m amazed. So much time went into making this. So much skill. And he made it for me. He did all this for me. I flex the arrow slightly, testing it. Then, with the slightest of efforts, I snap the arrow in two. The break isn’t clean. It’s jagged. Slivers of paint and shards of wood stick out from the ends like broken teeth. I let the pieces fall to the floor with a clatter.

I’m already reaching out again, scooping the rest of the arrows into my arms. There are thirty-one left. I turn, carrying them over to my neatly made bed, where I drop them like so many sticks.

I carefully select the top arrow from the pile. I carefully select the top stick. Because that’s all it is. It’s just a stick. It breaks as easily and as roughly as the first stick. Now there are thirty left.

As my hands move, I’m distantly amazed by how easy it is, how simple it is to shatter the perfection of the arrows. Of the sticks. Yesterday, I would have thought it’d be difficult. Impossible, even. But, no. It’s easy. They fracture, they crack, they rip, they split, they rupture, they snap, they break, they tear, they rend, they splinter.

Twenty.

I toss the broken fragments to the floor in a growing mound. When I look down at them, they seem much farther away than they should be. I’m not a mile tall. But there they are, down at my feet, and they look to be a mile away. They look just like a pile of sticks. That’s all they are. They’re just sticks.

Twelve.

If I’d hoped to feel something, I’m disappointed. I don’t feel anything as I work. No satisfaction, so remorse, no anger. I feel empty. It’s sad, almost. When I began, I think I’d hoped for more. But I’m not sure. I don’t remember.

Two.
I reach for the last arrow. I hold it over my bed, feeling its shaft with my thumb and forefinger, running my palm over the smooth surface. This one’s painted in a simple, elegant pattern of black and bright red. Most of the shaft is black, except for near both ends. In these two places run thin, parallel bands of red, highlights of color that seem to pop from the surface. It’s beautiful. Absolutely beautiful. Nothing, from its gleaming head to its pristine feathers, is marked or disturbed by any blemish whatsoever.

This arrow is newer than the rest. It’s fresh. Estas gave it to me within the past year. It hasn’t dried as completely as the others. Because of this, it bends much farther, arcing into a graceful crescent. The paint cracks and blisters in several places, but the shaft itself remains intact.

Then, with a crunching-cracking sound, the arrow breaks in the middle. The ends are sharp with splinters, looking like small serrated knives. I let the two halves fall out of my grasp, plummeting downward to the floor. They land among all the other broken sticks.

I take a step back, away from the pyre of shattered arrows. I still don’t feel anything. In place of emotion, I feel dead. I lower myself slowly to sit cross-legged on the floor. I hunch forward. I wait for the night to be over.
Chapter Seven

The barricade buzzes as it slides open, and Alpha and Beta deposit me on the other side. The Warden hasn’t shown up today. I don’t mind. Whether it’s disappointed by the fact that I’m continuing to breathe or is simply busy with paperwork, I’m glad I don’t have to see its face today. It makes things that much easier to deal with.

The moment I step into the giant room, I see Zach. He’s waiting for me. He’s just outside the yellow box painted onto the concrete floor. He smiles and waves at me. I blink, and have to remind myself that he doesn’t know how rude he’s being. A display that open, drawing so much attention, would never be allowed back in the Empire. Not in polite company, anyway. But I remind myself that this isn’t the Empire. And this isn’t polite company. It’s a human prison. This is the last place I’d look for manners.

As I get closer to him, I see that Zach’s face is swollen and discolored. He’s sporting a black eye, and there are several cuts and gashes on his chin and forehead. “What happened?” I ask, already knowing the answer.

Zach smiles at me. “Hello to you, too,” he says. “How’s it going today?”

I’m scanning the rest of the room, looking over the sea of humans. I’m relieved to notice that there are fewer pairs of eyes watching me than there were yesterday. It’s a step in the right direction. Reassured that no monster is charging toward me, I turn my attention back to Zach, brushing aside his question in favor of something more important. “Tell me what happened to you,” I say.

His smile dims slightly, but he manages to maintain the remnants of it. “Let’s take a walk,” he says, gesturing toward the track. “I feel like moving.” He starts off without waiting for me to follow, and I see that he’s walking with a slight limp. It’s his left leg. It doesn’t look like it’s bending very well. I go after him, catching up quickly. My own leg is much better today. As he did yesterday, Zach makes sure to walk on the inside lane of the track, physically placing himself between me and the rest of the human prisoners.

“Who attacked you?” I ask. “And where’s that other human? I don’t see it.”

Zach glances over at me. “Who?”

“The other one,” I say. “Michael. I don’t see it.” I’m looking into the crowd again, trying to find the human with the dark hair. It bothers me that I can’t find it. I’m looking up and down the room, searching every face, every figure, but the human is nowhere to be seen. This worries me. Having an enemy is one thing, but having an enemy that I can’t find is something else entirely. The human could be anywhere.

“Oh, he’s not here today,” Zach says. I wait for him to continue, to offer more of an explanation. But he doesn’t. He simply walks farther down the track.

“Is Michael the one that attacked you?” I ask. Zach doesn’t answer. He continues looking straight ahead, limping as we walk. This is answer enough for me. A few seconds later, though, he lets out a short sigh.

“He’s in solitary for the next few days,” he says. “It’s all right. I’m okay. Nothing permanent. And he’ll be out soon, so no harm done there, either.”

He says it all quietly, sounding more sad than upset. I look at him. Suddenly, unprompted, it occurs to me that I should be incredibly grateful to this man. He was just beaten for protecting me, but he still wants to help. He was still there by the door, waiting for me. That’s an incredible gift. It makes me uncomfortable. I should be more grateful than
I am. No matter what he’s done, I don’t even like standing near the human. Maybe this is the reason for what I say next. Maybe I’m testing him. Trying to see how grateful I should truly be. “You can go,” I say. “You don’t have to help me.”

Zach looks at me as if I’ve grown a third eye. “What are you talking about? Of course I do.”

“No, you don’t,” I say. “You can go if that would help you.” I feel slimy as I say this, manipulative and superior.

“No, I’m staying,” Zach says. He sounds irritated. “I’m helping you. This is my job.” He says it with conviction, as if he really means it. There’s one word he says, though, that sticks out to me.


“I mean you’re my job,” he says. “Everybody needs one. I guess you’re mine.”

I’m not sure I like the sound of this. Me? A job? That makes me sound like a burden. No, I definitely don’t like the sound of this. “I’m not your job,” I state. “Jobs pay.”

He shrugs as if this doesn’t matter. “I guess it’s more of an internship, then.”

Is that a joke? “I won’t take charity, Zach,” I say. “I mean it. Not from a human. Not from anyone. And not from you.” Zach stares at me, a strange look on his face. I can tell that he’s annoyed again, but I don’t care. This feels important to me all of a sudden. I’ve never turned away charity before - why would I say ‘no’ to something free? - but it feels imperative that I do so now. Especially charity from a human. I don’t want to be pitied. And certainly not by one of them. No. They have no right to feel sorry for me. “I don’t want to be your job,” I say.

He looks at me. His mouth is open slightly, and his forehead is wrinkled. “What’s wrong with you?” he asks. “Why won’t you let me help you? You need help. I’m willing to provide help. Why won’t you let me?”

I stop walking. Inside my head, a little voice is screaming at me. I bat it aside. Zach stops walking a few paces after me, and turns to face me. “I don’t trust you,” I say, looking him straight in the eye. “Why would you want to help me? Why would you care? You’re a human!”

Zach shakes his head. “Why would it matter what species I am?” He sounds confused. Confused and annoyed. To the little voice in my head, he sounds hurt, too. But I try to ignore this last observation. It’s no use to me. “I’m trying to help you. Isn’t that enough?” he says.

I stare at him. “Why don’t you hate me?” I ask.

He jerks his shoulders in a violent shrug. “Because I don’t! Why would I?”

“Ask them,” I say, pointing to the rest of the humans in the large room. “Ask them. They hate me.”

Zach rolls his eyes. “They don’t all hate you.”

“Enough of the do.”

“Well, I don’t. Okay?”


Zach looks back at me. I watch his expression slowly change. I think he understands now. He turns away and starts walking again. I follow. We’ve walked almost sixteen feet before he finally speaks.
"I've only been in here a few years," Zach begins. "Before that, I lived in New Sidney, one of the larger settlements on the inner planets. When I heard that we'd found life, I was blown away. I was so happy. I thought it was wonderful. Not everyone agreed with me, but I thought it was great. I saw so much future ahead of us." He pauses here, gathering his thoughts "I've always wanted to meet one of you," he continues. "I'm just so... grateful that we can be having this conversation right now. When you think about it, it's almost a miracle." Zach looks over at me, trying to make eye contact. But I'm looking straight ahead of us. Zach continues looking at me for another few seconds. Then he looks down at the track beneath our feet. "I was so excited for the anniversary celebration," he says. This gets my attention. My right ear twitches. It's a tick I have. A reflex. I reach my right hand up to massage it, another tick. "I watched the celebration live," Zach continues. "From beginning to end."

"And how'd you like it?" I ask, unable to stop myself. The question pops out of my mouth like a worm from a cracker. It's a horrible question. It's cruel. It's unnecessary. But it comes out anyway.

Zach turns to me. I'm still refusing to look at him. "I cried," he says.

"Well, good for you," I say, amazed and horrified to hear myself forming these words. Who am I? Who could be so mean? How could I act this way? I feel ashamed. But I don't take it back.

Zach sighs. "We've been fighting each other for a long time," he says. "We've all known someone who went off to fight and never came back. We go to the funerals. We hear the propaganda. And I worry, sometimes, that we've forgotten what it used to be like. Back when we'd just met. I worry that we're forgetting the hope we used to have. The joy." He laughs. "Do you remember what it was like to have a future? I do." He shakes his head. "I don't want to forget that."

I stare at the track ahead of us. "Me, neither," I whisper. I'm a little surprised to hear myself speak. Zach looks over at me.

"Did you used to hope?" he asks.

"Yes," I say. "I did." I refuse to meet his eye.

"Do you still hope?"

"No." I shake my head firmly. My voice is quiet. "No, not anymore."

"Why?"

I shrug. I feel self-conscious, as if my elbows were sticking out or my knees were bending inward. Zach and I are walking slowly. He's limping more heavily now than when we began. His leg must really be bothering him. But he doesn't asks to stop or rest. I don't make the offer. Instead, I listen to the sounds of the gymnasium around me. I've always loved listening. It's something I'm good at. I had a favorite place for listening, deep in the forest outside Alaseel. I loved it there. I found it one day many years ago, as I was wondering through the trees. There's a small brook, a tiny trickle of water that winds down toward the plain. When I found it, I was struck by how clean the water was. It looked as if liquid crystal was flowing through the forest. I walked along the brook until I came to a place where it turned and looped to make a small peninsula, a spit of dirt surrounded on three sides by the burbling water. There were no trees growing on the island. The soil must have been too rocky, the same reason why the stream diverted around it. But the ground was soft with moss and short grasses, the perfect place to sit and listen.
Once I found this place, I’d go there on every spare afternoon. I’d sit and I’d look around me. The trees stayed a few feet back from the edge of the brook, perhaps nervous to get their bark wet. The spot was deep enough into the forest for the trees to have a bit of age behind them, and the undergrowth had mostly been cleared out by the shade of the canopy. There was more light by the stream because the trees were thinner there, but it was always cool and I never had to fight my way through brush to get there. On the opposite side of the stream from where I’d sit, there was a huge boulder lying amongst the trees, covered in lichen. I only tried climbing on it once. I realized that I was scraping the lichen off, and I stopped immediately. I didn’t want the boulder to change. I didn’t want anything about the brook to change. I liked it just the way it was.

Besides watching the trees, I enjoyed simply closing my eyes and listening. I could hear everything around me, and if I tried hard enough, I could even pinpoint where the trees were, just by hearing how other sounds bounced off them. I loved it there. It was so peaceful. I could spend hours. Sitting. Watching. Listening. No one else came there. Few people ever went into the forest. I was glad for this. Sometimes, I’d bring along my homework, but only if I was behind and the assignment was important. I preferred to come alone. I preferred to look around at the stillness, listening to the sounds of the trees.

The sounds of the gymnasium are nowhere near as pleasant. I hear humans slamming weights down. The squeal of shoes on the court. The rise and fall of voices. Humans calling out to each other. Noise. It’s just noise. That was something else about my place at the brook. There were always sounds to listen to, but there was never any noise. Nothing I wanted to block out. Nothing to shield myself from. And there were no dangers. When the Empire of Aiohn settles a planet, it starts by adding oceans and then modified plankton to generate an atmosphere. In nature, this process would take millions of years, but there are a few techniques that can speed it up to only a few dozen. When the atmosphere is well enough established, flora is added to the continents. Grasses are brought in first because they grow so quickly, but trees are also introduced. At the same time, a rudimentary ecosystem of fauna is put in place. Insects, small mammals, birds, those kinds of things. Not many predators at first. Some, but not many. It’s a tricky thing, populating a planet.

Fairly early on in the process - nearly as soon as the air is breathable - cities are built. These newly settled worlds are notorious for harsh conditions, but they mature over time. Alaseel has been settled for a few hundred years now, and things are getting better. Most of the world is still plains, and the oceans are small. The forests are patchy and young. The planet is still in its infancy. I like this stage. It’s full of possibilities. And I love the open expanses of grass, stretching on for countless miles. And I love the forests, with saplings on the outer edges and older trees toward the center. There’s still only one city here. There are plans for others. But not yet. I love it all. I love the sounds of a growing world. In the gymnasium, all there is to hear is a bunch of murderous humans grunting and shouting.

“I don’t want to be fooled again,” I mumble.

Zach nods, and we continue walking. Then, “I’m not here to fool you.”

“I know.”

He look at me. When I continue to avert my eyes, Zach reaches out to touch my shoulder. I pull away. Zach takes his hand back. “So will you stop treating me like I’m trying to carry a bomb into a market?” he asks. Ha. He’s serious, but I can tell that he’s trying to change the mood of the conversation, trying to make me more comfortable.
“I’ll try,” I answer honestly. “Give me time.”

We walk farther down the track. Neither of us says anything more, but it doesn’t feel as though we’re ignoring each other. At one point, I sneak a glimpse of Zach’s face, and it looks different to me. It’s the same face, but something has changed. Then I identify it. It’s his eyes. His pupils. They don’t look quite so round anymore. This isn’t to say that they’ve changed shape. Of course they haven’t. I think I just notice them a little bit less.

At the end of the exercise period, a voice booms down from the overhead speakers, ordering the prisoners to form up into lines in front of the main entrance. Like we did yesterday,, Zach and I hang back from the crowd. Soon, Alpha and Beta emerge from behind the now-open barricade and march toward us. Zach leans in a little bit closer to me, as if to keep his voice from spreading. “Those are the same two guards who picked you up before,” he whispers. “Are they assigned to you?”

It’s a fair question. “I don’t know,” I say. “I suppose so.”

Zach grunts. “I wonder why they were chosen,” he murmurs. It’s a good question, I think. Why were these two guards, Alpha and Beta, chosen out of all the other candidates to escort me to and from my cell? What makes them special? Alpha and Beta are closer now, and Zach turns to me with a smile. “Bye, Void,” he says. “See you tomorrow.”

He starts walking off. “Goodbye,” I say. He smiles at me again. Then he’s joining the back of a line, and Alpha and Beta are yelling at me to hold out my hands. I comply. Alpha snaps on the pair of handcuffs and together the two guards lead me out of the gymnasium, past the queues of humans, cutting forward into an elevator. The doors slide shut behind us. With a jerk, the metal box begins to crawl its way up the shaft.

I stare forward. I can see the three of us reflected in the metal elevator doors. The image is distorted and hazy. The crack between the left and right doors splits my reflection vertically, a line running from my head down to my toes. But the image is still accurate enough for me to recognize us all. On a whim, I turn my head slightly and stare at the reflection of Alpha. “Why were you assigned to me?” I ask it.

“Quiet, elf,” is all the reply I get. But I’m not finished. I need to know.

“Have either of you been in the war?” I ask.

“I said, be quiet.” Alpha says. Mmm. Was that a ‘yes?’ It’s hard to tell.

“Have you had family members in the war?” I ask. I watch Alpha’s reflection turn toward me. There’s something intimidating about the reflection, something in the distortion of the human’s features that makes the creature seem more frightening. Maybe it’s the way the face blurs together. Or how its eyes are only indistinct dark pits. Or maybe there’s no distortion at all. Maybe I hit a nerve for real this time. Alpha glares at me, glares at the back of my head. “Have any of them died?” I ask.

“Shut up.” There’s a certain delicacy in the way Alpha says it. Something soft. Something far more dangerous than any shout or yell. Without turning my head, I glance over at Beta’s reflection. The other human hasn’t said anything. I see its eyes flasing nervously between its partner and myself. I look back at Alpha.

“How many have you lost?” I ask. My question is greeted by a deadly silence. It hangs in the elevator for several seconds, like a cloud of toxic mist. Like the poisonous dust from a saw cutting through concrete. Alpha’s reflection shifts in the elevator door. Then I feel something hard and sharp brushing against the back of my head, pushing aside my hair. I freeze. Alpha presses the muzzle of its gun against the back of my skull.
“Since you ask,” Alpha begins, speaking in a hoarse whisper, “I’ve lost both my brothers in the war. They were in the same platoon. They were real pleased to be together like that. They thought they’d have each other’s backs.” Alpha rubs the gun against my skin. I feel the sharp edges of the barrel grating against my skin, almost hard enough to cut me. “Their dropship was shot down two weeks after they were deployed. Two birds with one stone, as it were.” Alpha pauses, pushing the gun harder into the back of my head, forcing me to rock forward on the balls of my feet. I can feel the heat radiating off Alpha’s body. I can feel its breath on the back of my neck. “Ask me another question,” it dares.

I don’t say anything. We stand bolted in place, all three of us, until the elevator comes to a stop and the doors open. Alpha shoves me in the back, telling me to move. I obey. I don’t say a word all the way to the cell, and don’t let out the breath I’m holding until the cell door slides shut behind me. I’m suddenly grateful for the thick metal.

I close my eyes, tightening my jaw until my teeth hurt. Then I relax, tilting my head back as far as my neck will go. I’m a fool.

I stare at the plate on the table in front of me. The plate is smooth. Its round surface is perfectly white, with small, twisting, dark green highlights of color dancing at its heart. The underside of the plate is a matching green-brown. The edges of the plate flare upward, allowing it to double as a shallow bowl. The plate is elegant. Like all the objects my mother buys, the plate instantly appeals to the eye. But it’s also practical. That’s requirement number two for Reyin. She tries to get both whenever she can, and almost always succeeds in finding what she’s looking for. We’ve had this set of plates for years. They’ve never cracked or chipped. I don’t know what they’re made of, but they’re strong. Right now, the plate in front of me is piled high with a bountiful assortment of mixed greens. There are some of my favorites here, but I don’t touch any of it. I shift my gaze from the plate to the table on which it sits.

Our dining room table is round, has three legs, and is largely white. Its surface is a mosaic of artfully shattered pottery, arranged so the cracks line up toe to toe, making a single plane. The whole thing is suspended in a sheet of glass, so the surface of the table is perfectly smooth. At the outer edge of the table, the pottery shards are a simple white. But as they move farther and farther away from the rim, they gain blue hues. By the time they’ve reached the center, they’re the color of lapis lazuli. The underside of the glass is misted, providing a cloudy backdrop to the shards of pottery.

The legs of the table are also special. They’re constructed out of a fine mesh of white wires, braided together in mesmerizing patterns, a hollow framework that seems to float even as it carries great weight. The table was a present to Reyin from one of her sisters when I was born. Reyin hates this sister, but took the table anyway. It’s too beautiful for anyone to refuse, no matter the circumstance. It has three legs to accommodate exactly three chairs; one for my mother, one for my father, and one for me. The chairs were included in the gift, and are crafted in the same style as the airy table legs.

There are three chairs at the table tonight, but only two of them are occupied. I haven’t seen Estas all day. Across from me sits Reyin. She’s eating her dinner, looking down at it and ignoring me. I’m grateful. She’s been ignoring me all day, ever since she found me this morning, asleep on my bedroom floor in front of a pile of broken arrows. She hasn’t talked to me. I’m fine with this. I don’t want to talk to anyone. I’m grateful that I haven’t
seen my father yet. I don’t know what I’d do. I don’t know what I’d say. It’s easier to just avoid him. So far this is easy. He seems to be avoiding me.

I have no appetite for dinner. Instead of eating, I let my gaze wander around the dining room. Like the rest of the house, the room is made of wood. The ceiling beams are exposed. Solid, powerful, and wooden. The dining room is set a step down from the rest of the first floor, a move that works to better define its boundaries. There aren’t many walls on the first floor, other than around the bedrooms and bath. I like the way it looks. There are wooden columns rising up here and there, usually placed to mark out the corners of an area. The dining room is up against the exterior wall of the house, and has two windows. Because the majority of the house is wooden, any decorations need to make up for the darkness of the wood. The windows, for instance, are framed by white-painted woodwork, and veiled by semi-transparent white curtains. The window ledges are deep, and carry a few statuettes on their frames, all carved from white marble. They’re my mother’s work. Thin, graceful, and sometimes abstract representations of various animals. My personal favorite is of a fish, twisting high out of the water and into the air as the marble ocean boils and foams beneath it.

Continuing the white trend, my mother is dressed in a white shirt and light gray pants. Around her neck hangs a black marble pendant, suspended on a fine silver chain. The pendant is about an inch and a half long, and twists in a slight, delicate spiral. She loves this necklace. She’s had it for years. I can’t remember the last time she took it off.

As if sensing my attention, Reyin stops eating and sits back in her chair, looking at me for what feels like the first time all day. I look down at the plate sitting in front of me. It’s perfect. It’s beautiful. It’s exactly what its creator wanted it to be. It’s an odd feeling, envying an inanimate object.

“What happened last night?” my mother asks. I don’t look at her.

“Nothing,” I say. She stares at me, face blank. Her face is always blank.

“That’s what your father said,” Reyin states. “And I didn’t believe him, either. What happened, Void?”

“I said ‘Nothing,’” I say. Reyin’s gaze changes slightly. It moves from the steely, chilling grip from a second ago into something more… confused. “Is that it?” she asks. “Is that the only reason you’re upset?”

I can hardly believe my ears. What does she mean, ‘only reason?’ Isn’t it reason enough? I glare at her. “He also told me I couldn’t specialize for another eight years,” I say. The confusion fades from my mother’s eyes.

“Oh,” she murmurs, sitting back slightly. “That makes more sense.” Then her brow furrows. “He mentioned that to me a few weeks ago. I didn’t think he’d actually go through with it. Did he tell you why he’s concerned?”

“Yes,” I say, nodding my head angrily. “And I think it’s insane! There’s no reason for me to put off the start of my career for eight years. It’s crazy!”
My mother looks down at her plate. “Perhaps not entirely,” she says softly. There’s a brief moment when I’m not sure if I’ve heard her right. Is there something wrong with my hearing? How could she be saying this? How is this happening? Reyin continues, choosing her words carefully. “I don’t agree with your father’s decision,” she says. “I don’t think it’s a good idea for you to delay specialization for eight years. I think that would put you at a disadvantage in the job market.” She pauses. So far, so good, I think. She’s making more sense. “But,” she says. My stomach drops. “Estas does have a point. Things are changing. This doesn’t frighten me the way it frightens your father. But he’s right to think that contact will change the economy in ways we can’t predict. Perhaps it’s a good idea to hold off on making any large decisions for a few years. Until we know more.” Reyin breaks off, drawing a deep breath. That sinking feeling from a moment ago has matured into a full-fledged panic. I don’t know what to do. This is a mistake. This is all wrong. Surely Reyin must realize this. Right? She’s smart. She can understand these things. So why can’t she get it? Like a bad dream, I’m unable to say anything. I just sit here, staring at her as she continues to demolish my future.

“I wouldn’t have made this choice myself,” she says, “but only because I know how hard it will be for you. However, now that your father has made the decision, I’m not going to argue with it. It’s for the best. You’ll have to work around it.”

“But what about being banned from his workroom?” I blurt out. “What about that? Doesn’t that matter?” I’m shouting. I don’t even know why I’m talking about this. This is the smaller issue. I can get along fine without watching Estas craft arrows. “There’s no reason I shouldn’t be in there! He’s paranoid! I don’t want to be a fletcher! He doesn’t have to worry! I just want to be there!”

Reyin’s eyes flash with anger. It’s one of the few times I’ve ever seen it in her. “Don’t you yell at me,” she whispers slowly, controlling the words as they slide past her tongue. “Don’t yell. I raised you for better than that.”

I scream. Not words. Something primal. I grit my teeth in frustration, breathing hard, and glare hatefully at my mother. “Don’t do that!” I yell. “Don’t tell me about control! You’ve been telling me to control myself for my entire life! But guess what? I’m not like you! I can’t just turn my emotions off! I have a right to spend time with my father! I-“

Reyin stands up from the table so quickly that I jerk back in my chair, startled into silence. She looks at me, and I realize that I’ve never been afraid of my mother before. I am now. I can’t read anything from her face. It’s as calm and dead as a statue. Even her body language, aside from the sudden movement, is even and neutral. She looks at me with empty eyes. I can’t see anything past them. I can’t tell if she wants to hug me or murder me. It’s terrifying. But my anger remains just as powerful. It’s a strange thing. I’m frightened into silence, but inside I’m still shouting. Her eyes bore into me. “I didn’t want dinner to go like this,” she intones. She doesn’t sound disappointed. There’s no emotion in her voice at all. She’s just stating a fact. “I will talk to Estas about letting you in his workroom. I will not argue with him. I will discuss it, but no more. I will also talk to him about your specialization and confirm details. I will not argue with him about that, either. Good night, Void. You may go to your room and finish your schoolwork for tomorrow. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Then she just stands there, staring at me. I’m still sitting. My breathing’s shaky. I’m jittering as badly as if I’d run eight miles. I feel small, far too small to hold in all this anger and frustration and sadness and fear. I feel like I could rupture. Slowly, I push back my chair and stand up, maintaining eye contact with Reyin the entire time. She doesn’t react.
Then I turn and start leaving the room. I’ve made it to the step out of the dining room when I hear my mother’s voice behind me. “I love you,” she says.


“I love you,” she repeats. There’s still no expression on her face, and hardly any soul to her voice.

I stare at her. It feels strange to be hearing this. I don’t know how I should react. She’s never told me this before. I’ve always known that my mother loves me. But she’s never said so outright. And now that she has - tonight, of all times - I don’t know how I’m supposed to respond. So I react with even more sarcasm. “And am I supposed to be happy about that?” I ask.

My mother nods her head, a small graceful movement that seems more turned inwards than directed toward me. “Yes,” she whispers. “Yes. I’d like you to be happy. I love you, Void.”

I clench my teeth. “Thank you,” I say. “Someday, you might even try showing it.” Then I turn and storm away, leaving my mother standing alone and emotionless in the dining room.
Chapter Eight

“Zachary Canning. Convicted of second-degree murder. No previous record. Sentenced to twenty-three years with the chance of parole. Model prisoner, no complaints, no violations.”

I look over at the Warden. I’d been staring at the small statue on the bookshelf, the man with the halfway umbrella. I stretch my wrists uncomfortably in the restraints. Alpha and Beta surprised me by bringing me straight here after today’s exercise period. When I reached the gymnasium a little over an hour ago, Zach was waiting for me just outside the painted yellow box. He smiled at me. His leg was worse today. His knee had started to swell. He could do less walking today, and had to sit down more frequently. It worried me. I’m not used to seeing people in pain, people who don’t heal from minor injuries. It worried me. And now I’m here, sitting across from the Warden, listening as it reads off a piece of paper. This worries me, also. The Warden drops the file, casting away the sheet of paper with a gesture of complete dismissal. The Warden shrugs its shoulders as the file hits the desk.

“It’s too bad,” it says. “Mr. Canning was doing so well. With a record this shiny, he would have had no trouble making parole when his chance came up in a few more years. I hope he knew what he was doing when he started acting out recently.”

I sit very still. My throat is cold, as if an ice cube were being forced down my esophagus. I don’t want to hear this. “He gets in a fight with his cellmate,” the Warden continues. “He riles up the other prisoners. He causes unrest. This is bad behavior, elf. This is dangerous. If this continues, Mr. Canning is going to start a serious conflict and someone is going to get hurt.” The Warden shakes its head, looking somber. “No, we can’t have this. This has to stop.”

The ice cube has reached my stomach. “Why are you telling me this?” I ask, afraid that I already know the answer.

The human shrugs again. “I just thought you’d like to know,” it says. “You’ve been spending some time with him. So I thought you’d like to know the reason why you won’t be seeing him in the yard anymore.”

“What?” The question pops out of my mouth before I can think. I hardly even notice. The Warden nods.

“I’m moving him to another floor later today. For his own safety. He’ll have a different exercise period now, and it won’t overlap with yours, I’m sorry to say.” The Warden doesn’t sound sorry at all. It sounds as if it’s only barely maintaining its serious veneer, barely holding back the smug condescension. I hate this human. The Warden doesn’t even have the decency to be subtle. It might as well be jumping up and down, blaring a horn, shouting to the world that it’s about to remove my one and only defense. My one and only ally. I stare at the human, hating every line and fold on its face.
“Why are you doing this?” I ask in a rough whisper. The Warden looks at me, taking a deep breath through its nostrils.

“We have an agreement,” it says. “And you’re trying to drop your end of the deal. But I’ve done my part, and now it’s time for you to do yours.” It spreads its arms slightly, as if in appeal. “All I’m asking for is a bit of follow-through. Is that too much to hope for?”

The human’s tone is so matter-of-fact that I have to remind myself what we’re talking about. We aren’t discussing a simple agreement. As if the Warden is reminding me of a promise I made to turn off the light after I leave a room. He’s asking me to fight someone. He’s reminding me to die. Is that too much to hope for? I clench my jaw. “What do you want?” I ask through my teeth. I know I don’t have power here. But maybe I can make a deal.

The Warden leans closer to me, putting its elbows on the desk. “I want you gone,” it says. Any false neutrality it had been adopting has now vanished in the course of seconds. All that’s left now is a look of pure loathing. “I want you out of here. You don’t belong in this prison. You don’t belong anywhere. Your kind has no place in the universe. Not anymore. Tomorrow, I am going to march you into the yard and I am going to wait until your fellow prisoners pass judgement. That’s what I want, elf. I want you gone.”

It stares at me. “I don’t need anyone’s help to survive,” I lie. A wisp of a smile flickers across the Warden’s face.

“You’re a leech,” it says, pronouncing each syllable with harsh accuracy. “You suck off the charity of others. That’s all you do. You may moan and groan that you don’t like the taste of blood, but without it you will wither and die. I don’t expect you to last ten minutes without a host.”

I shake my head, my gaze dropping to the desk. “I’m not a parasite,” I say. “I give back. I help the people who help me. And I can look after myself without them.”

The Warden nods. It’s a polite gesture. Polite and disbelieving. “All right,” it says. “I believe you. Tomorrow you can prove it.” Then it looks away from me, over toward the door. “Guard!”

The door opens, and Alpha sticks its head into the room. “Sir?”

The Warden waves a finger at me. “Back in its cell,” it says. The Warden picks up one of the files on its desk and thumbs through it, ignoring me as Alpha and Beta enter the office and unstrap me from the chair. I’m escorted out of the room. When we reach my cell, Alpha points to the bench and orders me to sit down. I obey. When I’m seated, the human comes over and swipes its card through the slot in the handcuffs. The green light blinks three times, and the metal restraints fold open. Alpha takes the cuffs with it as it leaves the cell. When the red metal door starts to slide closed, I stand up from the bench and step toward the hallway. I’m not trying to escape. I know that escape is impossible. But it feels like the right thing to do, approaching the closing door. Then the door covers the entrance completely and the lock clangs into place. The noise rings through the cell. Soon the echo dies out and is replaced by silence.
I stare at the red metal for close to a minute. Then I walk over to the sink and turn on the faucet. I wash my hands, shaking them into the basin until they dry. I leave the water running. I like the way it sounds. I like it so much that I turn the handle farther, as far as it will go. Then I walk over to the bench and sit down. I pull up my legs, folding them under me. I lean against the wall. I close my eyes. I imagine that the running water comes not from a faucet, but from a stream. A brook. The brook in the woods. I’m not sitting on the bench. I’m sitting on the soft ground of the tree-shrouded bank. It’s cool in the shade, and the day is warm. The air is pleasantly humid. I can see the green all around me, the gorgeous hues of color that life so easily displays. The hues that only the most skilled artist can hope to render. I settle in by the brook, looking around me at the trees and the forest. The giant boulder, covered in lichen. In front of me, the stream runs cold. The water is always cold here. It’s like liquid ice, splashing clean and frigid. The banks of the stream are steep and moist, carved from loose soil. There are a few small plants growing on the banks, grasses and newly-sprouted saplings. There’s one small tree that grows almost horizontally above the rushing water. One flood is all it would take to wash the tree away.

Suddenly, even as I watch, the water level of the brook falls. It drops quickly, and within seconds the stream bed is completely dry. Not a drop of water left. The soil isn’t even moist.

I open my eyes. I look over at the faucet. Nothing’s coming out of it anymore. Confused, I stand up and walk over to it, jiggling the handle, turning it off, turning it back on again. Nothing. Then I realize what must be happening. There must be a water-control system in place here. To stop convicts from using too much water. Like me. It makes sense.

I kick the exposed pipes under the sink with my foot. This doesn’t change anything, but I bruise my big toe. It’s a satisfying injury. So satisfying that I kick the pipes again, this time with my other foot. I limp back to the bench, both feet hurting. I glare at the sink. I was just starting to settle in. The Warden’s question echoes in my head. Is that too much to hope for?

My father returns home the next morning. I never find out where he went. I don’t care enough to ask. Normally, I eat my breakfast at the dining room table, alongside Estas and Reyin. But today, the last thing I want - the very last thing - is to be trapped at the same table as those two. Instead, I eat breakfast in the sitting room. As always, the holo strip is on, and Tain and Mahdtroh are onscreen, rehashing the news from the last few days. Normally, the lifespan for a piece of news is only a few hours. But recently, if it concerns the aliens, old news can be repeated over and over for days or weeks until new information comes in.

For the past several days, Tain and Mahdtroh have been talking about how we’ve started sharing image files with the humans. This news was incredible when it first broke. Finally, after months, we were able to see what the aliens look like. We were all stunned to see them, awed to see that the aliens look so much like ourselves. Their ears are less pointed and their pupils are round, but other than that the differences are almost
nonexistent. No one expected that the aliens would be so familiar. We haven't been able to fully translate their language yet, but no one doubts that this breakthrough will come soon.

I'm usually enthralled by the news. But this morning I hardly glance at the holo as I eat my breakfast on the couch. I try to tune out the anchors' voices. I don't want to hear about the aliens. They're the ones who started this. They're responsible for my father's insanity. If they didn't exist, I'd be eating breakfast in the dining room with my parents. Instead, I'm hiding in the sitting room. I don't want to hear about them today.

I head out of the house soon after I finish breakfast, walking to school. I turn down the street toward Alaseel's central park. I usually love the park. As I walk toward it, I see the trees rising up in a solid walk, curving together around the circular perimeter of the park. On most days, I love the experience of walking into the park. I'll be passing through the center of the city, I'll step onto one of the park's paths, and four steps later I'll be in the middle of a forest. It's like passing through a magic portal. The trees are planted close together so that they form a thick screen along the path. The path curves as it enters the park, creating a kind of lightcatch that prevents anyone outside the park from looking in, and anyone inside the park from seeing that they're at the heart of the planet's most industrialized location. All I see are the trees. Normally, I love passing through the trees that encircle the park, with their strong trunks and branches that arch overhead. It's cool and it's quiet. I usually love it here. But this morning I don't love anything.

I glance up at a tree branch as I walk past. I see a large white bird looking down on me, fancy light-blue highlights adorning the feathers on its face. It's a pretty design. The bird watches me with milky yellow eyes. It's not a real bird. It's a biorobot, and I can tell from its white-and-blue coloring that this one is with the stävnemā fen mes. I see them all over the city. They help keep an eye on things. Make sure everyone's safe. I would never say this out loud, but I prefer the birds to the actual patrols of stävnemā fen mes. I know that the soldiers are only there to protect me, but I've never liked the way that their tinted helmets always hid their faces. It's much nicer to see a pretty bird sitting peacefully on a branch than to be approached by four armed officers. I nod at the bird. I never know if this makes a difference, but I try to be polite to the birds. It can't hurt. The bird ruffles its feathers in response, and continues watching me as I move on.

In the middle of the park, parking the exact center of Alaseel, the forest clears and gives way to a cobblestone-paved area. It's made of concentric stepped rings, each smaller ring dug below the one before it. A the bottom of the steps is a large, flat space for gatherings and festivals. This morning, there's only one other person at the center of the park. It's a man of about my height, the curls in his brownish hair betraying his lower-class status. He's standing still, arms crossed over his chest, neck craning back as he looks up at the sky. He turns around as I enter the space. He seems a bit surprised to see me. "Void," he says. Good morning.

It's Ahlem, my father's friend and business partner. I grit my teeth. Bad luck. Of all the people I could have bumped into today, it had to be him. I've never actually liked Ahlem. It's nothing that he does - nothing I can put my finger on, at least - but something about him always gets under my skin. Estas thinks Ahlem is one of the finest people in the world. They're close friends. They tell each other everything. Ahlem must know what happened. It makes me shudder, just thinking about it. This is so humiliating. "Good morning, Ahlem," I say. I do my best to sound cordia. "How are you?"
He nods politely. “I’m doing well,” he says. Then he glances over at the far side of the paved space, the direction I was walking in. “Are you on your way to school?”

“I am. I’m actually running a bit late today,” I lie, starting to move off again. “Ah, that’s a shame,” he says as I move away. “Are you sure you don’t have a minute to talk?”

I barely even slow down. “I’m afraid not. I’m in a rush. Have a good day.”

For anyone else, I’m sure that this would be enough of a signal to end the conversation. But I hear him trying again. “How about half a minute, then?”

I can’t believe it. I’m several feet past him now, my back turned to him, and Ahlem still hasn’t gotten the message. Despite myself, I come to a reluctant stop. Annoyed as I am, I don’t want to be rude. “...Maybe,” I say after a pause, trying to get across all of my reluctance in the one word. “But I am in a hurry.”

“Thank you, Void,” Ahlem says, smiling slightly at me. Like my father, Ahlem was born at the bottom of the lower-class. He was never taught to maintain a neutral face. I sometimes enjoy it when Estas smiles at me, but on Ahlem the gesture only ever seems borderline-vulgar. “I’ve known your father for a long time,” Ahlem continues. “It’s coming up on thirty years now, and I know that whenever he makes a decision, it’s only after he considers his options carefully.” There it is. I knew it. I knew this was where he was headed. I hate the fact that Ahlem has brought this up. What gives him the right to say this? What gives him the right to humiliate me? “You’re father always thinks things through,” Ahlem says, “And he’s almost always right.”

“Almost always, yes,” I say. I can hear the venom in my voice. It’s getting harder for me to hold my anger back. I can feel my frustrations starting to bubble up, and I feel consumed by so much anger and helplessness that it hurts. Ahlem’s eyebrows come together at my tone.

“He only wants what’s best for you,” he says. His voice is still mostly even, but I can hear the undercurrents of irritation. Good, I think. Let him feel it, too.

“He wants something for me” I retort. “Who knows what?”

Ahlem is physically taken aback by the sharpness of my tone, his head rocking back on his neck. Suddenly, his eyes look furious. Confused and hurt, too. He speaks, sounding as if he’s actively working to reign himself in. “You should be grateful he says, tone irate, “for everything Estas does for you. And you should realize that this hasn’t been easy for him, either. Do you know how much it hurt him when you spat in his face? You should be grateful for - “

I punch him. Right in the jaw. My right fist clenches, my arm pulls back, and I hurl my knuckles into the side of his face. I’ve never punched someone before. I’m surprised, both my how much it hurts my hand, and by the amount of power I’m able to summon up. I knock him all the way over, so that he’s lying a foot or so away on the cobblestones. He makes a grunting sound as my fist connects, but when he’s on the ground he’s completely silent. He stares up at me, a look of shock and absolute fury covering his face. I glare right back down at him, nursing my knuckles and seething.

Above me, I hear a painfully high-pitched screech. I jerk around to look up, just in time to see a white cannonball hurtling toward me. Before I can react, the bird rams me in the center of my chest, pitching me backwards onto the ring of steps. I tumble and roll from the force of the hit, coughing and trying to get air back into my lungs. When I try to stand up, the large white bird is on me again, bludgeoning me with its wings and letting out its
constant, painful screech. I don't know if it's the same bird as I saw before. They all look alike. All I care about right now is covering my head and trying to protect my face. The bird isn't landing blows on any part of me that it could seriously damage, but I hardly even notice. I'm too busy trying to defend myself. Trying and failing. The bird is everywhere - over me, beside me, on top of me, behind me. It moves too quickly for me to hit it, and my wild flailing isn't doing anything to frighten it away. Then, just as it's landing another blow to my shoulder, I hear Ahlem yelling at it.

"No! Leave her alone! It's all right! I'm fine!" To my surprise, the bird pauses, pulling back slightly. I curl into a ball, making myself ready for when it attacks me again. The bird looks over at Ahlem. He's standing now, hands extending toward the bird in a calming gesture. "It's all right," he says. "I'm not pressing charges. You're not needed here." The bird looks at him, tilting its head. It screeches. Then, after a moment of hesitation, its talons release from their grip on my backpack. I stay hunkered down, even as the creature flaps over to land in a nearby tree. It's gaze never leaves us.

I feel like I'm in shock. Shakely, I climb to my feet, brushing dust off my clothing. My left shoulder aches, and I can tell I'll have a bruise there tomorrow. I stare at the bird, watching carefully for any move it might make. But it's staying still now. Watching. Ahlem stares back at it. His arm is still raised halfway toward it. "Really," he says to the bird. "It's all right. I'm fine. There's no trouble here." Then he looks over at me. His eyes are still angry, but his body language is protective. It's a strange combination.

"After all," he says, "I might have deserved that. We should all know that trying to help Void is a crime." He's still addressing the bird, even though he's looking straight at me now. I swallow. Then, glancing frequently back at the bird, I start walking quickly away. The bird doesn't come after me. It just watches me. It's terrifying. Ahlem watches me, too. When I get to the forest, I start jogging. When I round the first bend in the path and I'm out of their line of sight, I start sprinting. I run all the way to school. I don't stop until the doors are closed securely behind me.
Chapter Nine

The sky is a monochrome blue-gray color, extending in every direction without once being broken or detailed by spots of clouds. The sun is bright and round, sitting squarely at the top of its arc. It hasn’t moved in hours. It hasn’t moved in days. In fact, it hasn’t moved an inch since I got here. Not that it should have. Lightbulbs aren’t particularly prone to wandering about.

In all truth, the walls and ceiling of the cell look nothing like the sky. They look like walls. Concrete. Painted the most boring color imaginable. And the single caged lightbulb bears only the faintest resemblance to the sun. They both put out light. That’s all the two have in common. But, lying on my back, stretching my arms up to cushion my head against the hard bench, I’d like to think that I’m looking at the sky. I’d like to think that I’m anyplace but here.

I’ve already had lunch. The tray is back on its shelf built into the door, safely tucked away and ready to be removed. From experience, I know that the exercise period never comes too long after I’m finished lunch. Maybe half an hour after, forty-five minutes at the most. I’m frightened. I don’t know what will happen down there today. Without Zach, I’m all the way back to square one.

Not quite, I tell myself forcefully. It might be true that I don’t have Zach’s help anymore, but I’m still in a better place now than when I first went down to the gymnasium. Today, I know the layout of the floor. I know which humans to watch. I’ve fully healed from my injuries. The humans are starting to get used to my presence. This last one should be especially helpful. When I was first brought through those barricade doors, I was the center of attention for each and every one of the humans. But over the past few days, plenty of the inmates seem to have dismissed me as nothing too special, nothing worth their attention. This is very good for me. If they don’t care about me, then maybe they’ll leave me alone. Maybe today won’t be so bad, after all. Maybe I don’t really need Zach’s protection, the way I told the Warden. Maybe there’s no danger anymore.

Maybe. It’s not a strong word. It suggests uncertainty, a chord of doubt running through the air. But it isn’t the ‘maybe’ that frightens me. I’m afraid of the ‘maybe not.’

A droplet of water drips from the head of the faucet, splashing into the sink with a soft boom. I leap off the bench, whirling around to face the sink basin. My heart’s racing, and I realize that my hands are clenched into fists. I stare at the sink, trying to calm myself down. It was just a water droplet. It can’t hurt me. Just a water droplet. I close my eyes, reaching my hand up to massage the tip of my right ear. When I do, I find that my hand’s shaking. I’m almost disappointed in myself. I’m almost ashamed. I should be able to hold it together better than this. Nothing’s happened yet, after all. I don’t even know for sure that anything is going to happen. For all I know, I might enter the gymnasium, walk around for an hour, never be disturbed, and leave without a scratch. It could happen. At the very least, I need to calm down. Jumping a foot whenever a drop of water splashes into the sink is unacceptable. True, the splash was the first sound I’ve heard in a while, but that’s no excuse. It’s unacceptable to be so tense.

I take a deep breath, pumping my lungs full of air and feeling my heart pound against my ribs. I hold the breath until my heart slows down, finally reaching a mild, easy pace, much better than the wild gallop it was doing before. I sit down on the bench. I slouch
forward, elbows on knees. I let my head hang. I feel jittery, as if I’m slowly vibrating out of my skin. I think to myself that I’d feel better if everything was just over with. It’s the waiting, I believe, that’s got me so worked up. The not knowing. The silence. The sense of time ticking down. It seems strange, but I wish the wait was over. I wish Alpha and Beta were here right now, right this minute, cuffing me and taking me to the elevator. How odd that I’d wish the object of my fear to come more quickly. How odd. But it’s true. I fear going to the gymnasium. It frightens me almost to be point of being sick. But I wish I didn’t have to wait. I wish the wait was over. I wish time moved more quickly.

This thought almost makes me laugh. As if a force of nature would change its course just for me. I clench my jaw, squeezing my eyes tightly shut. I wait.

I shovel fork-fulls of dinner into my mouth, trying to get it over with as quickly as possible. If it were up to me, I wouldn’t be eating dinner at the table at all. I’d be eating in my room, probably. The holostrip room is no longer private enough. It doesn’t have a door I can close behind me. After school, I was nervous about leaving the safety of the building. I didn’t know what would be waiting for me outside. I’ve never been in trouble with the stävnemā fen mes before. I once saw someone else getting arrested in the Market district one day, tranquilized and hauled away for stealing a pocket-full of nutrient sticks, but I’ve always prided myself on staying far away from trouble. I’ve felt horrible all day about what happened at the park. I never should have acted that way. I don’t know what came over me. It was stupid. It was immature. On the walk home from the Academic district, I avoided going anywhere near the park. I went through the Market district, breaking into a sweat whenever I saw a patrol of stävnemā fen mes looking my way. But I was never stopped or questioned. I saw a few more white birds, and I imagined that they were all staring at me. They may have been. Or they may have been paying no more attention to me than they usually do. It didn’t matter to me. I kept my head down and walked quickly.

I avoided my parents for the next few hours. I furtively did schoolwork in the confines of my room, window closed, curtain pulled. And then Reyin came and knocked on my door and insisted that I come to the table for dinner. I tried saying I had work to do. The excuse didn’t work. Reying didn’t give me a choice. She marched me out to the dining room, sitting me down at the table. I’m only a foot or two from Estas. It’s the closest we’ve been since we were sitting at his worktable. I’m not comfortable. Not at all. I don’t look at him. And he ignores me, too.

Dinner itself is fine. I really don’t pay much attention to the food. There’s no conversation at the table, not even between my parents. There’s an occasional scrape as a fork hits a plate, but other than this the room is quiet. Estas is focusing down on his meal, eating through it with mechanical precision. Reyin is eating the same way she always does, with small, polite mouthfuls, all carefully chewed before the next one is bitten into. She keeps looking between my father and myself, eyes flitting back and forth between the two of us as if she can’t decide who needs closer watching. I’m not angry at her anymore. This doesn’t mean that I feel comfortable around her - I don’t - but I’m not angry. And I’m not entirely sure why. After all, she’s done enough to make my life harder. And I’m hurt that she’s refused to argue my case with Estas, refused to help me. It hurts. But I’m not angry with her. My father, on the other hand, I’m furious with. The feeling’s just as strong as it was two days ago. If not even stronger.
Without any warning, Estas looks up at me. “I saw Ahlem today,” he blurs out. I don’t look at him. I’m in the midst of chewing. It’s about time to swallow, but the action suddenly seems impossible. It’s as if there’s something blocking my throat. Estas continues. “He said he bumped into you in the park this morning.”

Finally, I’m able to force the food to go down my throat. It requires a drink of water from my glass. I wipe my mouth with my napkin, staring down at the plate. I’m not sure what I can say. I have a great feeling of dread, a horrible sense that bad things are just around the corner. All day, I’ve been hoping that Ahlem wouldn’t mention anything to my father. I’ve been hoping beyond hope that the events in the park would just blow over, without anyone ever needing to know. I hoped that Ahlem would be so kind as to do this for me. But Estas is staring at me, and I know that my hopes haven’t paid off. Estas is waiting for me to say something. I’d rather not, but I don’t think I have a choice. So I try to keep it as simple as possible. “Yes,” I mumble. “I saw him on my way to school.”

“He says you had a brief conversation.” Estas isn’t letting up. He’s still looking at me, fork balanced in his hand, half-loaded with dinner.

“Yes,” I say. “I was in a hurry.”

“He said that he tried giving you some advice.” Estas says this, and then there’s a pause at the table. I can’t say anything. How could I? What could I say? I can feel the conversation careening toward the cliff. I can’t think of any way to stop it. I keep silent. And then Estas continues, and what he says surprises me. “He told me that he must have phrased it wrong, and that he offended you.” I blink. Ahlem said that? That’s not too bad. He’s not blaming me. He’s taking responsibility for offending me. That’s not too bad at all. In my mind, I see the conversation turn slightly, heading at a new angle that will miss the cliff by just a few feet. And then Estas says one more thing, and the conversation reverts right back to its old, deadly path. “He said that one of the stävnemā fen birds got involved.”

“What?! What happened?” Reyin drops her fork, glaring at me with a sudden mix of fury and shock. It’s not so much the intensity of her anger that frightens me, but the knowledge that she must be much, much more angry than she’s letting on in order for anything to have broken through her calm mask. I hunch over my plate, trying to be invisible.

“He didn’t say.” Estas is still looking at me, but he’s addressing my mother now. “All he said would tell me is that it was his fault, and that he offers Void his apologies.” Again, hearing this, I feel the smallest hint of hope. Maybe Estas will never find out what happened. Ahlem hasn’t told him. And he certainly won’t be hearing it from me. Maybe it’ll be all right. Thinking this, I’m starting to feel a fraction better. Then Estas goes on, stating, “He had a bruise on the left side of his jaw today, and it looked fresh.” I close my eyes. I can’t help it. I know I should keep them open, remain impassive, unmoving, unmoved. It’s a dead giveaway to flinch. But closing my eyes is reflexive. It comes without thought. I feel horrible right now, and all I want is to be left alone. “Void?” It’s Estas. I’m sure he’s still looking at me. I don’t respond. I don’t move. “Void, I want you to tell me exactly what happened today.”

“Nothing happened,” I whisper. I’m sick. I could throw up at any moment. Estas sounds even madder when he responds.

“Don’t lie to me,” he growls. “Tell me what happened, and tell me why a bird got involved.”
“Nothing happened,” I repeat, louder this time. I’m desperate. I just need to get away.

My father stares. “Void-

“STOP IT!” I scream, hitting the table with my fist, making the plates and silverware jump. It’s a miracle the entire glass top doesn’t shatter. “Just...” I don’t know what to say. I feel too horrible. “...Stop.”

There’s silence in the room following my outburst. I half expect Estas to start yelling at me again, this time for losing my temper. As if he can talk. Or, I expect Reyin to launch into a huge lecture about the virtues of staying calm all the time, never showing emotion, never breaking down, never revealing the thoughts inside my head. I hate these lectures. And it’s not as if Reyin is perfect, either. She occasionally lets something through, like a moment ago when she reacted to the news that I’d attracted the attention of a bird. She’s not perfect. She’s only close. Much closer than I am.

I expect all these things, but none of them come true. Instead, Estas heaves a tired sigh. “Void, I know you’re angry with me,” he says. I could laugh. It’s such an understatement. “But you have no excuse,” he continues, “for taking that anger out on my friends. That is disgraceful.” He pauses for a moment, as if letting the message sink in. He needn’t bother. I get it. I understand perfectly well. I understood long before he started talking, even. Estas looks down at his plate. He wets his lips, drawing in a half-breath. I’ve never liked waiting for a person to say something. It’s annoying, watching someone come up with the right words. I always find myself wishing they’d just spit it out. Estas clears his throat. “Now,” he says, with a note in his voice that signals a change in subject. “If you wanted to have a calm discussion about why we’re delaying the start of your specialization, I’d be more than willing to have that talk.” I don’t say anything. There’s nothing for me to say. I don’t want to have that discussion. I know why he’s delaying. And I don’t want to talk about. Estas had paused, and now he continues. “But I won’t change my mind,” he says. Again, I don’t reply. Of course he won’t be changing his mind. He never does. He doesn’t need to tell me that. I start massaging the tip of my right ear, pressing it and rolling it between thumb and forefinger. It gives me a good excuse to look down. Estas sighs again. He reaches forward, grabbing his glass as if to take a drink of water. But he doesn’t lift it. He just holds it there. Then, in a quiet voice, he says, “I’d like to make it up to you in some other way.”

I look over at him. “You what?”

“I’d like to make it up to you,” he repeats. He’s not making eye contact with me. He looks nervous now, almost embarrassed. Estas shrugs his shoulders. “I know you don’t have the arrows I gave you anymore.” He looks sheepishly at me. “How would you like it if I made you another set?”

I stare at him, mouth slightly open. I’m stunned. I’m completely taken by surprise. I never would have predicted this. It makes no sense. What could be going through my father’s head? What could he be thinking right now? More arrows? What’re they supposed to do? “How would that help me?” I ask.

My father finally takes a drink from the glass he’s been holding. He takes a moment to swallow, then he clears his throat. “Would you like a new set?” he asks, as if he hadn’t heard my question. I’m quiet. Out of the corner of my eye, I can see Reyin studying Estas. I can’t tell what she’s thinking, but I’m sure it can’t be all that far from my own thoughts.
“How would a bunch of arrows help?” I ask. “You’re forbidding me from starting my life. How would a bunch of sharpened sticks make that better?”

My father gestures with his hand, trying to articulate something. “I’m offering to give you a new set of arrows,” he says again, looking down at the glass.

“I know what you’re offering,” I speak clearly, pronouncing each word - each letter - with exacting precision. “I. Don’t. Want. It.” I glare at him. He’s not looking at me. His jaw is clenched and he’s fumbling with the glass now, rotating it and tilting it on the table. For just a split second, he looks completely helpless. Completely ineffective. He looks like he’s barely able to walk on his own. He looks like a child. Then the moment passes, and he’s just my father, angry and afraid of the future, offering me stupid things in an attempt to fix some of the damage he’s done. I’m about to start talking again, saying something just to hurt him, when Reyin suddenly interrupts.

“It’s a beautiful night outside,” she says. Her voice is calm and gentle, low and silky. No one else can have a voice like that. I’ve only ever heard these tones like that coming from Reyin, and only at special times. Normally, I love it when her voice goes this way. It’s soothing and comfortable, beautiful to listen to. But right now, I’m only angry at her for butting in. “Void,” she continues, “come with me to the front step.”

“No.” I don’t even turn to look at her. I say the one word with conviction, an assurity that I almost never feel. But right now, I know exactly what I want.

“Now.” The velvety tone has gone out of her voice, but Reyin still sounds perfectly calm. Still, there’s no mistaking the force she puts behind the order. Without waiting for a response, my mother stands up from the table and leaves the room. I don’t move. I stay exactly as I am, glaring at Estas as he remains frozen, looking angrily at the glass of water clenched in his hand. Neither of us says anything. Neither of us budges. I have no intention of following Reyin outside. None.

Then, after many seconds of sitting as if trapped in amber, I close my eyes and clench my jaw. I stay like this for another moment or two. Then I roughly push my chair back and get up from the table. I storm out of the room, making my way across the house to the front door. When I grasp the handle and force the door open, I’m greeted by a rush of warm night air. The street is quiet. The houses all around us have their lights on, but I don’t see anyone else. I don’t even hear the tramp of boots that accompanies the patrols of stävnemā fen mes. It’s peaceful out here. I don’t like it. It doesn’t fit with my mood.

Reyin is standing a few feet away from me at the top of the steps. Her hands are clasped behind her back, and she’s looking up at the night sky. I glance up, unconsciously following her lead. The sky is dark, peppered by only a handful of stars. Alaseel has no moon. There aren’t many clouds, either, right now. The lights from the city float up, getting caught in the atmosphere and reflected back down, make a kind of softly glowing dome over the whole area.

“It’s a beautiful night,” Reyin says. I’ll never admit it, but I agree with her. It is beautiful out here. I don’t say anything. Reyin is quiet for a minute, looking peacefully around. Her eyes scan over everything but me. Then she asks me, “Do you want the arrows?”

“No,” I say. I’m surprised by how calm and quiet my voice is. It’s almost as if I were perfectly relaxed. This isn’t how I feel, though. I’m not furious the way I was a moment ago, but ‘calm’ is certainly the wrong word. Maybe ‘reeling’ us closer to the truth.
“All right, then.” Reyin makes it sound like no big deal. As if I’d said no to a piece of fruit. No big deal at all. I’d expected the question when I came out here, but not the easy response to my answer. I’m relieved. I can feel the muscles in my shoulders and neck letting go of the cramped knots that they’d formed into. I hadn’t even realized that they were tensed. There’s quiet on the front step for another minute or two, with neither of us talking, neither of us moving. And then in a very small voice, scarcely more than a whisper, Reyin asks, “What happened in the park? What did Ahlem say to you?”

I don’t answer immediately. In fact, when I first hear the question, I have no intention of answering. She doesn’t need to know. I don’t want her to know. The whole thing will just blow over if I keep my mouth shut and pretend that nothing happened. Nobody needs to ever find out. But then, just as I’m resolving to act as if I didn’t hear her, I find myself answering. “He started talking,” I say, “about how wise he thinks Estas is.”

My mother nods. She’s still looking out at the street, her back partially turned towards me. She looks like she was expecting my answer. She doesn’t seem surprised at all. I, on the other hand, am completely unprepared for her response. “Then I hope that bruise on his face came from you,” she states. “He deserved it.” I blink. What? Did I hear that right? Could this be possible? Could my mother really be commending me for punching someone? That would be completely unlike her. Reyin is always focused on etiquette and control. Could she really be taking the news so well that I punched her husband’s best friend? No, I think. It’s not possible. Reyin would be beside herself to learn that I’d attacked someone. I must have heard her wrong. That’s the only possible explanation. And, yet, despite its impossibility, I seem to have heard my mother right. She continues, still facing away from me. "It wasn't his place to give that kind of advice," she says. "Ahlem has a bad habit of inserting himself where he doesn't belong. Is he pressing charges?"

This last part seems to come as more of an afterthought. I shake my head. “No.”

“That’s good.” Reyin lets out a deep breath in a sigh. “So, no harm done, then.”

I’m not sure I agree. I think plenty of harm was done. And I was irresponsible enough to do it. So what if Ahlem isn’t pressing charges? So what is if the stävnemā fen mes won’t be knocking down our front door in the next few hours? Estas is still furious with me. And Ahlem hated me now, I’m sure of it. With only these two things, it sounds as if more than enough harm was done. I’m amazed that Reyin can’t see this. Surely it must be clear. What’s special about her that allows my mother to walk through a calamity and come out talking about the weather? “How do you stay so calm?” I ask, feeling hollow. I want to know. I want to know the secret to not caring.

My mother tilts her head a few degrees to one side, thinking. This is a movement that I always associate with her. She does it whenever she’s seriously considering something. I’ve seen other people try it, tilting their heads while they think. They always come off looking strange. But not Reyin. I’ve never seen anyone else look so majestic. I wish with all my heart that I could be like that. Perfect. Calm. Graceful. My mother makes a low humming sound. “I don’t know,” she says after a moment of thought. "It's just the way I am. My parents were very proud of me. They wanted a robot for a daughter, and they got one."

I can hear the disdain in her voice. But I don’t feel that way. I believe it’s a great gift that she can stay so in control. “Can you teach me?” I ask.

Reyin makes the humming sound again. “No,” she murmurs. "I've been trying for years, and I don't think it can be taught." She turns to me now, looking me straight in the eye. “And I’m glad. I wouldn't want you to go through life without feelings.”
I swallow, then look down slightly. "But you don’t want me like this, either," I say. It’s not a question. It’s a statement. I know I’m right. And Reyin doesn’t argue with me. "You’ll calm down," she says. "You always do." She looks out at the street again, surveying the houses and the pavement. In the distance, I hear the scream of one of the stävnemā fen mes birds. It must be arresting someone, and making the city that much safer. Normally, I feel comforted to know that such a force is looking out for the good of Alaseel. But tonight, I feel a twinge of pity for the person getting arrested. The bird’s scream doesn’t last long, and it quickly finishes its job. The night is quiet again. On the street, two men walk past, talking casually. They don’t acknowledge our presence, and we don’t acknowledge theirs. Anything else would be rude. Soon, the men have turned a corner and are out of sight. Reyin heaves a large sigh. "It is a lovely night," she says. I don’t respond. I’m too busy wishing that I could make Reyin proud. I wish I knew how. Then my mother turns around and starts heading inside. "Good night, Void," she says. "I’ll see you in the morning. And don’t worry about Estas. I’ll make sure he understands."

With that, she disappears through the front door, closing it behind her. I stare at the door for a few seconds, wondering if it’s locked. Probably not. I would have heard the latch click. And besides, my mother wouldn’t lock me out. Even if I deserved it. Even if she believed I deserved it. So I don’t know why I’m anxious, looking at the closed door, wondering if I can get back in. It’s many minutes before I try the handle. And when it turns, I feel a rush of relief. I enter the house quickly. I lock the door after me, and then I quietly go to bed.

_Clang!_ I scramble to my feet just as the door opens. Out in the hallway, I see Alpha and Beta standing side by side, staring in at me. Alpha points at the bench. "Sit down," it grunts. I obey. I’d have to be stupid to refuse. The human steps inside the cell, producing the pair of handcuffs from the back of its belt. I hold out my wrists, and the metal restraints click into place. The guard motions for me to leave the small room. In the hallway, Alpha and Beta herd me in the direction of the elevators. As the painted red metal doors flash past on either side of us, I start to wonder what would happen if I suddenly broke and ran. I know I wouldn’t escape. I probably wouldn’t make it eight feet. But still, I wonder what the guards would do. Would they chase after me and tackle me to the ground? Would they pull out their handguns and shoot at me? Either way, would they continue bringing me to the gymnasium? Or would they turn around and march me back to the cell? And if this second scenario is the case, then would running be worth it? It’s possible. The most dangerous place for me is in the gymnasium, I think. Anything that delays my arrival, even for a short time, might very well be worth it. But I don’t have the nerve to run. I’ve spent years getting used to taking orders. From the stävnemā fen mes. From the professors at school. From my parents. I’m not used to disobeying. I delay my run for so long that I lose the chance. We’ve come to the elevators. There’s nowhere I can run here. It’s a dead end, with the two humans plugging the only exit.

Alpha slides its card through the slot in the elevator control panel, and presses its thumb against the small glass plate. A green light on the panel flashes once, twice, three times, verifying its acceptance of Alpha’s identity. A short moment later, there’s a quiet _ding!_ One of the elevators opens. Alpha and Beta escort me inside. Once again, the three of us form a loose triangle. I’m at the tip, facing the metal doors. They slide shut, only a few inches from the tip of my nose. The metal box starts to descend.
My eyes are drawn to the figures reflected in the buffed metal of the doors. The images waver slightly, and I take a moment to study the distorted picture of myself. The picture is cut directly in half by the line separating the left elevator door from the right. The two sides of the picture don’t exactly match up. One of them is tilted slightly. The eyes aren’t at the same height, and bits of my nose are cut off. It’s not a flattering picture.

Of course, neither are the reflected images of Alpha and Beta. They both look hideous. Monstrously disfigured, bare shadows of a real life form. Cruelly, I think to myself that the reflections aren’t all that far off. I turn my head, looking at the reflection of Beta. “What time is it?” I ask. The reflection turns and looks back at me. I don’t think it’s a distortion in the metal that makes the human’s eyes seem to fill with venom. I think back to the last question I asked Beta. About losing someone. Seeing the intensity in the reflection’s eyes, I know that it must have been someone close. When I’d asked my current question about the time, I’d been honestly curious. Seeing the response, though, any curiosity is wiped away and in its place come fear. Fear and dread.

But it’s a strange kind of fear. It’s not the kind that paralyses me. The kind that shuts me down, closing off my abilities to think and to move. This fear is stupid-fear. It’s the kind that makes me brave. Enables me to do things and say things that would otherwise be strictly off-limits. Things that are off-limits for a reason. In this way, I suppose stupid-fear also closes off my ability to think. The problem is that it enhances my ability to act. I turn my head, changing my focus over to Alpha’s reflection. “And you,” I say. “Do you know what time it is?”

Alpha’s image closes its eyes slowly. It works its jaw back and forth a few times. Then it looks at me. Not meeting my eyes by looking at my reflection. It stares at the physical back of my head. That all it does for several seconds. Stares at me. Then, in a fraction of a second, far too quickly for me to react, it grabs a fistful of my hair and punches my head forward into the metal doors. I cry out, from pain and from shock, crumpling to the floor. My vision blurs. I blink my eyes, and am overcome by nausea. It’s all I can do not to retch. The elevator looks and feels like it’s spinning in jerky circles, out of control, plummeting, rocketing, rising, falling, imploding and breaking to bits. My ears are ringing. Out of nowhere, I feel two hands grab my shoulders and hoist me to my feet. Distantly, as if from underwater, I hear shouting. I can’t make out the individual words. I can’t even make out who’s speaking.

Timidly, the hands holding me let go, but quickly grab me again as I start to fall back down. My forehead aches and pounds. It feels like a mountain fell on me. I realize that it’s Beta propping me up. It’s now only using one hand. With the other, it’s gesturing wildly at Alpha yelling something that I can’t quite seem to understand. Then the world shifts, and I can make out a few words. Beta’s yelling about “a camera up there,” pointing furiously at the ceiling of the elevator. Alpha seems to be shrugging its partner off. Telling it to calm down. Telling it not to worry. Telling it that “she’s fine.” But I must not have heard this last part right. It makes no sense. Nobody in their right mind would think that I’m fine. I’m not fine. I’m not fine at all.

Beta tries letting go of me again, and I sway dangerously. But by some miracle I stay upright. I reach my cuffed hands up, cradling the front of my skull, eyes closed. When I take my hands down a moment later, things look different. It takes me several seconds of staring to realize that the elevator doors must have opened. I guess I missed the chime. I’m looking out into the antechamber of the gymnasium.
Someone pushes me from behind, and I stumble out the elevator. I shake my head, trying to clear it, but stop quickly as things get worse. I turn around, looking at the two guards. I keep having to blink. I can't seem to keep my eyes open for more than a second. The lights are all so bright. It's too much. "Can I sit down?" I ask. The guards, appearing to me as blurry silhouettes, look at me funny. They don't seem to understand me. Which is too bad because I really do need to sit down. I repeat my question. Alpha gives me a disgusted glare. Then it shoves me, telling me to keep moving. The force of the blow twirls me around so I'm facing forward again. I almost throw up. The world's already spinning, I can handle it, barely, but not if the both of us are doing pirouettes. I start asking again if I can sit down, but then it occurs to me that I'm speaking in Ohnieil. Not wonder the guards can't understand me. I close my eyes. I try swallowing some of the saliva that's been building up in my mouth, but feel even more nauseated as the warm, sticky fluid slides down the back of my throat. "Can I sit down?" I ask, this time making sure to use Human Standard.

Alpha looks at me, and the hate and malice it feels toward me are palpable. Slightly off to one side, Beta is glancing rapidly back and forth between its partner and me. It looks extremely uncomfortable with this situation. Its eyes flicker over the antechamber. I'm sure it's checking if the other guards down here are paying attention. It doesn't look comfortable by what it sees. Alpha pushes me again, grabbing my shoulder and forcibly turning me around to face front. I only barely manage to keep my balance. I stand for a moment, blinking rapidly, seeing only blurry outlines. My head is pounding, loud with every beat of my heart. I watch as the lights in the room flash with every beat, then dim between beats. Thump, bright. Rest, dark. Thump, bright. Rest, dark. I'm going to be sick.

Suddenly, I don't need permission to sit down anymore. I take one step toward the barricade, in the direction Alpha's telling me to go, and my knees give out. It's as if the strings holding me up have abruptly been cut. I go down in a straight line, not falling forward or back, simply crumpling downward. I feel the impact deep in my core. I imagine that it feels similar to being slammed by a fast-moving mattress. Bones probably won't break, but tissue will tear and organs will liquify. Somehow, though, the fall doesn't kill me. It feels like it should, but I'm still here. The lights are continuing to strobe on and off. I have an overwhelming urge to sleep. I feel too damaged for anything else. And having fallen, I'm already lying down, after all. It makes sense that I should sleep.

Above me and around me, I hear a garbled waterfall of noise. It's voices. People are talking. I can only make out some of the words. Most of the meaning behind the words gets stripped away somewhere on the long journey from the speakers' mouths to my tattered ears. I think I recognize two of the voices as belonging to Alpha and Beta. But there's a third voice, too. I don't know this one. I haven't heard it before. I can't quite tell, but this third voice seems to be talking with the two guards. I don't really care what they're saying. I just want to sleep. Sleep would be good right now.

Unfortunately, someone has other plans for me. I feel a pair of hands grabbing me under my armpits and carrying-dragging me over the floor. The hands prop me up against a wall. I struggle vaguely, squirming and weakly moving my arms. It does no good. I crack open my eyes, hating the garish light that fills the room. I see a face leaning in toward me, maybe a foot or so away. I don't recognize it. In fact, I only know that it's a face because it has eyes and is wearing a hat. Other than these markers, it just looks like a pinkish blob. It's talking at me, I think. The lower part of the blob is moving, down where the mouth should be, and I hear the third voice talking. The other two voices have stopped. In the
background, I see two large shapes looming. I can only assume that these are Alpha and Beta. I can only guess as to which is which. Blob-face is talking, but I can’t make out the words. The sound seems to be coming from all directions at once. I squeeze my eyes shut. I tell myself to concentrate. I answer myself, saying that I’m doing the best I can, and thank you for not butting in. I open my eyes. The face looks a little bit clearer, a little less blobby. I can make out the mouth now. The lips are definitely moving. It’s trying to talk to me. I wish I could understand what it’s saying.

Then, like a cloud randomly drifting into a recognizable shape, the sounds coming from its mouth solidify and I hear words. “What’s… wrong… with… you?” It’s speaking slowly. Each word is pronounced with great care and precision. I appreciate it. Even as it is, it takes me a moment to decode the question. The one thing I could do without, though, is the volume. The face is speaking loudly, almost shouting. It hurts my ears. I swallow again. The saliva’s built back up, and it feels almost like a solid lump as I force it down my esophagus. I consider the face’s question. What’s wrong with me? I think I should know this. I know I should know this. What am I talking about? Of course I know this.

“M-my head hit the door,” I say. I’m proud. That was a good thing I just did. I answered a question. That’s quite an achievement. My eyes glaze over the face, and I’m disappointed to see that it doesn’t quite share my sense of accomplishment. It just looks confused.

“Which door?” It asks. It gives me a slight shake. I groan. I don’t like being shaken. “Look at me,” it says. “No, look at me. That’s the floor. Look at me.” I bring my eyes up, struggling to maneuver the face into the center of my vision. “Which door?” the face asks again. I blink. I wish I didn’t have to answer so many questions. It’s hard. Everything’s hard right now. Even breathing. Each breath is a struggle. It doesn’t feel automatic somehow, the way breathing should be. It feels like a chore, something I have to work hard at if it’s going to get done. It takes a lot of energy. I don’t have a lot left over to answer stupid questions with.

“In the elevator,” I say. In my mind, I gesture toward the closed metal doors I’m talking about. But I don’t think this gesture ever gets translated into physical movement. It stays just a thought. The face rounds on the two guards. Then it starts speaking loudly again. I can tell that the words aren’t directed at me, though, so I don’t bother translating them. The little bits and pieces that I catch are enough to tell me that the face is asking about what happened. It doesn’t seem happy about the explanations it’s getting. Beta’s doing most of the talking. Alpha’s just standing there, clenching its jaw so tightly that I can almost hear its teeth grind. Beta’s talking about how I slipped and fell. The face doesn’t seem to be buying it. I close my eyes, giving up completely on following the discussion. After all, it doesn’t really matter.

Then, all of a sudden, I feel something shift. I feel different. It’s like going from trying to breathe underwater one minute, to trying to breathe in thick steam the next. The former is impossible. The latter is only difficult. Things get clearer. I’m still dizzy, fuzzy, pounding, and nauseated, but now the world spins a little less rapidly, shapes are a little less blurry, the lightly flicker a little less severely, and the floor below me is a little less akin to the deck of a heaving ship. I even have the brainpower to wonder at this marvelous transformation. How wonderful it is, I think, to heal quickly. I’m so lucky that Aiohn subsidizes alterations for healing. What a public service. I open my eyes, and am dazzled by the brightness of the room. It’s a lot, but I can take it. Barely. I look up at the three figures standing close together. Two of them I recognize. They’re Alpha and Beta. The third figure is new to me,
but I assume that it’s what the face belonged to. It’s talking angrily with the two guards. It’s clearly upset. This confuses me slightly. I don’t understand why a human would be upset about an ōnä mälhā getting hurt. Shouldn’t the human be pleased? I know the Warden would be thrilled.

The Warden. In my mind, I imagine the Warden watching me. Maybe there’s a camera somewhere, and the human is peering through it. Watching me as I sit like a puddle on the floor, propped against the wall. The very picture of defeat. No, I think to myself. This won’t do. This won’t do at all. I lean over and press my hands against the ground, pushing myself upward. It’s a struggle. I sway, and my head pounds with a vengeance, but I try and ignore it. Then my vision blacks out. I can’t see anything. Also, instead of feeling dizzy, I feel sort of floaty. As if the gyrating world had been extinguished, leaving me dangling in the middle of a vacuum. It’s almost nicer than being dizzy. At least it’s not nauseating. Instead, it’s just terrifying. A wave of panic crashes over me, and I can’t tell if I’m falling or flying. It’s the most horrifying and disturbing sensation that I can imagine. I give my head and neck a hard shake, desperately trying to call back my sense of gravity. After I shake my head a second time, a little bit of the dizziness comes back. Soon after this, my vision starts to clear. It begins with a pinprick of light at the center of my field of view, but expands until the blinding darkness is pushed back to the very peripheries. I look around. I’m amazed to find that I’m standing upright. I made it. I haven’t fallen over. I’m leaning heavily against the wall, but that’s all right. I can accept leaning. The panic subsides.

I can hear Beta talking to the human with the face. Beta’s pointing at me, saying that she’s all right. Look at her! She’s already improving. I could almost laugh. Sure, I’m standing. But without the wall to hold me up, there’s no doubt in my mind that I’d have fallen down the very second I got to my feet. Am I all right? As if. I’m getting there, though. Give me another hour or two, and I’ll be back to normal. The human with the face listens to Beta, eyeing me as I unsteadily work to stay standing. It seems sceptical about what it’s hearing. It occurs to me that the hat this human is wearing is somewhat similar to the one bedecking the Warden. This human must have some rank behind it, then. In fact, considering where we are, this human is probably in charge of some aspect of the gymnasium. Maybe it oversees the inmates. Something like that. At any rate, the human with the face apparently has some power here. This point is confirmed for me by the way Beta is acting. It seems nervous, defensive. As if something major were on the line here. Like a job. Or discipline, at the very least.

I’m not entirely sure why, but this bothers me. I don’t like the idea that Alpha or Beta could get in trouble. It seems counter-intuitive, but it’s easier for me if there’s only one kind of human to worry about. If humans are all like the Warden, then things are simple. Things might not be nice, but at least everything’s easy to understand. It all conforms to a single rule. I can allow one exception for Zach, but that’s it. And I even have to justify this exception by telling myself that he’s not really human. He’s just human-like. Zach doesn’t act like a human. He’s different. He’s, well, Zach.

But if the human with the face is willing to punish Alpha and Beta, then I have a problem. It makes the water murky. It makes the line harder to draw between us and them. I don’t like this. There needs to be a line. There has to be. I don’t like not knowing where to put it. Or, even worse, having to shift the line and admit that my first attempt to draw it was wrong. I don’t like that at all. And in my current state, with the world spinning and the lights pulsing, I can’t find it within myself to allow for complications. I need things to be
simple. I need clarity, an organized set of boxes that everything can fit neatly inside of, without overlap, without spills, without ambiguity. I need certainty. And this is the reason I lie.

When the human with the face asks me if I’m better, I say yes. Or, I mean to. I actually just grunt, and gently nod my head. Of course this isn’t true. But I want to get away from here. And I figure that if I’m judged to be doing well, then maybe they’ll allow me to go through the barricade. To where things are simple. To where everyone hates me. No uncertainty there. Sure, I’m safer where I am right now. Nobody’s trying to kill me here. But I’m so uncomfortable with the idea of a sympathetic human that the danger doesn’t matter to me. I only want to be away from here. Maybe I’m not thinking well. In fact, I know I’m not thinking well. But an interesting aspect of being a mental slug is that no matter how acutely I realize that I’m being stupid, it still feels like the right thing to do.

The human with the face squints at me. It doesn’t believe me. I don’t blame it. I must look horrible. And the human doesn’t understand why I would lie to it. What could I gain? It doesn’t get it. Not that I would expect it to. I’m not using a traditional form of logic here. It only makes sense in my damaged head. The human asks me if I want to sit down for a moment. I say no, slurring out that I’m fine. Beta gestures triumphantly in my direction. It says something, ending it’s point with, ‘It was just a bit of a fall.’ Alpha is still grinding its teeth, glaring down at the floor.

The human with the face looks back and forth between the three of us. I do my best to be convincing and make eye contact, don’t do so well. Eventually, the human’s gaze settles on Beta. “All right,” it says. “Put her in.” Then it turns away and walks over to the small security door set on one side of the antechamber. It scans its card, the door opens, and the human walks through into a carpeted, office-like control room. The door slides shut. I hear Beta let out a sigh of relief. It closes its eyes for a moment, then glances sidelong at its partner. Alpha hasn’t moved. Beta looks over to me, then takes hold of my shoulders and starts marching me toward the barricade. I have a hard time keeping up, and Beta ends up half carrying me. Alpha walks a few feet behind us.

When we reach the giant metal doors, Beta removes my handcuffs. It pushes the button for the intercom, and after making the usual request, the doors start sliding open. Beta gives me an experimental shove. I can tell that it’s trying hard not to tip me right over, while at the same time giving me enough of a push to propel me forward. It’s a thin line. I stumble through the doors, and find myself standing in the yellow box that marks the entrance to the gymnasium. Behind me, I hear the barricade slide shut.

The language barrier falls more quickly than anyone had expected. Barely two months after first contact, we’re able to swap complex messages with the aliens. There’s even a computer program that Aiohn makes public, translating Ohnieil into Human Standard and back again. I watch it all on the news. The aliens, it turns out, call themselves ‘humans.’ From Tain and Mahdtroh, I even hear the rumblings of a plan to meet the humans face to face. There are logistical problems, of course, including questions of biohazards and whatnot. But the anchors seem upbeat, and all news comes off with a positive spin.

Despite myself, I’ve regained a bit of my fascination with the emerging story. A week or so has passed since the conversation with my mother on the front step, and as much as I’d like to blame the humans for the problems I’m having, they’re just too fascinating for me to boycott. Things haven’t changed much between me and Estas. We’re not talking. To tell
the truth, this is actually a good thing. It takes away a lot of pressure. It allows me to be in
the same room as him without constantly worrying about an impending argument.
Sometimes, judging from the way he looks at me, I think he feels the same way. So, it’s a
good truce. I don’t forgive him. Of course I don’t. He’s made a mess of my future. But at least
we’ve been able to establish a brittle calm.

Reyin’s taken on the role of go-between. She tries to stay neutral. She does a good
job, I think. Most of the time, anyway. Sometimes, I get the feeling that she’s siding with her
husband more than with me, but this could be an illusion. Neutrality has a habit of
appearing that way to me every now and then. Under the right circumstances, if someone’s
not siding with me, it can feel as though they’re actively working against me. So I’m not
entirely sure if I’m being fair to my mother. She certainly tries hard. At dinner,
conversations consist of Reyin asking me a series of questions about my day, and then
turning to Estas and asking him a series of similar questions. It’s as if she’s trying to get the
two of have a conversation by proxy.

And then the day comes when an ambassador from the Empire of Aiohn goes to
meet her human counterpart. It’s a huge event. It takes place about eight months after First
Contact. The scientists have announced by now that the biohazard threats posed by the
humans and their array of microbes are actually minimal, and that cross-contamination can
be controlled. I hear that almost the entire empire tunes in to watch the live coverage of the
event. Our ambassador’s ship meets the human ship halfway between our two territories.
Docking presents a bit of a problem, as the designs of the ships’ ports don’t match up, but
they work it out eventually. It’s actually a bit of a surprise to me that they didn’t fix this
detail beforehand. But, I suppose no one can prepare for everything. Not even Aiohn.

The meeting itself is actually a bit boring to watch, if you happen to forget that it’s
taking place between members of two different species who, a year ago, had no idea that
the other existed. The ambassadors exchange speeches through robotic translators, and
present each other with gifts. We get a globe of their home world. It’s made with intricately
fitted stones, varying in colored to show the changes in the land. It’s very pretty. In return,
the humans get a sword from the first Emperor of Aiohn’s personal armory. I’m impressed
by this gift. Artifacts from the first Emperor are considered almost sacred. That we’d hand
one over makes a strong statement.

Soon after the meeting, a program starts up at each of the Empire’s schools. For free,
anyone can attend a series of courses aimed at teaching the human language. I’m one of the
first in our neighborhood to sign up. Sure, I’m already taking a full load of courses, but I
don’t want to miss this chance. And besides, my classes actually don’t take up all of my
time. The courses are designed to allow students to begin specialization training on the
side, something that I’m conspicuously missing out on. It’s still a tight schedule, but I make
it work. I’m looking forward to what the future has to bring. And when, fourteen months
after First Contact, Tain and Mahdtroh announce that the Empire of Aiohn is working with
the human government to set up an event celebrating the second anniversary of the
discovery of life, I find myself counting the days. I follow the negotiations closely. In the
end, the date is settled for just under the two year mark. This is to account for an averaging
of our years with the human years. But on the upside, the event is pegged to take place in
our capital city. Right in the center of Aiohn. It’ll be broadcast everywhere. There’s even
talk in Alaseel of setting up huge screen in the park so people can watch the anniversary
together as a group.
I can hardly wait. Estas seems to get more and more nervous and depressed as the date approaches, but this only makes me even more frustrated with him. I don't see why he can't just embrace the beauty of the glorious future we have in store. Because, together, who knows what we and the humans can achieve? We've found life. Things will never be the same.
Chapter Ten

For a moment, I’m disoriented. Where’s Zach? He’s not standing where he always stands, right outside the yellow box surrounding the barricade. I don’t see him anywhere. Then I remember that he’s not here anymore. He’s been moved. Of course, I never forgot this piece of information. Even with a head injury, I know perfectly well that I’m alone. But maybe, for a second, I was wishing so hard that he’d be here to help me that I made myself forget the truth. I certainly need the help. I can hardly even walk straight.

But I know I need to get moving. I can’t just stand here. So, with as much strength as I can muster, I cross over the yellow line and step onto the track. I’d meant to walk with purposeful invincibility, showing to anyone who might be watching that I can handle anything. But instead, I find myself slumping against the wall of the gymnasium. It comes up right against the outside of the track, so I’m still technically walking on the rubberized path. Only, now, it’s with my left shoulder trailing against the concrete of the wall, my right hand crossing over my body to let my fingers slide along in front of me. I’m making progress. I’m moving forward. It’s slow, but I’m thankful to be moving at all. At least I haven’t toppled over yet. At this point, I haven’t looked over at the other occupants of the room. I can hear them, though. I can hear the distant conversations, the sound of shoes on the court. The clink of weights being picked up and put back down on their holders. But I keep my eyes facing forward. It’s too much effort to turn my head and look over.

I set my sights on the far lefthand corner of the room. The gymnasium is rectangular, even if the track that runs around it is an oval. In the corners of the room, there are small, empty spaces where the track has turned away and nothing else has been put in its place. I head for one of these. I like the idea of being as far away from the center of the room as possible. And I can tell from the wobble in my legs that I won’t be able to walk for much longer. In fact, just as I reach the corner of the room, I collapse. I sort of tip forward, fumbling with my feet and falling down. I drag myself the rest of the distance. Then I force myself to sit up, pressing my back into the place where the two walls of the room meet at a ninety degree angle. I close my eyes. I take a moment to rest. I breathe in. I breathe out. I try to make the world around me snap into focus. I breathe for several seconds. It could easily turn into hours. I could fall asleep right here, right in the corner. I know this is possible. And I know that it’s dangerous. But it feels so alluring. To sleep. To recover. It’d make me feel better, I know it would. I get so close, so very close to drifting away into the marvelous darkness. I wish I could go all the way.

But I’m afraid. I’m frightened of what might happen if I let go. If I fall asleep, I’ll be completely defenseless. And that scares me more than anything else. With a huge force of will, I open my eyes and look around the gymnasium. I see the humans. Their orange jumpsuits. I see them working out. Talking. Playing on the court. I don’t see Michael, though. There are certainly a few faces turned my way, but none that I recognize. And none of the humans are anywhere near me. I draw my knees up to my chest and hug them in with my arms. I close my eyes again. I don’t let myself fall asleep, though. I make sure to stay alert. As alert as I can manage. I open my ears all the way, listening to the room. Usually, when I listen like this, I find it relaxing. But right now, it’s more painful than anything else. Sounds come at me, seemingly from all directions. It’s hard to make sense of any of it. It’s all a big blur.
I tone back my hearing somewhat, focusing exclusively on sounds coming from nearby. This is all that matters, anyway. I don’t need to know what a human is saying on the other side of the room. I’m sure I could hear it, if I really tried. But it’d be overwhelming. Better to stick with what I need.

As I listen for approaching danger, I try to make a plan. How can I get this to work? How can I make it to the end of today and still have a pulse? I’m sure someone’s going to come over eventually. It might take a few minutes, but I’m sure it’ll happen. And I’m sure that it will be Michael. Fighting’s out. I’d lose in seconds. I’d stand up, make a lunge forward, and fall on my face. Despite myself, I crack a thin smile. Maybe if I aimed well, I’d be able to fall on top of someone. It’d certainly have the element of surprise.

Still smiling, I note that I’m doing fractionally better. The spinning is calming down. I feel weak and slow, but I’m less sick. This is all good. It’s not enough to help me much, but I’m glad for any progress. I open my eyes. I tilt my head back and stare up at the ceiling. It’s a flat expanse of light beige tiles, a grid of perfect squares that seems to go on forever. It’s interrupted occasionally by one of the massive columns, but the ceiling is otherwise unmarked. Except for the black warts. Every now and then, a large black hemisphere of glass will poke its nose through the tiling, peering in on the gymnasium. Cameras. There are cameras all over this place. They look almost like buboes. Swollen nodes of sickness. For a second time, I wonder if the Warden is watching me. There’s a camera located only a few feet from my corner. The Warden could be looking through it right now. Anyone could. Any of the guards. Maybe even the human with the face, looking at me on a screen in the control room. They’re all just waiting for something to happen to me.

Now, this is pure speculation. And I understand that. But as I look up at the smooth, black casing of the camera, I realize that there definitely is someone watching me. I can hear them. I look back down. Maybe twenty feet away from me, five humans are standing in an arc, blocking off access to the rest of the room. I realize now that it was probably a stupid decision to literally back myself into a corner. It seemed like a good idea at the time. Not now. Still, I suppose this was inevitable. And I was right about at least one thing. Michael at the center of the group, staring at me. I vaguely recognize the other four humans from before. I can’t remember their names, though. One of them started with a ‘B’, I think. I’m not sure. Seeing them all lined up, even through the fear that suddenly surges up within me, I could almost sigh. I wish I’d had more time to rest. I could have used at least a few more minutes. It would have been nice. But. Oh, well. Time’s up. I place my palms against the floor, pushing myself into a standing position. I almost don’t make it. I sway, putting my hand out to the wall. Michael moves its head, pointing at me with its chin. “What’s wrong with you?” it asks.

I suppose this could be seen as a polite question. A simple inquiry into my health. It doesn’t sound this way, however. I can feel the sneer in Michael’s voice. More of an insult than a question. I let go of the wall, standing up as straight as I can. “Nothing,” I say weakly. “I’m fine.”

Michael nods slowly, pursuing its lips and making a show of considering my statement. It doesn’t believe me. I can tell. And I don’t blame it. It’d have to be blind to think I’m fine. Then Michael glances left and right, looking up and down the arcing line drawn by the other humans. It almost looks like it’s searching for something. Or someone. “Zach’s not here,” it says. Its voice is calm. The comment comes out in a completely matter-of-fact tone, the kind of tone that’s used to inform a person that a square has four sides. Or that gravity
exists. Water is wet. Stars are hot. Something obvious. Michael looks at me, continuing to speak. “And he won’t be coming back. It’s your fault.”

“What makes you think he’s not coming back?” I ask. I’m not actually curious. I know as well as anyone that I’m not seeing Zach again. No one here is. The Warden would never allow it. But I figure that as long as Michael’s talking, I’m not being killed.

“I was there when he was taken away,” the human answers. “They said he was being transferred to another floor. There was something about security. He’s not coming back. We both know that.”

I blink my eyes. There’s a kind of whitish, powdery fog that’s sprung up in my corner of the gymnasium. It’s hard to see through. It makes everything look softer, less real. I wish there was a breeze blowing through this place. Anything to push the fog away. “Why were you there when Zach was moved?”

This I’m actually wondering about. It doesn’t make much sense to me. Zach would have been in his cell at the time, so I don’t see how Michael could have witnessed everything. The human answers without delaying, but I’m surprised by what it tells me. “I’m his cellmate,” it says.

I have to think about this. “His cellmate,” I say stupidly. This hadn’t occurred to me. I suppose it makes some sense, though. How else could Michael have gotten the opportunity to beat Zach to a pulp? As far as I know, the only time all the inmates come together is for the exercise periods. And I’ve been with Zach at all the exercise periods since we met. Until today. So I guess it makes sense. Michael certainly seems to think so.

“Of course I’m his cellmate,” it says impatiently. “Or, I was. Didn’t he tell you?” It looks at me, annoyed. I don’t know what to say. Then the human’s expression changes into something clearer. Almost satisfied, even. “No,” it says. “He didn’t tell you. Huh. Shows how much he trusted you.” For whatever reason, Michael seems to think of this conclusion as a win. A win for his side. This bothers me. I can’t quite wrap my head around why this is a win. I also have the sense that the explanation is right in front of me, if only I could think well enough to seize it. Simultaneously, I’m sure that Michael is wrong. Zach trusted me. Of course he did. He must have had some reason for neglecting to tell me that he was rooming with Michael. Maybe he thought it just wasn’t important. Or maybe it embarrassed him. Or maybe he didn’t want to make me feel guilty for putting him through so much. Or some combination of all this. Something, anyway. I know he had a reason. But I can’t seem to find the words to argue with Michael. The fog is a little thinner now that I’ve been standing for several seconds, but my head still feels miles away. Michael glances away from me for a moment. “Well,” it says. Then it gestures at two of the behemoths, pointing in my direction. “Hold her for me.”

The two massive human walls start advancing toward me. One of them has a faint smile forming on its face. The other just looks stupid. I notice that the second one has an odd necklace of black moles circling around the base of its neck, each mole about the size of half the nail on my little finger. I’ve never seen a pattern of moles like this before. I find myself staring at it, even as the humans draw closer and closer. By the time I’m able to look away, the humans are only about twelve feet from me. I take a step forward. This is to get some room to move in, away from the walls of the room. Past this, I have no plan. My eyes go again to the raised black dots sprinkling the human’s neck. Underneath the fog that’s filling my mind, I’m desperate. It’s like a bad dream. I need to move faster, but however hard I try, nothing seems to work. I need to think better, but no matter how hard I strain,
no thoughts come. I stare at the moles. They’re only five feet away now. I’ve still done nothing. There’s one particularly large mole right over the human’s windpipe. It’s almost the size of my thumb nail. It’s fascinating.

The humans fan out slightly, moving to my right and left. They hesitate for a split second. They expect me to do something. They expect me to defend myself. They expect me to put up a fight. They expect wrong. Because I don’t do anything. I just stand here. Looking at that one mole. The huge one. The one right over the human’s windpipe. Big and black. As chance would have it, the human with the moles is the one that reaches out first, trying to grab my arms. For the longest time, I don’t move. Then, out of nowhere, my brain clicks into gear and I think of something to do.

Maybe the human has let its guard down by now, after so long of me doing nothing. Maybe it’s just got slow reflexes. Maybe I take it by surprise. I don’t really care. All that matters to me is the fact that I’m able to move my arm up, between the human’s grasping hands, and jab my index and middle fingers several inches into the depths of its windpipe. The human chokes and gags, stumbling backwards to double over, coughing and holding its throat. The other human pauses. It looks shocked. But not quite as shocked as when I jam my knee up into its groin. Both of these attacks happen quickly, one right after the other, taking up no more than a second. At the end of this second, the two humans are reeling, struggling to recover from attacks that they never saw coming. That I never saw coming. And then I do something that truly surprises me. With the two humans unable to stop me, I charge straight at Michael’s chest.

I sprint, hurtling across the twenty feet that separate us. At my speed, twenty feet goes by quickly. The two remaining behemoths only have time to gape and blink. Michael thinks a little bit faster. It states moving to one side, trying to get out of my way, but I’m still able to reach out and catch hold of its right arm. I latch on. There’s no way I’m letting go. My momentum carries the two of us several feet farther, sprawling on the floor in a heap. On impacting with the floor, I feel my brain jitter inside my skull. It’s one of the most painful and disturbing sensations I’ve ever felt. Somehow, though, I stay conscious. More, by some miracle, I come out of the heap with Michael in a headlock. With my left forearm, I’m pushing down on its chest while I hook my right forearm under its chin, pulling up, forcing Michael’s head back as far as it can go. Michael’s hands fly up, grabbing my arms and trying to rip them away. But it’s in an awkward position, and I’m able to hold on. It’s hard, though, and I’m straining to keep my grip. “I’ll break your neck,” I hiss through clenched teeth. I’m not sure if I actually mean it. I might. Following through on this threat wouldn’t be unprecedented. Mostly, I want the human to stop struggling. And, to my surprise and relief, the human does. It doesn’t let go of my arms, but it stops pulling. It stops twisting its body, too. I take advantage of this to stand up, pulling Michael off balance and keeping it so that it has to arch its back to stay upright. I look over Michael’s shoulder at the four other humans. “Don’t move!” I yell. “I’ll kill him!”

The two closest behemoths had started advancing toward me, but they come to a halt now, staring intently at their leader. I’m shaking. Hard. And I can tell that it’s only partially from adrenalin. Mostly, it’s the bucking floor that’s doing it. That and the spurts of acid shooting up my throat. The behemoths look blurry. I can see the fuzzy shapes of the two humans I attacked. One of them is walking with an odd limp, and the other is panting with its hands to its throat. Both of them are glaring murder at me. All the humans are. Out of focus though they might seem, this detail is clear enough.
I swallow, trying to think of what to do next. I stumble sideways, dragging Michael with me, using the left-hand wall of the gymnasium as support. Frankly, I'm amazed that I've made it this far. I never would have expected the two behemoths to react so poorly, or for Michael to be caught off guard. Also, for someone without a plan, things seem to be going pretty well for me. Now I just need to figure out where I should go from-

Michael's head smashes back into my face, landing squarely on the bridge of my nose. I hear the sick crunch of cartilage snapping. I cry out in pain and my vision flickers, the floor tilting and pitching as my brain once again goes ricocheting around the inside of my head. But I don't let go. Instead, I hammer Michael's head sideways into the concrete wall. I feel it make solid contact, even though I can't see right now. The human grunts. It goes still, stopping its renewed struggle. I don't care. I repeat the movement two more times, slamming the side of the human's head as hard as I can against the wall. I blink my eyes, trying to clear my vision. I see a trickle of bright red blood moving down the human's face. I also see the behemoths starting to advance on me again. "DON'T MOVE!" I scream. "I'll kill him!"

The words come out slightly garbled. I have to fight to talk through the stream of thick, salty mucus coursing down the back of my throat. My nose is on fire. It's making my eyes water. As if I didn't have enough trouble seeing already. The humans come to a stop again. They're closer than they were before. They're only about eight feet away. The one in front - it's only a haze to me - has its hands clenched into fists. "Let him go, elf," it orders. I shake my head. There's no way I'm giving up now. I try to breath in, but end up choking on the mucus. I cough. I feel a string of snotty saliva get caught on my lips and dribble down to my chin. My vision clouds back up, almost to the point where I can't see anything at all. I'm not sure how I remain standing. It's probably some lucky combination of the wall at my side and the use of Michael as a counter-weight.

"Don't move," I say. I don't know if anyone hears me. I feel so weak. I could fall over at any second. Then, through the haze, I see the shapes of the behemoths getting slowly bigger. The sight terrifies me. I get a burst of raw energy, a jolt of power only felt by the defeated. "DON'T MOVE!" I bellow. I feel some of the blood in my mouth spray out through my lips again. I get an image of what I must look like. Battered and bleeding. Broken nose. Red spit flying from my mouth. Half dead. Holding an unconscious human by the neck. Screaming at an insane pitch. It's almost no wonder that the shape stop again.

I'm really shaking now. I know that can't keep this up for much longer. I need something to happen. I need help. I'm desperately searching my mind, wading through the quagmire of my brain to find some solution, some way out. I don't find anything. My mind's a swamp. I can't make any progress through it. Unbidden, an image of the Warden blooms in front of me. It's watching me. I'm sure of it. It's watching me lose. Watching me die. With absolute certainty, I know in my bones that I don't want this. I don't want to die, but, even more, I don't want to lose. Not to something like the Warden. That'd be worse than death. To die knowing that the Warden was smiling. It's more than I can take. In a furry, I glance up at the black semi-circle protruding from the ceiling. The camera. It's almost directly overhead. In my disintegrating state of mind, I can see the Warden's face reflected in the shining glass. I can see my tormentor staring down at me. It's real. It's right there. I can see it's face, its eyes, its hat. It's all there.

And then I think of the other human that wears a hat. The human with the face. It's also watching me. I can feel it. To my relief, I get an idea. "I know you're watching me!"
shout at the camera, still fiercely holding on to Michael’s neck. “I know you’re there! I know you can hear me!” A few feet away, the leading behemoth is yelling at me again. It’s telling me to let Michael go. I ignore it. I don’t have the strength or time to respond. I can feel myself slipping rapidly. I continue shouting at the camera. “If you don’t come in here,” I scream, “Then people will die! And it won’t just be me! It’ll be this, too!”

I shake Michael, showing the camera exactly who I mean. Around me, the world is twirling in quick circles. I realize I’m panting. No, not just panting. I’m hyperventilating. I can’t seem to stop. Small, pure white sparks start popping up all over my field of vision, dancing around as if they were alive. They’re so beautiful that I hardly even mind. I try to focus. This is important. “Is this what you want?” I yell up at the camera. “You’ll have two dead people! Is this what you want?”

I pant. The camera isn’t responding. It’s only a camera. One of the four other humans starts speaking again. I can’t tell which it is. They’re all too blurry. And the sound seems to come from all of them. All at the same time. “Let him go,” they say. “Let him go, and we’ll let you go.”

I could almost laugh. It’s all so ridiculous. So hysterical. Them, talking in harmony. Michael, bleeding. The cameraman, ignoring me. And their statement. Especially their statement. That’s the most ridiculous thing of all. “You’ll let me go?” I sputter. “You’ll just let me go. We’ll be done. That’ll be it. Right?”

I smile crookedly. My breaths are going in and out in sharp stabs of air, loud and painful. The humans seem to hesitate, unsure. The sound disturbed. “Yeah, that’s right,” they say. “Now, let him go.”

I continue panting. The room continues spinning. The floor continues rocking. The sparks continue flying, getting brighter and bigger, growing and soaring. I continue panting the entire time as I slide down the wall and hit the floor. I’m still holding Michael. It’s not moving. The human is on top of me, pinning me against the floor. I can’t move. I’m so exhausted. I feel like I’m falling, even now that I’m lying down. My eyes close. The sparks stay with me. I watch them, tracing their lazy orbits around the insides of my eyelids. “Don’t move,” I whisper. I can hardly feel my body anymore. My feet, for instance, feel completely detached. What I do feel is the pair of hands roughly grabbing my arms and prying them away from Michael’s throat. I try to resist. But there’s nothing I can do. I feel another pair of hands clamp on to my shoulders, dragging me out from under the human and pulling me upright. I feel the first punches land on my face. I feel myself thrown against the wall. I feel myself falling and crumpling back down to the floor. I feel something hard strike my ribs. I feel the kicks that follow. They land everywhere, on my legs, my arms, my torso, my head. I feel like a ragdoll. I feel light years away. But no matter how far I am, it still hurts. And it goes on forever. For years and for years. A lifetime. I can’t hear much. I hear the thuds that accompany each kick, but not much more. I’m afraid. But, like my hearing, I’m afraid from a distance. And if frightens me that I’m not more terrified. That I can’t scream. That I can’t move. That I can’t do anything. I’m limp. I’m a corpse already. I hate it. It scares me. The blows continue.

Until, very suddenly, they stop. I’m a universe away at this point, but the pause in the beating draws my attention. What’s going on out there? I strain to hear something. I pick up a faint noise. I focus on it, and I realize that it’s a voice. Saying something. Shouting something. I can’t tell what the words are. Then, out of the darkness, I see a bolt of lightning. It sears across my retinas, bright even through my eyelids. I hear a grunt. Then a
thud. It sounds like a falling body. With the very last of my strength, I open my eyes. At first, even with my eyes open, all I see is darkness. Then I see another bolt of lightning. It hits one of the behemoths in the chest. The human is knocked backward and falls to the ground. In a blur, I see five uniformed guards. They all have odd-looking instruments in their hands. They're the ones shouting. Two more flashes light up the space, each followed by the sound of someone falling over. I don't know what to make of this. I don't move. I can't move. I can't even move my eyes. I can already feel myself falling back into darkness. My body already feels miles away again. But even so, I'm plenty aware enough to feel it when another bolt of lightning is fired off and slams into the side of my ribcage. In comparison, the beating was nothing.

I hold the glass under the faucet, filling it with cool water before setting it down beside the sink and reaching for the second glass. I fill this one, too. Estas said he wasn’t thirsty. This may or may not be true. It’s just as likely that he’ll get up from the couch in a few minutes to get a glass for himself. He hasn’t asked me for a favor in over a year. He hasn’t said much of anything to me, in fact. I’ve returned the silence. But, as I think to myself as I leave the kitchen with a glass balanced in each hand, if my father wants something to drink during the main anniversary event, he’d better get one soon. It should be starting any minute now.

I walks slowly through the house. I filled the glasses just a little too much. The water inside keeps sloshing right up to the brim, threatening to spill. That’s something I’ve never really understood about these glasses. They’re beautiful works of art, mottled sculptures made from blown glass. There are blobs of different colors speckled all over the glasses, shifting fluidly from greens to blues to reds and back again. The set of glasses were a gift to my mother from one of her friends, a glassblower. She made them herself. We only ever use the glasses during special occasions. Reyin decided that today, as the anniversary of First Contact, counted as special. I love the way they look, but I’ve never understood how to fill them. It must be something about the way they’re shaped. Whenever the liquid I’m filling it with gets close to the brim, I can no longer tell how far I have left to go. As a result, I’m always overfilling them. But today, I’m determined not to spill. I get all the way to the living room, working my way slowly and carefully across the house. Then, as I climb the single step up into the living room proper, the glass in my left hand sloshes a bit too violently and a small stream of water runs over my knuckles, dripping onto the floor. Great, I think. It’s perfect timing, too. I’m standing right next to the couch where my parents are seated, and they’d turned to look at me as I entered the room. Reyin stands up, waving her hand at the mess on the floor. “Don’t worry about it,” she says. “Thank you.” She takes her glass from me, immediately sipping it to lower the water level. “We’ll clean it up later.”

My mother goes to sit back down. When she asked me a minute ago to please get her a glass of water, she’d been sitting in the middle of the couch. I’d been sitting on her right, and my father had been on her left. Now, as she reclaims her seat, she’s sitting on the right side of the couch. Not in the middle. I pause. The only seat left is next to Estas. I glance at Reyin. She’s not looking at me. She’s watching the holostrip at the other end of the room, as it projects Tain and Mahdtroh into the air. I bet she did this on purpose. She’s always trying to get my father and me together. She doesn’t like the fact that we’re not on good terms. It annoys her. She thinks it’s childish. She hasn’t said so outright, but easy enough to tell from the way she sometimes speaks. Reluctantly, with no other choice, I sit down in the middle.
of the couch. Estas squeezes a bit tighter against the left armrest, and I move in the other direction. We're separated by several inches.

On the holostrip, the two anchors are talking. They remind us that we're waiting for President Glass to begin his speech from the central park of Aiohn. As they keep repeating, it's supposed to start in just a few more minutes. In the mean time, Tain and Mahdtroh start discussing the background of the upcoming speaker. As the top-ranking official in the human government, they say, President Glass has been looking out for the welfare of his people for more than sixteen years now. He won the last election in a landslide, taking in more than seventy percent of the vote. This popularity has been attributed in part to the countless public works projects he's initiated, employing up to twenty percent of the human population.

From here, the anchors move on to tidbits about where he grew up, who he's married to, his career so far. It's all interesting. And, as with everything, Tain and Mahdtroh bring a constant energy to whatever they're saying, livening up even the dullest statistics. Still, no matter how many factoids they site or anecdotes I hear, I don't feel as if I lean much. President Glass still feels like a mystery to me. This is often the way it goes for me. I'll watch the news, and at the end of it, wonder if I missed something. Because I must have. How could two well-informed people talk for a whole hour without saying anything important? It doesn't seem possible. Over the years, I've become convinced that the problem is on my end. I must not be listening properly. That must be it. I'm sure other people don't have this issue. Or, at least, I don't hear them talking about it.

I take a sip of water, trying not to brush Estas with my elbow. He leans forward to see past me, speaking to Reyin. “Do you think he'll talk about expanding trade?” he asks. This is something he's been worrying about a lot recently. Since First Contact, Estas has seen a resurgence in his business, but he's still selling fewer arrows today than eight years ago. I've overheard him telling Reyin that he's concerned about the effect trade with the humans might have on businesses. More competitors, he says, can only lower prices. And what will happen then? Reyin told him that she doubts there'll be much competition from the humans when it comes to crafting artisanal arrows. Estas wavered, but in the end, continued worrying.

My mother shrugs. She's facing forward, continuing to watch the anchors earnestly discussing trivia about President Glass. Her forearms are resting on her thighs, her hands clasped loosely around the glass. “I don't know,” she says. “Trade hasn't come up much in the news recently. It's been months since anyone seriously proposed opening commerce with them.”

Estas isn't convinced. “They could just be saving the announcement for today,” he says. “Making an event of it.” My mother looks over at him now. I press myself into the back of the couch, trying to get out of their way. This would be much easier, I think, if Reyin and I switched places.

“I don't think so,” my mother says. “I doubt this speech will be policy-heavy. He's probably going to focus on the accomplishments of the past few years.” Estas makes a humming sound. He still doesn't seem convinced. But he doesn't say anything more, and the three of us continue watching the holostrip in silence. After a moment, Estas mumbles that he's going to get a glass of water. He stands up and leaves the room. Right now, Mahdtroh is giving more details on a jobs program that President Glass set up three years ago. She tells us that it has “positively impacted an estimated 2.3 billion humans.” Tain chimes in to say
that this act alone makes President Glass one of the most population-focused leaders that
the humans have had in centuries. Tain goes on to begin another success story centered
around President Glass, but is soon cut off by Mahdtroh. She says that they’ve just heard
that President Glass is taking the stage, so we’ll have to leave it there.

Reyn yells over her shoulder toward the kitchen, telling Estas to hurry up. The view
on the holo cuts to an overhead shot of the central area in Aiohn’s park. I recognize it
immediately. Not only is it the same general design as the park here in Alaseel, I visited this
very place with my parents when we went to Aiohn for the funeral. It’d be hard to forget
the massive open space sitting in the very middle of the park’s towering trees. The center of
Aiohn’s park is much bigger than ours here at home. At a guess, I’d say it could easily
accommodate over eight thousand one hundred ninety-two people, all with plenty of elbow
room. And right now, it’s filled to capacity. A huge crowd has gathered in the clearing, all
facing a stage. I can tell instantly that the humans constructed it. It’s rectangular. It looks
out of place, the only rectangular shape in the entire circular park.

The camera cuts again. This time, it’s angled above and behind the crowd, viewing
the stage from a distance. Estas comes back into the living room just as a figure walks out
onto the stage. As soon as the figure is standing behind a large podium, the camera cuts one
more time, to a zoomed-in version of the previous angle. The figure is now large on the
holo. I’ve seen pictures of President Glass before, but looking at him onstage I realize that
they failed to adequately capture his aura of control. He’s tall and musculously thin, wearing
a dark blue suit, and has short blond hair. His eyes are clear blue. It’s a handsome face, but
that’s never the first thing I notice when I see him. It’s his obvious self-assurance. His
power. His certainty in his abilities. His intelligence. All his public works projects aside, this
characteristic alone is enough for him to gain my respect. In pictures, this intelligence was
always clear. But now, seeing the live broadcast him, I’m even more impressed. President
Glass faces the audience. The crowd has gone quiet. He takes a moment to look around at
the park. Then he begins speaking.

“Good afternoon,” he says, amplified voice echoing around the huge, open space. “I
am Jonathan Glass. I am the President of the International Republic, and it is my honor to
speak here today.” We hear his words in Ohnieil, but they don’t match up with the
movements of his lips. They must be translating the broadcast in real time. He continues.
“Three years ago, when the people of the International Republic reelected me to the
position of President, no one expected that so much would change so rapidly in the coming
years.” I hear my father grunt quietly at this. I ignore him. The President goes on. “But
things have changed. Our two societies have found one another. World views have been
altered, and we both finally have the answer to the question, ‘are we alone?’ The answer is,
‘no.’ We have each other. And I’d like to promise, right here, that as the leader of the IR, I
will support the Empire of Aiohn as an ally and as a friend.” He pauses here for a second. In
my head, I find this statement both sappy and soothing. It’s politician talk, obviously, but
it’s also nice to know that the head of the IR would at least think to say that he wants peace.
He continues.

“Ten years ago, we could not have predicted that we would end up here today. And
now that we’ve found each other, the next ten years are equally unclear. But wherever we
we end up, I am confident that it will be for the good of us all. As we move forward
together, through compromise and agreement, we will work together and build a brighter
future for.”
A deafening noise cuts through the President’s words. It’s so loud that it makes the holostrip’s speakers rumble, vibrating and shaking in their cases. The President’s eyes open wide, and he takes an involuntary step backwards as another explosion shatters through the park. I can hear screams now. Debris, broken bits of cobble stones and other rubble, clatters against a clear wall surrounding the stage. The wall had been invisible until now. The camera pans jerkily away from the podium, and I see thick pillars of black smoke billowing from two craters in the crowd. Reyin bolts up from the couch and stands, mouth open, as a third bomb goes off. This one is caught on camera, and I see a jet of soot-blackened flame burst up and out from a point in the crowd, engulfing everything around it. I stare at the holo in shock. The screams are louder now, and a fourth bomb detonates, taking away another chunk of the audience in a blast of fire and smoke. The crowd’s stampeding, trying desperately to get away, and two more explosions cut holes in the struggling mass. Up in one corner of the holo, I glimpse a team of humans sprinting onstage and grabbing President Glass, shielding him with their bodies as they pull him through a door. They disappear through it. Another bomb goes off, massive as it burns through the air, searing and blowing foot-long splinters of shrapnel through anyone standing nearby.

Then the image cuts out. It’s replaced by a pristine white field. But for whatever reason, the sounds of the attacks keep broadcasting for several seconds. I count three more explosions. The screams of the panicking audience are so loud now that they almost drown out the last bomb. And then the sound cuts out, too. For a moment, there’s only silence. My parents and I stay frozen where we are, staring at the white, silent holo. Seconds pass. Then, a simple sentence appears on the holo, spelling out in blue lettering what is perhaps the most absurd statement I’ve ever seen.

“We appreciate your patience.”

And then light music starts to play.
Chapter Eleven

For the rest of the day, the holostrip stays blank. No more news comes out of it. The music stops after a while, and there’s only silence. It’s such a strange sound. We’re all used to the constant background noise of the holostrip. It’s always on, always saying something. It gets quieter at night, but never silent. I’ve never heard the house go completely quiet before. It’s unnerving. It doesn’t feel like home.

Then, just after dinner - Reyin, Estas, and I all eat our meals without speaking - we get a knock at our front door. Reyin goes to answer it. Estas is right behind her. He tells me to stay in the dining room, but I follow behind them, keeping out of sight. Reyin opens the door. It’s a patrol of stävnemā fen mes. They’re going from house to house, they say. They tell my parents that a curfew has been established. No one’s allowed outside after dark. They also advise us to stay home for the next few days. Reyin asks them what’s happening, what happened in Aiohn. They reply that they don’t have access to that information. They bid my parents a good night, saying that if they see anything suspicious or unusual, they should report it immediately. Estas says that we will. Then the patrol moves on, and Reyin shuts and bolts the door.

The three of us stand around in the foyer for a few minutes. Not talking. Not sure what to do. Then I go to my room and finish up my schoolwork. Estas goes to start on the dishes. Reyin says she needs to make a phone call. In the security of my room, I find it almost impossible to focus on my history text. My thoughts keep flicking back to the holo. What we saw there. I don’t know what to make of any of it. I don’t know what happened. I don’t sleep well that night. I doubt there’s a single person in the whole city who sleeps well.

In the morning, the holo has changed slightly. It’s still a white field, with no sound coming out of it. But now, under where it says, “We appreciate your patience,” there’s a list of closures and temporary bans. School’s closed. The curfew is mentioned prominently. Forming in groups of greater than four persons is illegal. The public transit network is closed. Interplanetary shuttles are canceled. Communication of all kinds, local and long-distance, has been shut down.

This last item is confirmed by my mother. She tells Estas and me over a small breakfast that she tried calling one of her sisters last night. She wanted to find out if she was all right, and if she knew anything about what had happened. Reyin says that she couldn’t get through. She would select her sister from the menu, and then the phone would tell her to please try again later. After several attempts, she gave up. Looking at my mother from across the table, it’s easy to see how worried she is. She’s barely eating at all. In my ignorance, it surprises me that she would feel this way over a sister that she never much liked to begin with. I guess it makes a little sense, but I’m still surprised.

For the whole day, I take the stävnemā fen’s advice. I stay indoors. Reyin does, too. Late in the afternoon, Estas goes out with a quiver that he’s recently finished. He doesn’t want to go, but he promised to deliver it to a client today. He comes back about an hour later. The quiver is gone. He looks shaken. He tells us that he was stopped by a patrol of stävnemā fen mes, and they told him that the sale of weaponry is temporarily illegal. They questioned him for several minutes, confiscated the quiver, and told him that he would be contacted when he was allowed to retrieve it. He came straight home. None of us leave the house after this.
We stay cooped up for two more days. Then, on the evening of the third day, we're seated in the dining room when a sudden, loud, drawn-out, siren-like burst of noise comes from the holostrip. We rush into the living room just in time to see the picture changing from a white background with blue lettering on it, to the normal shot of the studio worked in by Tain and Mahdtroh. We stare at the holo. We listen as the anchors explain that, as of yesterday, the Empire of Aiohn is at war.

A single droplet of water grows up out of the depths of the faucet. It stands, quivering and dancing. It grows, feet and base becoming narrower, the droplet as a whole stretching taller and taller. Then, with one final quiver, it leaps skyward, mind made up, cutting off all contact with the lowly faucet. The droplet rises, accelerating upwards, flying higher than ever before, moving quickly and audaciously, crossing great distances in only fractions of a second. It rockets through the air, aiming up at the sky below it. It flies past the lip of the sink basin, vanishing from sight. I hear it strike the roof of the basin, dripping with a single, deafening boom that reverberates around the cell for what feels like an entire minute.

I blink, enjoying the unfamiliar weight pressing down against my eyelids. Blood rushes through my ears, thumping in time with the beat of my heart. This second sensation isn't particularly comfortable, but I do nothing to get rid of it. In fact, I welcome it. I welcome the discomfort. It isn't necessary. I know it isn't. But I keep it anyway. The reasoning behind this choice is similar to when I leave an itch unscratched. Not out of politeness or inability to scratch it, but solely to prove to myself that it can be left unscratched. An unnecessary discomfort, present only because it's better than the alternative. The alternative in this case is nothingness.

In other words, I'm bored.

I swallow, then wince. Swallowing while doing a handstand isn't nearly as interesting or fun as blinking. Some of the saliva even goes up my nose. It hurts. I guess it would hurt anyway, but my nose has been particularly sensitive for the past four days, ever since I set it so it'd be straight again. It'll take a few more days for my nose to fully heal. In the meantime, it just aches and throbs. Same with my ribs. I think I got lucky and none of my bones actually broke, but I can't take a full breath in. There were at least two or three fractures. And I'm bruised everywhere. It hurts to sit, stand, and especially to lie down. It also hurts to do a handstand, but there's only so much boredom I can take before I have to start getting creative.

It's been five days since the red door to the cell last opened. I don't know how long I was unconscious for, but I don't think it was more than a few hours. When I woke up, I was back in the cell, lying on the floor. Just like the first time I woke up in here. There's a gray singe mark on the side of my orange jumpsuit. The spot where the lightning bolt hit me. When I woke up, despite the fact that I hurt all over and my face was swelling up to the size of melon, I felt a wave of joy sweep over me. I wasn't dead. That meant a lot to me. Despite the odds, I'm still alive. That joy faded quickly as the fractures and the bruises started making their presence more loudly known. They were angry for having been overlooked while I was unconscious. It's been five days now, and I'm doing better. I can move with almost regular flexibility, and I have a lot of my energy back. Most of my skin is still colored the bruising shades of green, yellow, blue, and orange, but that won't last. Mostly, it's the
boredom that nags at me. There’s nothing for me to do. The walls are blank, the cell is quiet, I’m alone, and the single lightbulb never switches off, even at night.

But the handstand really is starting to hurt, and I have to swallow again. I tip forward, having my feet swing down toward the floor in a nice arc. I push off with my hands, springing athletically to a standing position. Or, at least, the movement is athletic until my feet touch down and I’m standing. Upright, I stagger, the blood fleeing my head in favor of my feat. I have to put a hand out to the wall to stop myself toppling over. I’ve been upside down for several minutes. The sudden switch in what’s up and what’s down gives me a headache.

I look around for something else to do. I’m so bored. I almost painful. I need something to distract myself. I look at the sink. That’s no good. I already played with the sink. Turning on and off the faucets, trying to make a musical rhythm with the spurts of falling water. And then the water supply cut out. But it was good while it lasted.

I look at the bench. That’s no good, either. There’s not much I can do on it, other than lie down or sit, and both of these non-activities would drive me straight out of my skull. For one of my handstands, I tried doing it on the edge of the bench. I think I would have succeeded, but I lost my nerve at the last moment. I’ve stuck to doing them on the floor since then.

The floor. I’ve used it to do rolls and somersaults, flipping around on the tiny concrete rectangle like a madman. It’s a wonder I didn’t kill myself by crashing right into a wall. I’ve also tried climbing up the red metal door, which is fun while I’m doing it but, in the end, is a very short trip. I’ve also tried singing. The cell gives off an interesting echo, but I’m not a good enough singer to really enjoy listening to myself. Right now, with nothing better presenting itself, I start spinning around in circles at the center of the cell, trying to turn around as quickly as possible. Screw my headache. I’m bored.

Five days. Who knew that five days could take so long? Who knew that the world could become so boring in so short a time? It’s easy to understand why the exercise periods have stopped. The Warden could never send me back down there now. I tried to kill another inmate. No amount of paperwork can cover that up. I won’t be allowed back down ever again. Despite the danger they posed, I miss them. I miss them with a vengeance. At least they were interesting. I got to talk to Zach. I got to walk around. I got to see something other than the tiny concrete walls surrounding the insides of the cell. I spin.

Even without the exercise periods, I’m surprised that staying sane is proving so difficult. I thought I was more resilient than this. Five days is no time at all. I could be here for years. After all, I’m never being released. Nobody’s here to kill me. I’m not dying of old age. The only other option is dying of young age, and that doesn’t exist. So, I can see myself being stuck here for a very long time. I wish I was better at keeping myself entertained. After all, when I first got here, I spent several days all by myself, and I didn’t lose it then. I spin.

Well, yes, I think. But back then, I was still healing from getting shot in the elevator. I didn’t have enough energy left over to get bored. Now, today, I’m not doing all that bad. I’ve mostly recovered from having my head smashed into a door. And my physical injuries are well on the way to healing. It’s almost unfortunate. Because I’m doing better, I’m actually doing worse. I’m so bored that I feel as if I’ll shatter. Explode. Crack. Lose my mind. If I haven’t already. I spin.
I wonder how Zach’s doing. I wonder where he is now. I wonder what time it is. I wonder how Michael is. I wonder if it’s still injured. I wonder if I did anything serious. I wonder if I should feel guilty about feeling proud. I wonder what time it is. I wonder how Zach’s doing right now. I wonder if he’s gotten a new cell mate. I wonder why he didn’t tell me he shared a cell with Michael. I wonder who Zach’s new cell mate is. I wonder if they get along. I wonder what his cell mate did that got it in here. I wonder if it’s dangerous. I wonder if Zach will be all right. I wonder what time it is. I spin.

As the walls flash past, they streak together so I’m not standing in a rectangular box anymore. At this speed, it looks more like a cylinder. There are influxes of color from the red door and the grimy sink, but for the most part the cylinder is colored a grayish blue, matching the walls of the cell. Distractedly, I wonder if the same paint was used for both. Slowly, I let my hands be drawn out from my sides as I spin. Soon they’re almost fully extended. I push my fingers together and angle my hands like a propellor. I imagine that I’ll lift off at any second, flying straight through the ceiling.

The third knuckle on my right index finger cracks against the wall of the cell, setting off a loud and ringing echo. I grunt, coming to a drunken stop, holding the sparking finger as I stumble and sway over to the bench, plopping down on it with a thud! The world’s spinning, tilting on its axis and revolving in slow circles. I hate it. It looks much the same as when I was in the gymnasium. I could be sick. I decide firmly not to try spinning again. It’s not worth it.

But with the dizziness temporarily driving away the boredom, my mind is surprisingly calm. I can actually think for once. And I realize that I can’t put up with this for much longer. This lunacy won’t do. I need an out. I need a way to stay sane. I look around, but the cell is still empty. I’m disappointed. I guess I’ll need to come up with something creative.

We’re at war. I can’t believe it. Aiohn hasn’t been at war for centuries. And even then, the war was only a minor rebellion on an outer planet, nothing too major or too serious. It was resolved in just a few months. The last time Aiohn got into a real war was millennia ago, when it was still unifying the other nations. By now, the unification and the wars that accompanied it are quite literally ancient history. There’s been peace for my entire life. For my parents’ lives. For their parents’ lives. Back further, generations and generations, so long ago that war doesn’t even seems possible today.

But. The unthinkable has happened. The impossible has transpired. We’re at war. The next morning, after the sobering announcement, Tain and Mahdroh start in on the coverage. We get footage from the frontlines, images of huge spaceships blowing each other to smithereens. In one of the images, both of the ships are so damaged that it’s impossible to tell who’s who. There are pictures of research bases, set up on moons and large comets out on the periphery of the Empire. The ones we’re shown are bombed to dust. There’s nothing left. Most disturbing to me is hearing that one of the destroyed bases was the place where we first picked up the humans’ signal. That base, responsible for the largest, most momentous, and most promising discovery in history, is now a pile of twisted metal and melted glass. The entire research staff was killed in the raid.

We also get stories of our own attacks. They’re made out as daring missions, forays against a monstrous foe. We’ve already destroyed five of their warships. Five already. This statistic is trotted out multiple times by the two anchors. Five ships. They’ve only destroyed
two of ours. We get a full video of one of the victories, captured by a small probe so that our generals can better understand human tactics. It’s gruesome to watch. Even though it only shows the outsides of ships, I know that there must be hundreds - even thousands - of people inside each vessel, staffing it and maintaining it. This is a life-or-death struggle we’re watching. It’s barbaric. It’s awful to see one ship sending rockets toward the other. Seeing them explode against the hull in blinding galaxies of light. Seeing the wounded ship struggle, return fire, but very quickly die with no chance at all. The video is touted as a victory. But shouldn’t a victory make me feel proud?

Tain and Mahdtroh also offer details on the anniversary itself, explaining why we’re at war. According to what they say, the IR government snuck a group of humans past our security, hiding them in the crowd as President Glass gave his speech. Each of the humans was wearing a suicide vest. Over a hundred twenty-eight people were killed. More than twice this number were severely injured. Tain says that we tried negotiating. Aiohn wanted peace, he says. But the humans had a different idea. They were already launching attacks. There was nothing for us to do but defend ourselves.

I don’t know what to make of this. It sounds impossible. I don’t even understand the logic of it. If the humans were about to launch an attack on our capital city, then why would they time the attack to coincide with their leader’s speech? Wouldn’t they want him light years away, where he would be safe? And he certainly looked surprised when the first bombs went off. And he was saying such nice things in his speech. But what other explanation could there be? We’re even shown security footage of the event, revealing humans in heavy coats walking through the crowd in Aiohn’s central park, getting into position. I guess this proves it. But I still don’t understand.

In the end, though, it doesn’t matter if I understand it or not. We’re at war. That’s what’s important now. It doesn’t matter as much how we got here as what happens now that we’ve arrived. More attacks. More fighting. Over the next few days, my parents and I witness plenty of it on the holostrip. More bombings. More outposts destroyed. More daring missions led by our crack military commanders.

Some of the policies put in place after the anniversary are lifted now. Gathering in groups is legal again. Public transit and communication networks start back up. The curfew is pushed out another hour, until seven o’clock. The ban on selling weapons also is withdrawn, but my father is never contacted about retrieving his arrows. And when he calls about them, he’s simply told that his claim is being processed, and that he shouldn’t call again.

Schools and businesses open. Going to school or going shopping, even stepping outside, it’s easy to see the effect that the war is already having. The entire spirit of the city has changed. No one talks to anyone else. People walk a little bit faster. Put a bit more distance between themselves and everyone else. The change is especially noticeable in the underground transit terminals. Despite the architecture for reducing the noise of hundreds of bustling people, the underground is always a loud place to be. Now, though, it’s almost quiet. Conversations with other passengers aren’t happening anymore. Before the anniversary, there was a festive feeling in the air. There were even a few decorations on the outsides of houses and stores. So little time has passed that a few of these are still up, but now they have an almost haunted feel. Like the remains of a dead future. Only a day after the suggestion to stay inside our houses is lifted, all decorations are gone.
One change from the anniversary that doesn’t go away is that there are still more patrols of stävnemā fen mes than ever before. I can see them everywhere. No matter what street I’m on, there’s always at least one patrol close by. Also, while it used to be that only some patrols carried their rifles in their hands, and the rest carried them strapped across their backs, now every patrol has their weapons in hand. There are more birds now, too. Circling overhead. Sometimes following me from above when I break away from the main crowd.

Frankly, most people don’t seem to mind the extra security. With all the carnage we’re seeing whenever we enter our livingrooms, a few more watchful eyes doesn’t sound like all that bad an idea. This is how Estas feels. He tells my mother and me over dinner. Only a few hours after being told not to call about his claim again. He looks down at his soup and says that he’s grateful to know that Aiohn is being so careful. He doesn’t want what’s happening on the front lines to happen here, he says. And if the stävnemā fen mes can do anything to protect us, he thinks it’s worth it. My mother doesn’t comment. Neither do I. After dinner, I sit in my room, doing my schoolwork. I can hear through the door the distant sounds of the holostrip. Both my parents are watching. I wish they’d put a cloth over the speakers. If we turn the strip off we’ll be fined, but that doesn’t mean we have to listen to it all the time. For me, I only want to block the news out and pretend that nothing’s happening. I’m too frightened to know everything.

Slowly - slowly - I push the spoon forward until its tip gently taps against the wall. I’m about to make the first mark. I’ve been planning it for hours now, carefully getting it straight in my mind how exactly I want to approach this project. What should I draw? How do I want it centered? How should my subject be portrayed? Where does the first mark belong? I’ve enjoyed the planning. It’s something to do. And now, I’m finally ready to get started.

My choice in projects was a natural decision. The walls of this cell are so bereft of decoration that they’re practically screaming for a bit of embellishment. Once the idea came to me, I wondered why it took me so long to think of it. After all, a task that can both enhance my living space and give me something to do is just the kind of thing I need. I even have the perfect implement for it. True, the mush spoon isn’t a precision tool, but then, I’m not a precision artist. Back in school, my worst subject was always art. In my mind, I could always imagine the art I wanted to create, but somehow, on its journey from my head to the outside world, it would warp and distort until it was boring at best and ugly at worst. Seeing as I had two artists for parents, my professors were especially critical. When I was first learning to draw, I quickly realized that I wasn’t much good at holding the pencil. My professors were always trying to change the way I positioned it between my fingers, never with any success. They gave up soon enough. I didn’t mind. Not being able to hold the damn thing was the least of my problems. Nothing else made sense to me, either. I couldn’t figure out how to judge and draw a circle, my parallel lines always found a way of touching, and putting things in perspective was a pure fantasy for me. There was one time when I tried doing a sketch of Reyin’s fish sculpture. It was actually one of my better pieces. Which is sad to say, because my professor had to ask me what it was supposed to be. I tried to avoid doing sketches after this.

But now, a sketch is exactly what I’m trying to do. I don’t have colored paints or anything like that with me, but I figure that I should be able to do a lot simply by putting
strategic scratches on the large cell wall. The spoon is unbalanced and awkward to hold, but it should do a better job than one of my fingernails. Besides, I’m not trying for a masterpiece here. I’m only trying to stay sane.

Keeping the tip of the spoon pressed up against the concrete wall, I carefully and deliberately drag it down and across the surface of the gray-blue paint. There’s a faint white scratch in my wake. I pull the spoon away, and inspect the mark. On the whole, not bad. It wavers slightly, and isn’t the perfect arc I’d wanted it to be. But by my standards, it’s not bad at all. I decide to keep it. I can’t get rid of it, anyway. I move on to the next mark, scratching my way across the blank wall. Some of the scratches I go over more than once, deepening them, making them more visible. Other scratches I leave as shading.

As I work, I try to push back a nagging worry. This project is great, but what will I do when I finish? I’ll be right back where I started. Sure, the cell will be a bit more interesting, but I’ll once again have nothing to do. There will be nothing to keep me from the strangling boredom. And then what will happen to me?

There’s no use in thinking about this. Whatever will happen after I’m done with the wall will happen after I’m done with the wall. It will take me at least another week to finish what I have in mind. Maybe even longer, if I’m really careful. It could very well be that I’ll get used to the boredom in this time. Or perhaps interesting will present itself. At any rate, there’s nothing I can do about this hypothetical future today. And worrying will only make things worse. Still, logic and reasonable thoughts don’t hold much sway over anxiety. I still worry. No matter how senseless it may seem. Even to me.

I focus on my most recent scratch. It’s a wavery line, wobbling in directions that I hadn’t intended. I lick the pad of my thumb and try rubbing the line out. This works to some extent, but not entirely. I try drawing the line again. I want to get it right this time. The noise created by the spoon scraping against the paint is long and sharp. Quiet, but with a distinct edge. I listen intently to the sound. I’m amazed by how luxurious it seems. Any noise at all is a welcome change recently, a wonderful break from the pressing silence. I finish the line. Once again, it’s not perfectly straight. But I’m satisfied. It’s not getting any better.

Before starting on the next scratch, I change my grip on the spoon and thwack the bowl of the spoon against the floor. It makes a lovely sound. Cracking and loud, with just a tiny bit of metallic ring to it. I repeat the movement, pounding out a sporadic rhythm against the concrete. I make sure not to let the beats become predictable. I keep it changing, morphing, flowing. It’s not a pretty rhythm. I don’t care. It’s not as if I’m playing for an audience. I’m just keeping myself amused.

When I’m done playing with the sound, I switch my grip on the spoon back to the way it was before. Gently, I place the tip of the bowl back up against the wall. I start drawing, leaving little white scratches in the paint. Little threads of patterns. Weaving together into something greater. That’s the idea, at least. But maybe they’re just scratches.

Only a single week elapses between the start of the war and the first rounds of the draft. I didn’t even know we had a draft. In peacetime, there’s never any need for it. We never hear about it. I don’t, at any rate. But soon the news is swarming with information about what the draft means, how to respond if your number comes up, and what a great honor it is to serve the Empire of Aiohn.
When he first hears of it, the draft sends my father into a panic. He can’t stand the idea of any of us, especially me, getting plucked up and shipped out to the front lines. It frightens me, too. That I wouldn’t have any say in it. That I could suddenly find myself in the middle of a war zone. I don’t care what Tain and Mahdtroh say. I don’t want to fight. I don’t care if it’s honorable. I don’t care if volunteering is the “right” thing to do. The thought of fighting and dying terrifies me.

So I’m relieved when I hear that the minimum age to qualify for the draft is many years away for me. Sixteen years, to be exact. This means I’m safe. The war will be long over by then, and I’ll never be in any danger of getting syphoned off to war. I’m also relieved when Estas learns that he’s exempt from the draft, too. He did a bit of research, and he found that, technically, he’s a weapons manufacturer. The draft doesn’t touch people like him. He’s not even allowed to volunteer. It’s an old law that lets fletchers declare themselves as weapons manufacturers, but it still applies. My parents and I all let out a sigh of relief when we hear this.

And then there’s Reyin. She’s plenty old enough to qualify for the draft, and her job does nothing to grant her an exempt status. She’s a sculptor. The war effort doesn’t need sculptors. I need her. Estas needs her. But Aiohn doesn’t.

Every day, I watch the draft portion of the news carefully, checking to make sure that Reyin’s number isn’t called. Around the neighborhood, I can already see the crowds getting slightly less dense, the streets less crowded. So soon, noticeable chunks of the population are going missing. Gobbled up into the military. I don’t sleep very well. There’s something extraordinarily frightening about the concept that my mother could suddenly be whisked away and that there’s nothing any of us can do about it. For her part, Reyin doesn’t seem too affected. But, then, she never seems too affected. It’s the small things that give her away. How she spends more time in her workroom, sculpting. How she talks less. How I sometimes catch her peering into the living room when the draft numbers are being called. It’s small things like this that let me know how worried she is.

It gets worse when, two weeks later, Ahlem is drafted. He’s the first one I know personally to get sucked away. My father practically has a fit. He calls up the military office in Alaseel, and tries to make the case that Ahlem is his assistant, and therefore a weapons manufacturer also. I eavesdrop on the call. Objectively, the official on the other end of the phone sounds sympathetic. But he says that there’s nothing he can do. “Assistant” to a fletcher isn’t good enough. Ahlem is picked up anyway. Estas doesn’t even get the chance to talk to him.

Then, miraculously, two days after Ahlem’s number comes up, Reyin gets a call from her sister. She’s on the phone for almost an hour. When she ends the call, my mother asks Estas and me to come into the dining room. Reyin looks stunned. She tells us that her number’s out of the draft now. She won’t be called.

I’m almost ashamed that my first reaction is confusion and not relief. Relief comes soon after, but I don’t understand at all how it could be that Reyin would suddenly gain exemption. Nobody else gets exemption from out of nowhere. For Estas, his first reaction is to almost collapse as the pent-up stress within him gets released. But when he’s recovered, his confusion is even stronger than mine. When the draft first started, he thoroughly researched all paths to exemption and non-entry. Reyin didn’t qualify for a single one. And then my mother explains, in a slightly ashamed tone of voice, that her sister had spent the past week selling off pieces of the family artwork. Yesterday, she succeeded in coming up
with enough funds to “compensate” key officials for removing her own and Reyin’s numbers from the pool. Reyin reports that her sister called this act “perfectly legal.” After all, the logic goes, a soldier is worth only so much to the Empire. If Aiohn receives this value plus a bit extra in cash, then it works out to be in Aiohn’s favor to remove the individual from the draft.

This isn’t a common method of gaining exemption. In fact, it isn’t even officially listed. But Reyin’s sister reassures her that it isn’t an uncommon path for people of means to take. Reyin’s sister said over the phone that she’s happy to help. The only thing she wants in return is a bit of courtesy in the future.

Of course I’m happy about all of this. Of course I am. My mother won’t be going anywhere. The fear can no longer come true. Of course this makes me want to dance and sing and celebrate. Or, at the very least, give Reyin a hug. It’s one of the few times she’s ever let me. But the next day, as I’m sitting in class, I realize how many of the students around me have already lost a relative or a parent to the draft. They don’t know that mine are exempt. I haven’t told them. I’m not ashamed, or anything like that. It’s more complicated. I would never want to give up the exemptions that my family has been so lucky to catch. But it also doesn’t feel fair that we’d sit safe while everyone else is picked off one by one.

I’ve never spent much time with the other students. I wouldn’t call any of them “friends.” Sometimes I enjoy spending time with one or two, but I never miss them when I don’t see them. I think that’s the test of a real friend. Wanting to spend time with someone, no matter where you are. Not having to be forced together into one lunchroom in order to spend time together. But since the phone call from Reyin’s sister, I find myself spending still less time with the other students. Avoiding them, even. I don’t want to be around them. I don’t want to be reminded of anything.

One night, almost a year into the war, I’m eating dinner with my parents. Since the bombings, our dinners have been quiet as a rule. None of us has anything we want to talk about. But tonight, Estas puts down his fork and announces that Ahlem has been killed. It happened about a month ago, he says. I stop chewing. The food sits in my mouth, unnoticed. I’m stunned. Despite my fear of the draft and despite my knowledge of how deadly the war is turning, it takes me completely by surprise to learn that someone I know is dead. I didn’t think it could happen. Sure, I knew it could happen. I knew it would happen. But Ahlem? I’ve known him for years. I’ve never really liked him, and I haven’t spoken to him since that day in the park. But still. It just doesn’t make sense. People don’t die anymore. Aiohn has seen to that. It’s fixed the aging problem. Disease has long been a thing of the past. And accidents are rare. People don’t die. That’s how it is.

But, now there’s a war. It’s a shock to learn of a threat that Aiohn can’t protect us from.

Estas explains that he’s been keeping in touch with Ahlem since the draft. He goes to the military office a few times a week and writes messages about what’s going on in Alaseel. If the messages are approved, then the office sends them out. About a week later, Estas gets a reply back. A few weeks ago, however, the replies stopped coming. After some time of hearing only silence, my father started asking around. He says it took him forever to get through to someone who would talk to him. In the end, my father was able to get in touch with the official he’d spoken to previously, about getting Ahlem an exemption from the draft. The official remembered Estas. He promised my father that he would look into it and call back. This afternoon, Estas finally got that call. As Estas tells my mother and me,
Ahlem was on a transport ship with several hundred other soldiers. They ran into a human convoy. A missile hit the side of Ahlem’s ship. It tore through the hull. As the official explained it to my father, Ahlem died from a sudden loss of air pressure.

I know what this means. It means he found himself in a vacuum without any protection. It means his blood boiled and his muscles liquified. It means he died almost instantly.

I don’t have much appetite for dinner after this. I don’t finish my meal. And afterwards, as I’m trying to do schoolwork, I find concentrating almost impossible. Even though I need to concentrate. I have a final exam coming up. And then a few weeks after that, a graduation exam. Normally, graduation from the school is a big event. Not so in my case. I haven’t specialized in anything. I’m not prepared for any job. Graduation just means that I’ll have nothing to do. No school work, no career. But strangely, I’m not worried. With the war in full force, everything else seems a lot less important. At least I’m safe.

And then, a few days before I’m scheduled to graduate, I hear on the news that the minimum draft age has lowered. It’s gone down by eight years. Now I’m only six year away from qualifying. It’s easy to understand why Aiohn did this. Looking around at Alaseel, it looks almost empty. It’s like a juiced fruit. Only the structures remain standing. There are people all around, of course, but when I compare the bustle of Market before First Contact to the dregs of crowds there today, there’s no contest. So many people have been drafted. Even the shop owners. Their absence is particularly easy to feel. Like the instrument merchant. He had his booth set up there for years. I never bought anything from him, but he was always there when I was walking home. He disappeared one day. I haven’t seen him since. It’s no wonder that Aiohn needs to dip into a new segment of the population. The one it’s been mining since the start of the war is almost dry.

The reduction in the minimum draft age frightens me, but my reaction is nothing compared to how Estas takes it. The very next day, he tells me that he’ll be teaching me how to become a fletcher after all. The motive for this is clear. He’s desperate to find another way to make me draft-exempt. He’s worried that the minimum age could fall even further.

I appreciate that he wants to protect me. But it also bothers me that the very thing that first set us at odds is now being jammed down my throat. True, after I graduate I’ll have nothing better to do with my time. But I wasn’t lying all those years ago when I said I didn’t want to become a fletcher. I enjoy watching my father work, but crafting arrows isn’t for me. Besides, I don’t believe the minimum age could fall any lower. There are laws about this kind of thing. And I still have six years before I qualify. The war should be over by then.

But Estas won’t take no for an answer. He starts at the beginning, teaching me step-by-step how to carve shafts, how to make the heads, cut the fletchings. It’ll take several years of training before I can officially be termed a weapons manufacturer, so in my father’s mind there’s no time to lose. And as I watch the holostrip each day, I start to be grateful. The news is always full of carnage. Scenes of violence and death. There’s extensive coverage when a whole city is bombed, flattened by a human raid. The city was on the outskirts of the Empire, but we all believe that we should have been able to protect it anyway. The news always frightens me. I don’t want to be pulled into the war. I want to stay right where I am.
In just a few brief days, the mural has evolved from a few scratches and lines etched clumsily onto the wall into the outlines of a cohesive image. I suppose that if I were a real artist, then the proportions would be better. Yet, for my standards, they're excellent. The first part of the mural is almost done. I've got most of the outlines up. It will only take me another day or two to finish them. After that, I'll be on to the detail work. Putting in shadows, textures. The small things that, when taken together, will make the image as a whole come alive.

I'm enjoying working on the mural. I've found a love for sketching that I never knew I had. I also enjoy the planning. Sitting on the bench, facing my work. Thinking through what needs to be done next. And then there's also the thrill factor of creating the mural. No one's ever told me that it's against the rules to scratch up a wall, but I'm pretty sure that if any of the guards were to see what I've done, I'd be in big trouble. I'm almost amused when I think about this. So what if I'm in big trouble? What are they going to do to me? It's not as if they can put me in solitary. I'm already here. It's not as if they can take away my privileges. I don't have any. And they can't give me an exercise period again. The paperwork would never go through. In fact, I almost want to be found out. I think I'd like to see some guard's reaction when it came in here, see its eyes bug out, shocked at the expanse of damage on the wall. I'd like for them to try to stop me. I'd like to show them that they can't stop me. Sure, they could take away my spoons. But they can't take away my fingernails. They can't stop me, and I'd like to prove it.

Almost. There's another part of me, nagging and sensible, that doesn't want to be caught. After all, what if they can punish me? Or, worse, what if they find a way to stop me from drawing? Then there'd be nothing between me and the boredom. Besides, it's been so long since anyone has paid any attention to me that I've started to wonder if the Warden has lost interest. That'd be a good thing. The Warden isn't the kind of creature that I want taking a keen interest in me. I wouldn't want to spoil this by attracting any undue attention.

In the end, the cautions side of me wins out. I take every precaution I can, stopping my scratches whenever I hear approaching footsteps and rushing over to return the spoon to the bowl. I wouldn't want the guard with the food cart to notice that my spoons keep going missing. I don't know if this would make a difference, but I'm careful anyway. Sometimes, I even go the extra distance and wipe off the little specks and paint dust that get stuck to the spoon.

Then, when the footsteps are gone, I retrieve my instrument and get back to work. Or, if the footsteps turn out to belong to the guard with the food cart, then I simply watch as my old tray is removed along with the spoon and a new tray is shoved onto the boxy shelf. I always finish eating before I use the spoon for anything else. I'd hate to get paint dust in my food. I also wash the spoon off in the sink before using it, and dry it on my jumpsuit. I like to think of this as taking good care of my tools.

When I was first starting the mural, I kept being tempted to give up on my master plan and go instead for a slew of smaller, simpler drawings. Just a series of unconnected images. It'd certainly be more gratifying to sketch small pictures, finishing them in an hour or two. Instantly getting to appreciate my work. With the mural, even with the outline mostly completed, it will still be another week before I'm done. At least. It could take longer. Given this, it really does seem tempting to go for something easier.

Each time this would happen, I would stand up and pace around the cell for a few minutes. Whenever I was tempted to give up, it would be after several hours of work, each
hour getting me what seemed like no closer to the end. I needed to take a break. I would wince as my knees unfolded from where I’d been squatting. I’d start walking around the cell, pacing. I’ve learned that ovals aren’t a good shape to walk in. I get dizzy after only a few minutes. It’s the turns that do it, making me spin around and around in slow motion, always turning right or always turning left. A better shape, I’ve learned, is the figure eight. Using this roadmap, I alternate the direction of my turns. First one way, then another. I walk straight, turn right. I walks straight, turn left. Repeat. With this pattern, I can keep going for much longer before I get dizzy.

But after I was significantly invested in the mural, I noticed that I no longer had the urge to abandon it. I only wanted to do a good job. This is still my goal. It feels good to have a goal. Even now, when I’m having to reach awkwardly over the toilet to get to the spot of pain that needs scratching. Even when I’m suspending myself over a bowl of filthy water - I flush, but the toilet hasn’t been cleaned in forever - I’m having a good time. I wish this could keep going forever. It’s sad to think that I could finish. I’m sure that for a long time there will always be more details for me to fill in, but the day will come when there’s nothing more that can be added. It’s inevitable. After all, there’s only so much wall space. The paint can hold only so many scratches. It can hold plenty, but not an infinite number. The day will come when I have nothing to draw on. But until then, I’m determined to continue.

I close the front door behind me, my head spinning with new information about glue. Ah. I can hardly imagine. How many different kinds of glues can there possibly be in this world? A lot. More than I wish to know.

Unfortunately, I need to know them all. I’m in the second year of fletcher training. I should have learned them months ago. I kept pushing it off. I kept asking Estas to teach me about something else, instead. But today he insisted. You can’t be a fletcher, he told me, if you don’t know how to keep the arrow in one piece. I suppose he’s correct. I just can’t stand dealing with so much glue.

There are different glues for different woods. Different glues for different fletchings. Different glues for different style heads, and different glues for different metals. There are different glues for different color schemes. Different glues for different purposes. It’s all so much. It’s all too much. And I have to learn what each is for. I need to know what to use when. Also - and this is what really gets me - I need to know how to make each and every one of them. There’s no buying them from a store. No, no. Each has to be made, by hand, over a timeframe that varies from glue to glue, ranging from a few hours to a few days. I hate it. I can’t stand glues. The session ended when I asked my father why we needed all this. Couldn’t we just get the kinds of glues they sell at the store? The kinds that everyone else uses? He looked at me and sighed. Then he told me to take a break. That was all right with me.

As I step out onto the street, I take a deep breath of fresh air. It’s good to be outside. And it’s only mid afternoon, too. I have plenty of time before it gets dark. I hop down the front steps, looking around on the street. Other than a patrol farther along, the street is empty. This only serves to remind me of how much worse the war has gotten. It’s gotten to the point where Tain and Mahdtroh don’t even give that day’s casualty numbers anymore. And with the voracious draft having gone on for so long, many parts of Alaseel are starting to look like ghost towns. Only the young, the lucky, and the exempt remain. It’s been close to four years now. I don’t know how much longer this can keep going.
The paving stones on the street are warm from the day’s sun. I can feel them through my shoes. It’s a lovely feeling. The air is cool, and there’s a soft breeze floating through the city. It’s a perfect afternoon. I can hardly wait to get to the forest. On a day like today, it’ll smell so good. With all the earth and the leaves, the trees and the life. It’ll be a wonderful change from inhaling glue fumes all day.

“Halt!”

I look, and see a patrol of four stävnemā fen mes hustling toward me. In their full body armor, they all look alike. The only individual who stands out is the ranking officer. There are red highlights on either side of his helmet. His or her, actually. It could be either one. Other than the red markings, the four are completely alike. Their bodies are gleaming white, detailed with light blue patterns on their chests and arms, and their faces are black plates of polished glass. The voice I hear is digitized, scrambled slightly as it’s piped over a loudspeaker mounted somewhere on the leader’s helmet. I turn to face the patrol, making sure that my hands are clearly visible. “Good afternoon,” I say. It’s always a good idea to be polite with these people. This is the same philosophy as I have with the birds. As usual, they ignore my greeting. They walk up to me. The leader isn’t holding a rifle, but the other three are. The leader’s is still strapped over his or her back. They each have a handgun sitting in a holster by their waists.

“May I see your bracelet?” the leader asks me. It’s phrased as a question, but, of course, it’s not. It’s an order. After an entire lifetime of dealing with the stävnemā fen mes, there’s little doubt left in my mind as to who’s in charge here. I nod. I hold out my left arm, and the leader takes my wrists and scans my identification bracelet with a small device in the palm of its armored glove. The bracelets are a new thing, only a few years old. They were implemented about a year after the war started. They’re meant to help the stävnemā fen mes keep track of everyone. When the program first started up, I was a bit sceptical. I wasn’t sure I liked the idea of having a piece of metal permanently affixed around my left wrist. But in fact, it’s not bad at all. I actually like the way it looks. It’s like a little ribbon of silver, flowing smoothly around the base of my hand. It’s lightweight, and even though I’m told I couldn’t cut it with a bandsaw, it’s still just as flexible as fabric. It also makes interactions with the stävnemā fen mes much easier. Before, whenever I was stopped, I’d have to go through proving who I am. Listing identification numbers. Answering questions. And if I ever messed up, it’d mean hours of trouble and a small fine. With the bracelet, all I have to do is hold out my arm and the patrol knows exactly who I am.

“Where are you going, Void?” the leader asks. Here we go, I think. The ritual begins. “I’m spending the afternoon in the forest just outside the city,” I say. “I’ll be back long before curfew.” Through the reinforced glass of the helmet, I can feel a pair of eyes studying me, searching to make sure that I can be trusted.

“Is there anything more productive you can be doing with your time?” the leader asks. “You know that the war effort demands hard work and participation from all of us.” I dip my head, making sure to acknowledge the statement. It’s a catchphrase I’m familiar with, used by almost every stävnemā fen whenever they stop me. It came into prominence almost overnight, replacing an earlier catchphrase that I can’t even remember at this point. Clearly, the stävnemā fen mes are told to say these things.

“There’s nothing more I can do until later tonight,” I say. This is true, actually. When Estas told me to go take a break, he made it clear that we wouldn’t be continuing until after dinner. Apparently, while learning about glues is frustrating for me, trying to teach me
about them is frustrating for him. The armored figure doesn’t look happy with my answer. But then, I’ve never seen a happy-looking stāvmē fen. They always look stoic. As stoic as a suit of armor can look, anyway.

The leader may not be happy with my answer, but it seems to pass muster. “Then enjoy your afternoon,” the leader says. These are obviously empty words. The real message comes next. “Remember to be back inside before seven o’clock curfew.”


The leader makes a gesture with his or her left hand. “Move along,” the leader says. I nod my head again and turn away, walking at a normal speed as I continue down the street. I don’t look behind me. The last time I made that mistake, I was stopped again. As it is, I’m questioned by two more patrols before I finally reach the edge of Alaseel. And even then I’m not through. I have to stop at a permanent bunker-like checkpoint set up along the side of the road. At each of the stops, I’m asked the same things, I answer in the same ways, and I’m set on my way. It’s a little bit annoying that I have to give up a few minutes of the precious afternoon in this way, but I’m not going to argue. Given the destruction I see on the news every day, I’ll welcome anything that has even the slightest chance of increasing security.

As soon as I’m clear of the checkpoint, I turn off the main road and start strolling over the open, grassy fields. A few years ago, I would have started jogging at this point. But since the war started, the stāvmē fen mes have gotten more twitchy. There’s nothing to bring them down on me like breaking into a run. There aren’t many of them out here past the city line, but I wouldn’t put it past them to come after me. In their minds, someone running must have something they’re running from.

When I reach the base of the hills, I head straight up toward the forest. As the trees close in around me, I turn around and look back at Alaseel. It’s a beautiful city. Circular, open, based largely in white tones, with a low skyline punctuated by only a handful of towers. I can see the park, the Education district. I can’t tell which of the houses is mine, but I’m sure I’m looking straight at it. From this distance, there’s no sign to tell me that there’s a war. I can’t see it anywhere. Then, just as I’m thinking this, I see a small turret at one corner of the city. I squint. Vaguely, I recognize it as an anti-aircraft machine. I sigh. So much for no sign of the war. I turn back to the forest. At least everything’s peaceful in here.

I walk farther in. As I pass a sapling, I reach out a hand and grab the trunk. My hand comes away with gritty flecks of bark sticking to it. I wipe my hand on my pants, and most of the flecks fall away. I grab the next sapling I see in the same way. This time, I don’t wipe my hand clean. I like the way the dust feels on my skin.

After many minutes of walking, I step between two trees and find myself standing in front of the small stream that winds through the forest. A few dozen feet farther along to my left, the stream bends sharply in one direction and then back again, forming a small spur of land that juts out into the water. I walk over to it and sit down crosslegged. Across the water from me is the moss and lichen covered boulder. It’s still exactly the same. Same place. Same appearance. The war hasn’t touched it at all.

I close my eyes. I take a deep breath of air. I remember the breath I took outside my house, and how it felt so fresh compared to the fumes I’d been breathing. That city air is just as impure when compared to the richness I’m taking in now. And this isn’t because Alaseel has dirty air. No. There’s nothing wrong with the air in my home. But, by that same token, there’s nothing right about it, either. Here in the forest, especially by the stream, the
air is made alive by its surroundings, pulling into itself a thick medley of leaves, water, dirt, and life. I smile. I love it here. There’s no war here, and I love it.

I open my eyes, and I watch as the view changes. It’s still much the same, but the colors are fading now, turning from vibrant greens and browns into a wash of blue-gray. Details also fade. Depth goes out from the forest, like a candle in a high wind. The little sounds of the stream and the trees quiet and are soon lost. All that’s left is a poorly drawn mural, scratched haphazardly onto a wall with the bowl of a mush spoon. I close my eyes again, sitting crosslegged on the bench, and try to pretend that it’s all real.
Chapter Twelve

Eyes closed, I let my sphere of hearing expand around me, becoming my main point of contact with the world. It's cool and dark in the forest. Perfect for listening. I let my hearing grow and strengthen, magnifying the sounds of the trees with their leaves and branches, the gushing of the stream as it flows between its steep banks, and the occasional murmuring of a far-off creature. I float at the center of a universe of sounds. I identify everything that I recognize, labeling noises in my mind with a source, a body, an entire history. Whatever I don't immediately recognize, I spend a few seconds turning over and studying, hearing it from this angle and that. If by the end of this process I still don't know what it is, I set it aside and move on to the next sound.

There aren't many things as relaxing as listening. It lets me know exactly what's going on around me, granting me a kind of three-hundred-sixty-degree vision. Omniscient, I can rest easy with the knowledge that nothing bad is coming my way. Also, listening allows me to separate my mind from my body. It's the only way I've ever been able to experience true flight.

By shifting the focus of my hearing, I can move all around and about the stream, flitting farther away, turning around, and exploring the other direction. I move out over the water. Skimming its surface. Hearing the gurgling from up-close. I'm barely an inch above the flow. I listen around at the trees, feeling them with my ears and soaring all the way up to the highest branches and sitting forty feet above the ground. The boulder is especially interesting to hear. It doesn't make any noise itself, but it has a signature way of blocking and distorting the other sounds around it. Hearing its shape feels a lot like gazing at the heatwaves that rise off a stovetop or an open fire. I can't see the heat itself - I don't have that alteration - but I can see the effect the heat has on the images around it. By watching how other objects shimmer and bend, I can get a surprisingly clear picture of where the heat is and where it's going. The lichen-painted boulder is itself “black” to my ears, a spot of darkness in an otherwise brilliant sea of sounds. But even though I can't hear it, it stands out like a beacon, a spot of black in an otherwise sparkling bright field.

I loosen my focus. I'm not homing in on any one object or place anymore. I'm enjoying the entire area at once. Taking it all in together. Hearing everything. I could never do this in Alaseel. I would never be able to push my hearing this far. The city is too loud. I'd be deafened. Like putting my ear right up against a speaker piping out music full blast. It'd be like staring at the sun. Only deep in the forest, away from the people and the businesses, can I fully enjoy my favorite sense.

Just as I'm thinking this, a massive hurricane comes roaring in toward the stream, setting up such a deafening burst of screaming wind that my hands fly up and cover my ears as I dial back my hearing as quickly as I can. I feel as if I've been physically assaulted. Cautiously, ears ringing, I crack open one of my eyes and take a peek at my attacker. When I see it, I smile ruefully to myself. I lower my hands.

Craning my neck back, I look up at the branch where a medium-sized bird has come to perch. It's jet black, with a smart, pointed beak and an angular crest spearing off the back of its head. On the very tips of its wings are startlingly red highlights, almost glowing against the rest of its body. I squint at it, trying to see it better. I don't recognize it. I've never seen this kind of bird before. Normally, birds have blue markings, not red. And this
bird’s eyes are black, not the usual milky-white cameras that adorn the birds I’m used to. I wonder what agency it’s from.

Then the bird does something that I’ve never seen before. It rotates its head on its shoulders and starts grooming its left wing, working the tip of its beak in a line beneath its feathers as it jitters the beak open and closed. This isn’t the behavior of any stāvnemā fen creation. Again, I wonder where the bird could be from. What agency or office would design a bird like this?

With a jolt, I realize that the bird isn’t a creation at all. It’s real. It’s alive. It was hatched from an egg, it’s made from flesh and blood, and it will die in a matter of years. It’s real. I’ve never seen anything like it. I’ve heard that Aiohn has actual birds living on the planet, but I didn’t see any when I visited all those years ago. And for all the other settled planets, Aiohn usually refrains from introducing birds into the ecosystem. The only birds I’ve ever seen here in Alaseel are the large white-and-blue ones that assist the stāvnemā fen mes. But the creature in front of me is nothing like that at all. I’m enthralled by it.

How did it get here? Are there more? Who introduced it to the forest? The bird is such a mystery to me. This, plus the fact that the bird is one of the most beautiful things I’ve ever seen, makes me instantly fall in love with it. I gaze up at the bird in wonder.

For its part, the bird ignores me. It knows it’s safe up there on the branch. It could be half a mile away by the time I even got to my feet. It knows I’m here, but it really doesn’t seem to care. This is such a big change from the stāvnemā fen birds. They’ll watch me until I rot, no matter what I’m doing. I’m amazed by how refreshing it is to see a creature whose purpose isn’t to stare at me. I wish I knew what this kind of bird is called.

My right ear twitches. I hear something. It’s faint - very faint - but it’s there. It sounds like… a siren? The bird hears it, too. It stops grooming its wing and freezes in place. I stand up and look around toward the source of the noise. It sounds as if it’s coming from Alaseel. But why would that be? That doesn’t make-

The ground under my feet bucks violently and an explosion shatters through the forest. The bird screams, racing away deeper into the trees. I stay locked in place, eyes wide, feet braced. I can feel the first waves of fear rising in my throat. As the echoes from the explosion start to fade, I can hear the siren again. This time I recognize it. It’s the air raid siren. Another explosion bursts through the trees and sets my ears ringing, the ground jumping. And then I’m running through the forest, sprinting toward home.

With each new blast, the ground jerks, making me stumble as I run full tilt. After one explosion, I come so close to falling flat on my face that I’m only barely able to right myself, standing upright just in time to collide at full speed with a low-hanging branch. It catches me right below the shoulder. My feet continue moving forward even as my upper body is brought to a dead stop, and I’m launched through the air before landing hard on my back. All breath is knocked out of me, and I lie stunned on the ground for several seconds, gasping and trying to reteach myself how to inhale. Through the leafy canopy of the treetops, I see small patches of dark clouds. I know this is wrong. Just a few minutes ago, the sky was completely clear. No clouds in sight. They’re not clouds, then. Smoke. The next blast gets me back on my feet, and I’m running again.

By the time I can see Alaseel through the trees, there are massive columns of thick smoke rising from sections of it. I pull up short at the sight, putting my hand out against a tree as I try and catch my breath. In the sky overhead, I see what looks like an entire army of warplanes. There’s a sporadic rain of little black dots falling from their underbellies. I
pick out one dot in particular, and follow it with my eyes as it accelerates hungrily toward the ground. It disappears behind a set of buildings, but an instant later a giant globe of fire erupts from the spot, tearing through structures and homes like an arrow through paper. It takes a few seconds for the sound to reach my ears. When it does, it’s deafening.

I start moving again, running down the grassy hill toward Alaseel. I’m sprinting. Pounding. Speeding. I fly down the hill, directly towards the next globe of fire already blooming. My fear has been replaced by full-fledged panic, searing at me and removing any chance to think. The only thing I want, the only thing filling my mind as I flash down the hill covered in tall grass is to get home. It doesn’t make sense, but I don’t care. As I run, panting and sweating, I keep my gaze fixed on the warplanes circling in the sky. Like carrion birds. But these are no passive watchers. These planes aren’t simply waiting for Alaseel to die. They’re bombing it to dust, releasing dot after dot, inferno after inferno.

Watching them, I miss the sudden ditch in the ground. My foot falls into it and I go sprawling. The hill is so steep here and I’m running so quickly that I keep moving, rolling and battering my way downhill, side over side and end over end. The sky and ground flash together as I twist and fall, and then I finally come to a stop by slamming flat onto my chest. Pain lances up from every part of my body - my legs, my back, my arms, my head - but especially from my right ankle, the one that took the fall when I stepped into the ditch. I cough dust out of my mouth, and try pushing myself up off the ground. I hear three more explosions, each louder than the one before it. I push myself upward until my head is above the grassline, and immediately look back up at the warplanes. More dots are falling. More explosions.

I try to stand up, but my hurt ankle gives way, sending me falling back into the tall grass. I try crawling now, dragging my leg behind me. I only make it a few dozen feet before I crumple into a heap, nursing my ankle and watching the firestorm overtaking the city. There’s a boulder near where I lie, and I make my way over to it, listening to the great, ringing booms that flash over the grassy plane. I can’t close my eyes. I can’t look away. I don’t know what to think, or to feel. I prop my back up against the boulder. I hold my ankle, and watch the next ball of flames burst free of its shell with all the power and fury of a newborn star. The wave of sound the star generates washes over me, bludgeoning me and overwhelming me.

A large part of me can’t believe what I’m seeing. This can’t be happening. How could this be happening? This is like something I watch on the news, but unedited and projected with a holo the size of a planet. The only things missing are the anchors. In shock, I half expect Tain and Mahdroh to appear any second and start describing how the humans started bombing a city yesterday, and all was lost until our forces came and defeated the human warplanes and there were actually minimal casualties because the humans are terrible shots and rescue efforts are now underway and this is why we need Aiohn to protect us so please join the armed forces because we can win this war but only if we all work hard and participate.

Another bomb goes off. It’s louder than anything I could hear through the holo in my living room. I can feel it all the way in my chest, rattling and echoing in the cavernous space where my heart used to be. The anchors don’t appear. This isn’t happening somewhere else. This attack isn’t light years away. This is going on right here, right now, to me, to us, to Alaseel. I tighten my grip on my ankle, trying to ignore how much it hurts.
Watching the warplanes, a captive audience, I realize that they’re bombing specific targets. The first things to go are the anti-aircraft towers, like the one I saw when I was leaving. The towers are firing away, but if they actually hit anything, it’s not hard enough to do damage. The bombers, however, have a devastating effect. The towers are blown apart one by one, shattering and going up in flames and smoke. Next to be targeted are the military outposts and stations. I watch as the concrete checkpoint I passed through on my way out of the city gets struck by a fireball. And then the warplanes turn to the exits of the city, closing them off by blasting craters into the ground and setting up thick walls of fire, burning black with soot and smoke. A perimeter is set up like this all around the city, trapping the residents inside. Tiny at this distance, I see one group of people trying to get away before an exit is cut off, sprinting beyond the city limits and into the grass. I see a bomber swoop over them. I see another black dot get released. I see the group disappear into a sphere of starlight. When the blaze dies down, they’re nowhere to be seen. In their place, fires start in the grass, and licking their way across the plane. The smoke is thick.

Exits destroyed, the warplanes start crisscrossing over the rest of the city in an organized grid formation. I imagine how it must be to stand, trapped, corralled by walls of fire and craters a story deep. I imagine what it must be like to see the formation of bombers heading my way. See the dots growing larger. Watch the explosions, hear the roar, feel the heat, and then be blown apart or set aflame.

As I watch my home being carefully destroyed - the Municipal district, the Education district, the Market district, and, finally, the Residential district - my mind goes blank. I have no further thoughts. I can only watch as the warplanes jettison their deadly cargo. I can’t do anything to stop it. I can hardly even stand. I get spots in my eyes from seeing so many blinding flashes of light, so many brightly burning landmarks. I go so long without blinking that my eyes sting when my eyelids sweep over them. I can hardly breath. And it isn’t from the smoke.

Then, one thought does come to me. I realize just how well wood burns. All the wooden structures, the wooden facades, the wooden buildings, the wooden decorations, they all blaze and catch fire when they’re hit. This hurts me. It isn’t fair. The wood was put up to show appreciation for the past, to remind ourselves that we have a history that extends further than glass and steel. It isn’t fair that our culture would be so easily set alight. Wood burns.

I hear the explosions. I watch the bombers. I stare, wide-eyed and open mouthed, shaking and jittering, squeezing my ankle so hard that blood flow is cut off. I’m going to be sick. Wood burns.

The sun is sinking low in the sky by the time the bombing finally stops. Never at any point do our forces show up to chase the warplanes away. Never does any help arrive. When they’re finished, the bombers circle the city for another moment. As if eyeing the job. Searching for anything left undone. After a few seconds pass without bombs going off, I use the boulder at my back to help push myself up from the ground. I wince as my ankle takes on weight. It hurts, but it’s healing already. It wasn’t a bad injury. Just immensely painful. It’s probably the only thing on the entire continent that’s healing. Slowly, with a major limp, I start making my way down the grassy hill. The fires that started in the grass around the city have mostly died out, leaving patches of ashen, blistered earth, sending plumes of smoke into the already-thick air. Even without the falling stars to add new flames, Alaseel...
continues to burn and smolder. It’s almost perfectly flat. Where there used to be buildings and towers, there are now fields of rubble. The sight takes my breath away.

Overhead, a movement catches my eye. I look up and see one of the bombers peeling away from the rest of the flock. It begins speeding in my direction. I stop walking and stare up at it. As it comes closer, I start to hear the faint humming of its thrusters. The sound strobes through my body, loud yet scarcely audible at the same time. Closer now, I can see more details of its body. The craft is relatively small. Its width is no more than the width of an average street. Its shape is boxy and angular. No part of it looks elegant or sleek. No part of it is pleasing to the eye. It’s only efficient. The warplane comes to a stop about twenty-four feet away from me, hovering over the ground. The grass beneath it is flattened down, plastered to the dirt by its thrusters. The craft tilts forward on an invisible axis until I can see the cockpit. Until the cockpit can see me. Inside, I can make out the flattened down, boxy, angular shape of a person. A face. A pilot. I can’t see features, but I stare at the pilot anyway. I couldn’t look anywhere else.

To my right, a clod of dirt suddenly explodes, showering me with mud and small stones, clumps of grass. It’s a warning shot. The pilot could have hit me if it had wanted to. I’m right here. I’m right in front of it. I raise my arms and wipe dirt out of my hair and face. I’m still staring at the pilot.

A moment later, the craft starts moving forward again, straight towards me. I can see the thrusters’ imprints on the grass moving, coming at me. And then the bomber glides directly over me. It feels like a tree has suddenly come crashing down on my head. I’m shoved to the ground and pinned, my skin rippling from the downward force. I’m pressed into the ground, flattening and stretching. I can’t breath. I’m afraid my eyes are going to pop. Or my head. The pressure is incredible. I can feel my ribs creaking, struggling to keep from snapping like twigs. The sound from the thrusters is much louder now. I can hear it throughout my entire body. A keening, high-pitched rumble that permeates deep inside me. The bomber slows down as it passes over me, steamrolling me into the dirt. When it finally leaves to rejoin the flock, I stay still, lying in an imprint of earth. I still can’t breathe. Then, with one wheezing cough, my lungs start working again. Bruised and shaking from head to toe, I slowly sit up. My nose is bleeding. I can’t see straight. I think my eyes were pushed out of shape. I sit still until I start to feel more normal. Already, the swarm of warplanes is moving away from the burning remains of Alaseel. As soon as I’m able, I get to my feet and start down the hill once more.

Aside from the burned and smoking grasses, the damage is confined to the city limits. None of the bombs fell in a place where they wouldn’t do damage. Even a few dozen feet from where the grass ends and Alaseel begins, there are no craters, no potmarks. Everything’s coated in ash and there are chunks of debris scattered all around, but other than this, the plane itself is all right. In fact, so sharp is the difference between what’s inside the city and what’s outside, that it looks as if Alaseel’s curving border is the base of an invisible wall separating near-normality from total destruction. Pass this border and almost nothing remains standing. A few sections of walls rise crookedly from the ash, but not a single one makes it higher than my shoulder. Many sections of the ground have collapsed inward, revealing the intricate network of public transportation tunnels. Most of the tunnels were built directly beneath the streets, which are now gaping chasms. The fires are still burning. The smoke stings my eyes.
I walk around the edge of the city, trying to find a way in that's not blocked by rubble or canyons. I eventually find myself in front of the shattered concrete husk of the checkpoint that I passed through, only a few hours ago. I remember seeing the bomb that struck it. It looks like it was a direct hit. The checkpoint is so demolished and broken-down that I’d never guess what it is if I didn’t already know. A few feet away, I see what at first I take to be a blackened branch. It’s lying on the ground, twisted out of shape. I look at it more closely, and it reveals itself to be the remains of an armor-plated leg. It’s from a stāvnemā fen. I can still make out a patch of white under the charring. I look away.

I move past the checkpoint. I don’t know where I’m going. Home, maybe. I’m not sure. I’m in shock. But I don’t get very far. In front of me, the street drops off into the tunnels, where I see even more flames burning. Thick, unbreathable fumes are boiling up into the sky from the gulf. I step back from the ledge, and move to one side of the street. I try to walk over the space that was once taken up by houses. I walk past a shattered wall and through a dense patch of rubble. But almost immediately my foot lands on something soft that gives and squishes when I put my weight on it. I jerk my foot away, not wanting to know what it is. I stumble back down to the checkpoint and sit down, hard.

I look over the structures of fallen rubble, the fields of ash, the towers of smoke. Other than the crackling of fires and the sounds of parts of buildings finally giving up and crashing down, Alaseel is silent. No one is crying for help. No one is crying in pain. No one is crying for those around them. No one is crying at all. No one but me. I howl.

Ash rides the updrafts over the smoldering city, circulating through the black air and raining down to cover everything with a fine gray shroud. The air, thick with smoke and dust, diffuses the light from the setting sun, spreading it evenly over the desolate area, trading patches of light and shadow for a uniform dusk. In this light, the gray plane looks even more lifeless.

I lie curled up on my side. Unmoving. The ash falls on me and around me, but I make no move to brush it away. My face is pressed up against the ground, and the bottom eye I’ve squeezed shut. The other I leave open. I stare at a mound of shattered concrete. As the ash continues to fall, the it piles up and softens the shape of the pile. Eventually, its sharp and jagged edges flow smoothly into one another. The ground around me is an inch deep in ash. The only spot kept clear is in front of my nose, kept that way by my breathing. The thick carpet of gray smothers all noises. I can’t even hear the fires anymore. And the normal sounds of dusk are gone tonight. The animals will have fled the area. There’s only silence left.

Maybe this quiet is what lets me hear the boom. I’m certainly not listening for it. And ash fills my upturned ear, plugging it like a cork. I hear the noise, but I don’t react. I don’t care. Even if it’s the bombers, coming back for a second round, that’s fine with me. It’s not as if any more damage can be done. And I might even get lucky this time and be caught in one of the blasts. That’d be easier. Much easier that this.

I hear a second noise now. Unlike the boom, this one’s long and drawn-out, a high pitched rumbling with some thumping and rattling thrown in. It gets louder and louder as the seconds pass, as if getting nearer and nearer. I don’t react, until it’s screamingly loud and it feels like it’s right on top of me. Then I roll onto my back and look up into the sky. What I see is a fireball.
A giant, blazing meteor plummets downward, almost directly overhead. As it continues to fall, I start to recognize the disintegrating shape as one of the warplanes. It’s covered in fire, bits and pieces of it coming off in droves. It leaves a long tail of smoke behind it. I prop myself up on my elbows, ash sloughing from my clothes in thick sheets. I watch as the warplane burns through the final short distance between it and the ground below. It seems to be aiming for just outside the city limits. The impact is extraordinary, making the ground quake and setting up a giant plume of flame. Debris rains down over the surrounding area. I don’t know if I’ve ever heard anything so loud. Even the bombs are nothing in comparison. And with the initial blast of flame now spent, a crackling fire springs up on and around the wreck. To my ears, the fire sounds ravenous.

I look away from the smouldering pile of crumpled metal and back into the sky, following the trail of smoke the warplane left behind. There are clouds up there now. In the twilight, I can’t tell if they're made from smoke or regular water vapor. Inside the clouds, there are patches of flashing mist, as if lightning were sparking in pulses, flickering in and out of existence. But these are not storm clouds.

Strange as it may be, I don’t wonder about the source of the flickering. I don’t care. It doesn’t seem important to me. So what if the clouds are flashing? What does that change? But I continue to look at them. I’m lying on my back now, a passenger in the rising sea of ash. It doesn’t seem worth it to look away.

Suddenly, a warplane ducks out from the cloud layer, whipping through the air at high speeds. A second later, it’s followed by another ship, chasing close behind. This ship is slimmer and smoother than the warplane, with curves that flow together as naturally and elegantly as running water. I recognize the design immediately. I’ve seen it on the news countless times. It’s one of ours. A fighter. Unlike the warplane’s boxy frame, the fighter is thin and pierces the sky like a needle. Fighters like this are actually designed for combat in deep space, but can be used inside an atmosphere as well. Tain has championed the design as one of the most advanced in our entire fleet.

I see thin red lines tear through the sky in front of the fighter, skewering toward the warplane. They miss, barely, and the bomber ducks and weaves. Lasers. I guess these are where the flashes in the clouds are coming from. Ordinarily, laser fire is invisible. But I suppose that all the smoke and dust in the air must be refracting enough of the beams for me to see faint red scratches in the sky. The warplane veers to one side, and is pursued by the fighter.

At this moment, another two, three, four - nine pairs of ships dip down from the clouds. The sky is filled with a chaotic whirlwind of fighters and warplanes diving and dodging, chasing one another and firing off weapons. As far as I can tell, the humans aren't using lasers. I don't see the flashes. Instead, I hear what sounds like the rattle of high-speed gunshots. The sounds are distant - the crafts are all high above me - but I can make them out clearly. It’s an ugly sound. I wish it would go away.

I watch the first pairing of warplane and fighter. They spiral around each other, the warplane turning tight corners in the sky, the fighter easily pivoting to match it. The fighter is closer to its target now. Maybe in desperation, the warplane suddenly loops upward, tilting backward and arcing over the fighter. This turns out to be a mistake. The fighter comes almost to a dead stop, rotating in mid-air about some invisible axis. It keeps its weapons aimed at the warplane, raking it as the human craft flies over it. I see an explosion overtake the rear half of the warplane. Smoke starts to billow from the craft, and gravity
takes over. It begins the long fall toward the ground. A second later, a small beige shape bursts from the roof of the warplane, flying free of the plummeting wreck. As the shape starts its own fall, upward momentum lost, a white parachute balloons in the air above it. It starts to drift downward. At this point, the pilot would survive the crash. Perhaps with no injuries at all. But the fighter isn’t going to let this happen. It banks around, turning its weapons on the white chute. I see the red laser beams scar through the fabric, tearing giant holes and setting the entire apparatus aflame. The pilot falls through the air, a line of fire marking its passage. It’s too far away for me to see if the pilot is flailing or not.

The fighter pulls up and races over toward the rest of the battle. It skims under the belly of the clouds, homing in on another of the duels. Then, out of nowhere, it explodes in a spherical inferno, bright and huge, lighting up the sky like a star. The sun is almost fully down by now, and the ball of light, for a fraction of a second, takes its place. The carcass of the smoking fighter drops from the sky. I blink. Even through my thick veneer of not caring what happens above me or around me, I’m surprised. And maybe just a little bit betrayed. Ever since the war began more than two years ago, there’s seldom been a day when I haven’t watched the news. And never, not once, have I ever seen a fighter destroyed. It doesn’t happen. Fighters are our best. The humans are no match for them. How could this be happening? It doesn’t make sense.

Another of the warplanes, hidden in the clouds until now, drops into view from above where the fighter was hit. It’s already loosing another black dot. Another bomb. The bomb’s trajectory curves to follow the path of a new fighter, busy chasing one of the warplanes. When the fighter realizes what’s happening, it breaks off the chase, focusing on staying ahead of the lethal missile. The fighter’s faster than the bomb, but in the end this doesn’t matter. The bomb gets close enough. And the fighter can’t outrun the explosion. Its tail gets caught in the ball of fire and the craft loses control. It spins downward, spiraling and falling. Unlike the warplane, the fighter’s pilot doesn’t eject. I don’t think it can. The fighters are meant for doing battle in deep space. It’s no use ejecting into a vacuum. You’re just as dead. The fighter crashes into the grassy plane, and another fire starts up amongst the green shoots.

The dogfight continues. More of the warplanes are using their bombs now, a fireworks display with deadly consequences. Three more of the fighters go down, bringing only a single warplane with them. And then it’s reduced to a battle of attrition. No tactics anymore. Only numbers. I don’t know how long it takes. The sky is black with night by the time it’s over. The stars - the real stars - are blocked by the thick, billowing clouds. The world is lit only by the searing lasers and the glorious bursting stars. Large flakes of ash cover my body again, my face. I don’t wipe them away. I lie where I am, a motionless and silent spectator to the violence in the sky above my home. When it’s all done, there are only five remaining vessels. They’re all warplanes. Only the humans have survived. The warplanes circle for a moment. Then the start moving away.

I trace their path with my eyes, watching as they grow more distant. They don’t move back above the cloudline. They fly low, skimming just a few hundred feet above the plane. They look like shadows. Dark, their lights turned out. Silent from so far away. But I can still see them. The night may be deep, but I can still see. And I watch as the warplanes do something that surprises me. Instead of hurrying away, flying to safety while they still have the chance, the warplanes pause over a forest on the horizon. This forest is downhill from Alaseel, and much farther away than the forest with the stream. I don’t go there often.
It takes at least an hour to walk there, and I don’t usually have that kind of time. Besides, I’ve never found a place in it as perfect as by my stream. The forest is reduced to a dark clump of trees at this distance. But I can still clearly see it when the warplanes, one by one, descend through the branches. At first I wonder if it’s just an illusion. They’re moving away from me, and objects naturally tend to sink into the horizon as move on at great distances. I stand up, getting a better view. No, it’s not an illusion. They’re landing in the forest.

I don’t even think to wonder why. I don’t think at all. I’m past that. I stare at the shadowy trees. Inside me, I feel the stirrings of something. I can’t quite put my finger on what it is. But I’ve felt it before. I felt it when I was staring back at the warplane pilot. A need. A need to be exactly where I am. Nothing else matters. Only, now, I feel a need to be somewhere else. I need to be in the forest.

But before I leave, I glance down at the charred leg. It’s only a few feet away. Through the smoke from all the burned-out buildings around me, I can’t smell the cooked flesh. The sickly-sweet odor blends in with everything else. I look over toward the desiccated shell of the concrete checkpoint. Sure enough, I see a three-limbed body. It’s scorched body armor shows me that it’s a stāvnemā fen. The leg’s former owner. The body was so disfigured in the blast that I can’t even tell if it’s lying on its back or its front. I step over to the leg and slowly drop down so that I’m squatting in front of it, balanced on the balls of my feet with one hand on the ground for extra support. I stare at the leg. It hardly even looks like a leg anymore. It’s just an object. A dead object.

With one hand, I start reaching out for the calf. A few inches above it, though, I pause. My hand doesn’t want to get any closer. The leg is horrifying. The last thing I want to do is to touch it. The thing is a scorched lump of ash, barely holding its previous shape. In fact, I suspect that if it weren’t for the armor wrapping it together, it would have fallen to shreds long ago. I swallow. I’m disgusted that my mouth is watering. I push my hand forward, grabbing the leg around the calf. I’m relieved to make contact with solid armor, and not meaty, cooked flesh. I try lifting it. Nothing happens. It’s stuck to the pavement. I close my eyes. My teeth clench. I pull harder. The leg breaks free with a sick cracking-crunching-sucking sound, and my arm jerks upward with the pent-up force of straining. I freeze, the deadweight suspended at the end of my arm. For a moment, I can’t move. My entire focus is dedicated to not vomiting.

After a few seconds of bracing myself, I open my eyes. I realize that I’m actually not holding the entire leg. The foot is still melted into the ground. It came off at the ankle. By itself now, it looks like any of the other million lumps of rubble scattered amongst the ashes. I suppose I was right. The only thing keeping this leg together is the armor. At joints, like the ankle, the tissue is no longer able to hold. It’s disintegrated. I swallow again, mouth filling with saliva. I decide to leave the foot where it rests. What I have is enough. I stand up, carrying the leg at arm’s length the few yards over to the destroyed checkpoint. When I reach the leg’s former owner, I stoop down and try to line up the leg with the stump it came from. I can smell it now. It smells like sweat.

I stand up, wiping my hand on my pants. Trying to get the flecks of charring off my fingers and palf. I look down at my work. It looks better now, I think. The corpse is slightly less disfigured. It’s still dead and badly mutilated, but more complete somehow. It reminds me of a student I used to see every day at school. He’s dead now. The whole school is. He always wore the same kinds of clothes. Every day, it was always black pants, gray shirt. Every day for years. And then, one day, with no warning at all, he changed his style of pants.
They were gray now, matching his shirts. I almost didn’t recognize him. It was frightening how large an effect it had on his appearance. I couldn’t look at him without being shocked and, secretly, repulsed. I would have been no less shocked if he had come into school one day with one fewer leg. He wouldn’t have looked right. He wouldn’t have looked healthy. I think the entire school was glad when he went back to black pants after a few weeks.

The stävnemā fen is similar. Without its leg, it was a monster to me. It frightened me to look at it. It was a horrifying freak, terrifying to behold. Now, it’s just a dead person. Scorched and maimed. No foot. But these aren’t at all so bad as missing an entire limb. It just wasn’t right. It’s better now. A little bit, anyway. It’s all I can do.

I turn away from the checkpoint and the body. I don’t want to look at them for any longer. I don’t think I could stand it. I walk out of the city. I circle around the perimeter, keeping to the grass and avoiding the thrown bits of rubble and the patches where the grass was burned away. I try not to look at Alaseel. I try not to breath. I keep my eyes focused on the darkened forest, all the way on the horizon.
Chapter Thirteen

There is no watcher standing in the tall grass. No one is looking out at the wide plane, noticing how the wind hisses over and through the thin blades, carving the grasses into smooth peaks and troughs. No one see how the clouds quickly move across the night sky, blocking out patches of starlight, dripping black pools of shadow onto the ground below. There’s no one here to see any of this. There’s no one here but me. And even if there were a watcher on the plane, someone who saw all the grasses and the clouds and the shadows, that person would believe that they were alone. They wouldn’t see me. They wouldn’t see the small shadow sprinting across the plane to keep pace with the fast-moving pools of darkness, running to stay submerged in the center of their protection.

I’m running as fast as I can, just barely managing to keep up with the clouds overhead. In fact, they gradually pull ahead of me, leaving me behind. Right when I judge that I’m about to be exposed, I dive into the grass. The shadow moves on without me, skimming over the flat landscape. I wait for another cloud to come along. I lie in the grass, breathing heavily but trying not to move or make a sound. A few inches in front of my face, there’s a small, stubby, thick-stemmed flower. It doesn’t look healthy. It looks half dead. But this is to be expected, seeing how it’s spent its whole life in the dusky shade under the taller stalks of grass. The flower isn’t blooming right now. Its petals are withering up. Those that remain are a deep maroon color, studding the rim of the little plant. The entire thing is covered in small hairs, sharp-looking protrusions that stick out from every part of the flower but the petals. The plant has only two leaves. One of them looks like it’s been chewed on by a hungry insect. It’s not a pretty flower. I stare at it anyway. I try to direct all my focus at it. I try to forget what I’m doing. The night around me dims as another cloud passes overhead, and I’m on my feet and running again.

I have to dip into the grass several more times before I reach the forest. When I’m there, I sprint straight for a tree. I stand behind it, pressing my body against its trunk, listening for any sound, sniffing for any scent. Anything that might betray danger. I rest the back of my head against the bark of the tree as I search with my senses. I’m out of breath from the running. I shouldn’t be. I am. I should be able to run much farther than this without any effort. That’s what my mother could do. But I’m not Reyin. I press outwards with my hearing, probing the edge of the forest. I try to slow my breathing. It’s hard to hear over it. I listen. The grass ocean roars around me. It’s mimicked by the leaves in the treetops, rushing and sloshing in the breeze. Branches creak as they rub up against their neighbors. The insects and the fauna are quiet tonight. Even this far from the bombings, I can smell the smoke. I can also smell the grasses, sweet against the night. As for the forest, it smells as it usually does. Only the smoke is out of place. And I can’t hear anything that I’m unable to safely identify. I’m relieved to find nothing threatening. The humans are farther in, then. I step around the trunk of the tree, moving past the edge of the forest and deeper into the murk.

The tree branches block out nearly all starlight, but I can still see. In conditions like these, everything takes on a greenish-gray tint to my eyes. Details aren’t quite as clear as they would be in the day, but I can still see the big picture with no trouble at all. My father could never do this. He didn’t have the alteration. I went for a walk with him one night in the forest, years before the war started and the curfew was put in place. He kept bumping
into things, tripping over twigs and stepping into ditches. He was nearly blind, while I could see perfectly well. Of course, my mother could see even better than I can. She’d walk into a pitch black room and not turn on the light. I or my father would come in after her, and we’d be unable to see a thing. Then Reyin would chew us out for turning on the light and wasting energy. Looking around at the green-gray forest, a faint smile plays over my face. I love them both. And then the smile fades.

I pass from tree to tree, working my way farther into the woods. I keep my eyes wide open, but most of my attention is going to my ears. I listen for any unexpected sounds. Anything from a hushed voice, to a breaking twig, to the click of metal on metal. I keep my footsteps quiet, aiming for my feet to land between clumps of fallen leaves or beside small branches. I even consider taking my shoes off. That’d make it easier to avoid stepping on anything. But after thinking about it for a moment, I decide against it. Without my shoes, I won’t be able to run as quickly.

The trees are dense in this part of the forest. It’s well enough established for the trunks to be thick and sturdy, growing close together with only a few feet in between neighbors. I can’t see more than a dozen feet ahead before my vision is blocked. I stop moving forwards, closing my eyes. I focus entirely on sound. The most obvious sounds are the harmless things. The branches, the leaves. A few bold insects, chirping in the distance. I can’t hear the grassy plane anymore, but I can hear the rustling overhead of the breeze through the canopy. I try looking past these noises, searching for something else, but my attention keeps getting drawn back. Back to the breeze. It blows through the forest, sounding like a quiet waterfall, a layer of rhythmical hushing beneath it and-

I freeze. Wind doesn’t sound like that. Wind is constant. It may die and rise, but only slowly and gradually, sporadically shifting from present to gone. It never maintains a rhythm. I stand perfectly still, once again flattening myself against a tree trunk. I listen harder. The wind moves through the sky over the forest, fluttering the leaves as it runs circles around the trees. I gusts through the high branches, making the wood click and grind. It breezes through the trees, ebbing and flowing. I stop my search. I’ve found it. Breathing. I focus in on it. About two dozen feet ahead of me, there’s a patch of air that gushes back and forth, back and forth in sets of two, inhale, exhale. I move to the left, silently walking a circle around the puffs of breath.

I continue until I’m on the other side of the noise. I don’t know which way the breather is facing, but it makes sense that it’d be looking toward the edge of the forest, not the center. I should be behind it now. I start walking carefully toward it. I come to a wide tree, and crouch next to it, placing the trunk between myself and the noise. Slowly, holding the trunk with my hands, I move my head until one eye can peer past it. No more than sixteen feet away, a figure is standing behind another tree trunk, its left side tucked behind the protection of the thick wood. Sure enough, it’s looking away from me, into the darkness of the forest. It clutches a large gun with both hands.

I take a moment to study the human. It’s the first time I’ve ever seen a human in the flesh. There’s been a smell wafting through the forest for some distance, but I didn’t know what to attribute it to. I’ve never smelled an alien before. It smells strange. SICKLY and foreign. Silently, I step out from behind my tree. I watch the figure for any reaction. Nothing. The breather takes another lungful of air in through its nose, staring out at the dense trees. With one careful step at a time, I approach. I come to stand only two feet behind the human. Here, I pause. The human is wearing a green flight suit. It’s a pilot. It was
flying one of those warplanes. I can’t tell how old the human is. I know that they age very differently than we do, but this one still seems healthy. It hasn’t been damaged by time yet. It’s still young, then. A child by our standards. An infant.

I imagine what the infant would see if it were to look behind it at this moment. It would see me. Standing right over its shoulder. Silent. I’m covered in dark gray ash from Alaseel. In this light, my eyes will be glowing slightly, refracting and reflecting the little starlight that filters down through the branches. I must look like a monster.

Quickly, taking less than half a second, I reach both hands forward, right hand going to cover the human’s mouth, left hand going to cradle the back of its head. I twist my arms before the human has a chance to react. I’m rewarded with a crisp snapping sound. The human goes limp as its neck breaks. I catch it with one hand as it starts to fall, grabbing it by the back of its shirt, my other hand snagging the gun as it tumbles from the human’s grasp. I lower the human to the ground, laying the gun on its chest. All clean. All silent. No noise. Over in the blink of an eye. I stand up, wiping a streak of thick saliva off my palm from where it covered the human’s mouth. I have to wipe my hand on my pants several times before it feels clean again.

I step over the body, careful not to touch it with my feet. I feel the same revulsion toward it as I would toward a pile of manure. I don’t want to touch it ever again. I don’t want its gun. The weapon might help, but I don’t want it. I rationalize this choice to myself by thinking that I wouldn’t be able to use it anyway. The other sentries would hear it. I can always pick one up later. I’m sure the others will be armed.

I start walking away from the body, deeper into the forest. Then, after only a few dozen yards, I stop again. Ahead of me, faint and dusty through the barrels of the trees, there comes a faint light. A soft glow. It’s not natural. It’s not starlight. It’s the humans. It must be. There’s no one else out here. For a full minutes, I stand completely still, looking at the distant light. I’m trying to put words to what I feel. But I come up short. As I stare at the light, I don’t blink. I’m afraid that this even this tiny movement will break some kind of spell and the light will disappear. Even when my eyes start burning, I put off blinking for as long as I can. My eyelids sting as they finally scratch over my eyes. When I open them, I almost expect to find myself completely alone in a dark, empty forest. But the light’s still there. I don’t understand it, but this makes me want to cry.

I move away from the light until I can only make out the barest traces of it. Then I start circling around it, using it as a bearing to find the rest of the sentries. They must have spread out in all directions. And they probably went about the same distance from camp. If this is the case, then they should be arrayed in a simple ring with the camp at its center. As I walk between the vibrant trees, I make sure to breath quietly and watch what I step on. I need to be silent here.

Before long, I come across the next human. It’s standing in the darkness behind a fallen log that’s suspended at an angle between two other trees. This human, like the first, is holding a gun. But unlike its friend, this human senses something as I’m reaching out to grab its face. It looks over its shoulder at me. Maybe it heard me. Maybe it got a whiff of the smoke on my clothing. Maybe it even felt some of the heat coming off my body. Or maybe it’s just as coincidence that it chooses this precise moment to look behind it. Whatever the case, sensing me doesn’t help the human. It only makes it easier for me to break the sentry’s already-twisting neck. The human gurgles for a moment, going limp, but it’s a quiet sound, and is smothered by my hand over its mouth. The human is still alive as I lower it to
the ground. It can’t breathe and is paralyzed, but its eyes are flashing all around in sheer panic. I stay with it until it suffocates. Then I move on.

There are four sentries in total. This number makes some sense. There were only five warplanes that survived the dogfight to land in the forest. If each had a pilot and a co-pilot, then that makes ten humans. Four sentries isn’t a large force, but it’s nearly half their number. There are only six left now. After I kill the forth human, I complete the circle around the light source, arriving back at the first sentry’s body. I can’t see it well in the dark. In its green flight suit, it blends in with the shadowy underbrush. But I can smell it. It smells dead and alien. I pick up the gun that I’d placed on the human’s chest. It’s heavy. It pulls down on my arm as I advance through the trees toward the dull light. As I get closer, I begin to hear the small noises of a group of people. Light breathing, rustling clothes. Quiet voices.

I squint my eyes until they’re almost shut. I don’t want them glowing brightly against the prick of light and giving me away. Even squinting, anyone looking in my direction would probably see two slivers of light shining back at them. But this can’t be helped. Squinting is the best I can do, short of closing my eyes all the way. And while my hearing may be excellent, it doesn’t help me to avoid stepping on leaves and twigs. Only my eyes can do this.

Soon, a clearing opens up in front of me. It’s formed by a single, flat sheet of rock poking through the ground, making it hard for trees and bushes to grow. There are a few enterprising weeds sprinkled here and there, but the ground is mostly clear. The five warplanes are all parked on the far edge of the clearing, straddling the line between trees and rocky ground. For the most part, the ships are tucked under the reach of the branches. Maybe this is an attempt to stay hidden from anything searching the skies. There’s a patch of the clearing where the branches reach out especially far over the rock, making a leafy ceiling. This sections is about twelve yards from me. It’s where a group of humans in green flight suits is sitting around a tiny lantern. After the darkness of the forest, seeing the light makes my eyes ache.

I stand behind one of the trees that borders the clearing, looking in at the group. Most of the humans are unarmed. A few of them have weapons resting on the ground nearby, but no one carries a weapon in their hands. Two or three of the humans are talking in hushed voices, but the rest remain silent, staring into the lantern. They don’t move, other than to shift position slightly. Looking at them, I pause. Five. I count five of them. But there should be six. Five warplanes parked in the clearing, to pilots per craft. Minus the four sentries makes six. So where’s the last human?

I whirl around and drop down to the ground, flattening myself against the leaves. I fully expect to see the sentry I somehow missed standing right behind me, weapon raised. I point the heavy gun into the murk. After all the light in the clearing, I can’t see anything. I switch to my ears instead, listening all around me, probing and poking at sounds that I don’t recognize. But they all turn out harmless. The only large creatures anywhere near me are sitting in the clearing. I stay on the ground. My night vision finally comes back, and I scan the woods. I don’t see anything, either. Not that this means anything necessarily. The sentry might not be homing in on me right this second, but it could still be out there in the trees. It could come rushing back at any moment. I can’t have that. I need to go back out there, find it. I can’t make a move before the sentries are out.
From behind me, I hear a loud hissing sound. I look back, startled. On top of one of the warplanes, the glass of the cockpit is swinging open. A human clambers out, jumping to the ground. Seeing it, I let out a sigh of relief, relaxing and closing my eyes for a moment. There’s the sixth. I found each of the sentries, after all. I stand up from where I’ve been lying, returning to my place behind the tree. The sixth human walks across the clearing toward the rest of the pilots. They all look around at it, and the quiet conversations come to a stop. They look expectantly at the human.

Still standing, the sixth pilot kicks at a small pebble on the ground, sending it skittering away. “Well,” it says. My mind trips over the foreign word. It takes me some time to make the switch into Standard. I haven’t practiced in years. Not since the war began. In fact, I’m surprised that I can make sense of the human’s words at all. “I finally got through,” it continues. “It turns out that there were a few more Pointies here than we expected. After the drop, the Thomas was attacked and had to leave the system. They’re working on coming back to pick us up. When they do, we’ll only have a few minutes to get onboard. We have some wait time right now, but as soon as we get the call from the Thomas, we need to be heading out. I don’t want to spend the night here.” There come a few grunts from the audience, along with some nodding heads. It seems as though they all want to leave. I tighten my grip on the weapon. The human goes on. “Until we’re picked up, we’ve been advised to lay low. So I want that put out,” it says, gesturing at the lantern. None of the other pilots complain. I think they all realize the sense in this. The light is how I found them, after all. One of the seated humans leans forward and flicks a switch. The lantern fades down to nothing. The clearing is left significantly darker. The stars overhead don’t provide much illumination. The humans seem blind without the small lightsource. I, on the other hand, can see even better now than before. The sixth human claps its hands together, tone shifting upwards. It’s obviously trying to raise moral now. “So!” it says. “While we’re waiting, now would be a good time for some storytelling.” It looks around at the other five faces. “Who’s got something?”

I step out from behind the tree, holding the gun with both hands as I saw the sentries doing. I point the barrel at the speaker. I squeeze the trigger. The gun explodes, bucking violently in my hands. I stumble backwards, nearly dropping the weapon. Twelve yards from me, the man lets out a shout and is knocked forward. I see blood starting to weep up from its right shoulder. Around the clearing, the humans jerk away from their companion in surprise, looking blindly around the dark forest for their attacker. Some start reaching for their weapons, but I’m already firing again. I judge the recoil slightly better this time, and hit the first human to pick up its gun squarely in the chest. I’m walking forward now, only ten yards from the group, firing as I go. From this close, it’d be almost impossible to miss. Another pilot manages to get a shot off, but isn’t aiming. I don’t know if it even sees me. The bullet goes wide to my right. My next shot takes it in the right lung. By now, the remaining three humans have scrambled to their feet. They’re running away from me, scattering toward the trees. I fire again and again, spraying the forest with bullets before finally hitting one of the humans in the back, sending it sprawling. The next human is farther away, but I get lucky. I hit it on my first try.

The last pilot is into the trees by now, sprinting away from me. I aim at its back and pull the trigger, but the gun clicks emptily. I shake it, then throw it to the ground. Without ammunition, it’s useless. I start running after human, chasing it as fast as my legs can carry me.
It's not hard for me to track my prey. It's loud in the underbrush, crashing through branches and vines, barrelling over all kinds of foliage. It sounds as if it can't see a thing. Is running blind. I run after it. I can hear my prey, but I can't actually see it through all the trees. Its clothing blends in well. I dodge between trunks, staying on the trail. They only way I know I'm getting closer is when the crashing gets louder, and I can hear the human panting. I turn off the trail, running alongside the human. I keep pace with it, a thin wall of trees and brush separating us. I can see it now. A shadow running with me in the murk. There's a break in the wall, and with a snarl I dive sideways, pouncing on the human and tripping it up. We both skid over the ground, leaves sliding under us. We fall in a jumble and come apart. I land with a root in my side. I scramble to my feet, and round on the human. It's getting to its feet, too. I start rushing it again, but catch a faint glint in the starlight. The human is holding a gun. It must have grabbed it back in the clearing, and just hasn't fired it yet.

The human starts bringing the gun up. Before it gets the chance, I tackle it in its midsection, sending the both of us sprawling again. I land on top, grabbing the barrel of the weapon and holding it away from me. This is when the pilot starts hammering the side of its fist into my ribs, my shoulder, then - working its way up - my head. I try elbowing the human, but both my hands are busy restraining the gun. The next strike to my head sets my ears ringing. I let go of the gun with one hand, trying to shield off the blows. I take the next punch on my forearm.

Before the human can strike me again, I jam the knuckles of my shielding arm upward into the human's nose. The pilot cries out, and the gun goes off as it inadvertently pulls the trigger, but neither of us is hit. I punch the human again. As I bring my fist back, readying for another blow, I feel my ribs explode with pain. The human has grabbed a thin branch off the ground with its free hand, jabbing me with the point. It doesn't actually break the skin, but I'm sure it bruises the bone and it's screamingly painful.

I topple sideways, away from the blow. I grab the gun with both hands as I fall, trying to rip it away from the human. It holds on. With its other hand, it lets go of the twig and grabs a thick branch. Before I can react, it clubs me on the head with it. My vision flashes white. I crumple, still holding fiercely onto the gun. But holding it is all I can do. The human hits me again with the branch, then tries jerking its weapon out of my hands. I'm barely conscious after the two blows, but I'm never letting go of the gun.

Then the human does something that I hadn't expected. It lets go of the gun, scrambles to its feet, and starts sprinting away from me. I lie on the ground, still reeling and clutching the heavy metal. I try getting up, but fall over again. My head is ablaze. It feels as if my skull is cracked wide open. But I can hear the sounds of the human getting farther and farther away as it puts more distance between us. It's escaping! This thought is more than I can handle. Somehow, it gets me standing again and stumbling after the fleeing pilot.

As I run, I begin to recover enough from the blows to notice a new sound in the forest. It sounds mechanical. I burst back into the clearing, and see the human clambering into one of the warplanes. Already, the craft is warming up. I sprint toward it, firing the gun as I go. The bullets glance off the warplane's armor. When I reach the plane, I jump and grab hold of the side, pulling myself up to the top of the craft. I haul myself over the edge and find my footing on the flat roof of the boxy ship. As I do, I feel the warplane begin to vibrate, shaking and humming. I also hear the thrusters start giving out their strobing buzz of noise. I hurry over to the cockpit, planting my feet directly on top of the clear glass that
now separates me from the pilot. Inside the cockpit, I can see the human desperately 
fllicking switches and preparing the craft for take-off. I aim the gun down at the top if its 
head. I fire.

The first bullet ricochets off the glass, leaving only a scratch. Inside, the human 
starts working even faster, its arms flying around the instruments in sheer panic. I fire 
again, and this time a small array of cracks starts to form. I pull the trigger again. And again. 
The cracks spread. The glass becomes cloudy with them. Then opaque. Then, with one 
more shot, it shatters in a jagged hole around where I’ve been aiming. I squeeze the trigger 
three more times in quick succession. The human has no where to hide in the confines of 
the cockpit. The tip of the gun’s barrel is only three feet above the top of its head. I couldn’t 
miss if I tried. Blood spatters the control panels, the windows. The pilot spasms for the 
shortest of seconds and then collapses. The human is still.

I don’t move for well over a minute. I stand right where I am, gun still pointed down 
through the cockpit glass. I’m panting. I can’t help it. I have no control over my breathing. 
Around me, the clearing is quiet again. There’s no more screaming. No more talking. No 
more muttering. No more crashing, fighting, hurting. The only sound comes from the 
warplane. It continues to hum. I wish it would stop.

I step back from the cockpit, staring at the spattered red as if hypnotized by it. I trail 
the gun from my right hand. I don’t let go of it. Slowly, I climb down from the warplane, 
gently easing my way back onto the clearing’s rocky floor. I look around. There are bodies 
sprawled all over the shaded section of the clearing. The lantern is knocked over and is 
lying on its side. I move away from the bodies. I head over to the center of the clearing, out 
into the starlight. It’s not much light. It’s filtered through the clouds. There are so many 
clouds up there. I wonder if it will rain later. It might. It doesn’t smell like rain, though. It 
smells like blood. Usually, before it rains, it smells like water and soil. Not blood. It 
probably won’t rain, then. Still.... It’s an awful lot of clouds.

From behind me, I hear a small sound. The sound of movement. Immediately, I 
whirl, bringing the heavy weapon up yet again. I see one of the pilots, the one I hit first, in 
its shoulder, sitting up and trying to drag itself away, hand covering the bloody wound. It 
looks around at me when it realizes 
that I’ve seen it. I aim the gun at its head and tighten 
my finger on the trigger.

“No!”

I freeze, the trigger half-pulled. I don’t move a muscle as I try to work through the 
single word. I can’t understand what it means. Then, over the course of several seconds, I 
begin to realize what the human could be saying. I feel my face twisting, my forehead 
contorting into grooves and ridges.

Not perfect anymore. As if I ever was. I’ve never heard my voice sound like this before. I 
still have the weapon leveled at the human’s head. The human is holding its left arm out, 
palm facing me. As if the hand could stop a bullet.

“No,” it repeats. It’s shaking. A tremor runs through its entire body. I can’t tell if this 
comes from fear or the injury. “No,” it says. “Please don’t kill me.”

My eyes narrow and I squint across the clearing at the human. I can’t believe what 
I’m hearing. It doesn’t make sense. The human shouldn’t be doing this. Gun still aimed, I 
take a step toward the wounded pilot. “Are you...” I search for the right word. I take 
another step. “Are you begging?” I ask. I’m disgusted by the question.
The human doesn’t move. It continues to tremor, holding out its hand in a warding gesture. I’m close enough to see its face more clearly now. The human’s hair is cut short. It’s a sandy brown color. Its eyes are a light green. Its pupils are round. Round. Perfect black circles. Round. Alien. “Yes,” it says. “Please don’t kill me.”

I’ve been continuing to advance forward as the human drags itself back, pushing off from the ground with its feet and sliding backwards across the clearing. Its right arm hangs limp from the wounded shoulder. When I hear its answer, though, I stop moving. For a second, I’m locked in place. It’s absurd. I can’t believe what I’m hearing. It doesn’t make sense. The human shouldn’t be doing this. Because it is absurd. This pilot has taken everything from me. This pilot killed the two people I love most. This pilot destroyed my home. And now it has the courage to beg. To beg me. A sound escapes me, some animal crossbreed of a laugh, a snarl, and a sob. My mouth stretches and twists. It’s hard to talk through. I try anyway. “You.” I stop, stuck on the first word. I try again. “You.” I can’t get past it. I can’t begin to speak. I clench my jaw. “You.” I try to fight past the thick gel coating the inside of my throat. “You didn’t let my family beg. You didn’t let my city beg. Why should I let you beg?” My voice is hoarse and broken. I realize that I’m shaking, too. At least as much as the human.

From where it lies, bleeding, the human stares at me with so much fear in its green eyes and its round pupils that it’s almost painful to look at. I watch as it desperately tries to come up with an answer. Something that might save it. It opens its mouth. But nothing comes out. It can’t think of anything. Then, just as I’m starting to pull the trigger back again, the human screams at me. “WAIT!” I pause. The human stares at me. It tries one, last-ditch effort. “Because you’re better.”

My stomach drops. I’m hit with an intense wave of nausea. My lips contort again, rearing back across my face into what could almost be mistaken as a smile. The figure in front of me begins to blur, and I blink my eyes rapidly to clear them. I’ve never felt this sick. Not in my entire life. “I’m no better,” I say.

The gun detonates. The man is thrown backwards to the ground. It’s bleeding from the center of its chest. I shoot it one more time. Just to make sure that it’s dead. Just to make sure that it stays dead. Just to make sure. I need to know. Just to make sure.
Chapter Fourteen

I stare at the colorless wall in front of me. The scratches and marks that cover its surface are meant to come together as a mural, forming a cohesive picture. But they’ve somehow drifted apart from each other. Physically, they’re in the same locations as always. But in my mind, they no longer form an image. They’re just lines. Abstract. Separate. I stare at them, trying to force them into living again. I try to bring back the forest and the stream. I try with all my might. I fail.

I close my eyes, bending forward from my seat on the bench until my torso rests on top of my thighs. My arms hang forward, hands lying on my feet. I let my neck droop between my knees. I feel my hair tumbling downward over my head. It sticks together in strands, thick ropes of oil and grime. It’s been so long since I’ve bathed.

I move my right hand between my feet, tracing a box on the floor with a fingertip. I draw an X through the box, then a circle. A squiggle. I’m not drawing anything in particular. I’m just bored. It’s been over a week since I finished the mural. There’s nothing left for me to do. The boredom has gotten so bad that it’s reached an entirely new level. It frightens me now. I always feel on the edge of panic. It terrifies me to think that this could go on for much longer. I need it to stop. I need something to happen.

A searing, screeching wail pounds into the cell, coming out of nowhere and startling me so badly that I bolt upright, cracking my head against the wall behind me. I curse, trying to hold both the newly forming lump and my ears at the same time. The wail goes on. I recognize it as a siren now. It swells and falls, jagged and sharp, so loud against the backdrop of silence that my eardrums like they’re being punctured. I press my hands flat against my ears, trying to block out the painful din. I haven’t heard a loud noise in so long that the change is ground-shattering.

I stand up, staggering over to the cell door. I try calling through it, screaming at the top of my lungs for someone to turn the siren off. I stop screaming when I only add to the cacophony. I return to the bench, curling up on top of it. I try to press on one ear against the bench, using it as an extra buffer between me and the siren. It doesn’t help much. I grit my teeth. Soon, I tell myself. Soon I’ll get used to this. It’ll get better. Just give it time.

Minutes pass. I stay right where I am, holding my ears as if letting go would cause my head to explode. The siren keeps blaring. It goes on for so long that I begin to wonder if it will ever stop. Maybe this is the way things are now. Maybe this is a new normal. Maybe this siren will continue to shriek until it shatters whatever loudspeaker it’s coming from. It’s a frightening thought. I shake my head, trying to convince myself that this can’t be true. A siren is never normal. Something’s wrong. Even the humans, deaf as they are, could never live with this. No, this can’t last.

Yet, incredibly, it does. The siren goes on, rising and falling, shredding the air with blasts of sound. Gradually, my ears adjust. It’s an improvement, but only slightly. It’s still loud in here. It’s giving me a headache. In fact, it’s so loud that I nearly miss another noise, hidden under the mass of writhing sound. A clang. I haven’t heard this noise in over three weeks.

I stand up instantly, my focus swarming to the red metal door. It’s opening! I can hardly believe it. This is terrific. This is amazing. It’s been so long since I was out of this cell
that I’d even be happy to see Alpha and Beta. So what if Alpha slammed my head into a
door? It had a reason. I was being annoying. Intentionally irritating. The human only did
what any other dumb beast would do.

The door starts to slide open. It seems to me to take forever. It lumbers over the
threshold, slowly revealing the hallway beyond. As it does, the siren gets louder, gaining
unimpeded access to the cell. It hurts, but I don’t mind. I’m just happy that the door’s
opening. Then the door passes the midpoint of its frame, opening wide enough to reveal the
figure standing beyond. Right up until the very second when I realize who it is, I can’t think
of anyone in the entire world I’d be unhappy to see. After so long in isolation, there’s no
way I’m going to be choosy about who I spend my time with. That’d be ridiculous. I’ll take
anyone. This, however, is the mindset I’m in only before I see who it is.

The Warden stands in the hallway. Its arms are extending outwards, clasping a small
gun with both hands. The Warden points the gun directly at my head. I don’t move. The
human flicks the tip of the gun down toward the bench. “Sit down,” it orders.

I stare at the gun, making no move to sit. I don’t feel the need. I’m scared - someone’s
pointing a gun at me. Of course I’m scared - but it doesn’t feel as visceral as I might have
imagined. It feels dulled somehow. As if spending so much time staring at a wall has
bruised some crucial part of my mind. The part that deals with self-preservation. “What’s
the siren for?” I ask, belligerent.

The Warden ignores me. It gestures at the bench again. “Sit down. Now.” Its words
are clipped and it sounds agitated. A few beads of sweat are clinging to its forehead, and its
gray hat is sitting slightly off-center. There’s also a thin veneer of ashen dust coating its
body and uniform. Even as I watch, another drop of sweat emerges from its hairline,
carving a channel through the grime on its skin.

“What’s the siren for?” I press. The Warden rolls its eyes. It lets go of the gun with
one hand and points it down the hallway with the other. It pulls the trigger. An enormous
bang surges through the air, even drowning out the
siren for a moment. The Warden
 maintains eye contact with me as it does this, returning the gun to point at my head.

“Now,” it repeats. I consider disobeying. I think about it, but then decide against it.
After all, the Warden proved the first time we met that it’s willing to shoot me. I sit down on
the bench. The Warden gives a curt nod, face drawn tight. It reaches behind its back, pulling
a pair of handcuffs off its belt. “Good,” it says. “Now, put these on.” It holds the cuffs up so I
can see them, then then tosses them across the cell at me. I don’t catch them. They hit me
mid-chest, bouncing off to land on the floor with a clatter. I stare back at the human. The
Warden does something with the gun, and it gives out a series of sharp, metallic clicks.
There’s menace in the sound. It’s mechanical, a preparing-to-shoot-you kind of noise. I
hesitate a moment longer, then bend forward and pick up the handcuffs. It’s difficult
putting them on myself. I have to stretch and contort my fingers, even using my chin to
snap the mechanism shut. I hold my bound wrists up for the Warden to see. It nods again.

I drop my hands back down to my lap. “So what are the cuffs for?”

“They’re to keep you out of trouble,” the Warden says briefly. “Stand up. We need to

The Warden keeps sparing glances down the hallway, as if expecting something to
round the corner at any moment. It looks so agitated that, if I didn’t know better, I’d think
the human was afraid. Mmm. So it’s not invulnerable, after all. What a wonderful thought. I
repeat it to myself, and it gives me a small boost of courage. I stand up from the bench, but
make no move to obey the rest of the human’s order.
“Tell me what’s going on,” I demand. The Warden squeezes its eyes shut for a second. When it opens them, the Warden looks almost deranged with impatience. It speaks carefully, biting at the tails of the words as they slip past its mouth.

“All right, fine. Here’s what’s happening: I am in trouble, you are my hostage, and we need to go. Now.”

My eyebrows come together in confusion. Hostage! What could that mean? It doesn’t make much sense. How could I be a hostage? I’m already in prison. I sort through the heaping pile of questions that’s suddenly dropped into my mind, selecting the most basic one I can get my hands on. “Hostage against what?” I ask.

The Warden’s head practically lolls on its neck in frustration, and its jaw clenches so tightly, it’s a wonder its teeth don’t shatter. “Against the aliens attacking this facility!” It screams. “Let’s go! NOW!”

I blink. It takes a moment for me to fully process what I’ve just heard. Aliens. Attacking the prison. Who are the aliens? The only aliens are humans. But it’s a human who’s said it. So what does it mean? It couldn’t mean ŏnā mälhā, could it? But we’re not aliens. Then I realize that, from the Warden’s perspective, in a strange and convoluted way, we are, sort of. Out of nowhere, I feel a rush of emotion as I grasp the meaning of what’s been said. Aiohn is here! This changes everything. I don’t know why they’re here. I don’t know how they’re here. But the entire dynamic has shifted now. Power is up for grabs. The Warden is no longer the undisputed master of this small chunk of a world. Aiohn is here. I feel a surge of joy at the news. I feel hope. And I also feel a curl of dread. Because I know, deep down and with total assurance, that Aiohn isn’t here for me. They’re here for some other reason. This could be my biggest stroke of luck in ages, but it could also be deadly. I look at the Warden. “You think that Aiohn will be kinder to you if you put a gun to my head?”

“I think they’ll have to be,” the Warden growls. I almost smile. Almost. But my sense of humor is overcome by my sense of dread, which has grown much stronger. I know instinctively that the Warden is wrong. It’s made a mistake. After watching the stävnemā fen mes for my entire life, I know without a doubt that their first job is to protect the society and that their second job is to protect the individual. In that order. Not the other way around. If sacrificing a single life helps the larger picture, then that’s the choice they’ll make. The military won’t be any different. Aiohn is a strong as it is, has survived for as long as it has, because it’s willing to make the hard choice. It’s able to put emotion aside. If the Warden were to hold me out in front as a living shield, then Aiohn would simply shoot through me. But I don’t tell this to the Warden. I don’t want it to know that I’m useless.

Fortunately, the Warden takes my silence as affirmation. It thinks I’m unable to come up with a good argument. It tries to smile at me, but is only able to grimace. “Out into the hallway,” it says. Its voice is soft and thin, almost a coo. It starts backing away from the entrance to the cell. Slowly, I follow it. I walk over the threshold. The Warden keeps its gun trained on my head. There’s about five feet between us. I’m out of the cell now. “All right,” it says. “Now-”

Something happens, and the Warden stops cold. It startled both of us. The siren, so loud and constant a second ago, disappeared so suddenly that it makes me blink. Almost as if someone had snapped their fingers an inch from my eye. The Warden’s head jerks around, and it glances down the hallway. Without even thinking, without even being aware of what I’m doing, I move.
I lunge forwards, rotating and bending my body to the side, out of the gun’s line of fire. At the same time, I swing my bound hands up and to the left. They collide with the Warden’s wrists. The gun goes off, a monstrous, jarring *bang!* that resonates and echoes around the concrete walls of the corridor. The Warden cries out in shock, but manages to hold onto the gun. Without pausing, I reverse the direction of my swing, aiming for the human’s head. At the last second, though, the Warden moves away from me, and I connect instead with the side of its neck. The blow isn’t crippling, but it knocks the Warden off balance. As it recovers, it tries bringing the gun back up, pointing it now into my gut. But I’m standing so close that the Warden has to extend and crane its arm in order to get a clear shot. This gives me just the chance I need. Before the human can pull the trigger, I sidestep its arm and slip the loop of my bound wrists over and past the gun, my right forearm ending up on top of its right forearm, my left forearm underneath. I squeeze my arms together, holding the human’s arm as if in a vise. The human grabs me with its free left arm, holding me by my shoulder and trying to tear me away. As it pulls me off balance, I use the extra force to slam my right knee up into the Warden’s right forearm, creating a lever of pressure, sandwiching and torquing its bones, my left arm and right knee underneath, my right arm on top. I’m trying to break its arm, but don’t succeed. It’s enough to make the Warden scream again, though. And, more importantly, to drop the gun. Before anything else, I give the gun a savage kick with my foot. It skitters across the floor, ending up almost two dozen feet away.

The Warden responds by clenching its newly-free hand into a fist and hammering it straight into my chin. I feel my jaw retract into my throat slightly, and I stumble backwards. I try to get my arms untangled from the Warden, but it stays on top of me, pushing me backwards into a wall. It holds me there with its grip on my shoulder and starts leaning against my throat with its right elbow. Because my wrists are bound and looped over its arm, I can’t get a good hold of the human to push it away from my throat. I start choking. With my hands the way they are, I can’t do much of anything to protect myself. I start pushing against the only thing I can reach: the Warden’s face. It’s awkward, though, and I can’t get much purchase. I can’t breathe, either. I start to see little white sparks, like sunlight on windblown water, in the air between the human and me. The sparks terrify me.

My hands slip off the human’s face again, this time landing on its neck. I grab the Warden’s throat, squeezing my fingers into the soft, fleshy area around its windpipe. I try to crush the bones. It gags. I watch its face getting redder and redder, eyes getting bigger, bulging in their sockets. My fingertips are right up against the human’s jugular, and I feel its heart beating, beating, beating furiously, sending blood surging through its veins and arteries.

For a moment, we stand locked together, each of us trying to strangle the other to death. But my method seems to work a little bit faster. The human starts losing strength. Using my grip on its throat, I slam its head into the wall next to me. It crumples. Before it can recover, I let go of its throat, tear myself away from its left hand, still holding my shoulder, and sprint down the hallway. I don’t look back. I make a dive for the small gun, scooping it up and whirling around. I hold it my right hand, my left hand dangling uselessly in the handcuffs. The Warden is just starting to get back to its feet. It sees me, and we both freeze. Neither of us moves a muscle. We just stare at each other, a line drawn between us by the aim of the gun.
I know why the Warden isn’t moving. It’s natural to freeze when someone points a gun at you. But I’m frozen for another reason. It’s simple: I don’t know what to do. When I attacked the Warden, I did so without thinking, without a plan. Frankly, I’m surprised I’ve made it this far. I have no idea what I should do next. And what am I supposed to do with the Warden? Should I kill it? Should I lock it up? Should I take it with me? How am I supposed to know the answer to these questions? And no matter what I chose, what do I do after that? I want to get out of here, obviously, but how? The Warden said Aiohn was here. Should I find them? How would I do that? And what would happen then?

I decide there’s no reason in worrying about something so hypothetical. It seems unlikely that my luck will hold for much longer. I probably won’t even make it off this floor. It’s senseless to worry about what I should do if I find Aiohn’s forces when I haven’t even made it to the elevator.

And then a thought occurs to me, slowly surfacing in my mind. It’s so obvious once it appears that I’m actually ashamed I didn’t think of it sooner. I do owe it to him, after all. “What cell is Zach in?” I shout over to the human.

The Warden is staring at the gun. “I don’t know,” it says, forming its words loudly and clearly. It doesn’t move any part of its body other than its mouth.

“Find out,” I say. “Right now.” I hear the cruel impatience in my voice. I sound cold and angry. In fact, I’m just frightened. My stomach is shaking. Speaking in harsh, clipped tones is the best I can do.

The Warden slowly moves its hand down to a pocket, other hand held up in the air. Its eyes are fixated on the tip of the gun. I tense as its hand disappears into the pocket, but all that’s pulled out is a small, beige rectangle. It’s about four inches in height, three inches wide, and less than a quarter of an inch thick. The Warden starts sliding and flicking its thumb over the surface of the device, then begins tapping at what I assume is a keyboard. After a moment, though, it stops. “I don’t know his last name,” the Warden says, not looking up from the small screen.

I pause. This is a problem. I don’t know Zach’s last name, either. In fact, until this very moment, it hadn’t even occurred to me that Zach had a last name. He’s just ‘Zach.’ I try to think. There has to be some way to work around this. “Can you pull up a list of recent prisoner transfers?” I ask.

“Yes.” The Warden sounds like a hissing gasket, about to explode.

“Then do it,” I order. The Warden glares murder at me, then starts tapping at the screen again. The tapping goes on for some time. I grow increasingly impatient. It’s not lost on me that I need to keep moving. I don’t have time to throw away. Aiohn could leave before I reach them. More humans could come my way. Anything could happen. I need to go. Now. After what feels like a full minute, I can’t take it anymore. “Do you have him yet?” I ask.

The Warden doesn’t look up at me. “Almost,” it says. Then, “...Yes. Here he is.”

“What cell is he in?” I ask impatiently. I should have left several minutes ago. The Warden studies the screen.

“Cell -12 F 37,” it says. I nod at the small device with my chin, keeping the gun centered on the human’s chest.

“Make the cell number the only thing on the screen. Freeze the image so it can’t change.” The Warden slides and taps at the screen a few more times. Then, it slowly moves
its thumb away from the device. It keeps staring at the small screen. I really don’t have time for this. “Is it done?” I ask.

The Warden looks up at me now. Not at the device, not at the gun, at me. Its face is almost calm. To my eyes, this seems far more dangerous than any primal look of hate ever could. “Yes, Elf,” it says. “It’s done.”

I look back at the human. I know I need to go, but I stay where I am for a moment. I’m searching for what to say. Now that it’s come down to it, I feel I should say something. No that I don’t need it anymore. “Good.” That’s the best I can come up with. “Thank you.” I don’t mean this to be sarcastic. It’s true. I’m grateful. I am.

I pull the trigger on the gun. Once, twice, three times. Each squeeze of my finger is followed by a deafening explosion. The Warden staggers backwards with each gunshot before its left knee gives way and it down, down to the concrete floor. It keep the gun trained on it as I approach. On the human’s chest, three patches of red are already peering through its gray uniform, moving out in expanding stains. The shots weren’t well aimed. One took it under the right collarbone. Another landed near its left kidney. Only the third found it in mid-chest. This bullet is the only reason it dies quickly. The Warden is dead by the time I reach it.

I squat down next to the body, dropping the gun onto the floor as I use my bound hands to rifle through the human’s breast pocket. I’m relieved when my fingers touch what I’m looking for. The security card. I take it out and hold it between my teeth, maneuvering my wrists so that the handcuffs are up near my face. Carefully, I work the card into the slot of the cuffs. They beep once, then pop open. Hands free now, I hurl the handcuffs through the still-open door of the cell. They fall with a clatter against the bare pipes of the sink. I pick the gun back up. I reach over the corpse for the beige device, picking it from the dead fingers. I hold it in my left hand, along with the security card.

I stand up, looking down at the Warden. Almost its entire shirt is a deep red now, and the smell of blood is rich in my nostrils. I almost gag. Then, when I’m turning away, I remember that there’s one more thing I need from the human. I sit back down on my heels, grasping its right hand. I push the muzzle of the gun up against the base of the human’s thumb. I close my eyes and pull the trigger. I hear the bang!, I feel the way the human’s hand bucks savagely in mine, jarring my arm to the bone. I open my eyes. There’s red everywhere. The thumb, bone shattered, is holding on with a bit of skin and tendon. I put the gun, card, and screen down on the floor. Reluctantly, I grab the human’s wrist with one hand and its thumb with the other. I pull. At first, nothing happens. Then there’s a pop, a crack, a wet tearing sound, and it comes free. I fall back to the floor, holding tightly to the small, moist object. It’s still warm. I pick up the gun, card, and screen from the floor and stand up. I start running down the hallway. I don’t look back.

I slow down as I come to intersection with the main corridor. I poke one eye past the corner, looking both ways before venturing out into the open space. I stick close to the walls, sprinting toward the elevators. Each time I cross paths with one of the side hallways, I look down it, weapon already aiming. I never see anyone. There’s no one down here.

I breathe a sigh of relief when the elevators are still working, and when I’m able get inside one using the Warden’s credentials. Inside the small metal box, I’m confronted with an overwhelming array of buttons. I can’t read a single one. I almost panic as the doors slide shut on me. I don’t even know what to push in order to get them open again. I look
again at the control panel. It's made up from three long columns of round buttons. They each have one, two, or three characters inscribed on them in black lettering.

I hold up the device in my hand. Covering its screen is a series of abstract characters, looping and curving all around with no sense behind them whatsoever. I strain to tell which way I should be holding the device for the characters to be pointing up. I'm only able to do this by comparing what's on the buttons to what's on the screen. When I'm holding it the right way, I focus on the first group of characters. If the humans have any sense of logic, then these should give me the floor number. And, sure enough, when I scan the buttons again, I see one with a matching dash, line, lower-dash-with-an-undosed-circle-above-it. I punch this button. The elevator begins to rise, jerking slightly when it first starts off. I stand to one side of the doors. It'd be stupid to stand directly in front of them. I don't know what's going to show up on the other side.

As the elevator makes its way up the shaft, I glance at the ceiling. It looks a lot like the other five sides of the metal cube: smooth, shiny metal. Well, except for a tiny black mark at the center. I squint at it. The mark is round, and bulges out ever so slightly from the surrounding metal. Out of nowhere, I remember something I heard right after Alph slammed my head into the doors of this very elevator. I think it was Beta that said it. It was yelling at its partner something about a “camera up there.” I blink at it. The camera is tiny. If I didn't know what it was, I'd probably mistake it for a speck of dirt or something. It's so small, in fact, that it doesn't worry me. It's as if I can't imagine that something so miniscule could actually see me. Instead of panicking, I wonder vaguely if I should shoot it. I don't want to be spotted. But then it occurs to me that there are probably cameras like this lining the ceilings of the entire prison. There was probably even a camera watching me as I killed the Warden. The fact that nothing happened, that I was allowed to get into the elevator, strongly suggests that no one's watching. They're too busy with Aiohn. And, besides, I'm not a good shot. I couldn't hit it anyway.

The metal box jerks to a stop. There's a quiet ding. A second later, the doors slide open. From where I'm standing, I can't see out into the space beyond. I flatten my back against the wall and take a deep breath. The, I swing around the corner of the door, sweeping the gun in front of me. I step out of the elevator, turning in almost a full circle, scouring the walls of the elevator loading area for anything that might be dangerous. It's empty. There's no one here, either. I start running down the lone corridor that leads away from the elevators.

Immediately, I notice that the layout of this floor is identical to the layout of my own, right down to the placement of wall signs. It's disorienting. I wonder for a moment if I've actually gone anywhere at all. If I'm right back where I started. But I'm sure I felt the elevator rising. This must be a different floor. I stop in front of the next sign I come to, a huge metal rectangle bolted to a wall. It's painted red with black lettering. I compare it with the characters on the beige screen. I'm pleased when the first three characters match. I'm on the right floor, then. Still, the rest of the characters are all different. The cell I'm looking for is down here somewhere. I just need to find it.

I keep moving, running farther down the hallway. I pause each time I pass a new sign, studying it against the characters on the small device. For a while, I have no luck at all. The second portion of the signs never matches what I need. It doesn't even get close. I'm quite a distance from the elevators before I finally see a sign whose fourth character - a line with two dashes sticking out - echoes what's on the screen. Triumphantly, I turn down the
hallway the sign’s next to, jogging past the red-painted cell doors. As I go, I check the small plaques next to each door, looking for the correct fifth character. This one looks to me like an abstract bird flying on its side. I check the right side of the hallway first. I reach the end, and start jogging back up the other side. With each step, I’m aware of time passing, time being lost. This needs to go faster. I’m losing entire minutes. Minutes! I don’t have minutes.

At first, the fifth character on the plaques looks like a simple line. It stays this way for a while. Then it changes, becoming the dash with an open circle over it. This, too, lasts for a while. Then, to my relief, it becomes the bird. I stop jogging, walking more slowly now. I’m still hurrying, but I’m being more careful. I’m looking for a leaning vertical line with a horizontal line resting on top. A number of doors along, I spot it.

I stand in front of the securely closed metal door, double and triple-checking the plaque against what’s on the screen. I don’t want to get this wrong. But I don’t seem to have made a mistake. The plaque and the screen match. This is the one. I step over to the control panel next to the door, looking for the slot to slide the Warden’s card through. I find it almost instantly. I fumble the card in my hands, trying to juggle the thumb, the gun, the beige device, and the security card at the same time. It turns out not to be possible. Giving up, I deposit the gun and the screen on the floor. The thumb’s too fragile to be left alone. With my hands less full, I’m able to swipe the card through the slot. A blinking green light appears on the panel. I watch it closely. It flashes once, twice. Then it turns red. The door doesn’t budge. I swipe the card again. The same thing happens. Flash, flash, red.

“Dtōk!” I swear loudly and violently, kicking the wall under the panel. I think I bruise my big toe. I glare at the control panel, fuming. How could this happen? How could I get this far, spending precious minutes to find the correct door amongst a sea of wrong doors, and still fail? Why won’t it open? It’s not fair. It doesn’t make sense. I grind my teeth and try to think. To open doors, the guards always slide their passes. That’s it. I’ve watched them do it. That’s all they ever do. There’s no other step. And I got into the elevator with no problem, so I know the card is valid and working. So what’s the problem? I swipe the card one more time. Nothing. Flash, flash, red. I hate the red light.

I hold up the card and stare at it. In the upper right-hand corner of the card, there’s a picture of the Warden. It’s not a good picture. The human must have been having a bad day when it was taken. It looks like it wants nothing more than to storm out of the frame and start doing real business. It doesn’t have time for a photo-op. The rest of the card is covered in illegible alien script. All except for a patch right in the center, where the script is overlaying two characters written in block writing. I vaguely recognize them from scouring the signs and plaques. I look up, comparing the characters against the plaque next to the red door. Sure enough, they don’t match. This card, apparently, isn’t valid on this floor.

I drop down to the small pile of objects on the ground, putting down the card and grabbing the gun in its place. Then I stand up and run back down the hallway, away from the cell. When I reach the intersection with the main corridor, I turn right, sprinting away from the elevators, farther into the depths of the floor. When the main corridor eventually terminates, I veer left onto a more narrow hallway. The doors here are painted white. They aren’t designed for security. These are the offices. They’re in the same place here as on my floor. And there, at the far end, is a door that stand out from all the others. It’s made to look like wood, an opaque window set into it, starting a bit above the waist and traveling upward. This is exactly what I’ve been looking for.
As I did in the elevator, I run up to stand to one side of the closed door, back pressed up against the wall. I grip the gun a little tighter. Then, I spin around to face the door, kicking it as hard as I can with the flat of my foot. It doesn't give. I kick it again. This time, it groans a bit, cracks forming in the glass. I kick it one more time, and it bursts inward. I hurry past it, not wanting to give any more of the surprise. I scan the room with the tip of the gun. I settle on the occupant. “Don’t move!” I yell.

The figure doesn't respond. It remains where it is, draped forward over the room's central desk. I pause. There’s something wrong here. I sniff the air. It smells like blood in here. I lower the gun, now seeing the dark pool the human’s lying in. I also see the hole in the side of its head. And the gun in its hand. I take a step back, disgusted. Suicide? The human must have been desperate. Aiohn must be making headway here, and the human panicked. Maybe it though that, as a ranking official of the prison, it’d be interrogated. this is probably wrong. Aiohn would have just killed the human. What could it know, anyway? Suicide just saved us the trouble.

It certainly saves me some trouble. I hate to admit this, but the human’s death is extremely convenient for me. I don’t have to worry about subduing it or anything like that. I walk right up to the slumped body, pulling it up by the back of its shirt and retrieving its security card from its breast pocket. I carefully place the human back down, trying to get it to rest in exactly the same position it was in before I came. I start to leave the room, but then a thought stops me. I go back to the desk, plucking the gun from its hand. The human has no more use for it. I do. But I have to hold the gun in my mouth. My hands are full. I hate not having pockets.

I leave the office and jog back down the hallway, turning right onto the main corridor. As I run along it, I look down each side hallway that I pass. In one of them, I spy the small cluster of objects that I left lying next to Zach’s cell. I run toward them, spitting out the extra gun onto the floor by the pile. With the new pass in hand, I step over to the door’s control panel. Begging the scanner to accept it, I slide the card. As it did with the Warden’s card, a green light appears. It flashes once, twice. Then, to my immense relief, turns solid. I let out a grateful sigh, moving quickly over to stand in front of the door as the lock clangs. The door begins to slide open.

Through the expanding gap between the edge of the door and the wall, I get a glimpse of the inside of the cell. I see a human standing up from a cot. I’ve never seen this human before in my life. Reflexively, before the door even stops moving, I’ve brought the gun up and I’m pointing it squarely at the human’s head. It jerks away, retreating backwards. Its mouth opens. “Void?”

I blink. The human’s mouth is open, but its lips haven’t moved. And how does it know my name? Then the door opens farther, and I can see more of the small room. On the opposite wall, standing up from another cot, is Zach. My arms drop down, pointing the gun a the floor. After the split second of panic at seeing the wrong human, I feel euphoric. “Zach! Dzūmāhāmā. I thought I had the wrong cell.” I shake my head, trying to calm down after the spike of adrenaline. I look at Zach. His bruises have all healed by now, several weeks after the attack. He looks normal. Healthy. Confused and bewildered, but that’s all right. “Let’s go,” I say, gesturing out into the hallway. “We have to move quickly.”
Zach squints. He cranes his neck to see past me. Next to him in the cell, the other human is standing still like a tree. It’s staring at me, mouth agape. I don’t the attention.


I shake my head. “No time,” I say impatiently. “We need to go.” Zach shifts his focus over to my face, searching for some answers there. He looks completely confused.

“Go?” he says. “Go where?”

I come this close to stamping my feet. Why doesn’t he just do what I want? What’s so difficult to understand here? We’re in a hurry! “Out!” I yell. “Where else? Come one! No! Not you.” The other human had taken a step forward, and I point the gun at it again. It stops cold.

Zach just stares at me. “Out? Out as in... out-out? But that’s against the rules!”

“You’re breaking out?” This comes from the other human. It’s still looking at the gun, but it seems to have found its voice. “Can I come, too?”

“No!” I scream. I can hardly believe this. This conversation is all wrong. Zach, the one I’m trying to take with me, wants to stay where he is. The other human, the one I’m considering shooting, is practically begging to come along. This is exactly the opposite of how this is supposed to go.

“Why not?” the second human argues. “I can help! I can be useful! I swear!”

“No!” I scream again. I can feel a vein bulging on my neck. “Zach, get out now!”

“Why?” Zach persists. I can’t believe this at all. I must be having a nightmare. “Tell me what’s happening!”

I’ve had enough. I swing my right arm around, pointing the gun down the hallway. This trick worked on me. There’s no reason to think it shouldn’t work now. I pull the trigger. The bang is extraordinary. Both the humans flinch, Zach’s entire head retracting deep between his shoulders. “NOW!” I bellow.

Zach takes a half step backwards in surprise. His mouth opens and closes several times, a look of fear covering his face. Eventually, though, he puts his head down and walks slowly out into the hallway. I’ve moved the gun back to point at the other human. It’s standing with its hands half raised. It looks as though the gun is the only thing stopping it from arguing even more. I look over my shoulder at Zach, jerking my head at the control panel. “Shut the door,” I say.

Zach steps gingerly over to the panel. He’s walking as if the ground might blow up at any moment. He looks at the panel. “How?” he asks.

He expects me to know? I have no idea how to close the cell door. I’ve always been on the inside of the cell when this part happened. I never got to watch. And besides, I can’t read Standard. “Press buttons and figure it out,” I say. I don’t have sympathy for him.

Zach reluctantly turns back to the panel, examining it and tapping at a few spots. At first, he doesn’t get anywhere. Then, to the horror of the human still in the cell, the door shudders and starts to slide closed. The human starts talking to Zach, rapidly escalating into shouting as the door get closer and closer to the other wall. “Zach? What are you doing? You’re just going to leave me here? Zach, come on! Let me out!”

The door thuds shut and the lock clangs, muffling the voice. I can still hear it, but only barely. I lower the gun. Then I glance over at Zach. He’s standing perfectly still, staring at the control panel. He looks ashamed. I nod to the beige device, the old security pass, and the second gun on the floor. “Pick those up and let’s go. And take this.” I hold the second
pass out to him. He stares at it, then takes it from me. I turn away and take a few steps, then remember one more thing I need him to carry. I walk back over. “And this, too.”

I press the small, wet object into his hand. Zach holds it up, studying it with fascination. Then, slowly, he turns toward me. “This is a thumb,” he says.

I’ve already turned away again. I look over my shoulder. “Yes, I know it’s a thumb,” I say. “Just take it, take the rest of the stuff, and let’s move!”

Zach doesn’t seem to hear any of this. He remains transfixed by the small, moist digit. He looks at it closely. “Where did you get a thumb?” He sounds almost accusing.


“Why did he have a thumb?”

I groan. All I want is to get going. Maybe it was a mistake, coming for Zach. He has to be smarter than this. In fact, I know he’s smarter than this. So why can’t he understand anything? “It’s his thumb,” I say.

Zach’s eyes open wide, his mouth forming a circle that’s almost comical for its perfection. “It’s his thumb?!?” Zach can’t believe his ears. “Why did you take his thumb?”

“Because it’s dead!” I yell, slashing my hand through the air between us. “It doesn’t need it anymore! Now, come on! We really need to go!”

Zach looks all around, searching the very air for answers. “Why’s he dead?”

I clench my left hand into a fist. My fingernails dig into my palm. It hurts. I clench harder. “Because I shot it,” I say, doing my very best to stay calm.

Zach stares at me in horror. “What?” All he can manage at this point is a loud whisper. “Why-”

“PICK UP THE STUFF!” I yell, cutting him off. So much for staying calm. But this could go on forever. And we don’t have that timeframe. “We’re leaving.” And with that, I turn around and start storming down the hallway. I don’t look behind me. I figure that, at this point, Zach’s either coming or he’s not. There’s nothing I can do to get him to make up his mind faster. At first, I don’t hear anything behind me. Then, when I’m about halfway to the main corridor, I hear hurried footsteps coming after me. Several seconds later, Zach jogs up, arms full of the things I’ve gathered in the past few minutes. We walk together. He stays a foot or so behind me, but keeps pace. I pause when we get to the intersection with the main corridor, peering around to make sure nobody else is here.

“Void, please tell me what’s going on,” Zach whispers, begging. I shake my head. I’m busy right now.

“Later,” I say firmly. Then I steal a sidelong glance at him. He looks terrified. Inside my head, I sigh. I feel sorry for him. But there’s no time to have a long conversation right now. I’ll explain everything later. When things are safer. Glancing at him, I notice that he’s holding the gun by its short barrel, no the handle. I nod toward it. “Hold the gun correctly,” I say. “You can’t fire it like that.”

Zach looks up at me, confused. “Why would I want to fire it?”

I wince. Ah, not good. Getting out of here with Zach in tow is going to be a lot harder than I’d expected. Reluctantly, I hold out my free hand. “Fine,” I say. “Give it to me.”

Zach gives me the gun. He seems happy to be rid of it. Now I’ve got two guns, one in either hand. It feels awkward, but it’ll have to do. I look up and down the main corridor one more time, then, seeing it empty, start moving again. I jog back toward the elevators. Zach
trails behind me. We pass a few more side hallways, each deserted. Then I hear Zach piping up again. “Can I give you the thumb, too?”

“No, you may not,” I say. Privately, I don’t think that question should even exist. But Zach persists.

“Please?” he says. “I really don’t like holding it.” I know what he means. I didn’t like holding it, either. It’s wet and kind of mushy. Also, it’s a thumb. That’s disgusting enough by itself. But I can’t hold the thumb and both guns, too. He’ll have to hold it. He must know this already, so I decide not to answer. I keep jogging. A moment later, Zach’s whining again. “Why do we need a thumb, anyway? It’s horrible.”

“Because,” I say, “in case you hadn’t noticed, the elevators require a security card and a matching thumbprint in order to work. So make sure you keep it in good condition. It’s the only thumb we’ve got.”

Behind me, I can almost hear Zach nodding to himself. It’s that kind of silence. Then, after hesitating for a moment, he starts speaking again. “Right,” he says. “Are we really breaking out, then?”

“Yes.”

Zach nods again. He’s considering this. He pauses for long enough that I begin to hope that maybe he’s finally grasped the situation. But then he speaks again, ruining it. “Right. And how are we doing that?”

I close my eyes for a moment. Why is this happening? What am I doing wrong here? Why is Zach so dense today? I wonder if I shouldn’t just leave him behind. “By moving quickly,” I say, starting to jog a little bit faster. Zach seems to take the hint. Finally. We speed up. I can hear him panting behind me. Slowly, the elevators draw near. Then, as we’re passing one of the last side hallways, I hear a faint, quiet noise. A ding.

“Get down!” I yell, shoving Zach into the hallway, off the main corridor. I sprint over to the corner of the intersection, kneeling down next to it. I try to get as much of my body behind the wall as possible. I raise both my arms, pointing the two guns at the elevator doors. They’re already starting to open. Inside stand two guards. They’re both covered in black dust, like the Warden. They’re each holding rifles. As soon as the doors open, they starting stepping outside. I open fire.

There’s about sixteen yards between me and the guards, and at first I don’t hit anything. I see small explosions of dusty powder as the bullets dig into the concrete walls on either side of the humans. For a second, the guards are taken by surprise, freezing in place. Then I finally hit one of them, a bullet randomly striking its neck. It’s not a lethal injury - not immediately, anyway - but the guard crumples, hand flying it its neck to try to hold the blood in. It starts spasming on the floor. The other guard reflexively jerks away from its companion as it’s hit. Then it tries retreating back into the elevator, jamming its finger desperately and repeatedly into a button. The doors start to close again, but bump into the torso of the downed guard. They slide open again.

It’s only now that the second guard raises its rifle and starts shooting back. Its first shot takes a chunk out of the wall a few feet over my head, but its next shots go wide. I have better cover than the human does. It tries going to one side of the elevator doors, behind a lip there. It’s the same spot I stood behind when I was in the elevator. But before the human can reach it, another of my bullets finds its mark. The human stumbles backward, a patch of red sprouting on its chest. It falls against the back wall of the elevator, slowly sliding down to the floor. It’s not quite dead, though. I stand up, pushing off from the corner I’ve been
kneeling behind. I sprint toward the elevators. When I'm near enough so I can't miss, I shoot the human two more times. It relaxes, going limp.

I'm standing next to the other human now. It's still shaking on the floor, eyes lolling in its head as it tries to hold in the red liquid surging from a hole in its neck. Its hands are coated in its own blood. Its eyes look up at me, huge and white. I shoot it in the head. It goes still.

The elevator doors try closing again. They bump into the torso of the dead human, and open back up. A few seconds later, the doors give it another attempt. Close, bump, open. Close, bump, open. It's almost funny to watch. It's almost funny. Not quite, though. I throw the two handguns aside, bending down to scoop up one of the rifles. I strap it over my shoulder. I'm sure it's more effective. And besides, the handguns are probably nearly out of ammunition. As I straighten back up, I hear a voice coming from behind me, loud and appalled. "You killed them!"

I look around. Zach's standing in the middle of the hallway, his gaze flickering between the two dead humans. His mouth is hanging open again. I don't know why, but the comment annoys me. It's so obvious. Of course I killed them. He doesn't have to shout it. I turn away, reaching down for the ankles of the second guard, slouched against the back wall of the elevator. "Help me drag this outside," I say over my shoulder. There's no response. Frustrated, I start pulling on the human's legs anyway, dragging it over the floor. "But you killed them."

I start. I hadn't heard Zach approaching, and now he's right over my shoulder. I let go of the human's ankles and stand up, turning around. Zach's staring at the human, clutching his small armload of objects. He looks, for a moment, like a small child. I glare at him. "Zach," I say, "you're a convicted criminal serving a sentence. Until recently, you were housed on one of the most secure floors in the entire prison. And on top of that, you're a human! Surely you can help me move a body!"

Zach's eyes open even wider, and he staggers backwards as if I'd hit him. He starts shaking his head side to side, emphatic. "No! No!" he babbles. "I'm not like that! I'm a good person! It was drunk when it happened! It was a mistake. An accident! I'm in here on a plea deal! I get a chance for parole in just two more years! I'm a good person! I swear!"

"Fine!" I cut him off, fuming. This is all so much harder than it has to be. "If you can't be useful, then just...." Just what? Zach's coming off as totally inept. What can he do? "Just hold the door open," I finish weakly. I feel a twinge of guilt for being so unsympathetic, but there's really no time for all this. We're in a rush.

I wait until Zach moves in front of the elevator doors, holding them open as I drag the human outside. Zach looks like he's in shock. He looks scared of me, actually. Again, like a small child. Out of his depth. The dead human is heavy and hard to drag, leaving a smear of blood on the floor behind it. Finally, it's all the way out. I drop its legs, moving over to the other human. The one I shot in the face. I do the same thing with this one. Dragging it outside. Before I step into the elevator, I pick up the other rifle, as well. I'm not deluded into thinking that Zach might actually be able to use it, but it seems like a dumb thing to leave behind.

I walk into the elevator, trying not to put my feet in the smeared stain. Zach's still holding the doors. "Get in," I say. I try not to sound too impatient. I'm not sure how I come off, though. Zach doesn't respond. He follows me in, standing off in a corner of the metal box. He stare miserably down at the filthy floor. The doors close. I look over at the
columns of buttons lining the control panel. They all look mysterious to me. “Which one do
I press for the ground floor?” I ask.

“Um...” Zach looks up, squinting over at the array. “That one.” He points toward the
bottom of the panel. I can’t tell which button he means.

“Why don’t you press it?” I say. Zach blinks at me, confused. Then he leans over and
presses one of the buttons with the back of a knuckle. His hands are full. The elevator jerks,
and we start to ascend.

As we move slowly upwards, there are a few seconds of silence in the elevator.
Neither of us is talking. Now that there’s an enforced pause, I feel uncomfortable. I feel
guilty, I think. After all, it’s not really Zach’s fault. He’s only decent. That’s why I like him to
begin with. He’s decent. I hope I’m decent, too. I’m pretty sure that I am. After all, I’m
helping Zach escape. That’s a decent thing to do. As for all the other stuff.... Well, it’s not as
if I had much of a choice. So it’s not really my fault. Of course I’m like Zach. Of course I’m
decent.

I glance over at him. He’s still holding all the stuff, the passes, the device, the thumb.
I look at it. “We don’t need all that anymore,” I say. I try to sound more gentle. “You can
leave everything but the thumb and that card.” I point at the card with the Warden’s
picture. We probably don’t even need these two items, but I’d hate to get rid of them and
then discover later on that we can’t move on without them. Frankly, I feel the same way
about the card and device I’m telling Zach to get rid of, but this is my present to him. He
doesn’t have to carry everything. It’s not much of a gift, but it’s the best I can do right now.
Zach bends his knees, carefully stacking the card on top of the beige device and laying them
both against the side of the elevator. He stands up. He still doesn’t look happy.

There’s another pause, neither of us speaking or moving. Then, in a very small voice,
Zach says, “Void? Void, what’s going on?”

I consider brushing him off again. Telling him that we’re in a hurry. But then I realize
that we’re not in a hurry right now. We’ve got a moment. And, besides, this is something
Zach will appreciate. “Aiohn’s attacking the prison,” I explain. “I don’t know why, but that
doesn’t matter. They seem to be gaining ground, and my Warden panicked. It came to my
cell and tried using me as a hostage. I escaped, I found you, and now our goal is to find
Aiohn and get them to take us along when they leave.” I pause, trying to think if there was
anything else. I don’t think so. The rest is details. It’s not vital. I glance over at Zach. He’s
looking down at the stain on the floor. He doesn’t react to anything I’ve said. He doesn’t
nod. He doesn’t comment. He just looks miserable. Mentally, I shrug. I guess you can’t
please everyone.

“Stand over there,” I say, pointing to the corner of the elevator next to the doors.
“And put your back against the wall. That way, no one can surprise us like I surprised the
guards.” Zach nods vaguely, moving over to stand where I’ve told him. I change my position,
too, sheltering behind the narrow lip between the elevator wall and the edge of the doors. I
adjust the rifle slung over my back into a more comfortable position, then raise the other
rifle so it’s pointing up and to the left, supported by my other hand. I wait for the elevator
to reach its destination.

“Void?” I look over at Zach. He’s staring at me sheepishly, as if embarrassed to exist.
“I know why they’ll take you,” he says. “You’re one of them. But why will they take me?”

I blink. I hadn’t thought of this. I’d just assumed. But Zach has a point. Why would
Aiohn help a human? “Because I’ll ask them to,” I say, trying my hardest to sound confident.
“And they’ll just do it?”
I hesitate. Then I realize my mistake and try to make up for it by sounding emphatic.
“Yes,” I say. “Yes, of course they will.”
I don’t think Zach believes me. I can see it in his face. I look away from him, focusing
on the elevator. A few seconds later, it bumps to a halt. I signal for Zach to stay right where
he is, and the familiar ding! resonates through the air. I squeeze against the wall on my side
of the doors, holding the rifle with both hands. The doors slide open. Immediately, I swing
the barrel of the rifle around the doorway, sweeping it over the floor outside, searching for
any threat. As soon as I actually see what’s out there, though, I stop.
In a way, the area’s clear. This should be good news. And it would be, too, if not for
one thing. Because, in my mind, chaos is never good news.
Chapter Fifteen

Unbridled destruction. There’s no other way of describing it. Outside the elevator doors, jagged, singed chunks of rubble, broken off from the pockmarked walls, lie scattered across the floor, interspersing a maze of bodies. Each of the bodies is maimed in some horrible way. Most have deep, ruined holes blasted into their chests. Others are missing limbs, or even heads. Or parts of heads. It’s revolting. I choke, stomach acid burning my throat. The air smells horrible. Covering everything is a thin layer of black dust, like powdery charcoal ash.

I’ve never heard of laser rifles this powerful. Some of the holes in the walls are six inches in diameter. I’m awed and frightened by the display of firepower in front of me. Each shot would have been like a small explosion, the laser heating up its target so quickly that it expanded and shattered. There’s no protecting against weapons like these. The guards didn’t stand a chance.

Not surprisingly, each of the bodies is human. Was human. There are no ōnā mālḥā mes here. It’s all human guards, dressed in gray uniforms. Most are holding some kind of weapon, pistols or rifles. I notice that many of the guards are lying facedown, and their wounds are on their backs. Their clothes are spattered with gore. They were trying to run away.

They wouldn’t have gotten far, even without their attackers. The elevators are set on one side of a short corridor, a dead end about three dozen feet long. The guards were hemmed in here. They were trying to get to the elevators. The only way out. They moved into a trap, instead. Those two guards I saw downstairs were probably the first among the humans to retreat. Those who came afterwards, the ones I’m seeing now, weren’t so successful.

Cautiously, I step out of the elevator. I try not to put my foot in anything that’s been alive. It’s an impossible task. The floor is coated in slick, red puddles. I try not to look at the floor. I stare at the walls. At least they’re mostly their original color. Gray-blue. Mostly. Some red spatters here, too. But mostly gray-blue. Mostly. I find myself breathing out more than in, as if attempting to keep myself from ingesting any of this. Keep myself from bringing any of this inside of me. Keep myself clean. Keep myself me. It’s impossible. I have to breathe in. There’s no choice. But I clamp my mouth shut, hoping that even a little of the scum will be filtered out in my nose before the air reaches my lungs. The air smells. It’s as if there’s a dense fog covering this area. I can’t see it, but it feels like a bruised yellow. Sick.

“Well? What’s out there?”

I hear Zach’s voice behind me, and glance briefly around. He’s still in the elevator, standing where I left him with his back pressed against the wall. He can’t see what’s out here. Lucky him. I open my mouth, staring around at the grizzly scene. Should I tell him? I consider ordering him to close his eyes while I steer him past the carnage. He’d never have to know. We could go around the next corner, and he wouldn’t have seen this. It’d all be fine. What he hasn’t seen can’t haunt him.

But for whatever reason, this deception seems impossible. It’s too much of a lie. Even for me. “There’s... ah...” I try to begin. But how do I describe this? I don’t think I can. And even if I could, I don’t think I’d want to. It could only make it more real. Besides, I still
want to protect Zach from this in some way. In any way that I can. “There’s nothing that can be helped by worry.”

I know it’s a stupid thing to say. It’s all I can come up with, though. I turn away from the elevator and start picking a path through the bodies. It’s hard to to avoid stepping on things. The entire floor is spattered with objects I can’t even identify. Not that I’d want that power. I don’t really want to know. As it is, I can still half-heartedly pretend that the clump of oozy black stuff sitting off by one wall is just a piece of trash. Nothing more. It has no significance.

Behind me, I hear a soft thud and a clatter. I look. Zach’s rooted on the threshold of the elevator, staring out at the field beyond. The thud was the severed thumb dropping to the floor. The clatter was the security card rushing to join it. Zach stands, bewitched, gazing at the scene. His expression is painful for me to even look at. I glance at the fallen items, but don’t tell him to pick them back up. I know I should. We might need them later. But I’m not willing to do this to him. It crosses some line. I’m not that cruel. Zach looks up at me. His face is full of horror and terror. It’s also pleading.

“Did you do this?” he asks in a whisper. I shake my head.

“No,” I say. I can’t even blame him for the question. What he’s asking isn’t logical - of course I didn’t kill these people - but nothing around us is logical, either. Looking at the totality and the savagery of the destruction here, anything, no matter how insane, makes just as much sense. I turn around again and try to move farther away. I’m only hoping that Zach will follow me. It’s several seconds before I hear him starting to move. I hear his ginger footsteps, each toe padding onto the ground as gently as if anything more forceful than a falling leaf of paper could shatter the whole building and bury us in rubble. I know how he feels.

The more distance I put between myself and the elevators, the fewer bodies there are. Eventually, the corridor is clear. I wait on a clean patch of floor for Zach to catch up. I look down at my feet. To my horror, I notice a trail of red footsteps behind me, leading up to where I stand, the imprints of the bottoms of my shoes. I close my eyes. I’d thought I’d avoided stepping in the worst of the blood. Zach’s almost caught up now, so I start walking again. I’m eager to walk away the red stain. I’m eager to leave all this behind. I want to go home. But because that’s impossible, Aionh seems the next best thing.

Farther along, we’re at a three-way intersection formed between the corridor to the elevators and a hallway traveling perpendicularly across it to the left and the right. The walls of this hallway are lined with metal doors, painted the same shade of red as the doors downstairs. These doors, though, aren’t solid. They’re made from woven bars, each an inch thick, tucking under and over each other, none more than three inches from its neighbors. Through the bars, I can see the small rooms beyond. They’re all empty. These are probably holding cells, I think. I don’t know where the prisoners went, but it doesn’t really matter. At least nobody’s around to cause problems.

I slow down as I approach the intersection, sidling up to peer around the corner. The hallway extends in both directions. It’s a long, empty stretch of concrete floor, lined on either side by the red cells. It looks unnaturally deserted. I step away from the intersection, putting some distance between myself and the corner. I lean up against the wall and close my eyes. I’m exhausted. I know I should be hurrying, but I feel too drained. After walking through so much violent death, I need to rest for a little while. Zach comes to a stop, too. In fact, he outdoes me by sitting right down on the floor. He seems to collapse inward,
pressing his hands on the floor and drooping forward, limp. It’s quite a thing to watch. After a lifetime of seeing emotions repressed, Zach’s posture is a blaze of honesty. It’s comforting and refreshing. It’s also disturbing. It reminds me of how much more he deserves than I do.

I push off from the wall. “Let’s get going,” I say. “We still need to find Aiohn.” I head back to the intersection and look both ways again, trying to decide which way to go. I don’t remember this intersection from when I was first brought to the prison. I wasn’t focusing on the layout then. I had other things on my mind. I bite my lip. Left or right? They look exactly the same, mirror images of each other. And I don’t see any signs. I give up on making an informed decision and chose randomly instead. I start turning left.

“Void?” It’s Zach again. I pause and glance around. He’s sitting upright, but hasn’t gotten to his feet.

“Yes?”


“No,” he says. “They won’t take me anywhere. Not if they can do all that.” He makes the slightest gesture with his head, back toward the carnage. The motion is unnecessary. He doesn’t have to tell me what he means. The slaughter is on both of our minds. “They won’t take a human with them,” he continues. “We both know that.”

Now it’s my turn to hesitate. I understand what he’s saying. I’m just too stubborn to consider that it might be correct. “Zach, I promise you that everything will be fine. It will work out.”

He smiles at me. “You don’t have the power to promise that,” he says. He continues to smile. Broad, warm. Kind. It takes the sting out of the criticism. No, it’s not a criticism. It’s a fact. I don’t have the power. I can only do my best.

“It will work out,” I repeat. “I’ll make it work out. All you have to do is follow my lead, do everything I tell you to do, and not resist anything that happens. If you don’t give them a reason to harm you, you’ll be fine. I promise.” He just looks at me. He doesn’t believe me. I can tell. And I can understand this. I don’t believe what I’m saying, either. But what other choice do I have? I can’t tell him the truth. That I’m just hoping. I have no idea if Aiohn will take Zach or not. All I know is that if Zach stays here, he’d be dead by the end of the day. Aiohn doesn’t leave a job half-done. And it doesn’t let enemies fester, either. It makes sure that all back passages are closed, all side doors are locked, all weaknesses patched up. It’s not going to let an entire building worth of human continue to live. It wouldn’t be logical. It wouldn’t make sense in the context of the war effort. The humans here could one day become soldiers. Safer and easier to eliminate them now. Get rid of the problem before it even arrives.

I have to get Zach out of here. There’s no other way. Besides, I have the bare beginnings of an idea. There is one way that Zach can be useful to Aiohn. I can make this work. I just need to get him to follow me. He’ll thank me someday. No matter how much he’ll hate me tomorrow, he’ll thank me someday. I’m sure of it. “I promise,” I say again. “We’ll be fine.” I look him in the eyes and I flat-out lie.

Zach stares at me. For a moment, I worry that I haven’t convinced him. After all, it’s not as if I’ve given him much reason to believe me. Only my word. And this is when I realize how trusting Zach really is. How decent he is. He gets up slowly, pushing off from the
ground with his knuckles and feet, standing up, a bit of a hunch in his shoulders. He’s still staring at me. Daring me, it feels like, to mislead him. Then, “All right,” he says. “Which way?”

Relieved, I turn back toward the intersection. “Left,” I say, stepping out past the shelter of the corner of the wall. I certainly hope it’s left. If not, we’ll have to double back. That’ll waste time, and-

_Scree! Scree! Scree!

Out of nowhere, with no warning, a panicked alarm bursts onto the scene, echoing and reverberating between the concrete walls of the hallway. I’m pretty sure I jump a foot in the air. My heart stops. I whirl around, instinctively ducking down low as I spin, searching for the source of the wail. What’s happening? What did I do? My search is desperate but short. The source isn’t exactly hiding. At the far end of the right-hand hallway, the point I’d begun to move away from, is a flashing, bobbing light, hovering in mid-air as it continues to let rip its howl of a siren. I freeze when I see it, but the panic loosens its grip on my throat a little. The fear’s still here, but at least it’s not threatening to drown me. I recognize the flashing siren. I’ve seen it before. On the news.

“Void? What’s-

I slash my hand through the air, truncating Zach’s sentence. I stand up from my crouch, maintaining eye contact with the strobing light. “Don’t move,” I tell Zach out of the corner of my mouth. “Stay right where you are. It can’t see you.” Zach’s still behind the corner of the intersection. From where it floats, the siren hasn’t picked him up yet. I intend to keep it that way. For now, at least. “Don’t move a muscle until I call you,” I say. Then, I gently deposit both rifles onto the floor, stand back up, put my hands on my head, and start walking slowly and deliberately toward the alarm.

Putting one foot in front of the other, I make my way up the hallway. The alarm doesn’t react to my progress. It continues to hover right where it is, flashing blue and blinding white. But it doesn’t need to do any more than has already be done. I don’t get far. Before I’ve gone even a dozen yards, a Quarter of soldiers comes running around a bend, armor and weapons glinting in the pulsing lights. I stop dead. There’s nothing more intimidating than seeing a group of four heavily armed soldiers sprinting toward you. And these soldiers certainly are heavily armed. Right away I notice the huge weapons that the soldiers carry. They’re like long, thick pipes, eight inches in diameter. A massive handle dangles underneath while a pair of grips on top helps the soldiers lug the guns along with them. Cannons. That’s the word. The soldiers look like they’re carrying cannons with them. Suddenly, the massive holes in the walls by the elevators don’t seem quite so unexplained.

“Freeze!” The barked order comes at me loud and fierce, amplified by a speaker built into one of the soldiers’ suits. I’m already standing stock-still. Three of the soldiers, continuing to run forward, are pointing their cannons at me now, one end of the pipes resting on their shoulders, the other end staring me down. For a split second, I’m confused by the soldier’s order. Not its meaning or its purpose - and I’d never think of disobeying it - but by something else. It’s the word itself. I understand it. I don’t have to strain. I don’t have to translate it. It makes intuitive sense to me. It’s Ohnieil. It isn’t Standard. It’s my native language. It’s luxurious. There could be a thousand guns pointed at me and I’d still notice this. It feels glorious to hear something so familiar. Even if what’s familiar is meant to be threatening.
The soldiers come to a stop about sixteen feet from me, spreading out in a semi-circle, the soles of their boots clicking sharply against the floor. Three of the soldiers continue to aim at me. The fourth stands a short ways apart from them, a foot or so in front. Their leader, perhaps. The soldier puts down its cannon and does something with an array of controls on the back of the armor covering its left wrist. I can’t see what it does exactly, but it makes the alarm at the end of the hallway go quiet. I don’t wait for anything else to happen. I start speaking, rapidly but clearly trying to get information across.

“My name is Void. My citizen identification number is two-two-three-six-one-two-zero-five. I am a resident of Alaseel. My mother was a resident of Aiohn. I am-”

“Shut up. Search her.” The leader barely glances at me. It’s not interested in what I have to say. I close my mouth, swallowing my next words. The leader’s voice is still amplified through a speaker system, and it’s almost deafening at such close range. One of the other soldiers steps forward, placing its cannon barrel-down on the floor. The weapon stands there, looking like a strange piece of art. The soldier walks up to me, pulling out a small device from a slot in the underside of its left wrist. It fits in the soldier’s armored palm. The soldier points it at me, and the device starts to hum. I’m ordered to hold my arms out, and the soldier starts to walk a circle around me, searching me up and down with the small scanner. I don’t resist in any way. Frankly, I’m relieved I’ve gotten this far. Nobody’s shot me yet. That’s a good sign. When they see that I’m no longer armed, maybe they’ll even trust me enough to stop pointing those cannons at me.

At any rate, being searched gives me a brief second to look over the four soldiers. They remind me immediately of the stävnemä fen mes. Armored suits cloak their entire bodies, reaching from head to toe. These suits are a similar style to what I’m familiar with, except for the faceplate. The strong glass is tinted black, as always. But with these soldiers, the edges of their faceplates carve across their helmets in elegant, sharp lines and patterns. The effect ends up looking almost like the large cheekbones and sunken skin of someone close to starving. The effect is equal parts grace and intimidation. It does more, too. The pattern suggests that the helmet is unoccupied. That the wearer’s skull and the helmet have become one, merging and creating a single entity. No longer can a distinction be drawn between person and soldier. There are no people in front of me. Only animated suits of armor.

The suits are colored dark green, solid and capable in away that gives them a near luminescence. On closer inspection, it’s obvious which one is the leader. While the helmets of three of the soldiers are solid in color, the helmet of the one who’s been speaking is marked on either side with clean white lines, maybe an inch and a half thick, running from the top of the helmet down to the base of the soldier’s neck. None of the soldiers bear any name tags or insignia. This is something that sets them apart from the stävnemä fen mes. With the domestic branch of the military, identification was a major part of operations. With these soldiers, accountability doesn’t seem to be such a priority.

Of course, this isn’t the biggest thing that sets the four soldiers apart from the stävnemä fen mes. Whereas the soldiers patrolling our cities are moderately armed with reasonably sized laser rifles and not much else, each of these figures is a walking armory. The cannons are just the start of it. Across each of the soldiers’ backs are strapped two different types of rifles. One has an extended barrel, thin and precise, while the other is shorter and wider. Judging from its appearance, the first is probably for sniping. As for the second, I can’t even guess. Also, a pair of small handguns occupy symmetrically positioned
holsters near the soldiers’ waists. If all this wasn’t enough, the armor itself looks strong enough to survive a run through a wall. I feel acutely gratitude that these people are on my side of the war.

The soldier is almost done scanning me now, having completed two full circles. “She’s clear,” it says, finished. I’m relieved. Even though I know I’m not carrying anything, I’d had a horrible fear that they’d find something, anyway. Something I forgot I had on me. A gun, perhaps. A security card. A thumb. They’d all make a bad impression. As it is, the leader nods once, then signals the soldier to return to the semi-circle. The leader does not, however, tell the others to stop aiming at me. It looks at me for a moment. I’ve returned my hands to my head, cupping them behind my occipital bone. There’s something about standing here, unarmed, unmoving, in front of four, massively powerful soldiers that makes my stomach turn. And for a second, they’re just staring at me. I hate this. Then the leader turns to the same soldier as before.

“Scan the area,” it orders. The soldier nods, reaching behind its back for the shorter of the two rifles. I feel my stomach drop. I hope I misinterpreted that remark. My eyes are glued to the soldier as it preps the rifle. There are several buttons and switches lining the stock, and the soldier flicks two or three of them, making a small light come on. The leader’s talking to me, but I can’t bring myself to look away from the rifle. I have an awful feeling. Like I’m in a dream, and I know I need to act now, but can’t seem to find a way. “What are you doing here?” The leader asks. “This is a human prison. They don’t keep onä mâlhâ mes here.”

I finally look at the leader and half-open my mouth, unsure of what to say. I wasn’t paying much attention. I’m completely distracted. But just as I’m about to say something, the soldier raises the rifle to its shoulder, points it up into the air and pulls the trigger. A hollow thu-dong sound resonates from the launcher. I turn my head, following the path of a small, egg-shaped projectile as it flies down the hallway. To my amazement, the egg unfolds as it goes, propellers and insect-like legs extending in mid-air. The propellers fire up, and the probe levels off its downward arc. It continues on, bobbing gently through the air. My eyes go wide. No more time for stalling. I whirl back around, facing the leader and talking quickly. “Actually, there’s someone with me.”

I’ve barely finished my sentence when a panicked alarm comes blasting down the hallway from the probe. It sounds just like the alarm from a second ago. Only, this time, I’m not the one who set it off. The leader stiffens, picking up its cannon from the floor. But, instead of pointing it down the hallway, it points it at me, at my gut. “Who are you hiding?” it barks.

“I’m not hiding anyone,” I say. Instinctively, I’ve taken a half-step back from the cannon. If it were to go off, at this kind of range, I’d end up as some kind of goo. “I just told him to wait until I got things sorted out.”

“Sir, it’s a human.” This comes from the soldier with the launcher, cutting in before the leader can respond to me. The soldier’s faceplate has changed color, turning a dull gray. I can make out the faint outline of a video feed projected on the inside of the faceplate. In it, there’s a small figure crouching by a wall. Zach’s staring up toward the camera. He looks like an animal about to bolt. Don’t run! I yell in my head. Whatever you do, don’t run! Don’t move! I can’t tell if Zach hears me or is simply paralyzed, but he remains right where he is. For now, anyway. The leader rounds on me.
“Human? Why is there a human with you?” It sounds almost betrayed - very, very angry. I try to come up with a good response, but fail. I'm not even completely sure why Zach's with me. Because it's the right thing, I suppose. But that reason won't do here.

“I can explain,” I say weakly. “He's with me.”

I can't actually see the leader's face, but I'm sure its eyebrows leap together at this. It was a stupid thing to say, I guess. “And why should we trust you?” It demands.


“I don't care what your number is!” the leader yells. “Why do you have a human with you?”

I stand, mouth gaping. I can't think. This isn't going right. This isn't going right at all. If I could only explain myself, then maybe they would understand. But I can't get a word in, and I can't seem to think, anyway. I just need time to think. I remember having a shadow of a plan when I walked into this, but this shadow has disappeared. The lights are too bright here. I can't focus. I can't think. I just need time. A few minutes would do. Just a few minutes. I wish they'd stop pointing those cannons at me. They're not making it easier. “I can explain,” I say again.

The leader looks at me through its darkened faceplate. Invisible, its eyes bore into me. Whatever the leader sees makes it shake its head in disgust. “Don't bother,” it says. Then it turns to one of the soldier operating the probe. “Kill it.”

Hearing the order, the soldier begins to move, working with the buttons on the launcher. I see this, and something inside me cracks. Just a little bit. Just enough. I can't let this happen. There's no way. Before I can even consider what I'm doing, I'm shouting. “No! No, no, no, no! Wait! He can spy!”

The effect is instantaneous. The leader's hand whips out and grabs the wrist of the soldier, stopping it from pushing any more buttons. Its other arm opens up to the side, signaling the two soldiers holding the cannons not to shoot me. They'd just readjusted their aims, getting ready to blow my to ash, and I realize that in my haste to make myself understood I've taken my hands off my head, holding them palm-out toward the leader and the soldier operating the probe. The five of us stand for a moment, frozen. Then the leader lets go of the soldier's wrist, turning to face me straight-on. “Say that again,” it orders.

This is all the encouragement I need. A small ember of hope has just sparked to life, and I'm going to do every in my power to keep it alight. “He can spy,” I say. “He can do it. He can spy for you. He's a human. He can go anywhere in the International Republic without being detected. They won't suspect him. He looks just like them. He can fit in, he can spy.” I realize that I'm mostly just repeating the same point over and over, but I don't care. I don't really have much to say. Zach? A spy? To be honest, the whole idea's ridiculous. Watching the way he's reacted to our escape, he's the last person I'd recommend to go into a high stakes, life-or-death situation. Yet, the way things are turning out right now, this is the only way he's living out the hour. At the very least I'm buying him a few extra minutes. I'm sure he'd thank me for that. So, I want to sell this. I need to sell this. And, without a complex, detailed pitch, the most I can do is be emphatic. “He can spy,” I repeat again. “Tell him where to go, what to do, and he'll do it. I swear. Don't kill him. You want him.”

The leader looks at me, unmoving. I can't see its face and I can't tell what it's thinking, but I'm still convinced that all this is a move in the right direction. At least
nobody’s shooting at Zach right this second. Finally, the leader makes up its mind. “Call him,” it tells me.

I’m so relieved that I make a small bow, curling my back forward toward the leader. “Thank you,” I whisper to no one in particular. I look around, facing the corner where the hallway intersects with the off-shoot going to the elevators. I call out, switching to Standard. “Zach! Come over here! It’s all right! Come on out!”

I’m a little bit worried that my words will be drowned out by the probe, which continues flashing and shrieking out its alarm. But a few seconds later, I see Zach cautiously edge around the corner. I’m relieved to notice that he’s smart enough to have his hands already placed behind his head. His shoulders are all hunched up, rising up his neck and making it look as if he’s trying to use them to hold his skull in place. He’s completely terrified. He’d look almost comical if everything weren’t so serious. He stops dead when he sees the four armored figures, looking at me for direction. I nod, trying to encourage him. He starts walking again, staring down at the floor by his feet. The probe follows him, doggedly floating a yard or two above his head. The leader says something to the soldier with the launcher, and the soldier pushes a few buttons in response. The probe goes quiet and its lights stop flashing. The momentary quiet is wonderful. Then the soldier pushes another button, and the probe suddenly loses all interest in Zach. It buzzes ahead of him, toward us, angling for the soldier, who raises the barrel of the launcher up into the air, tipping it to almost ninety degrees. The probe produces a pair of insect-like legs, jointed and thin, and uses tiny pincers to grab hold of the end of the launcher. Then, like a beetle disappearing into its burrow, the probe folds its propellers in, shapes itself back into a smooth egg, and dives straight into the barrel’s hole. There’s a sound of metal sliding over metal, then the launcher clicks. The soldier slings the launcher back over its shoulder. The probe’s return is actually quite beautiful to watch. It’s movements are all smooth and natural. It’s as if the probe were a real animal. This shouldn’t be surprising to me. After all, I’m no stranger to Aiohn’s other life-like creations. If any doubt remained, the birds employed by the stävnemā fen mes prove conclusively the skill of our engineers. But I suppose that, like a star, a true marvel never loses its shine.

I give my head a small shake, trying to get back to the issue at hand. Zach’s almost reached us now. The leader waits until Zach comes to a stop a few feet behind me. Then the leader addresses him. “What’s your name, human?”

From behind me, I hear Zach pick his head up, realizing that he’s being addressed. Then he leans closer to me. “Void,” he whispers, “what’s he saying?”

I come this close to wincing. I’d hoped this issue wouldn’t come up so soon. The leader rounds on me. “It doesn’t speak Ohnieil?” It sounds angry. I understand the problem immediately. Not being able to speak or understand the language of his employers is a definite hurdle between Zach a position as a spy.

“He’s a fast learner,” I say. “Very smart. He could pick it up in a month. Besides, it’s not a big deal, right? He’ll be around other humans, and he won’t need to speak Ohnieil then. He can still spy for you. He’s still valuable.”

Zach taps me on the shoulder, but I wave him off. He doesn’t understand anything going on in this conversation right now, but I don’t have time to explain it to him. I’m too busy keeping him alive. The leader’s staring at him, but addresses me. “Ask it if it’s willing to betray its species.”
I blink. I’ll definitely have to rephrase that. Put that way, the only possible answer is ‘no.’ And Zach can’t say ‘no.’ Not if he wants to continue living. I turn around to face Zach. His hands are still on his head. “Zach,” I say gently, “He wants me to ask you if you’d be willing to do some spying for them here and there.”


I can’t see the leader’s reaction to this, but I can hear its armor shift as it changes position. I can tell that it’s not happy with what it’s hearing. I wish I had a minute to privately explain everything to Zach. He’d understand then. I’m sure he would. But I know with complete certainty that the soldiers would never give me this chance. I just have to hope that Zach will understand what’s needed right now. “On other humans,” I say.

I try to signal Zach with my body language and expression, shouting at him to just say ‘yes!’ Don’t ask any more questions! We can worry about details and ethics later. Right now, you just need to play along. But Zach just squints at me. “Why?” he asks.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see the leader roll its head in frustration. Then it turns to one of the soldiers holding the cannons. Its order is simple. “Kill it.”

I spin around, arms stretching out again, placing myself firmly and completely between Zach and the barrel of the cannon that’s already turning in his direction. “No! I can sort him out! I promise.” I must sound desperate. I certainly feel desperate. “I just need to talk to him. I just need to explain things. He’ll be a great spy! Don’t kill him. Please.”

I stare at the leader’s faceplate, pleading, having to guess at where its eyes are. I wonder if I should get down on my knees and beg. I wonder if that would help. Probably not. All cannons are on me now. The third soldier, the one that operated the probe, has retrieved its cannon from the floor. The once time I glance away from the leader’s face for a split second, I notice that the ends of the cannons are actually flat. There’s no opening. Just a small circle of glass, smaller than the nail on my little finger, glinting from a recess at the center of the end of the barrel. All the firepower comes out of that tiny little thing. I can see this now because the cannons are pointed at my head. It’s hidden from all other angles.

For a second or two, nobody moves. It feels much longer to me. Hours. Then the leader’s posture shifts slightly. It’s subtle, but I’m so desperately focused that I notice it immediately. “All right,” it says. Then it turns its head away from me, looking at the soldier again. “Tranq it.”

I don’t wait to hear more. Sure, it’s not ideal, but I’ll take whatever I can get. I whirl to face Zach, grabbing him by his shoulders so he has to look me straight in the eye. I start talking urgently, knowing that I have only a few seconds. The soldier is already fiddling with a small, white cylinder it’s retrieved from somewhere. I have to hurry. “Zach, listen to me. Listen to me! You have to do whatever they say. You have to promise me that you’ll go along with them. I’ll get to you as soon as I can, but you have to promise me that you won’t give them any reason to hurt you. Zach, look at me!”

His eyes have started darting over to the soldier, who’s now holding what looks like a thick-barreled pistol. “Void? What’s going on?” He sounds upset. Almost panicked.

“Don’t worry about it,” I say. “Everything’s going to be fine. Just promise me that you won’t resist. Promise me you won’t give them reason to hurt you!” I give Zach a shake, but he’s not paying attention to me at all. He’s staring at the soldier, eyes wide. The gun is pointing at him now.
“Void? What’s going on?” He definitely sounds panicked now. And he gets even more panicked when I let go of him and step clear. “Void?” His gaze is flashing between the gun and me, horrified. “What’s—"

The gun makes a quiet popping sound, catching Zach in mid-sentence. I don’t see whatever enters his body, but I certainly see its effects. Zach stumbles back, clutching at a point on his abdomen. He’s only looking at me now. Only at me. I try to silently tell him that everything’s going to be fine. But I can tell he doesn’t understand. He looks terrified. He thinks he’s dying. And he doesn’t understand why I’d stand back and let someone shoot him. His mouth is open slightly, and I watch as he stumbles. He catches himself, swaying but upright. Then, as he’s still staring at me, his eyes glaze over and he collapses. His body goes limp, internal structures failing from the bottom up, crumpling one section at a time. First go his knees, then the rest of him. I feel almost sick when I hear the thump he makes on hitting the floor. I stand still, looking down at him.

“Her, too.”

I spin around toward the leader, agast. “What?!?” But that’s the only word I can get in. The gun pops again, and I feel a burst of pain in my left shoulder. My hand flies up to cover the wound. My fingers touch a small, raised bump at the heart of the impact site. It’s a pellet of some kind. I start to scramble at the lump, scratching at the skin. I need to get it out. But the area is covered by the fabric of my jumpsuit, and the only way of accessing the pellet is through the tiny hole it left in the fabric. And I don’t have any more time to work. I feel nauseated. Not tired, as I might have expected, just less capable. Soon, my frantic scratching turns into uncoordinated pawing. Then my hand drops to my side. I’m losing motor control. And my mind’s starting to numb, too. I stare at the soldiers. I can’t believe this is happening. I don’t feel betrayed. Not quite. It’s more like a deep personal hurt. As if I’d been counting on them for something, and they’d let me down. I’m disappointed to the verge of tears. “But I’m one of you,” I say. Or I mean to say. The words might get lost in my throat. I blink. Then I feel my mouth loosen, jaw unclenching, lips hanging slack. I can’t control my body. I hope I don’t hurt myself when I fall.

That’s the last thought I have. Almost immediately afterwards, the world tilts. The next thing I know, the soldiers are standing on the wall. Everything’s covered in fog, out of focus, gray. Things move too quickly, lights are too bright, colors, too weird. And time moves in jerks and stops, going too slowly one second, then speeding ahead the next, skipping to an entirely new scene. It’s as if it’s trying to lose me. Shake me off its tail.

In one scene, the soldiers are crowding around me. The next instant, a pair of armored legs tromp forward in my field of view, never getting any closer or farther from me. Blood pounds in my ears. I’m upside down. Carried over somebody’s shoulder. I can’t seem to mind. I’m already gone again. Then the legs have stopped. I’m still upside down, but now I can hear blubbery voices coming from all around. I can’t make out the words. Only the inflections. They sound familiar. I can’t tell what they’re saying, but I know instinctively that it’s Ohnieil. None of this Standard stuff. None of this alien jabbering. My language. It starts fading again, but I’m way ahead of it. I started fading the moment I reappeared. I’m like that. I cheat. I take head-starts. I’m gone.

The next time I surface to breath, I feel different. I’m no longer padded on all sides by thick gel, separating me from sensation and thought. I can feel things. I can feel my body. I can feel where my foot is compared to my hand. I can feel my shoulder. The way that it
aches. Aches. It really does. The skin feels like it’s been pulled across a drum and struck with a spiked mallet. There’s also a little pinprick of sharper pain, the place I identify as the pellet’s entry site. It hurts. In fact, I hurt. I can even feel a bruise on my temple I must have gotten when I feel over. So much wishes.

I open my eyes. At first, nothing I see makes sense. Huge, greenish shapes lumber past me, filling the air with echoes and noise. They’re so loud. Thumping. Banging. Clicking, thudding, tapping. It’s so much all at once. I close my eyes again, taking a breather, but the sounds stay where they are. And I’m not coordinated enough yet to control my ears. Careful this time, I slowly open my eyes. I try to focus, straining until the blurry picture solidifies into a mass of armored soldiers moving past me in the narrow aisle of a shuttle, strapping themselves into seats. I reach a hand up to touch my shoulder, but I meet resistance before I’ve even gone an inch. I gently tug at whatever’s holding me, but it doesn’t let go. I clumsily drop my head and look down. My hands are bound to a pair of armrests. Thick fabric straps loop around my wrists, secure enough to win any struggle. I don’t even try breaking loose. There’s no point. The rest of me is strapped in, too. Like the soldiers around me, an X shaped harness crosses over my chest, buckling down between my legs and on either side of my legs. The harness presses against my left shoulder, and I realize that this is part of the reason why my shoulder hurts so much. That, plus the fact that I must have clawed it into a pulp before passing out. And look what good that did me. Next time, I resolve to just leave the pellet be. I hope there won’t be a next time, but still. All I did was hurt myself.

I pick my head back up and look over the rows of seats. There are actually three aisles running along the length of the ship, not one as I’d first thought. Two of them are at the edges of the ship, moving past inward-facing seats like the one I’m in. On the inner side of these two aisles are more rows of seats, these ones facing forward. The seats are two to a row, with the rows separated by a final, central aisle. Even in my muddled state of mind, I take a moment to be impressed by the design. The way it’s set up, every seat has easy access to an aisle. That should speed the movement of the troops as they’re loading up and disembarking. Very efficient. Very military.

The shuttle itself is nondescript from the inside. Metallic, round windows set into the walls, low ceiling, harsh lights. I’ve been in a shuttle like this before. The seating arrangement and proportions were different, but something vaguely similar to this took me into orbit with my parents when we traveled to Aiohn. Once beyond the atmosphere of Alaseel, we docked with a larger ship. This took us the rest of the way. The soldiers around me are getting into their seats, not out, so I know that we haven’t taken off yet. Soon. Another minute or two.

I catch a blob of orange in my peripheral vision. I turn my head and see Zach sitting next to me, strapped in like I am. He’s still unconscious. His head rolls on his neck, and a thin streak of saliva is shining on his chin. He looks calm. Unharmed, at least. Knocked out, maybe, but things could be worse. So why does seeing him make me feel so guilty?

I look away. I can sort that out later. I’m feeling stronger with each passing second, my mind clearing and my muscles waking up. My shoulder still complains, but I can handle that. In fact, despite my reservations and the uninviting welcome, I actually feel a twinge of hope. Sure, I’m strapped to a chair. But at least the chair I’m bound to is getting ready to take me far away from here. I’m getting out. This is it. I’m free. Strapped in, restrained and all, I’m free.
I look down to one end of the shuttle, to where the lines of soldiers are coming from. There’s a hatch there, a piece of the shuttle wall that’s fallen outwards, creating a ramp between the passenger bay and the world beyond. I think I see some chunks of rubble lying out there, scattered on a concrete floor. I squint. The floor is familiar. It just like the floors in the prison, solid and practical, painted gray. Then, with a start, I realize that it is the prison floor. I’m looking at the inside of the building. Actual interior space. There are walls out there, even some furnishings. Everything’s lying in ruins, covered in dust and grit, but that can’t disguise its original state. I’m awestruck. This shuttle would have had to bash its way through a wall to get in here. Like a battering ram. Right through the outer defenses. Concerned, I survey the inside of the shuttle, looking for dents and cracks. I don’t see any. That doesn’t mean they don’t exist, but it’s still impressive that this craft could get to this point at all.

As I’m marveling at this, the last of the soldiers job up the ramp, and the catch begins to close. There aren’t many empty seats on the shuttle at this point, but none of the soldiers chooses to sit on my left, where an empty seat still remains. They find seats elsewhere, strapping themselves in quickly. I wonder briefly if I should be insulted. But frankly, I’m more comfortable this way. They’re soldiers, after all. I’m a civilian. We’re different. We may come from similar backgrounds and have had similar experiences before the war, but at this point we might as well be different species. Like Zach and me. I’ve learned to get along with him, but it wasn’t intuitive. I’m glad that I don’t have to sit next to one of them right now.

The hatch bangs shut, the sound reverberating through the closed space. The overhead lights change, getting somewhat darker, and then the whole craft shudders. It feels almost like a roar, deep and resonant, vibrating up and down the length of the passenger bay. I have to part my teeth slightly to keep them from chattering. And then we start to move. The craft heaves, yanking itself from the hole it’s punched in the prison. There’s a terrible screeching sound as the craft moves, concrete clawing at its sides. The noise comes from all around - top, bottom, in front, behind - loud enough to make me cringe and prolonged enough to make me start seriously worrying that there must be damage to the ship. But none of the soldiers seem concerned in the least. They have more faith in their shuttle than I do.

And then, an amazing spectacle. One by one, the windows lining the walls of the craft clear the prison structure, and blaze with light. Past them, I see a space that I can hardly comprehend after so much time in a cell the size of my bathroom at home. It’s giant. Spread out, vast, an endless landscape of red clay and boulders, sand and dust. Anyone else might call it desolate. Empty. But me, I’m enthralled. Even being able to see again over such great distances is a joy. The plane is wonderful.

The shuttle is fully withdrawn now. It tilts, beginning to fly upward, away from the ground, gaining speed, leaving the prison far behind. I twist in my seat, craning my neck as I try to look out of the window that’s right next to my seat. Because of the sharp I’m viewing it at, I can only see a sliver of what we’re fleeing. I stare at it anyway. It’s the first time I’ve seen the prison from the outside. From this height and this distance - we’re already far away - it appears as no more than a squat pile of brick and steel, rising a few stories from the surrounding red plane. There’s no hint of the extensive substructures beneath the building. No clue as to the thousands of humans living inside.
I’m distracted when a soldier suddenly sits down in the seat next to me. It works rapidly to secure itself with the harness. I glance around the bay, spotting an empty seat on the opposite wall that wasn’t there a moment ago. This soldier must be changing seats. And it only takes me a split second to recognize it. It’s the leader. The one I met in the hallway. I still can’t see its face through its helmet, and it’s true that there are several other soldiers in here with white markings on their armor, but I don’t doubt for a second that this is the same one.

Strapped in, the leader reaches for one of its holsters, pulling out a white cylinder. I recognize it instantly. The soldier twists a ring toward the top of the cylinder, and a small needle comes out. It’s no more than half an inch long, and very thin. Still, the sight frightens me. The soldier starts talking, having to speak up over the loud noises the shuttle makes as it claws a path through the atmosphere. “You’re not supposed to be awake yet.” The way it says this, it’s just a fact. Not a criticism, just the way things are. It’s also made clear that it’s the soldier’s job to correct me. “You clear toxins quickly,” it continues. Now it’s just making small talk as it finishes prepping the device. “It’s strange. You don’t look that altered.” And then the soldier leans over and stamps the cylinder onto my forearm. I wince as the needle punctures my skin. The soldier lifts it up immediately, and starts the process of breaking the device down again. I watch its armored hands as it works. I feel as if I want to say something, but can’t remember how to speak. Already, I’m getting dizzy again. I close my eyes, feeling immensely fatigued, almost to the point of mental pain. But I force my eyes open again. I don’t want to just go out. I look at the window again, ignoring the soldier sitting next to me.

I stare at the prison. Out of nowhere, a blinding streak of light lances across the sky, leaving an afterimage on my retina. It strikes the building, erupting in a flash that’s so bright that my vision at once turns purple. Another missile comes flying in, then another, another. Soon, the whole area is a blaze of fire and toxic smoke. Already, between the strikes, I can see the innards of the building laid bare, like the chest cavity of a slaughtered beast. Then more missiles hit, and the light is blinding again.

My eyes slide shut. They’re too heavy for me. But I can still see the missiles hitting. They’re tinged red now by my eyelids, but they’re just as clear as ever. Hit after hit, blossom after blossom, a steady rain of flashes and fire. Trails of light diving down, fingers of power tearing their way into the living substructure.

The anesthetic is making me feel sick. Nauseated. And something else, too, making me feel some odd play of unnatural emotions. It’s the anesthetic doing this to me. Messing with my brain, messing with my stomach. Because I do feel sick. And then I feel myself collapsing into the harness, going limp and still.

I’m free.

I sit cross legged in the center of the clearing, on the same patch of bare ground I’ve occupied the whole night long. I slump forward, unmoving, staring at the dirt and leaves in front of me. Small, natural things, unconcerned by the carnage spread out around them. The pilots sprawl where they fell, dark patches of blood staining their thin flight suits and soaking into the clearing floor. All dead. All destroyed.

so much else is dust? I stare at the dirt and the leaves in front of me. I wonder how they manage to be so peaceful. They don’t seem to care. To mind. To mind anything. They’re trampled and torn and they don’t react. Nothing bothers the dirt. I wish I were dirt.

The rifle lies where I dropped it, job done, content to rest. It doesn’t feel a thing. It’s the real murderer here, but it doesn’t seem to care. In contrast, all I did was pull the trigger. So why do I feel so much more? Why does the rifle get to rest? I don’t regret it. None of it. I’d do it again. I wouldn’t have any more choice the second time. But I’m saddened, not by the corpses around me, not by the destruction I’ve wreaked, but by the fact that none of it changed anything. It didn’t make any difference. Estas and Reyin are still dead. Alaseel is still flattened. So what if I’ve killed the people responsible? So what? What did that change? Nothing. It’s hopeless. There’s no changing any of it. Death is irreversible, and there’s nothing I can do about it. The powerlessness lies on me like a heavy blanket, deadening my movements, slowly crushing me. I could suffocate under here. And that wouldn’t matter, either. I’d be just one more dead body. One more corpse. Like the leaves. They’ve all fallen to their deaths from the trees above. They lie in the dirt, rotting. And they don’t care. They don’t mind. I wish I could be like them. I wish I could be like a rotting leaf.

I suppose that time must be passing. It must be nearly morning now. But I still don’t move. The darkness of the forest slowly brightens, a new day beginning, seeping in like a draft of cold air. There’s no escaping it. It fills the whole space, refusing to be ignored. The clearing has been quiet since last night, but noises soon start cropping up in response to the rising glow. Insects, animals. They start going about their days. As if nothing had happened. As if everything were normal. As if everything were as it should be. Their actions deny any knowledge of what’s happened. They lie, pretending to be ignorant. But I see through them. The whole world must know. Every world must know. They might pretend otherwise, but they all understand that my world has died. They all know. They just don’t care. After all, it wasn’t their world. It’s not their loss. These animals didn’t lose their home, their purpose, their family. So why should they care that I’ve lost mine?

The forest goes about its business. I continue to sit. Staring down at the ground. At some point, the forest suddenly goes quiet. A moment later, I hear a high-pitched humming. It’s coming from up above me, in the sky. I don’t care. It doesn’t matter. I recognize the sound at once, but make no attempt to run away or hide. I don’t even care enough to be curious. The humans are back. It doesn’t matter. Nothing matters.

The humming gets louder, sounding throughout the clearing in rough, penetration jabs. Then the small ship lands in the clearing. I see it out of the corner of my eye, but I don’t look over at it. I don’t feel the need. As far as I’m concerned, either they’ll go away or they won’t. And neither outcome changes anything. Neither outcome matters. Nothing can bring back Reyin. She and Estas are dead. So how could anything matter? How could anything possibly matter?

There are some more sounds that come from the ship, and then I hear a voice yelling at me. Ordering me to do something. Angry. Urgent. As if anything could be urgent anymore. The yeller is so ignorant. It doesn’t understand.

And then I feel a bolt of lightning hit me, and I’m knocked onto my side, coughing and wheezing. I feel like I’ve been put through a blast furnace, and I can picture the steam rising from my skin. I sputter, trying to breathe, pushing off the ground with my fists. I don’t make it all the way. Something else slams into me, forcing me back onto the ground, lying on my stomach. I feel a boot land on my upper back between my shoulderblades,
stepping on me and keeping me down. I don’t struggle. I’m terrified, but that’s only a reflex. Honestly, deep down, I don’t care. I don’t even care when the butt of a rifle smashes into the back of my skull. I’m not unconscious after the first hit. That takes three more tries. I’m not sure if the human stops after I’m out. It might continue. I don’t care. It doesn’t matter.
Part Two

“A thing is not necessarily true because a man dies for it.”
--Oscar Wilde
Chapter Sixteen

I fall, losing my balance and tipping forward on the steep slope. I reach out, grabbing hold of the slender trunk of a young tree. I hear its uppermost leaves *shushing* each other as the tree sways back and forth. I steady myself. It’s hard to gain a footing on the incline.

About a dozen feet from me, at the bottom of the slope, lies a dark body of water. Its surface is so clear, so smooth, so *cold*, that it reminds me of a window pane propped up against a winter storm. I’m glad I didn’t fall in. I’m glad I didn’t touch the water. I’m glad the water didn’t touch me.

I’m at the bottom of a valley, where the river winds between opposing steep banks. On the other side, I can see a tree-lined slope rising up to a series of cliffs, which rise in turn to meet a range of snowy mountains. These mountains climb even higher, merging with the bright gray sky. The water is cold, and the mountains colder, but I don’t feel the chill. I have my green shirt on, the solid one, the one I look forward to wearing each time the weather turns.

I hold on to the sapling, looking down the long valley. The river soon bends around a corner, disappearing from view. I grip the tree tighter. The slope here is so steep that barely anything can grow. The only trees here are young. Thin-bodied and nimble, they’re still able to resist the pull of gravity, the pull toward the river. There’s one old tree, a little ways off, clutching at the bank with wild fervor. It’s determined not to let go. There’s no power in the universe that could move that tree, I’m sure of it. The trees shade the bank, with little spots of gray sunlight darting through here and there. The light seems soft. Like a streetlamp in a rainstorm.

I reach out for the next-closest sapling, gripping it and steadying myself against it. When I let go of the first tree, my palm comes away gritty with specks of bark, making my skin dry and smooth. I move along the bank. Grabbing at each tree as I go. Using the trees to stay dry. Using them to stay out of the river.

It’s slow going, but I make steady progress and soon find myself rounding the gentle bend in the valley. I look downstream, seeing where the water flows to. I don’t have to look hard. Only a few hundred feet away, the river abruptly ends at a narrow beach, spanning from one side of the valley to the other. But where other beaches might be made of sand or gravel, this one is made completely of grasses and moss. A soft *green* cover which spreads uniformly over the ground, going right up to the water and vanishing underneath it. Past the level beach, another line of trees springs up. These tree, unlike the spindly saplings that line the valley banks, are old and thick, gnarled and twisted, hulking and austere. They’re gorgeous. The fill every inch of the land between the cliffs, growing so closely together that in some places the trunks are almost touching. The canopy of their branches forms a thick mat of dark green leaves.

I keep moving along the bank. When I get to the beach, I hop down from the incline, feeling the grass and moss squelch under my toes. It’s a wonderful sensation. Like grabbing a plush blanket and feeling my fingers disappear into the folds of thick fabric. I stare at the ancient trees. They stare back at me. I walk right up to them. They end in a perfect line, as if physically unable to push their roots into the grown an inch past where they are now. I enter the forest.
Almost immediately the light dims. What was before a gray but shining sky is now a massive roof, thinly emitting a dark green glow. I walk slowly as my eyes adjust. But my eyes do adjust, and soon I can see just as clearly as ever. The forest is thick, and it’s hard to move here. When I’ve only gone a dozen feet, I stop and look behind me. I don’t see anything but the trees. There’s no sign of the beach or the valley beyond, no hint of the light or the open space. This forest could go on forever and I wouldn’t know the difference. I’m lost already. I turn back around and keep walking.

Underfoot, the ground is hard and knobbly. The trees, growing so closely together, have filled the dirt to capacity with their thick roots. But the trees aren’t satisfied. They’ve continued to put out the wooden fingers, the wooden toes, the wooden protrusions. They cover the ground in a solid sheet, bumpy in places, but so completely that no dirt shows through. No leaves have fallen on the wooden floor. It’s been left bare and clean. I stumble over it, moving deeper and deeper into the woods.

I’m caught completely by surprise when, with no warning at all, I push past another group of trunks and step out into the clear. I look around, bewildered. The sun dazzles my eyes. The sky is a clear aquamarine, the sun shining brilliantly from directly overhead. The sky is bright and open, and seems to go up and up forever, far higher than any other sky has ever dared to reach. I’m standing on cropped grass, a shelf of manicured lawn, extending about eight feet from the army of trees. The grass is a pale yellow, almost white. It’s not green, the way I would expect it to be, but it looks healthy all the same. Past this shelf, I see a sprawling ocean. The water here, unlike in the river, is a warm blue, clear as the sky above, and matching it in its pristine hue. There’s no wind here, and the water lies as a flat plane of gently moving crystal. There’s no sound here, apart from my breathing and the soft padding of my feet against the ground. There’s not even the sound of the lapping water.

Far out in the middle of the ocean is a bank of fog. It’s the one dark patch in this whole shining world, the one blemish on a gorgeous day in a gorgeous place. The fog is thundercloud gray. It rises in a near-perfect dome over the water, squatting there, unmoving. I look away.

The cropped grass extends in front of the trees, slowly circling around the ocean. I follow the line of trees and grass with my eyes, seeing it curve into the distance, vanish behind the fog, reappear on the other side, and approaching me again. The grass forms a perfect ring. The ocean, a circular jewel. The trees are a steady presence on the outside of it all, looking in and containing the picture.

I turn to the right and start walking over the grass. I start off at a stroll, but begin walking faster and faster until I’m jogging over the no-man’s-land between the woods and the water. I feel the air rushing in my ears, but I don’t hear a thing. Only my breathing and the pad-pad-pad of my feet on the solid grassy earth. I let my eyes slide half-closed. I relax into the stable rhythm.

Out of nowhere, my foot collides with something hard, tripping me up and sending me sprawling on the short-cropped grass. I lie there for a few seconds, stunned. Then, slowly, I pick myself up, brushing myself off and peering around to see what I ran into.

There’s a small stone in the grass. It’s a bit smaller than my closed fist, colored a fine white. It’s shaped like an egg. Smooth and even, but not unnaturally so. It has the kind of undesigned smoothness that any rock in a stream can achieve, given enough time. I look around me, searching for anything else hiding in the grass, but there’s nothing. The stone and I are the only two things here.
I bend down and scoop up the stone in my left hand, holding it and weighing it. It feels good in my palm. It's been warmed by the sun, and radiates a gentle heat into my skin. I turn the stone over, examining it from all angles. It's white everywhere except for a small flaw on one side. Here, there's a small grain of a darker rock embedded in the stone. I run my thumb over the grain. It's flush with the rest of the stone. It doesn't feel any different than the surrounding material. Unlike the practiced curves that define the rest of the stone, however, the flaw has a jagged outline. Rough, serrated edges. Again, a natural stone.

I shift the stone to my right hand. I weigh it again, quickly raising it up a few inches and then quickly lowering it, feeling it grow weightless and the stone and my hand fall together, then growing heavier than ever when my hand comes to rest, stopping its fall. I do this maybe two or three times. Then I face the ocean, pull my arm back, and throw the stone out over the calm waters. I've never been a good throw. The stone doesn't go any more than sixteen feet before it hits the water, bounces a few times, then skitters to a stop.

I blink. The stone sits there, atop the gently rising and falling waves. I squint. No, the stone isn't atop the waves. It's on a flat spot, an area where the water stands truly still, glassine and solid. I look even closer, and now I can see that the patch is a slightly different color than the surrounding liquid; it's a brighter blue, with more green in it, more light. The stone landed right on top of the patch, and came to a stop only a few inches from the far edge.

I back up toward the treeline. I want as much runway as possible. I drop down to the ground, my left foot back, my right foot forward, fingers touching the prickly grass. I take a breath, let it out, take another, and then spring forward. I burst into motion, picking up speed quickly. By the time I reach the water, I'm running faster than I've ever run before. I jump. And then I'm in the air. I hang, flying over the water, its color the dream of any artist. When I land on the solid patch, I surprise myself by doing a perfect forward roll. I come to my feet, and look down at the stone. It's a little ways ahead of me. I walk over to it. From the shore, there looked to be three or four inches between it and the edge of the patch. From right over it, though, I can see just how close it actually came to falling off. There's less than an inch of the patch left between the stone and the edge. It seems to me extremely lucky that it didn't roll right off. I pick the stone back up. It fits neatly into my hand.

I tap my foot against the solid patch of water. I can see through it, right down to the sandy ocean floor. From above, the patch appears almost luminescent, even greener than it had seemed before. When I tap it, I don't hear anything. The sound is swallowed by the water, disappearing into the depths.

When I look at the surrounding ocean, I see another patch nearby, and another after that. It's like a chain of islands. Each patch is oddly shaped, an apparently random jumble of arcs and curves, widening in some parts, narrowing in others. The patches are of varying sizes. Some are no larger than my spread hand. Others, like the one I'm on now, are over a dozen feet long and half a dozen feet wide. There's no predicting where the next island in the chain will be. Some are to the left of their neighbors, some to the right, some out in front. Many are at diagonals. In general, though, they head out deeper into the ocean. Toward the fog bank. Looking at the patches, they remind me of an old paved road. After years of disuse and disrepair, the road cracks and crumbles, until whole chunks of pavement come off completely. What's left is a piecemeal network of vaguely associated spots where the paving has held, interspersed with dirt or gravel or shoots of grass.
I start off along the luminescent green islands, jumping from one to the other. I’m jogging again, running over the waves. I keep the stone held firmly in my hand. Once or twice I almost lose my balance, but I never slip, and I never fall into the sea. I leap and I run, feeling exuberant and powerful. The fog bank grows larger as I approach. The patches all seem to glow, but I still have a hard time seeing exactly what I’m running on. Because of this, there’s a wonderful illusion that I’m not running on anything. That I’m flying. That I can fly as far as I want, as high as I want, as fast as I want. The ocean laps at the islands, its small waves making no sound.

As I get closer and closer to it, the fog bank draws itself together. Unlike most fog, this fog is denser and thicker when seen up close. Harder around the edges. More solid. Finally, I come to a stop on an island that presses right up against the fog, now a sheer wall of gray. Small wisps flake off from the fog, drifting out over the sea. It’s colder here than it was at the shore. Even my thick green shirt can’t keep the chill away. It’s darker, too. The sun is weaker here. A soup with too much water added. The fog, gray and black and indistinct, fills my entire field of view. I look back toward the shore. It looks so distant now, the trees having grown short, the grassy ledge a mere inch wide. There’s nothing stopping me from going back. I turn to face the fog.

Slowly, I put out a hand, raking my fingers through the outer edge of the wall. Moisture condenses on my skin so that my hand comes away wet and freezing cold. I wipe it on my pants. I take a step back from the wall of gray, looking at it with new respect. I clench the stone in my fist. I know what I have to do. But I don’t have enough faith. I’m not strong enough to be the first. I don’t know what’s going to happen. I don’t want to be the one to find out. I can’t go first. I turn to face the fog.

With that thought, I hurl the stone into the fog bank. It disappears into the wall, leaving a small hole in its wake. The hole quickly fills, becoming a dent, a pocket, and then nothing at all. I listen carefully, but don’t hear a sound. Next to the fog, the world is even more silent than everywhere else. I hesitate. Then I think of the stone. We had a deal. It would go first. And I would follow. I take a running leap and jump straight into the fog.

Instantly I’m chilled to the bone. Icy moisture worms its way into every crack and crevice of my clothing and my skin, soaking me as thoroughly as if I’d jumped into the ocean itself. It’s impossible to breathe in the fog. I’d have better luck trying to breathe under water. And I can’t see a thing, not even my eyelids. The world is dark and gray and cold and weightless and insubstantial and gone. I’m in the air for a long time. Too long. It’s impossible. Then, when I land, it’s on soft, muddy earth. I collapse in an ungainly heap, going face-first into the muck.

I’m shivering. Without even thinking, I curl up into a ball and try to somehow stay warm, somehow keep alight the small flame in the core of my being. There’s no sun here. My eyes are open, but all I can see is a half-light plane. A world filled with gradients of brown and black and gray. Especially gray. Above me, the sky is a gray, shapeless mass. The sun, a mere pinprick of lighter gray. In the valley, the sky was gray. But it was never dark. In the forest, the trees blocked the sun. But I was never cold. By the ocean, the sun was full and bright. Here, there’s nothing but the dank and cold of the marsh.

It’s silent again. The only sound is my shaking breath, jittering in and out from between my purple lips. The ground I’m lying on is a mixture of dirt and ice water. It gives the illusion of firm ground but, when any pressure is applied, it gives way and forms a murky puddle. Teeth chattering, I force myself to sit up. I can’t lie in a puddle. That’ll only
make things worse. Besides, I've heard that motion is one of the best ways to warm up. I need to keep moving. If I just lie here, I'll be dead in minutes. I'm that cold. It's frightening. To know that I could freeze to death here. That there's almost nothing I can do to stop it. That there's no one to help me. I scramble to my feet, snatch the stone up from where it's fallen in the mud nearby, and stumble forward. I start running again. But, while I was jogging smoothly before, now I'm lurching and tripping on myself.

There's almost no light to see by. The ground heaves up and down in unexpected rises and pits, threatening to twist my ankles. Send me back down to the mud. Leave me unable to move. Strangle me with the cold. I run faster. I can see my breath. It balloons in front of me in little fog banks of its own. I start looking all around me as I run. I need to find someplace where I can be warm. I need to find shelter. But there's only the marsh. The fog bank has expanded in all direction forever, so that the muddy plane goes on infinitely, receding into the wispy fog and clouds.

And then I hit the reeds. They start off low. An inch or so high, and thinly covering the ground. They're a burned yellow color. The color of dried bone. At about the width of my thumb, they're strong enough, even when they're low, to make running even more difficult. And as I move forward, they get taller. And taller. They grow closer together. Soon, I'm desperately scooping them out of my way. Pushing past the powerful stalks, pushing my way into their midst, squeezing between them, drowning in them. I keep tripping. It's impossible to find clear ground to place each foot. I stumble and fall again and again, each time getting soaked anew in the brown, muddy, ice water.

They're over my head now. Six feet. Seven feet. Some even go up as high as eight feet. The tall ones are as thick as my forearm, impossible to bend. They smash into me as I flee the cold. They push me down and don't let me get back up. They hold me down, hold me underwater. I can't breath. I can't fight them. I can't move forward. I feel like I'm dying.

And then I collapse. It's not a choice. My joints lock up and my muscles stop responding. My body isn't working. It's ignoring me. I fall into the mud, sandwiched between the fibrous reeds. The water spurts up from the ground, soaking me. Half my face is in the water, and I can feel the skin quickly going numb. I haven't been able to feel my feet for a long time now, and my hands are only distant pricks of pain. But I can still feel the stone. Somehow, even here, it's retained its warmth. It's not much, but I focus on it entirely. Even as the mud fills my mouth and washes over my tongue, I put all my remaining energy into feeling the warmth of the stone. I close my eyes. It doesn't makes much of a difference. I go from a brown and gray world to a black one. I'm so cold. My breathing slows down. The world gets quiet. Silent. Because now I'm not breathing at all. I can feel my lungs beginning to starve. It's excruciating. A slow, impending progression that I should be able to stop but I don't because I don't have the strength because my body isn't mine anymore and I'm too cold for thought and I'm too tired for reason and the world becomes farther and farther away.

Then I hear a noise. It's faint. It's barely there at all. But it makes its way to me, and I recognize it. It's a crackling sound. The sound of a fire.

All I needed was hope. Even a distant one. A reason to breathe. Because without hope, after a point, why bother? But I hear the fire. And I open my eyes. And I start to breathe again.

I claw my way off the ground, pushing myself up onto hands and knees. From here, I use one of the thicker reeds to pull myself up to a standing position. I spit. There's still mud
coating the inside of my mouth. And I’m shaking like never before. My wonderful green shirt, so warm before, is now only a waterlogged rag, weighing me down, draining me of heat. I stumble through the reeds. I feel blind. I follow my ears. Follow the sound. Get to the fire. I need the fire. I can see it in my mind’s eye, blazing away in a glory of light and heat. My movements turn violent and desperate. I’m thrashing against the reeds, fighting the cold that threatens to shut me down again. If I were to fall at this point, I don’t think I’d be able to lift myself back up. The reeds fight back. Harder than ever. They bar my way and claw at my legs. They bite and scratch, battering me with all their might.

But then they abruptly give way to a clearing, and I stumble out into a dirt ring surrounded on all sides by reeds twelve feet tall. The ground here is firm. Actual dirt, not mud. And in the middle of the clearing is a bonfire. It’s bigger and hotter and brighter than I could ever have dreamed, roaring up into the foggy sky. There’s the skeleton of a dead tree in one edge of the clearing, but other than this it’s just me and the fire. I walk toward the flames. I have no coordination at this point, my feet stumping over the ground. My knees hardly bend. As I get closer, I start to feel the heat of the fire radiating toward me. It gets warmer and warmer, starting to thaw the thick layer of ice that’s taken shape under my skin. The fire fills my vision, burning into my retina. I don’t care. This is bliss. All I want is to walk up to the fire and crawl right into it, roasting my entire body until the cold is completely gone. My heart breaks when I don’t get the chance. Because, from behind me, I hear a shout.

“What do you want!”

I jerk around. My fingers, still numb, lose their grip on the stone for the very first time. It tumbles to the ground and rolls away from me, continuing toward the fire. I’m too frightened to go after it. I try to see the speaker, but I can’t make out anything. My vision is still consumed by the afterimage of the beautiful, beautiful flames. All I can see is a shadowy figure a few feet away from me. I’m backing away now, fear coursing through my body. “I… I’m sorry,” I stammer, backing away more quickly now. It’s hard to talk. My lips are also numb. “I didn’t know.”

Then I turn and run away, racing back to the reeds. I plunge in, sprinting as fast as I can through the bone-colored sea. It’s so hard to move again. The reeds resist my every attempt, blocking me and slowing me down. My feet get caught up almost immediately. I fall forward, the ground charging at me, mouth gaping, teeth bared. I try to put my arms forward to break my fall, but they, too, are caught in the reeds. I turn my head to the side and close my eyes, waiting to fall into the mud.
I fall, smacking onto the floor with a groan. Mmm. I have a headache. My mind feels black. Uncomfortably blank. As if the inside of my skull has been cleaned out with an steel bristle brush. Clean, yes. Raw? Definitely.

With caution, I crack open my eyes. I moan again. The room is so bright. Why does it have to be so bright in here? And of course it doesn’t help that the room, every single last inch of it, is white. Everything’s white. The whole room, from top to bottom. The floor. The walls. The ceiling. The light fixture. The door. The bed. It’s all white. Clean, pure, perfect, sterile, complete, total, utter, absolute white. The color’s been removed, probably by the same person who’s been scrubbing around in my head. The thoroughness of each job is impressive. And, in both cases, painful.

I squint up at the bed. I’m lying on my stomach, one leg still half-heartedly clinging to the edge of the mattress. I have to twist my neck around to see this. I must have fallen off. Mmm. That’s humiliating. I don’t think I’ve ever fallen out of bed before. Granted, I’m not usually sedated, and I’ve never slept in this particular bed before, but still. It doesn’t seem like the kind of thing a capable person would do.

I heave myself up on one elbow, and, from there, to a sitting position with the side of the bed at my back. I let my neck lol back on my shoulders, squeezing my eyes shut tight against the blinding light that’s coming from above. Seriously. Whoever designed this room did not consider its effects on the newly-conscious. They could at least have dimmed the light. Would that have been so hard? After a moment of sitting, I force myself to stand up and then flop onto the bed. For all the faults of the room, the bed is soft. The mattress is deep. It feels lovely. There are sheets on it, too. Sheets and a pillow. In my last cell, all I had was a bench. Aiohn takes much better care of us. Even with its white walls and bright lights, Aiohn known how to take care for its citizens.

Still, a cell is a cell. This one’s clean and more comfortable than my last one. That’s good. I’ll take any improvements. But even so, I’d hoped that when I was free from the humans, I’d be free from everything. Apparently not.

I shouldn’t be surprised. What did I expect? Waltzing up to a Quarter of Aiohn’s soldiers, a human in tow, no bracelet to identify me, spouting off nonsense about keeping a human alive. A human! Imagine. It’s no wonder they drugged me. I don’t even want to think about what they did to Zach.

Zach. I crack open my eyes again, double checking to see if he’s in the room with me. No. I’m alone. I sit up slowly, holding my headache and trying to think. I need to find Zach. I need to talk to him. I need to explain what’s going on, what he needs to do. I need to make him understand. Sitting on the edge of the bed, curled forward at my waist, I start to wonder if I’ve made a big mistake. Maybe I should have left Zach alone. Left him in his cell. Kept him out of this mess. Sure, he’d still be in prison, but he’s just as much of a captive here. Maybe even more so. At the old prison, at least he wasn’t being asked to spy on anyone. At least he wasn’t being asked to betray everything he knows.

Of course, if he’d stayed, he’d be dead. I can still see the burning afterimages of the missiles. The whole building, disintegrating into rubble and ash. Anyone still inside is now dead. And the subfloors, the sub-subfloors, even if the missiles didn’t penetrate that deep, the residents would be trapped under a mountain of rock. If they didn’t die immediately,
they’ll soon suffocate or starve, if they haven’t already. They won’t be able to get out. And I
don’t think anyone’s going to be able to get in. By the time they’re running out of air, down
to their last bowl of gray mush, they might even envy the prisoners on the upper floors. At
least those ones died neatly.

Zach’s only breathing because I got him out. It doesn’t really matter what the cost is.
Keeping him alive is worth it. And if he doesn’t agree with me right now, I’m sure he’ll agree
with me later. He’ll be grateful. I know I’d be grateful.

I drop my head to my hands, resigning myself to my situation and trying to push
away thoughts of Zach. I’ll think of him later. I can’t do anything right now. I rub my
forehead with the pads of my thumbs, trying to massage away the dull thumping. Mmm. I
don’t usually get headaches. With a mother like Reyin, I’m usually pretty healthy. But this is
really something. I can’t seem to look past it. I try rubbing harder. From somewhere in the
room, I hear a soft mechanical humming. It’s a pretty sound, like a young voice getting
ready to sing. It’s quiet, though, and over soon. It must have come from some piece of
equipment behind the walls. I don’t give it much thought. Until I hear a clear voice speak
up.

“You’ll have to forgive him.”

I look up, startled, gazing blearily across the cell. The door’s open. That must have
been the humming I heard. Standing in its place is a tall figure, but my eyes can’t focus well
enough to see details. I think it’s female. She continues, sounding sympathetic.

“He didn’t know how much sedative to give you. You cleared it so quickly the first
time that he ended giving you more than twice the recommended dose. You’ve been out for
some time. How do you feel?”

I blink. It occurs to me that I don’t have to understand her words. They make sense.
They aren’t alien. This is the language I’ve spoken for my entire life. I feel a rush of
gratitude that I’m able to hear it again. “I’m fine,” I say. Or that’s what I try to say. My jaw is
sloshing around as I’m talking, and the words get a little garbled. I’m just proud that
anything came out at all. The figure tilts her head slightly, sympathetic.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” she says. I’m grateful that she keeps her voice soft. “It will
clear soon. I promise.” There’s something in the way she says it that makes me want to
trust her. She sounds so reassuring, so stable. This is Aiohn, I think. This is how they treat us.

I look at her again, and this time I can make out a bit more detail. The woman is
taller than I am by a few inches, and looks thin but strong. She’s wearing a neatly pressed
gray uniform, with two thick bands on the cuffs of her sleeves, one white, one dark blue.
Her face is beautiful. I wish I had a face like that. It’s elegant. Smart. Assured. Altered. That,
too. Everything I’m not. Her parents must have been very wealthy.

It’s her hair, though, that grabs my attention most. I’ve never seen anything like it.
This woman’s hair is pure, glowing silver. As in starlight-silver. The stuff that grabs light
and holds it, getting brighter and brighter until finally it figures out how to make light on its
own, shining bright from within. This woman’s hair is one of the most beautiful things I’ve
ever seen. There’s no way it’s natural. That must have been an extraordinarily expensive
alteration. I can’t even imagine who her parents must be. Her hair is also cut short, which is
strange. Other than on humans, I almost never see short hair. It’s just not fashionable. And I
know that if I had hair like that, I’d wear it long and loose, showing it off to the world. I
wonder why she cut it. The woman continues speaking.
“We identified you while you were out,” she explains. “We’re glad to see you alive, Void. We lost sight of you after Alaseel was attacked.” She points toward my wrist. “And we gave you a new bracelet, too. You’re safe now.” I look down at my left wrist. Sure enough, glinting from its place on my arm is a thin band of silver. It looks just like my old bracelet, the one I lost when I was captured. It’s the same pure shade as the woman’s hair, I notice. They’re both perfect and clean. I suddenly feel self-conscious, aware that I haven’t showered in months. I must stink. And how does my hair look right now? I don’t even want to know. Like moss, probably.

“Thank you,” I murmur. My headache’s still raging, but my jaw seems a bit more under control now. The woman nods. Then she glances off to one side. This is past the frame of the doorway, so I can’t see what she’s looking at. She starts talking again, addressing someone else.

“Sahlai, I need to finish the report. Can I trust you to take care of things here? I’m assigning Void to you.”

“Yes, Mahsahnai.” I hear the second voice now. It’s also female, but sounds younger than the first woman. It also sounds a little bit timid. As if working for the first woman is such a large responsibility that any imperfection is something to be worried about. I sympathize with this immediately. It makes sense. Mahsahnai. I know that title. I’ve never bothered to memorize the exact order of the chain of command, but I know that Mahsahnai is pretty far up there. If I worked for someone like that, I’m want to be perfect, too. The woman looks back at me briefly, then returns to her aid.

“I’ll let you know when I have a free moment,” she says. She’s lowered her voice slightly, but not too much. She’s not trying to hide anything from me. I’m just not part of this conversation, that’s all. “I’ll want to talk to her again.”

“Yes, Mahsahnai.” The woman purses her lips slightly, considering whoever she’s addressing. She doesn’t seem completely satisfied. But she doesn’t comment on anything, and returns her focus to me.

“I’ll see you again later, Void. Sahlai will help you get settled in.” The woman pauses, then adds, “Welcome back to Aiohn.” I try nodding, trying to show that I’m grateful. Even though I don’t do it very well, I think the woman understands because she nods back. Then she turns away and walks down the hallway.

There’s a short moment of stillness. Then the second woman, Sahlai, walks into the frame of the doorway. She’s looking down the hall, after the disappearing back of her superior. I was right when I thought that her voice sounded young. Sahlai looks even younger than I am. Still, she’s tall, as tall as the first woman. And she’s more beautiful than I could ever hope to be. There’s an elegance about her that’s only slightly dimmed by the uncertain way in which she moves. Looking at her face, I’m struck by the similarities between her and the Mahsahnai. Of course, this woman’s hair - also cut short - is a soft brown. That’s a big difference. But her face is so alike to the one I just saw. It’s uncanny.

Sahlai is also wearing a uniform. There’s only one band on the end of her sleeves, a blue one. Lower rank. That makes sense. Sahlai looks at me now. “All right,” she says finally. I can tell that she’s trying to sound authoritative, but she only manages to sound apologetic. “Do you think you can walk?”

No, not really. Not with a headache like this, the bright lights, the world. But I bet I can, anyway. And I like the idea of getting out of this cell. No matter how much of an improvement it is over my last one, I still want out. Carefully, I ease myself onto my feet. As
I straighten up, I’m waiting for the floor to turn to jelly. It stays surprisingly stable. The Mahsahnai was right; I’m clearing the sedative quickly.

Encouraged, I take a few steps toward the hallway. I have to squint, but I’m able to keep my eyes open. The hallway is white, like the cell. Floor, walls, ceiling. There are doors at regular intervals, each one the face of a cell. But, all things considered, this doesn’t seem to me like a bad place. At least it’s clean.

I’m in the hall now, hunching my shoulders against the light and my pounding headache. Sahlai nods encouragingly, then turns around and starts walking down the hallway. “This way,” she says. I don’t move. I’m thinking. Sahlai notices after a few steps that I’m not behind her, and turns back around.

“There was a human with me,” I say. I do my best to keep my words in order. My jaw’s definitely warming up, but speech is still a bit of a chore. “Where is he? I want to see him.”

Normally, I’d never be so direct. Rude, almost. But I have a headache, and etiquette doesn’t seem quite as important right now. Also, it helps that I don’t feel inferior to Sahlai. Even with her uniform and rank, she doesn’t strike me as someone I have to obey. At least now now. Not while my head’s pounding. Sahlai does something with her mouth, maybe biting the inside of her lip. Then she shakes her head. “I’m sorry,” she says. “I can’t authorize that.” Listening to this, I’m surprised to hear that she sounds genuinely sorry. Usually people just say it as an expression. She goes on. “But I’m sure that the Mahsahnai will be able to schedule something. You’ll be meeting with her later today. You can ask her then?” This last part sounds more like a question than anything else. I grunt, and give a shallow nod. I suppose that will have to be a good enough answer. I didn’t really expect to see Zach right away. Just thought I’d ask. Sahlai gestures politely down the hallway. “Could you come this way, please?”

I nod again, and we slowly start off. As we go, I gradually begin to feel more and more confident about how I put down my feet. Walking’s getting easier. That’s good. But the light’s aren’t getting any dimmer.

Eventually, we come to the end of the hallway, where it opens up into a mid-sized room. There are counters here, with a few workers standing behind them. They’re busy navigating through holos, but look up as we pass. Each of the workers is wearing a uniform that’s similar to Sahlai’s, except that theirs are white. Like the room. All of them have their hair cut short. It’s strange. I can’t imagine why.

Sahlai leads me to the far end of the room. There are two elevators here, and Sahlai touches her bracelet against a small scanner built into the wall. The scanner is a white ring surrounding a luminescent blue circle, in total a few inches wide. The scanner flashes and a thin holo appears. She selects one of the many options. The holo fades, and we wait for one of the elevators to arrive. It isn’t a long wait. The door on the left soon hums open, making the same sound as the cell door. It’s pretty. Sahlai and I step inside. The elevator feels strangely roomy, even though it can’t be all that large. Like everything else here, it’s made with style in mind.

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Only the floor here is white, with the walls and ceiling patterned a clean gray. The door hums closed, and we start to move. For several seconds, there’s only quiet in the elevator. I glance briefly over at Sahlai. She looks uncomfortable. She’s staring straight ahead. I feel the urge to say something. To talk. I’ve been alone for a few weeks. A conversation is overdue. But I don’t know if it would be polite. Mentally, I shrug. I don’t
care enough. "How long have you worked for the Mahsahnai?" I ask. Sahlai looks at me, a little surprised.

"Hm? Ah, almost a year now." She nods, but doesn’t elaborate. I try again.

"What did you do before that?"

"I was in training." Again, Sahlai politely but awkwardly answers the bare minimum of my question. I’m a little bit disappointed. Sahlai doesn’t seem like a bad person. And I really do want to talk, no matter how bad my headache is. I try to think of another question. I have hundreds, but I throw most of them away immediately. These are questions about where I am, how I got here, how Zach is. Something tells me that Sahlai won’t know the answers, so no conversation is happening there. I do have one question, though. It’s a bit rude, but, again, I’m feeling bold right now.


Sahlai’s face clears, and she nods again. "I’m her sister," she says. "We come from a large family. Most of us end up looking like Tsan."

This peaks my interest for several reasons. First, large families are rare. Alterations are so expensive that most couples can only afford one or two children, three at most. Even Reyin’s parents could only pay to have four. But there’s something else that catches my attention here, too. "Her name is Tsan?"

Sahlai begins to nod, then gives her head a shake. "Mahsahnai Tsan. Sorry. She doesn’t like it when I drop her title."

"But you’re her sister."

Sahlai shrugs. "She still doesn’t like it." She looks forward again, staring at the closed elevator doors. I study the side of her head. I didn’t see this back in the cell, but now that I’m closer I notice that there are a few shining silver hairs interspersed among the rest of her soft brown locks. It looks nice. It also explains why her hair is brown, an unfashionable color. I’d wondered why someone so clearly altered would have brown hair. But it looks like it’s just a temporary stage as the real hair comes in. In a few years, Sahlai’s hair will be as radiant as her sister’s. It reminds me again of how astonishingly wealthy her family must be.

"Who are your parents?" I ask. Sahlai looks at me, brow slightly wrinkled.

"I’m sorry?" This time she doesn’t sound sorry at all. Just polite and uncomfortable. I decide to push anyway.

"Your parents," I ask. "Who are they? Not many families are so big." This isn’t the real reason I’m asking, but it’s close enough that I don’t consider it a lie. Sahlai shrugs again. Like everything she does, it’s an elegant gesture with a splash of awkwardness.

"Well, I have a big family," she says. It’s not an answer. And she’s looking forward again, so it’s pretty clear that she isn’t going to explain any further. I guess that’s all right. I shouldn’t be prying, anyway.

The elevator bobs to a halt and the doors hum open. Sahlai leads me out into another long hallway. The floors are, as always, pristine and white. The walls and ceiling are an off-gray, with maybe a touch of red mixed in. We start walking. I’m getting better at this, with my legs actually ending up where I want them. Most of the hallway is blank, but there are large double doors every now and then, a plaque next to them block lettering, spelling out a series of letters and numbers. I stare at the first few that I pass. I can read
them. It’s like magic. Symbols and letters actually create sounds in my head, real and understandable. Magic.

“You’ll be staying in here.” I look around, and see Sahlai standing by one of the pairs of double doors. She pushes one door open and gestures inside. I walk tentatively forward, stopping at the threshold. Sahlai continues. “This is usually where the Standard Troopers are housed, but we aren’t carrying any right now. You have the place to yourself. You can have any bunk that you want.”

It sounds welcoming, on the face of it. Unfortunately, the room is anything but. A warehouse. That’s the only way to describe it. A warehouse for bunk beds. The room is massive, at least a hundred twenty-eight feet wide and two hundred fifty-six feet deep. There are no columns here to hold up the ceiling, just row upon row of empty bunk beds. Everything’s arranged in a perfect grid. I can see all the way down the canyons between the bunks to the far wall. All it is is a giant, empty room for sleeping and nothing else. The harsh overhead lights don’t help the mood. They make it all feel sterilized.

“There’s a bag of standard equipment under each of them,” Sahlai says, looking around at the bunks. “You can take one of these. It’ll have a few changes of clothes in it.” Here her eyes dart briefly down to the jumpsuit I’m still wearing, shouting its neon orange shriek. And probably stinking from a mile away. I can’t tell anymore, but it looks as though she can. It doesn’t make me feel any better about myself. And what she says next doesn’t help, either. “The restroom is down that way, so you can take a shower if you want.” Sahlai points down the hall to the right. “The mess hall’s down that way, too.”

I nod. I’m only half-listening at this point. Mostly, I’m looking around at the warehouse and wondering if I’ll ever want to go in. Sahlai waits a moment for a response, then gives up. She tells me she’ll be back later. Then she leaves, heading back in the direction of the elevator. I hear the sound of her boots on the hard floor echo in the huge, empty room. No, I think. No, I definitely don’t want to go in there. But looking around, the hallway is just as empty. There’s nothing for me out here. Inside, Sahlai said there will be fresh clothes. That doesn’t sound so bad.

I try to hold this image in my head as, carefully, I step into the warehouse, walking around the edge, almost touching the wall. I look down each of the rows as I pass. The room is so huge that the bunks appear to get smaller as they retreat toward the far end. The room is packed tight with the bunks, but I’ve never been in a place so abandoned. When I reach the corner of the room, I turn with the wall, keeping along next to it. But the bunks are placed against the wall here, and I’m shuffled into one of the canyons. I keep going until I get to the very back of the room. I chose a bunk in the corner. Nothing feels sheltered in here, but this one is the most secluded. Turning around, I stare at the forest of bedposts. The bunks are identical, with strong metal frames and a thin mattress. They’re all double-deckers. A ladder at the foot climbs to the top. I chose the bottom. I sit down on the mattress, careful not to smash my head on the upper level. My headache’s a little bit better already, but a cracked skull is the last thing I’m looking for. I feel the mattress compress a few inches. I put my hands in my lap, holding my legs together and glancing around at the gray bunks that surround me. It’s amazingly quiet. I can barely even hear the air ducts, though I can smell the way this air’s been filtered.

I look down. The floor is white. Of course it is. All the floors are white here. I guess it’s no surprise. Aoihn’s always had a love for white floors. I only ever went into a few government buildings back in Alaseel - the Registration Office, the Office of Education, to
name two of them - and they all had perfectly white floors. Reyin explained it to me once. She said that it’s meant to be a show of power, a demonstration of wealth. She said that in her parents’ house, all the floors were white. She said she couldn’t stand how blank it was. But that was the point. Pure white floors are hard to maintain, requiring near-constant cleaning. Only the truly wealthy can afford that. White floors are a way of displaying power. Reyin talked about a thick white carpet that her father had placed right in front of the doorway, to be used as a mat. It was cleaned every other day, she said. It was replaced altogether once a month. I can hardly imagine that kind of wealth. But here I am in a place where every floor will show grime like a mirror, yet everything is somehow kept spotless. Aiohn will never stop amazing me.

I bend forward at the waist and peer under the bunk. As promised, there are two large drawstring sacks, about the color of the elevator walls. I reach under and drag one out. I heave it onto the bed next to me, dumping its contents onto the mattress with a few rough shakes. A jumble of fabric comes out, and I slowly sort through it. There are two complete uniforms here. Gray, no bands on the cuffs. There’s also a pillowcase, to go on the small pillow lying at one end of the bunk. There are sheets here, too, a mattress cover, a blanket. There’s even a pair of boots. I grab these and one of the uniforms and stand up. Retracing my path, I exit the warehouse. The door swings shut with a soft click behind me.

In the hallway, I turn right, following Sahlai’s directions. After a few blank double doors, I find one pair that’s marked by a large, solid black circle. Restroom. Found it. I push my way through, stepping into long, narrow room with a strip of lights along the ceiling and a white tile floor. I move forward, past a line of sinks one one side and a row of stalls on the other. The sinks have mirrors above them. I flinch as I see my reflection. Dtōk. I look horrible. Entranced, I step toward one of the mirrors, staring at the rotting mess that’s looking back at me. Her hair is crusty with grime, and there are lines of lighter skin poking through on her face and neck, etching the spots where her skin wrinkles. Everywhere else is covered with filth. And the jumpsuit is just about the dirtiest thing I’ve ever seen. And orange. Why orange? Why did they have to make it orange? Why not dark green, or even just black? It’s hideous. I’m hideous. There was a small group of people back in Alaseel that I always crossed the street to avoid. These were the poorest of the poor, way below Estas’s family, even. Normally, Aiohn looks after its citizens, sheltering us and providing for us. But not if we’ve done something wrong. The people I saw had all committed some crime, forfeiting government assistance. I look like one of them. I turn away, feeling slightly nauseated. I need a shower.

With a renewed sense of purpose, I walk quickly down the restroom, toward where the shower closets are kept. Finally, near the end of the room, I come to my destination. They might not look like much to someone else. But to me, the row of shower closets is gorgeous. Each is a copy of its neighbor, a light gray wall stretching from the floor below to the ceiling above. At about four feet wide, the closest are more than large enough to inspire a sense of luxury. Their doors stand open, beckoning inward. I can’t wait.

I step through the closest door, swinging it shut and bolting it behind me. There’s a step down inside the door. This is the shower pit proper. There are also three waterproof cupboards, two on the left side of the door, and one of the right. I open them up. The first two are empty, but the third holds a stack of dry, clean towels. I place the uniform and boots in the first empty one. Then I strip down, peeling away the jumpsuit and soft shoes. It’s the first time I’ve taken off the jumpsuit in weeks. When I started off in the prison, I
gave myself a sponge bath in the sink every few days. I could never get myself truly clean, though, and I hated the idea of taking off my clothes in front of a door that could open at any time. I stopped after a while. But in here, I’m delighted to rid myself of the garment. I bunch it up, stuffing it into the second cupboard. I’ll find a place to throw it out later. I close all three of the cupboard doors, pushing the rubber seals into place.

This done, I turn my attention to the shower itself. It looks different from the one I had at home. There, the showerhead was a circular pad mounted on the ceiling. It released big fat droplets of water, and made every shower feel like a tropical rainstorm. This was one of the few things in the house that Reyin demanded be a little luxurious. She didn’t agree with her parents on much, but shower design was certainly one of these areas. The showerhead I’m looking at here is more akin to a sieve. Bulky. Inelegant. Still, it’s probably much more efficient than the pad.

On the wall below it, at about chest-height, is a simple dial with colored markings. The colors range from pale blue to a rosy pink. I turn the dial all the way to hot, releasing a torrent of water that comes streaming out of the shower head and striking me in the face. I squeeze my eyes shut and wince, turning my head to the side with a cough. But the water is already warm, and I can’t bring myself to move farther away. Slowly, I stop wincing. The muscles in my face - in my entire body - relax, and I feel soothed. The water is incredible.

I turn around in a circle, not scrubbing yet, just enjoying long-awaited sensation. I hadn’t realized until just now how badly I’ve wanted to be clean. I haven’t felt clean in a long time. Not since Alaseel was attacked. This water feels as though it could wash everything away. Small, shamefully pleasureable bubbles pop under my skin wherever the water hits. It feels as though the old skin is being taken clean off, leaving me with something new.

I glance down at the shower drain. The water running toward it is dark and oily, with little black specks that might be the final remnants of scabs. The water’s giving me a fresh body. I wonder how I could ever have lived without showers. Without cleanliness. How could I still be myself while coated in filth?

I stand here until the water shuts off. It does it on its own. There must be an internal timer, like there was for the sink back in the prison. My time’s up. But I’m not done. I’ve barely even started. I grab the dial and give it another turn. Nothing happens. I frown, then shrug. No big deal. I’ve dealt with water rationing before. In Alaseel, there’d be a city-wide emergency drill every few years to test backup systems. This would include automatic limits being put in place on the amount of water each household item could use. I learned pretty quickly that there’s an easy way to get around the limits for showers. I walk over to the door of the shower closet, unlatch it, open it a few inches, then close it again. Relatching it, I walk back to the dial. I give it another turn. Sure enough, the water starts back up. I grin. The flow washes over me, and I marvel at the wondrous liquid. I imagine it wiping away more than just the grim and the sweat, the scabs and the dust. I imagine it wiping away the horror, as well, and everything else that’s splattered my skin. All it leaves is myself.

I continue standing here for a long time, renewing the water at regular intervals, and being renewed in turn. It even takes the last of my headache away. I start scrubbing eventually, using soap from a dispenser on one of the walls. I continue scrubbing until I hear my hand squeaking over my skin. I leave my hair for last, massaging my scalp with my fingertips. It takes a while to get all the grease out, but I stick with it until my hair feels
smooth and even. I stay under the water until it turns off again. Then, reluctantly, I use one of the towels to dry off. I put on the uniform. It’s a little stiff. It’s about my size, though, and feels clean, so I’m not going to complain. I exit the shower closet. There’s a basket on one wall of the restroom, into which I drop the wet towel. I also throw the jumpsuit in there. I figure that someone else can get rid of it. I don’t want to touch it any longer.

Combing my hair back with my fingers, I walk up to one of the mirrors, examining my body again. It’s like I’m a whole new person. My eyes are the same - slightly bloodshot - but the rest of my body looks neatly ordered. This is helped by the uniform, which seems to actively resist creases and folds. But mostly the change comes from the fact that I no longer look like a person who recently crawled from a rubbish heap. I’m clean. Compared with my recent self, I look almost beautiful. I savor this observation. It’s not often that I approve of my appearance. And even now I find myself casting around for a comb, not wanting to leave the room with my hair unbrushed. I rake it back with my fingers a few more times. It’ll have to do. I feel a bit ashamed, but also very proud.

I leave the room, turning onto the hallway and walking back toward the warehouse. My new boots *clack* against the white floor. The echoing sound makes me feel self-conscious. They’re nice boots; tall, thick, and well-made. They’re not a perfect fit, but they’re so close to my size that I don’t much care. I’m back at the double doors now, and push through them into the array of gray bunks, standing like a collection of hoodoos.

Back at my mattress, I survey the jumble of clothing and sheets I left behind. I sort through it more carefully now, neatly folding the extra uniforms. I slide these into the sack. Then, sheets in hand, I make the mattress into a bed. At home, back in Alaseel, I always kept my bed neatly tucked. Each sheet had to go on in a certain order, layering up in a predetermined and never-changing fashion. I liked having this part of my room stay neat. The rest of my room might devolve into an unmanageable mess, especially when schoolwork was heating up. But I made sure that I was always satisfied with where I slept. I try to do the same thing here. It’s a bit harder. The sheets are courser, don’t look quite as nice, and there aren’t as many of them as I’m used to. But I don’t mind. I’ve spent the past several months sleeping on a bench. The act of tidying up my living space feels luxurious.

When I’m done, and have smoothed out the last of the folds on the top sheet, I step back. It looks good. No need for shame here. As a final touch, I slide the sack of uniforms back under the bunk to where I found it. Now everything’s where it should be. I stand for another moment in the dead quiet of the warehouse, staring at the made bed, appreciating it. Then I look around and feel the same chill as when I first came in here. The warehouse is so empty. I wish I weren’t alone.

As if in response, there’s a knock on the door and I see it open through the forest of posts supporting the upper bunks. Sahlah steps inside. She peers around, searching for me. It’s hard to see through all these bunks. I start walking toward her. She must hear me coming, because she waits patiently until I appear in one of the aisles. I see her eyebrows go up slightly. It reminds me of my father. “You look different,” she says. Her voice rings between the walls of the warehouse. I don’t answer. “The Mahsahnai would like to talk to you now,” she adds. I nod to myself. I was in the shower for so long that it could easily be an hour or two later. I follow Sahlah into the hallway, and then toward the elevators. Soon, I find myself standing in front of a strong gray door, a plaque to one side. *Mahsahnai Tsan.*
Chapter Eighteen

*Tap-tap.* Sahlai knocks lightly on the door with one knuckle. I notice how she waits for a reply before turning the handle. Back at the door to the warehouse, she just pushed right in. The answer comes quickly here, and Sahlai opens the door. “Mahsahnai,” she says. “Void is here to see you.”

She says this without actually entering the room. She stands right outside it, carefully staying an inch away from the threshold. I hear Tsan reply from inside. “Thank you, Sahlai. Send her in. You may wait outside. I’m sure this won’t take long.” Sahlai bobs her head, turning to me and gesturing for me to enter. I walk through the doorway.

Tsan’s office larger than I’d expected, standing at least twenty feet wide by twenty-eight feet deep. There are cabinets and thin tables against the walls. On one of the tables sits a dark blue pot with a short plant growing out of it. It has a thick, squarish stem and maroon leaves. It’s taken over the entire pot. There are shoots coming up all over the place. I recognize it as a weed. It reminds me of how, many years ago, my father had tried to maintain a small garden for a while, but had eventually given up. One of the reasons was this plant. No matter how many times he took it out, it always came roaring back with a vengeance. He even tried poisoning it. It just wouldn’t die. I can’t imagine why anyone would be growing it on purpose.

I look around to the center of the room, where Tsan is sitting behind a wooden desk. She glances at the plant, and I know she saw me staring at it. I’m not sure why, but I feel almost guilty of something. The Mahsahnai points to a chair in front of her desk. “Void. It’s good to see you again. Please have a seat.”

I nod and quickly sit down. I put my hands on my thighs, then, in a moment of uncertainty, fold them in my lap. Tsan looks at me, hair gleaming in the overhead light. Unlike the rest of this place, the light in Tsan’s office looks natural, like sunlight. If possible, it makes her hair even more radiant. I think of my own hair, brown, wet, and uncombed. I try sitting up straighter to compensate. Tsan takes a breath in. “Thank you for coming,” she says. “I want to repeat how happy I am to see you safe.” I nod again. I don’t have anything to say. She continues. “I hope you’ll make yourself feel at home here.”

“Where am I?” I blurt. Inside, I cringe. I don’t want to be rude to the Mahsahnai. But Tsan doesn’t look offended, and calmly answers.

“You are onboard the Seeker. This is my ship. The Seeker is a Sprinter-class warship, one of the best in Aiohn’s fleet. Our job is to pursue carefully selected targets. As Mahsahnai, I not only command the Seeker, but am also a Coordinator of Non-Standard Operations.” She pauses, then adds, “We’re glad to have you with us.”

I only distantly hear this last part. I’m stuck on the bit where she mentioned Non-Standard Operations. I’ve heard this term before. It’s mentioned on the news every now and then, whenever some internal plot is foiled or a group of dissidents is located. From what I’ve gathered, Non-Standard Operations is a catch-all term for everything Aiohn does behind the scenes to keep the Empire running smoothly. This could include simple data collection, but extends all the way to the targeted assassination of “dangerous citizens.” I understand, of course how vital Non-Standard Operations must be to the health of Aiohn. But if I felt nervous before, it’s nothing compared to how I feel now. I nod again, trying to
cover this feeling up. Tsan stares at me for a moment. Then she sniffs the air and continues speaking, her voice as calm and trustworthy as always.

“Of course, there are some people - misguided - who doubt your loyalty to Aiohn.”

“What?” I feel my left ear twitch. Inside my chest, the vague sense of nervousness changes, forming a hard bubble of anxiety. Me? Disloyal? Never! Who could think that? This sounds like bad news. I start to say something more, defending myself, but Tsan raises her hand to hold me off.

“They’re not without reason,” she says. “They have records of you leaving Alaseel just before the attack, and not returning until after it’s over. Then their records end. Their records pick back up several months later when you appear in a human compound, running loose with a rifle in your hand and with a human in tow. It doesn’t look good to them, Void. It looks as though you’ve betrayed Aiohn.”

“But that’s not true!” I can hardly believe my ears. This is such an unfair misrepresentation of what happened. “I can explain all of that!” I say, desperate to correct things. “I’m completely loyal! I would never betray Aiohn!”

“I know.” Tsan holds up her hand, cutting me off again. “I know you’re loyal. My records are more complete than theirs are. That’s why you’re still alive.” I blink, mouth hanging slightly open. I don’t know if I should be comforted by that last comment or terrified by it. Both, I guess. The Mahsahnai continues. “Their records only include the official reports of your locations and activities. But in Non-Standard Operations, we can look at the broader picture.” She pauses, looking at me again, her head at a bit of a tilt this time. “I was very impressed by what you did in the forest.”

She says it quietly, but to me it seems to echo forever. I close my mouth and pull back a little into the chair. Tsan breaks eye contact with me, looking over to a small pad built into the surface of her desk. She slides her palm over it, then lifts her hand vertically upwards. The holo pad comes to life, projecting a menu of options for the Mahsahnai to choose from. Her hand moves through the air, directing the holo with smooth, graceful movements. It only takes a few seconds for Tsan to find what she’s looking for. She leans back as the holo expands, spilling over the desk and filling the air around us. The room’s overhead light dims.

It takes my eyes a moment to adjust, but then I find myself in the upper branches of a tree, staring down into a darkened forest. I feel the pit of my stomach drop as I see a figure - a human - standing down below, looking out into the trees. The human is wearing a green flight suit, and is carrying a large firearm. A couple of seconds pass, in which the human continues to keep watch. Then a second figure enters image, moving slowly and carefully over the ground. I can tell that the holo has sound to it, because I hear the wind overhead and the creaking of the tree’s branches, along with the soft breathing of the human. But I don’t hear this second figure at all. Neither does the human. It doesn’t react, even when the figure is standing directly behind it. The figure pauses for a moment. I close my eyes. I hear the rustle of fabric followed by the crisp cracking sound, but I choose not to watch this time. I’ve already been through it once. When I open my eyes again, the human is on the ground, and I see myself placing the weapon on its chest. I see myself stand up, wiping my right palm on my pants. Then I see myself moving off, and the holo ends. The lights come back on in Tsan’s office. She’s staring at me.

“I’m very impressed, Void,” she says. “You left the weapon behind. Most people would have taken it with them. But you realized that you wouldn’t be able to use it without
alerting the rest of the humans. That’s smart. If all of our soldiers could do that well without any training, this war would be over in four months.” Then she turns her attention back to the holo pad. “One more,” she says. I look down at my lap. Concentrate on my hands. The holo expands once more, reaching out and surrounding me.

I’m looking down from the top of a tree again, but this time I’m surveying a clearing in the forest. It has a rocky floor, mostly devoid of plant life, save for a few weeds. Over in one corner is a group of humans sitting around a small lantern. After a moment, another human walks over to join them, and they talk briefly. I hear the words, but don’t translate them into Ohnieil. The newcomer claps its hands together, saying something and looking around at the others. Before any of them can respond, I hear an explosion, and the human is knocked to the ground, clutching at a wound on its right shoulder. More shots follow, and I see the figure from the last holo advancing over the rocky ground, firing into the group as it goes. Before they can react, two more of the humans are on the dirt, bleeding. One of them looks dead already. The rest of the humans skatter, running for the cover of the trees. The figure keeps firing. Only one of the humans makes it out of the clearing, and the figure sprints after it, tossing the now-empty gun to one side. The two crash into the forest and out of sight. The holo abruptly ends.

“I’m sure you know the rest,” Tsan says. I stare at the empty air. I’m nauseated. I swallow, feeling a familiar gel starting to cover the inside of my throat. Tsan continues. “Because of this footage, I know without a doubt that you are a loyal citizen.” She pauses. “What I don’t know is why you lied to us.”

I hear this as if in a stupor. “Lied to you.”

“What I don’t know is why you lied to us.”

“I didn’t lie,” I say. “He will work for you. I just need to talk to him.” I pinch the bridge of my nose, hating the fact that I can’t seem to pull my thoughts together.

Tsan considers me, unconvinced. “Mmm. I’ve talked to it. It seems very firm. It keeps going on about how it doesn’t want to betray its species. Of all the humans you could have chosen, you had to bring us the one with a sense of morality.”

“He will work for you,” I say again. I don’t know exactly where Tsan is going with that last comment, but it doesn’t sound good. I want Zach to be safe. I feel an old sense of panicky despair as I’m reminded that this is not going the way I’d planned. “I promise. He just needs things explained to him.”

“It knows what it’s up against,” Tsan says quickly. “We’ve made it clear that if it can’t be useful, we’ll have to put it down. It doesn’t seem to care. You lied.”

I shake my head. “No. Let me talk to him. Let me change his mind. I can do it.” I almost sound like I’m begging. It’s humiliating, but I don’t know if I care. All I want is to have done the right thing. That’s worth a little begging, isn’t it?

The Mahsahnai looks across the desk at me. She doesn’t say anything for a moment, weighing her options, deciding whether or not she believes me. She enunciates, “It would be most appreciated if you could.”

“I can. Just give me a chance.”

“Huh.” She doesn’t sound convinced. I do my best to look trustworthy. A good, loyal citizen, willing to do anything for Aiohn. Even though she doesn’t react, I can tell that Tsan
isn't buying it. She isn't stupid, after all. Tsan leans forward, putting her forearms on the desk. "I want to make sure that you and I understand each other," she says. "The human is valuable to me. More than you know." She looks down for half a second, collecting her thoughts. "Aiohn is at war. We've been at war for a long time, and it's not going to end on its own. We need to finish this. Quickly. Now, I know some generals..." She leans back in her chair. "...Who believe that all we need are bigger weapons or better soldiers. And I agree, those would help. But strategies of that nature merely win battles. Only superior information can win the war. We need informants. We need humans, like your friend, who can infiltrate the enemy's ranks and tell us where to bomb and where to send our troops. Unfortunately, informants are extremely hard to come by. If you were able to convince the human to work with us, you would be making a strong contribution to the war effort. Do you understand?"

"Yes. Absolutely." I nod my head, sitting up as straight as I can. Good. Loyal. Tsan still doesn't look convinced.

"Then I'm sure you'll make every effort," she says, "to bring it around to see our point of view."

"Yes. I will."

"Mmm." Tsan makes a noncommittal sound, similar to a low hum. I start wondering what else I could do to make her trust me. I consider saying something about how everything I did in the forest was to help Aiohn. Some impassioned speech about how Aiohn inspired me to defend my city, striking a blow against the humans even as they assumed victory. But I've already decided that Tsan isn't stupid. And I'm not that good a liar. She'd see right through me. Tsan looks at me for a long time without speaking. Then, finally, she wets her lips and takes a deep breath. "I've been at this job for a long time, Void. And in my experience, people are less motivated to help others than they are to help themselves. So let me give you this additional incentive." I hear this, and feel my stomach drop down a notch. This doesn't sound good at all. The Mahsahnai continues. "When we gave you your new bracelet, we reactivated your Citizen Profile. It had been taken down when you were presumed dead. And when we put it back up, the system automatically entered you into all the draft drawings that you had missed. In one of these drawings, your number came up. You have been drafted. Congratulations."

I blink. I didn't hear that right. There's a mistake somewhere. "What?"

"You've been drafted," Tsan repeats, saying it in the exact same tone as before. Flat, even. No inflection. No emotion. "You are now part of Aiohn's military. Congratulations. It's an honor to serve the Empire."

"That's not possible." I say it complete conviction. I know I'm right. It isn't possible. Tsan looks at me. For some reason, I find this infuriating. "No, it's not!" I say. "I'm not drafted! I'm underaged! You can't draft me."

Across the desk, I see the Mahsahnai's face harden slightly. "You were underaged," she says. "But the minimum draft age was lowered almost three weeks ago. Now you qualify."

"You can't do that!" I shout. This is ridiculous. I don't care how rude I'm being. "You can't just lower the minimum age! It's the minimum!"

"Aiohn is in crisis, Void." Tsan glares at me, her eyes stony. Finally there's some emotion in her voice. It's just a flicker, but it's enough. I'm almost glad to hear it. Almost. I suddenly like the idea of Tsan getting upset. Anything to put a crack in her plaster-perfect
exterior. But in practice, hearing this small hint of emotion is only intimidating. Tsan sounds furious. She’s doing a practiced job of containing it, but there’s the sense that it could be unleashed at any moment. I wouldn’t want to be in the room if that happened. She doesn’t like being talked back to, I guess. “This war is taking all we have. We can do whatever it takes to win. We will do whatever it takes to win. And if that includes risking a few lives, we will be more than happy to oblige. You’ve been drafted. Accept it.” Tsan continues to glare at me, now in silence. I realize that my hands are clenched on my knees, pulling on the fabric of my uniform. I don’t care if it rips. “Now.” From her voice, Tsan makes it clear that she’s moving on. “You are assigned to be trained as a Standard Trooper. But because of the promise you have shown, I am willing to make you a Non-Standard Operator instead.”

Without thinking about it, I reach my hand up and start massaging the tip of my left ear. Pressing it between the pads of my fingers. Rubbing it. Bending it. I don’t understand any of this. This isn’t making sense. I’m still having trouble believing that this is happening at all. How could I be drafted? I can’t be drafted. I can’t. I’m not. I am. Non-Standard Operator. Eventually, I swallow. “Why would I want that?”

“Standard Troopers have a life expectancy of about a year and a half once they enter the field,” Tsan answers. Again, her words is devoid of any inflection or emotion. How quickly she steadies herself. Far more quickly than I ever could. “Non-Standard Operators, on the other hand, have a life expectancy of over three years.” She pauses. Then I see her face soften, becoming kinder and more gentle. But I don’t see it like this. I just see it as a different mask. “I’m trying to help you,” she says quietly.

I shake my head, letting go of my ear. My hand falls back to my lap. “It doesn’t feel that way.”

Tsan’s face hardens back up. She must have decided that the new mask wasn’t working. Better to just drop it. “I can’t change the draft,” she states. “You’re in the military now, whether you like it or not. I’m offering you a position where you might be a little safer. Someone else might be grateful for this.” This is the last thing I want to hear right now. An admonishment. I’m not going to feel guilty for prizing my life. For fearing death. For resisting the draft. I refuse to feel guilty. All the same, I’m not an idiot. A death sentence three years away is infinitely preferable to one a year and a half away. I’d do anything to improve my chances. “All you have to do,” Tsan says, “is convince the human to work with us. Can you do that?”

“Yes.” My jaw feels tight. I wonder if I’m gritting my teeth.

“Good.” Tsan doesn’t clap her hands, but she might as well do. Subject closed. “I’ll arrange a meeting between the two of you tomorrow morning, then. Is there anything else you’d like to discuss?”

“No.”

“Then I think we’re done here. Please close the door after you leave. It has a bad habit of sticking open.” The Mahsahnai nods past me to the exit. I blink. That was abrupt. After a moment of hesitation, I stand up from the chair and start walking toward the door. I’m just reaching for the handle when I hear her behind me. “Ah, and Void?” I look over my shoulder. “Those statistics on life expectancy are sensitive information. I’d appreciate it if you didn’t repeat them outside this room.”

I blink again. Then I nod, dumb. I feel stunned. I open the door and step out into the hallway, pulling the door shut behind me until I hear the latch click into place. I stand there.
For some reason, the gray wall of the hallway is fascinating to me. I stare at it. I’m not sure what else to do.

In my peripheral vision, I see a figure moving toward me. I turn my head and see Sahlai. She half smiles at me. Friendly. “How did it go?” she asks.

I stare at her with the same dazed intensity that I used on the wall. “I’m drafted.” My voice is hollow. Sahlai’s eyebrows go up slightly.

“Ah? Congratulations! It’s an honor to serve Aiohn.”

I continue to stare. I’m reminded now that Sahlai is Tsan’s sister. Sometimes the similarities are hard to spot. Not now. Now, the silver strands poking through Sahlai’s brown hair seem to stand out like stars against a black sky. I don’t respond. I just stare. Quickly, Sahlai regresses back into her slightly awkward manner. Her eyes drop down, avoiding my gaze. “The elevators are this way,” she mumbles. She starts walking away from me, not looking back. I don’t budge. I stand there, directly outside the door to the Mahsahnai’s office. I watch her go. I don’t want to follow her. I don’t want to be anywhere near someone who would congratulate me on being drafted.

But then I think to look behind me, at the door to the Mahsahnai’s office. It’s only a foot away from me. I think of the person sitting behind it. And suddenly Sahlai doesn’t seem so bad after all. I hurry after her, glancing over my shoulder as I go. I walk quickly.

I can hear the noise even before I’m conscious. A high-pitched keening. Continuous. Loud. It bothers me. But as I listen to it more, and as I get closer to breaching the conscious world, I realize that the noise doesn’t mean anything. It’s just noise. It doesn’t matter to me. It doesn’t matter at all.

My left arm is vibrating. I can feel it all the way through me, even inside my bones. The vibration starts at my wrist and runs up through the muscle toward my shoulder. It passes right through. It encircles my entire body, digging in deep and buzzing. I don’t care. It’s not important.

The back of my head throbs. It feels broken in the way that shattered dishware feels broken. It used to be beautiful. Now it’s just sharp. I open my eyes.

I’m sitting in a hard chair. There are thick straps curling over my ankles, my shins, my thighs. My torso has two straps across it. My right arm has three. There’s another strap over my neck, tying it to the back of the chair. It’s not tight enough to strangle me, but I can’t move my head without crushing my windpipe. My left arm is held away from me, strapped flat against a long and narrow metal table. The straps position it in such a way that my palm is forced to splay upwards. There’s one final strap holding my hand in place, running over my palm, starting between my thumb and forefinger and ending below the base of my little finger.

My arm is not alone on the table. I share it with another arm, this one bulky, gray, and robotic. It’s bolted to the far end of the metal table, and is busy attacking my left wrist. At first, still coming back into consciousness, I wonder if it’s cutting off my hand. But I don’t see any blood, and I don’t feel any pain. I blink my eyes, clearing them of the fog of gunk that’s built up. I look back at the metal table. It’s not me that the arm’s attacking. It’s my bracelet.

The arm has slid a flat metal finger in between my skin and the interior of the marvelous silver bracelet adorning my left wrist. Another of its fingers is composed of a small buzzsaw. It’s squeezing these two appendages together, the saw slowly but surely
gnawing away at the beautiful silver band. This is where the keening and the vibrations are coming from. The robot is eating into my last position. I watch as the buzzsaw makes progress, but I can’t find it within myself to care. None of this is significant. Not in comparison to anything else. Reyin. Estas. Alaseel. My home. My family. My world. My life. How could anything else matter? It can’t, any more than a candle could outshine a floodlight. Than an ember could outshine a star. A shooting star. A falling star. They fall. Bursting with light, heat, fire. Shattering. Destroying. Burning. My home burns. My parents burn. It all burns. How could an ember, a candle, a saw compare with this? How? It’s not possible. An ember is nothing. A candle is even less.

The buzzsaw continues screeching against the material of the bracelet. The bracelet is trapped. Finger on one side, saw on the other. It has nowhere to go. It’s doomed to fail. Nonetheless, the bracelet puts up a fight. After all, these things were designed to never come off. Once they’re on, they’re on for life. They’re so beautiful - thin rivers of the purest shining silver flowing over our skin, lightweight, flexible, beautiful - because Aiohn wants us to accept them. Aiohn needs to track its citizens somehow, but most people don’t like the idea of being tagged. The bracelet’s beauty is its prime defense, stopping anyone from wanting to be rid of it. And for those few who still want to be free, the bracelets are made of something so tough and resilient that it’s almost impossible to cut through. I’ve heard of criminals cutting off their hands instead, sliding the bracelets off instead of cutting through them. This makes it harder for the stävnenmä fen mes to track them. They’re almost always caught anyway, though. Some of the criminals are altered enough for their hands to grow back. Others are simply left with stumps.

Minutes pass. The saw wining and tearing at the calm silver. It was never a fair fight. With a loud snap! the moonlight-forged band falls open along a roughly hewn seam. It falls off my wrist, lying dead and flat on the table. The metal arm pulls away. It’s job is done. It has no more interest in me now. The air goes quiet.

The chair is at the center of a small room. There’s a light overhead, but the room feels dark. The corners feel shadowed. I can’t see the door. It must be behind me. The walls are bare. Off-white foam tiles that look almost grungy, but this might just be the lighting. There are no echoes in the room. The tiles swallow the noise. I can hear my breathing, but it sounds enclosed, as if I had the sheets pulled over my head. My face aches. I feel bruised everywhere. I wonder if someone walked over me with hard boots on. I wonder, but I don’t care. So what if they did?

I hear noise behind me of a door opening and several pairs of feet entering the small room. A team of humans in uniforms encircles the chair. They’re watching me closely. I glance at a few of them, then lose interest. I look toward the wall straight ahead of me. I let my eyes lose focus. The humans start undoing the straps, but never in a way that might give me the opportunity to struggle. I’m handcuffed immediately, and one of the humans keeps downward pressure on my shoulders from behind the chair. They needn’t bother. I have no intention of escaping. Escape to where? There’s no escaping this. There’s no place I can go to hide from the fact that my life is ash. And the humans? The humans don’t frighten me. What could they do? I’m already dead. It’s just my body that’s still breathing.

When the straps are off, the humans haul me out of the chair. I don’t resist. I stand when they tell me to, I walk when they order. They frogmarch me out of the room and into a narrow corridor. The walls here aren’t covered in tiles like the room. They’re just walls. Gray. Somehow official-looking. The humans lead me down the corridor.
Eventually, they deposit me in the center of a second room. This one’s completely bare, lacking even a chair. When they let go of my arms, I slowly sit down. It’s a little bit awkward with my hands still cuffed, but I don’t complain and the humans make no move to take off the restraints. I sit down, cross legged, facing away from the door. The humans leave without a word. I hear the door close behind them and bolt shut. I stare at the floor. It’s also gray. Slightly dirty. There’s a twisted clump of dusty hair off in one corner, a stain over in another. I close my eyes. I slump forward onto my feet, forehead touching the ground. It doesn’t matter. There’s only one thing that matters. Just one. The stars. The falling stars. My world is dead. My parents are murdered. Killed by falling stars.

I try to pull away from my body. I separate from my feet, ignoring them and discarding any sensation that they send to me. I separate from my legs. My abdomen. My chest, arms, hands, head. My mind. I try to float away. I try to leave all of this behind, float through the tiled ceiling, and disappear. I remember the rotting leaves on the forest floor. Remember how they didn’t mind rotting. How they simply existed, not caring, not noticing. Once again, I wish that I could be like that. I wish I could be like a rotting leaf.

Stars.
Chapter Nineteen

I jerk awake, nearly hitting my head on the top bunk as a strange warbling suddenly erupts through the still quiet of the warehouse. It’s loud and forceful, shouting out a series of shrill and dull notes. It sounds like it’s coming from everywhere. The pitch fluctuates rapidly, one second high, the next low, always changing, always keeping me off balance, never letting me know what to expect next. The warbling is impossible to ignore. I put my hands over my ears and squeeze my eyes shut, trying to block out the noise. A few seconds later, just as abruptly as it had begun, the warbling stops. I flop back onto the pillow. The lights in the warehouse come on, dispelling the darkness. I lay my elbow over my eyes and try to find sleep again.

I’m exhausted. It took me hours to fall asleep last night. I don’t appreciate a wake-up call. *I’m drafted*. The thought still echoes around my head. I can hardly believe it. How could this happen? I was underaged just weeks ago. I’m still underaged. I don’t care what Tsan says. I can’t be drafted. The minimum draft age can’t be lowered. It just can’t.

But it was. My protests don’t mean anything. I now qualify, and I’ve been sucked up into Aiohn’s military. I think of Ahlem. When he was drafted, he only had a day to report in. My father went to go see him. I didn’t. When Estas came home late that night, he looked sick. He didn’t say anything to me until the next morning. That’s when he told me I’d start training to be a fletcher. For the exemption. It was a good thought, I guess. But we never got far enough along for me to get licensed. That would take another year or two. Normally, that would have been just enough time for me to gain draft-exemption before coming of age. We didn’t count on the minimum age being lowered. All that time spent making glue. All of it for nothing.

Ahlem died when his ship was attacked. When a hole was blown through the hull. Maybe that ship was like the one I’m on now. He was being transported. Maybe he was lying on his bunk when it happened, in a warehouse like this one. I take my elbow off my face and roll my head to one side on the pillow so that I can look out at the grid of bunks. I imagine what this space must be like when it’s full. Hundreds of bodies. Lying around, maybe talking, maybe not. Then all the air is sucked out. No warning. No chance to prepare. Massive pressure drop. Gasses expand. Blood boils. They say that Ahlem died quickly. I believe that. I’m sure he died in seconds. What they didn’t say is that he died painlessly.

Looking around at the warehouse, the bunks suddenly look more than just empty to me. They look drained. As if each one had once held a living body, a person, and that person had been taken away. There are so many empty bunks. And they were all once full. Where did they all go? All the soldiers? Were they moved someplace else? Where they killed? *A year and a half*. Becoming a Standard Trooper is a death sentence.

I close my eyes. My thoughts have started up this morning exactly where they left off last night. I’m surprised that I got to sleep at all. After my meeting with the Mahsahnai, I came back here and lay down. Sahlai had told me about a nearby mess hall, but I wasn’t hungry. I couldn’t imagine putting food in my mouth. I skipped dinner. This means that I didn’t eat anything at all yesterday. My stomach feels cavernous now, but I still don’t get out of bed.

I think about the Mahsahnai’s offer. She said that she’d make me a Non-Standard Operator if I could convince Zach. She said that this would double my life expectancy to
over three years. I grit my teeth. None of this seems fair. I wasn’t killed when Alaseel was attacked. I wasn’t killed by the pilots. I wasn’t killed in prison. I wasn’t killed while escaping. Now, back in the comfort of Aiohn’s grasp, I’ve been given the grim statistical prognosis of only one and a half to three more years of life. It’s not fair. I didn’t go through all this just so I could be drafted and killed. I deserve better.

I start massaging my left ear again. I can hear one of Reyin’s lectures replaying in my head. This one’s a few years old. She was frustrated with me for feeling so sorry for myself after Estas banned me from specializing. She kept telling me that there were worse things than not being able to choose a career quite yet. That I was moping too much. That I should accept it and move on. I suppose she was right. There are worse things. Being drafted is one of them. I wonder if she’d still tell me to stop moping. Probably.

I wonder how Zach’s doing. He must be terrified. Tsan said he’s been threatened with death if he doesn’t cooperate. And yet he’s still refused. I can’t even imagine what must be going on in his head. If someone were to tell me that they’d spare my life in exchange for a bit of espionage, I’d cooperate so quickly that it would make their neck ache. But I suppose that this is where Zach and I differ. He’s decent. I saw that when we were escaping. He cares about more than just his own life. He’s a good person.

So what am I supposed to do? Honestly, I’m not sure if I can talk him around. If he’s that certain, what could I say? Life is the most valuable thing that a person can have. And if Zach is willing to give up his life, then what more could I possibly offer him? Tsan said I’d be meeting with him this morning. Just hours from now. I need an answer by then. I need an answer by then. If I fail, I’ve only got a year and a half left to live. Whereas, if he agrees, I’ve got over three years. Still too short a time, but better. And who knows? The war might be over by then. It can’t go on forever. Three years might be all I need to make it through. How could Zach be so selfish?

I sigh. I’m not being fair. Zach isn’t selfish. He’s just decent. These two characteristics happen to look similar from my current point of view, but they’re really quite different. I shouldn’t be criticizing. I only wish that he could be decent in a way that helped me out right now.

What does he have against cooperating, anyway? All he has to do is collect information. It’s not as if he’s going to be asked to kill people. Well, not directly, anyway. Like Tsan said, he’ll just be telling her where to bomb. Why would he give up his life to protect, in a small, insignificant way, a group of total strangers? I sigh again. I’m not deaf. I can hear myself. I know what I’m saying, and I understand how cold it is. I don’t always feel this way. I’m sure that if it ever came down to it, I’d be just as willing to sacrifice myself for someone else. Maybe.

I stop massaging my left ear and swing my legs out of bed, touching down onto the cold floor. The air itself is comfortable and warm, but I shiver as my toes touch the frigid white floor. I hurry to get my boots on, then pull on the uniform’s jacket. I slept in the shirt and pants of the uniform, not caring if they get wrinkled. I don’t like what they symbolize, anyway. But they didn’t wrinkle. They’re just as straight and orderly this morning as they were last night. Other than my tangled hair and bleary face, I could step out of this room looking professional. This bothers me for some reason.

I push open the doors to the hallway, heading off toward the showers. Sure, I’m near starved, but I can’t resist the opportunity to take another turn at that radiant water. Food can wait. I walk into the restroom and pad over to the same shower closet that I used
yesterday. With the door closed and secured behind me, I take off the uniform and seal it in one of the waterproof cabinets. I close my eyes as I crank the faucet and feel the luxurious water falling on me again. *It feels so good to be clean.* I stand under the water until it turns off, then renew it by opening and closing the closet door. It feels just as good the second time. And the third. After my fifth shower, my stomach starts complaining loudly, calling my attention back to breakfast. But it’s still a shame to leave the steaming water.

As I step out of the closet, uniform back in place, I work to get my hair in order. I watch myself in one of the mirrors. I recognize my face. But my body is hardly mine at all. It’s the uniform. Yesterday, it just felt good to get out of the jumpsuit. But now I wonder if I might prefer its horrid orange fabric to this orderly gray uniform. It makes me look like a soldier. It makes me look like any of the other soldiers I’ve seen since arriving here. It makes me look like one of them. As if I could ever be anything other than myself, a civilian. I turn away from the mirrors and walk quickly back to the hallway.

I find the mess hall without too much searching. It’d be hard to miss, actually. It’s marked by a large open doorway, leading into an empty space that reminds me immediately of the bunkbed warehouse. If the warehouse was a factory for sleeping, this is a factory for eating. The mess is dominated by a grid of rectangular tables, close to a hundred in all. It looks like a small city could eat in here without too much of a squeeze. But the place is completely deserted.

I stand on the threshold and sniff the air. Frankly, I’m surprised that I haven’t smelled anything yet. Back at school in Alaseel, I could smell the cafeteria from two buildings over. And this mess easily dwarfs anything I’ve eaten in before. But I don’t smell anything. I sniff again, closing my eyes and honing in. This time, appearing almost like a phantom image, I sense... something. I can hardly even tell if it’s there at all. Maybe I’m just imagining it. It smells like... I’m not sure. But it’s familiar. Vaguely.

Following the scent, I walk into the mess hall, weaving back and forth between the empty tables. Hungry as I am, I don’t feel any urgency. I let my hands skirt across the tabletops, touching this one here, that one there. It’s all so empty. Where are the soldiers? I imagine what it must be like in here when the room’s filled to capacity. Teaming bodies everywhere. Everyone talking. I think I’d go deaf. But now everything’s silent.

The closer I get to the far end of the mess hall, the stronger the smell becomes. I still can’t quite seem to parse out what it could be. For all I know, it’s not even food. The grid of tables comes to an end, and the room changes into a labyrinthine, a long, narrow passage confined by waist-height metal railings, zig-zagging back and forth and back and forth from the left side of the room to the right. This is where people usually start lining up. I skip the mile-long passage by ducking under the rails. After all, no one’s around but me.

On the far side of the rails is a wall with a counter running along it. There are slots cut into the wall at regular intervals. Each slot is perhaps four inches high and a foot and a half wide. To the left of each slot is a white ring, about the diameter of my palm, with a light blue circle at its center. I walk up to one of the slots and tap my bracelet against the scanner. The inner circle lights up gently. A moment later, a covered tray slides through the slot and onto the countertop. It’s an off white color. The smell is strongest now.

I pick up the tray and head back toward the tables, choosing the closest one to sit at. I scan over the other tables. I’m looking for anything that might make one table any more inviting than the others. Nothing stands out. There are just so many of them. So many recruits. All drafted, all shipped off, all gone. I shake my head. So what if they’re not here?
That doesn’t mean anything. They might be somewhere else. They could be out there right now, fighting for our freedom and heritage. Or whatever the slogan is this month. Alive, anyway. It’s possible.

I put my tray down on the table and plop onto the bench. I’m intensely hungry, but I take a moment to stare at the covered tray in front of me. After months of eating nothing but gray mush, I would like nothing more than a plate of good food. A true, fresh, unsynthesized meal. Real stuff. The kind of stuff I can actually picture as having once been alive. I bite my lip and peel off the tray’s lid. My shoulders slump. I’m not in luck.

Before me is a neatly ordered display. The tray is molded into three sections; two small ones at the top, one large one at the bottom. There are also two pockets in the tray. One holds a fork. The other, a napkin. The top right section of the tray holds a water bottle, shaped as a rectangular prism and fitting perfectly into the slot, not wasting even a millimeter of space. Next to it, in the top left section, is a thick brown paste. I have no idea what it could be. It’s a uniform color and texture, almost beige. It looks smooth, but at the same time almost gritty. It’s synthetic. I can tell this right away. It’s not animal, nor vegetable, nor mineral. Fake. Engineered. I’d have thought that the designers of the paste could at least have given it a better color. A darker brown, or maybe a little bit chunky. Anything to make it irregular and give the illusion that it’s made of something. As it is, the sauce isn’t even trying to pretend. This strikes me as lazy.

In the bottom section sits the grand entree of the meal; a thick, light green rectangular prism. It looks hard as a rock, and about half as appetizing. I sigh. Ah, well. I suppose this is why I never hear about the great culinary passion of Aiohn’s military. I reach for the fork and napkin, spreading the napkin over my lap and balancing the fork over my right index finger. Doubtfully, I poke at the green slab. I don’t even make a scratch. Whatever this thing is, it’s dry. Dry as a palmful of salt. I pick up the cuboid of water and uncap it, sloshing it over the parched green surface. The slab drinks it all up, pulling in the water at an alarming rate. Gradually, it turns from light to dark green. I stop pouring when the bottle is half empty. The slab shows no signs of being quenched, but I’d like to save some water for myself. I put the bottle back down and take up the fork. This time, the slab’s just dense and heavy, giving way as soon as enough force is applied. I break off a corner, skewering it with a quick jab. I bring it under my nose and skiff. Different. I can’t place it. It’s salty, but more than just that. The smell clings in an unusual way, right at the back of my nose, the upper tip of my throat. I feel like I should know what this is. In fact, I feel like I do know what this is. I just can’t remember.

I pop the corner in my mouth and chew. Ah. I was right about it being salty. It’s very salty. The corner dissociates between my teeth, becoming a coarse paste. A wet powder. A salty wet powder. In seconds, it’s gone from being a dense shape to an amorphous slurry. I can’t even chew it anymore. I try swallowing, but it takes several tries to get it all down. I reach for the bottle.

As I swish water around my mouth, I look down at the slab in irritated confusion. How am I supposed to eat this? How does anyone eat an entire tray of this stuff? I’m still not even sure what it is. It’s not synthetic, that’s for sure. If it were, there’d be nowhere near as much salt. Engineers know better than that. They know what’s awful. It must be natural, then. “Natural” in this case meaning “not designed to be eaten.” I poke it with the fork again, separating off little bits. There are no fibers in it that I can see, meaning that this
isn’t from a normal plant. Even after being powdered and dried to a crisp, there should still be some hints of connective tissue. So what is this?

Algae. That’s what it is. An algae cake. Wonderful. I’ve never had one until now, but I’ve heard all about them on the news. They’re typically used as emergency rations. Aiohn was very proud when it developed them. Grown in vats and compressed into bricks with added nutrients and vitamins, they’re famous for being extraordinarily healthy. And for tasting extraordinarily horrible. I heard about efforts to make them taste better, removing most of the salt. Good progress was being made, but then it turned out that the process of removing the salt also removed nearly all the nutritional value. The technique was scrapped. Too bad. I’d almost rather be malnourished than eat this.

Turning my attention away from the slab of algae, I look over at the brown puddle liquid sitting in the upper lefthand corner of the tray. I wonder if it’s any better. I scoop the tines of the fork through the paste, catching a bit as the rest dribbles through. I stick the fork into my mouth. I slosh the stuff around my mouth. I grimace. What is this? It’s not that it’s bad. It’s not good, either, and that’s the point. It’s not anything. It has no taste. None. Not even a little smidgen. The paste is so thoroughly bland that I can hardly even tell if it’s on my tongue. I swallow, again confused. I can’t imagine why anyone would engineer a paste to be so empty. Why strive for ultimate blandness?

Unless, of course, blandness can be useful. Unless there could be a blandness so strong as to smother all other flavors into submission, suffocating them under a thick coating of meh. I use the fork to run through another corner of the algae, dunking it in the brown sauce. It doesn’t look great. Brown on green. I hope the taste is better. I pop the new combination past my lips and chew.

The sauce does a surprisingly good job of out-shouting the block, reining it back to the point where it’s just pleasantly salted. Seasoned, even. I’m surprised to realize that it’s actually not that bad anymore. The texture’s still odd, but much better now that I’m not gagging. I chew it a bit more, and it becomes almost like a soft stew. I can work with this. What a relief. Now that I can eat this, my shooting hunger returns all at once, and I start to devour the block. By the time I finish, I’ve decided that it’s much better than the gray mush.

As I’m bussing my tray, I hear footsteps entering the mess hall. I turn around. It’s Sahlai. I start walking over to her. It occurs to me after the first few steps that Sahlai arrived exactly on time. Right when I finished eating. Not a second early, nor a second late. She must have been watching me. On a holo, probably. I guess I’m not surprised. There must be cameras all over this ship. This isn’t anything new. There are cameras all over Aiohn. Now that I think about it, I doubt that there’s more than a handful of moments of my life that aren’t on film. It’s nothing personal. I know this. It’s just more information. It’s just another way of keeping me safe. Information is knowledge, after all. And knowledge is power. And power is Aiohn. And Aiohn protects me. Therefore, information protects me. It’s not much of a stretch, really, when it’s laid out like this. I like being protected. I don’t mind the cameras. It occurs to me that none of this stopped Alaseel from burning. But I shake this thought from my mind. I don’t know if anything could have stopped the humans.

“Good morning, Void. How do you feel today?” I stare at Sahlai, now only a dozen feet away. She actually sounds as if she cares. That’s unusual.

“I’m fine,” I say. Then, a bit awkwardly, I add, “...How are you?”

“I’m well,” she says, giving me a little smile. “Would you come with me, please? The Mahsahnai is waiting for you in the brig.”
I nod, suddenly feeling unsure. This is it. And I still don’t have a plan. Reluctantly, I follow Sahlai out of the mess hall and toward the elevators. I start thinking as fast as I can, trying to come up with a way of getting Zach to abandon his moral compass. I flinch at the way I’ve phrased this to myself. *Make Zach abandon his moral compass.* That doesn’t sound good at all. It makes me sound like the bad guy. Worse, it sounds impossible.

I’m so distracted that I hardly even notice when we step inside the elevator and start to descend. Soon, though, the doors open again and Sahlai leads me out onto the floor beyond. I recognize it instantly from yesterday. Everything is so white here. I blink at the glare.

Sahlai takes me down a series of white hallways. After rounding a corner, I see Tsan standing a little ways off, in front of one of the cells. She doesn’t look around as we approach. She’s staring at something on the wall. I can’t see what. “Thank you, Sahlai,” she says when we’re close enough. “That’s all for now. You may wait in the control room.”

“Yes, Mahsahnai.” Sahlai bows, then turns around and heads back the way we came. I watch her go. This might just be me, but she looks relieved to be getting away so quickly. Now the hallway’s empty, apart from myself and Tsan.

“Void, look at this. Look at the human.” I turn back to the Mahsahnai, who’s still staring at the wall and is now gesturing me closer. She points to something. I can now see that she’s looking at a small holo. It’s projected from a panel on the wall next to the cell door, and as I get nearer, I realize that I’m seeing a top-down view of the cell. I’m looking at the top of Zach’s head. He’s sitting a table, hands folded in front of him. No, not folded; linked. Even in the cell, his hands are bound. Seeing this makes me uncomfortable. I glance sideways at Tsan. She’s standing right next to me, completely engrossed in the holo. “Look at it,” she says quietly. “It’s just sitting there.”

I shuffle my feet. There’s definitely something about this that’s making me feel nervous. The Mahsahnai doesn’t seem to notice. She leans in toward me and starts speaking in a confiding tone of voice. “I’ve heard,” she says, “That they don’t feel pain in the same way we do. They’re not as sensitive. I’ve also heard,” she says slowly, “That they don’t think in the same way we do. I’ve heard that when you look into it, there’s almost nothing to separate them from animals.” I squirm, feeling my stomach clench. Tsan looks at me now. “Do you believe that?” she asks.

“Ah...” I shrug my shoulders slightly, trying to come up with a good response. “I believe it if Aiohn says it’s true.” I look at Tsan hopefully. When I thought of it, it sounded like a good thing to say. But now Tsan’s frowning slightly.

“I hope you’re smarter than that.” She says it quietly, but there’s a distinct change in the tone of her voice from a moment ago. Whereas before she sounded soft and at my level, now she sounds harsher, more business-like. She looks me in the eye. “Aiohn will never mislead you,” she says. “But that does not mean that it will always tell you the truth. If you are going to be a Non-Standard Operator, you need to learn right away that there is an enormous difference between telling the truth and telling what’s real. Often, you will find that the truth is nowhere near as important as the consensus. And it will be your job, as a Non-Standard Operator, to control the consensus.” The Mahsahnai looks back at the holo. I don’t move. I don’t say anything. I feel more uncomfortable than ever. I have a feeling Tsan just told me something that she believes to be of unquestionable importance. But to me, it sounds a bit crazy. How could reality and truth be any different? And don’t people agree on
thing that are true? Also, it feels almost treasonous for Tsan to tell me that Aiohn won’t always tell the truth. I decide that staying quiet here is my best option.

“Remember that you’re doing this for a good cause.” I glance over at the Mahsahnai, feeling a bit of a jerk as she returns to her original topic. “We need to win this war. Our species will not survive if we lose. You are helping your species, your friend, and yourself.” Tsan doesn’t mention the fact that she could always give me the position of Non-Standard Operator, whether I convince Zach or no. She taps her bracelet against a scanner on the panel by the door, and a new holo materializes below the camera feed. The Mahsahnai points to the space in front of the cell door. “Stand there,” she says. I feel my pulse jump as I realize that she’s about to let me in. I walk over to where she’s pointing and stare at the white surface of the door. I still don’t have a plan. I try telling myself that it’s only Zach in there. It’s not as if I should be all that worried. It’ll be fine. It’s just Zach.

Tsan starts working at the controls in the holo, sliding her fingers through the air, cutting out graceful arcs and curves. She’s so perfect. Whoever her parents are, they must be very proud with the way she turned out. And here I am, feeling as if my lower abdomen is about to rupture. It’s certainly vibrating fast enough. I clench my jaw and look down at my feet, trying to resist the temptation to massage my left ear. I can hear the quiet sounds the holo makes as it accepts Tsan’s commands. I take a deep breath and let it out again. I wish I could calm down. It would help me think. I need to think. The noises of the holo pause, and I feel Tsan looking at me again. “You’ll do fine,” she says gently. It’s such a shift in tone that I look up, confused. How could one person shift so often? One second harsh, the very next kind? It’s disorienting.

“What makes you think that?” I ask. I don’t feel confident at all. Normally, I would never share this insecurity with someone like Tsan, especially not now, but the sudden change in her tone of voice makes it hard for me to think of her as the same person as the Mahsahnai.

“You’re motivated,” she says. “Nothing inspires creativity like an impending threat. Now, face front. The door’s opening.” I blink, again completely thrown by the disconnect between her voice and words. She still sounds just as gentle as before, but now she’s talking about death and disaster. I turn back to the white door. If anything I feel worse than I did before Tsan’s reassurance.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see the Mahsahnai’s hand complete one more fluttering pass through the holo. The projection evaporates, and is replaced by a soft humming sound. I stand up straighter as the door begins to slide open. I can see past it now, and watch as Zach looks up from the table. His eyes lock onto my face. I open my mouth, getting ready to say something, preparing to start the conversation and - my mind goes blank. I have no intelligent thought. “Zach!” I say it loudly, then pause. “Hello!”

Zach doesn’t move. He just stares at me, a strange look on his face. I can’t tell what it is. I don’t know what to do now. I was hoping that Zach might give me a hand in getting the conversation going. I’ve never been very good at that. Getting things started. I don’t know what to do. How should I act? How should I perform? What should I say? I don’t know what’s expected! What does he want? Already, within four seconds of the door opening, I’ve gone straight to borderline panic. I have stage fright. I can feel Tsan standing a few feet away. She’ll be hidden from Zach’s view, but I can almost hear her sighing. Not a great start. A terrible start.
Another couple of seconds pass in silence, Zach continuing to stare. Then, mercifully, he speaks. “We need to talk.”

He says it without any trace of emotion or inflection, but I’m so grateful for the rescue that I hardly even notice. “Yes!” I say. “Yes! That’s why I’m here! To talk. Ah…” I get stuck again. That happened quickly. “Do you mind if I come in?”

Zach seems to consider this. He brings his bound hands up to scratch his right cheek. He has to use the back of his left index finger. His nail makes a scraping noise against the skin, and I notice a grayish haze surrounding the lower part of his face. He hasn’t shaved today. “Mind? Not much,” he says eventually.

I pause. He doesn’t seem enthusiastic. Actually, that’s a massive understatement. He seems downright unhappy to see me. I feel my adrenaline spike a bit higher, but try to ignore it. “Thank you,” I say, nodding and stepping into the cell. As soon as I’m past the threshold, the door slides shut, locking me inside. My heart sinks. I hate these cells. I feel trapped. I look over to Zach. He still hasn’t moved. I try to smile. “So,” I say. “How are you?”

Zach stares at me, again taking his time before answering. “I’ve been better,” he says. “I was certainly better before I met you.” I feel my stomach drop to the floor, inspired by my heart, taking with it my attempt at a smile. I’ve been in here for only a handful of seconds and already this is going badly. I try to think of something to say that might turn things around, but Zach continues before I get a chance.

“So you realize that I was actually doing pretty well? I mean, I was in jail, but things weren’t too bad. No one hated me. I had a boyfriend. I was even up for review by the parole board next year. They would have let me out, too. My behavior was always perfect before you came along.” He cocks his head at me. I stand as still as possible. If it were up to me, I’d be invisible right now. “And then you showed up. Suddenly, I’m an outcast, my boyfriend hates me, I’m getting into fights, I’m being moved. Then, out of nowhere, you get me involved in an insane escape attempt that involves murdering multiples guards and hitching a ride with a bunch of maniacs!” Zach’s yelling by the time he finishes his sentence. He glares at me, livid. “And do you know what happens next? I wake up in an elven prison, being told that I’ll be executed if I don’t turn into an elven spy. What the hell have you done to me?”

I swallow. I’m producing a lot of saliva all of a sudden. I feel stunned. Petrified. It’s not just Zach’s anger, although this by itself is terrifying. It’s that I can’t shrug off what he’s accusing me of. Sure, he hasn’t presented the facts fairly. After all, wasn’t it his decision to intervene? In the end, though, it’s all true. This is all because of me. Whether or not it’s my fault, it was all caused by me. My decisions. My existance. I can’t apologize for being alive, but I also can’t deny that my life has put Zach in a bad position. “But I was just trying to help.” I say it in a quiet voice. Barely more than a whisper. But Zach hears it. His eyebrows go way up.

“This is you trying to help?” Zach yells, looking around at the cell. I feel myself shrinking against the wall. He looks at me, completely disgusted by what he sees. “Try harder.”

I blink my eyes rapidly, trying to clear them. For some reason, the room keeps blurring. “You’d be dead if I hadn’t gotten you out,” I whisper.

Zach nods, his words blunt. “I know. They told me about how the prison was bombed.”

“I saved your life.”
“Not really.” He shrugs. “They're going to kill me anyway.”
I close my eyes. I feel punch-drunk. “Not if you work with them,” I say.
“Spy for them, you mean,” he hisses.
“Zach, they're going to kill you!”
“Because of you!” Zach roars, standing up so quickly that his chair skitters backwards over the white floor. I look around the empty room for help.
“I didn't know this was going to happen!”
“Really?” He sounds frenzied. “Because they made it sound as if the whole spying thing was your idea!”
“I was trying to save your life! They were about to shoot you!”
“Look where I've ended up!” Zach screams. “Do I look like someone who's been saved?”
My throat locks up. I hear one small sound escape. It sounds almost like a whimper. I stare at Zach in horror. I don't know what to do. The algae brick I just ate is pounding against the inner wall of my stomach, fighting to get out. I wonder what would happen if I vomited right here in this cell. I swallow. “I'm sorry,” I say. My voice is hoarse. “I wanted to help you. You've done so much for me. I wanted to help.”
Zach looks at me. I don't think I've ever seen anyone so furious. His face is red. “Get out,” he says. My mouth drops open. This can't be happening. I can't fail.
“Zach—”
“Get out!” he screams, gesturing at the locked door with his cuffed fists. “I want you out of here! Out!”
“Zach, they're going to kill me, too!” I scream it right back into his face, matching him in volume and power. But where his voice is fueled by anger, mine is fueled by desperation. I don't know why I choose to shout exactly these words. When they leave my mouth, they have no plan attached of any sort. But when I hear them out in the open, I realize something. I've been so worried about not being able to convince Zach because I know he would never want to hurt anyone. But now I realize that this extends to me, as well. He won't let them hurt me. This is my way in.
Sure enough, Zach pauses. He still looks furious, but a narrow window opens onto something less murderous. “What?” Zach says the word slowly. It comes out like gravel being crunched between his molars.
I swallow again. I realize that I'm shaking. “I've been drafted,” I say. My voice is shaking, too. “Nobody lives long once they're drafted. Our soldiers die within months of reaching the field.” I hesitate, then look down. “Tsan says she can keep me safe. She says that she can take me out of the main war and put me someplace where I'll live longer.” I look back up at Zach, raising my eyes but not my head. “But she'll only do this if I can convince you to work for her. Zach, they're going to kill me. I was only trying to help. Please don't let them kill me.”
I feel greasy as I say this. As if warm, gritty oil were being poured over my skin. I remember the bliss I felt in the shower. This grease is the exact opposite sensation. I'm dirty again. Zach stares at me. He's breathing hard. Then he starts shaking his head slowly back and forth. “How dare you ask me that.”
“I don't have a choice,” I say. “You have to work for her. If you don't, it won't just be your life you'll be giving away. It'll be mine, as well. Please don't do that to me.” I'm begging.
I know I am. It’s what I’m aiming for. To be pathetic, completely unthreatening. The kind of creature that Zach could never harm. Zach clenches his teeth.

“If I spy for her,” he says, “I’ll be telling her where to aim the bombs. I’ll be killing hundreds of people. Maybe more. I can’t do that.” He shakes his head again. But his voice is quieter. I see another opening, and latch onto his eyes with my own, making sure he’s looking at me.

“What about me? Can you kill me?” I ask.

“I can’t kill a hundred.” He sounds firm, but not angry. Not anymore. I’m getting closer, then. I decide to give it one more try.

“Please don’t let them kill me,” I beg. He looks at me with an odd expression on his face. I can’t figure out what it is right away. And I don’t get the chance to investigate further. There’s a quiet hum from my left, and I turn my head to see the door opening. Sahlai is standing on the other side.

“Time’s up,” she says. It doesn’t sound like her normal voice. It sounds rougher, less kind. Then she starts advancing toward me. I whirl back around and start talking quickly as she grabs me.

“Zach, promise me you’ll think about it! Please, promise me! You can’t let them do this! Zach, please!” Sahlai literally drags me out of the room while Zach stands by and watches, his mouth slightly open. The doors slides shut on my last word. And then that’s it. I’m out in the hallway, panting. Sahlai lets go of me and takes a few steps back. I look at her, feeling betrayed and confused.

“Good job, Void. That went well. You’re a natural at this.”

I turn around and look at Tsan. She’s standing by the control panel, hand flicking through the holo as she replaces the security on the cell. “Why did you do that?” I ask. “I was so close!”

Tsan glances at me. “A dramatic exit heightens the emotional potency of an event.” She sounds as if she’s quoting a textbook. “Besides, you weren’t getting any further today. I like to end things when they’re over.”

I’m still panting. I feel like I’m in shock. Dimly, I reach a hand up and start massaging and pressing the tip of my left ear between my fingertips. “I need a shower,” I state. I can feel the grease sliding over my skin, marking my body with dark streaks of filth.

Tsan nods. She’s still facing the holo. “Sahlai will show you back to your quarters. I’ll contact you when the human makes a decision. Enjoy your shower.”

Sahlai walks up to me and gives me a faint smile. I’m confused. She looked so convincing when she came into the cell. She actually appeared as if she were dragging me off to an execution pit. But here she is, smiling at me. There can no longer be any doubt as to who her sister is. She starts to lead me back down the hallway, but Tsan call me back.

“Void? Water is a limited resource on this ship. A forty-five minute shower is excessive.” I stare at her. In Aiohn, surveillance is just the way things are. It’s not personal. I’m always one of the crowd. A beach can be looked at without any one grain of sand bearing the brunt. I’ve never minded being watched. But now I realize that things are different. Before, no one was looking specifically at me. Now they are. Tsan is. I turn away and start walking back to the elevators.
Chapter Twenty

I found it almost by accident. I wasn’t looking for anything in particular. I just felt like wandering. The hallways on my level of the Seeker seem to go on forever, twisting in a neatly ordered pattern of intersections and right angles. It’s easy to get lost if I wander too far from the warehouse. Or, it would be easy if it weren’t for the directional signs hanging everywhere, pointing the way to the nearest restroom, the nearest elevator, the nearest mess hall. There are actually three mess halls down here. They’re all identical. So are the restrooms. Everything’s empty. The floor is deserted. It’s so quiet. There are occasional announcements that come over the intercom, booming between the walls. Messages for the crew, or a request for a certain individual to come to a certain place. None of the messages are for me. And other than these, the floor is silent.

It’s been two days since I spoke with Zach, and I’ve developed a habit of walking randomly around the floor. I’m not really exploring. Just walking. Even after completing dozens of trips around the floor, it still feels huge and complex to me. Usually, when I spend enough time in a place, it begins to feel smaller and more manageable. The confusing quirks begin to iron themselves out, leaving me with an acceptable understanding of how to get from one place to another, and of what I’ll encounter along the way. This isn’t happening with the Seeker. Maybe it’s because everything looks so similar. There’s no good way of telling one end of the floor from the other. It still feels huge. It still feels like a maze.

It was yesterday afternoon when I came across the gym. It’s smallish and is tucked out of the way. As far as I can tell, it’s the only gym on the floor. I liked it instantly. Now I make my way back towards it from the elevators. Sahlai wishes me a good afternoon, but I don’t reply. It’s not a good afternoon. Not after everything I just heard. I need to get to the gym. I need to get moving, to clear my head.

I take off my jacket as I step into the space, about a quarter the size of the warehouse I sleep in. There are ceiling-high mirrors lining one of the walls, cleanly reflecting back the rows and aisles of workout equipment. I drop my jacket on a bench. On my left is a shelf of free weights. I never learned how to do much with these. I always feel as if I’m about to drop them on my foot. On my right is a line of more specialized equipment, but I ignore this as well. I walk instead to a white structure made entirely of pipes, all about an inch and a half in diameter. Right now, the pipes are folded up into a three-foot-tall jumble. It looks pretty unassuming. Just by looking at it, you would never guess how much it could do.

I swipe my bracelet over a post next to the structure. The scanner makes a melodic hum of recognition, and the tower of pipes twitches to life. It quickly unfolds, rising up eight feet and spreading out into a hollow sphere. It adjusts its position, stretching like a large animal, and is then still. The pipes are connected to one another at socket joints, flexing elegantly into a crosshatched pattern. I step inside the sphere, taking my place at the center of the structure where a circle is marked on the floor. In response, a holo lights up in front of me.

Tsan had a holo. She was eating lunch, but she was still in her office, busy working. I didn’t know what to expect when she called me up to talk. Had Zach finally agreed? Or had he refused? Had he still not made up his mind, and would Tsan ask me to talk with him again? I didn’t want it to be this last one. Anything but go through that conversation again.
Tsan closed the holo when I entered the room, asking me to sit down. I walked past that strange weedy plant of hers and pulled out the chair in front of her desk. I sat on the corner of the chair, my hands folded in my lap. Tsan didn’t waste any time; she thanked me right away for my help. Zach had agreed.

The holo draped over the structure flashes me a brief welcome message, then changes into a menu of options. I scan down the list. It’s an impressive collection of choices. From what I’m seeing, this machine can do almost anything, from strength training, to endurance training, even a bit of cardio. I choose a pre-programmed strength training routine, setting it to the second-to-lowest level. The machine changes its position around me, extending two rubber coated arms toward me. The holo shifts as well. I get a woozy out-of-body feeling as I see a holographic version of myself appear in the air. It’s not an actual video feed; it’s just compiled from video. It looks completely like me, right down to the way I hold my shoulders. The image is facing away from me, so I can only see her back. She’s standing in an identical copy of the metal structure, and starts acting out what I’m supposed to do. She grabs the two pipes that have extended toward her, and begins a series of tricep dips. It’s a strange feeling, watching her. Watching me.

I felt odd when I heard the news. I wasn’t relieved. Not quite. Instead, I felt like a member of a firing squad, hoping blindly that my shot wouldn’t be the one to killed the prisoner. Let that fall to someone else. I wasn’t looking to hear that I’d hit my mark. Sure, Zach wouldn’t be killed if he worked for Tsan, but I didn’t feel as if I’d done him any favors. I remembered how, right before Tsan told me, I’d have given anything to avoid talking to Zach again. This doesn’t feel true anymore. “Can I talk to him?” I asked.

“I’m afraid not,” Tsan answered briefly. “We’ll be taking it from here. Thank you.” I nodded to myself, looking down at my lap. I don’t feel well right now.

“Will I ever see him again?” I asked. I wanted to know. It felt important, even if I couldn’t put my finger on the reason why. What would seeing him do?

“It’s doubtful,” Tsan said. “We’ll train it, then the human will be put out in the field. After that, any contact between the two of you will be impossible.”

I grab the handles on either side of me. They come up to just below my armpits. The handles are not quite parallel, angling to a point ahead of me. I push off from the floor, hoisting myself up into the air. Now that they’re supporting my entire weight, I have to fight to keep my shoulders from rising up my neck. I bend my knees, tucking my feet behind me. Then I go into a dip. The way down is easy. But I struggle to push myself back up.

I felt weak. Not in the sense of being faint, but in the more literal sense of being ineffective and useless. This wasn’t how everything was supposed to go. After I got Zach out of prison, he was supposed to be free. Not this. “And I have more good news,” Tsan had said. “Because you’ve done such a good job here, I’ll be making sure that you are transferred to my division of Non-Standard Operators.”

That’s right. The Non-Standard Operators. They’d slipped my mind for a moment. I suppose it is good news that I’ll be joining them. I’ll live longer. I should be happy. “Thank you,” I whispered.

“You’re welcome. But you should know that the transfer won’t be quite as simple as we’d first thought.” I looked up at Tsan. “It turns out,” she said, “that it’s impossible for someone with absolutely no military training to be given the post I had in mind for you.” I blinked, not understanding. “Fortunately,” she continues, “I have a solution to this.”
I go into a second dip. I only barely make it back up to the top, my arms shaking and quivering. Those months in prison took a real toll on my body. I clench my teeth. I can't believe what Tsan's solution was. Even now. What must it be like inside her head? Despite her apparent perfection, there must be something wrong in there.

“You're already drafted,” she said, “and scheduled to be trained as a Standard Trooper. I think we should let this happen.”

I blinked again, leaning forward toward the desk. “What?” I asked. “I thought the entire point of all this was to stop me from becoming a Standard Trooper.” I looked at her suspiciously. I felt like I was being cheated.

“You'll only be trained as a Standard Trooper,” Tsan replied. She sounded as if she was trying to talk me down. It felt patronizing. “We'll transfer you into Non-Standard Operations soon after you're deployed to the field.”

“After I'm deployed?” I didn't like the sound of that at all. “Why after I'm deployed? How long after?”

“Only a week or two,” Tsan said. “And then you'll be transferred. It'll be easier this way. You'll be able to say that you have some experience.”

I'm at the bottom of my fourth dip now. I'm straining to get back up, but I'm stuck. My elbows are above my shoulders. There's not much I can do but hang. I'm breathing heavily in short, loud puffs of air. Experience. Experience of what? Of being a soldier! But that's not right! That's what I've been trying to get away from! I hear the metal structure whirr, and then two more pipes extend. They end up several feet below me. In the holo, I see my avatar unbending her knees and placing her feet on the pipes, using them as footrests. She continues her dips, now with assistance. I roll my eyes. I'm not in the mood to be babied. I glare at the footrests.

“Why would I want to say that?” I asked. “I'm just trying to be a Non-Standard Operator!” My voice was starting to get louder. I'm not sure why I was so upset. It's hard to put into words. I suppose it just didn't seem fair. I'd been offered something, and had sold my friend to get it. Now I was hearing that the offer had changed.

“I know you are, but you have to understand, Void, that most new Non-Standard Operators come in after several years of service in the military. It's considered a major promotion. It wouldn't look good if we took someone who hadn't spent a single day in the field.”

“I don't care how it looks! You told me that I'd become a Non-Standard Operator if I helped you with Zach.” I heard the underlying whine in my voice, but didn't care very much. Some things are worth whining for.

“And you will,” Tsan said. She was still perfectly calm. Behind her desk, she looked completely collected. As if there wasn't a thing in the universe that could knock her off balance. “You'll spend two weeks in the field, and then we'll transfer you right away. What's so concerning?”

I push against the pipes. But it feels as though the harder I push, the heavier I become. I'm not strong enough to get back up. Below me, the footrests bob up and down once, twice. It's a clear invitation. Don't worry about it, they're saying. We'll help you. I don't want their help. Can't they see that? It should be obvious. I'll make it even clearer. I drop my feet down, but instead of stepping onto the footrests, I start kicking them. Not too hard. Just hard enough to send a message. I don't want to bruise a toe. That'd only make my mood even worse. What's so concerning? It's a ridiculous question. There are only two
people who could have asked me that. Reyin and Tsan. I hate to compare them, but they do appear to have a similarly stunted emotional range, and a similar inability to comprehend anything outside that range. Maybe everyone so heavily altered is like this. For the first time in my life, I feel almost glad that I’m not more perfect.

I stared at the Mahsahnai. I could hardly believe my ears. Two weeks! A moment before, she had said one week! This was getting out of hand fast. “I can’t spend two weeks in the field,” I stated. I was trying to sound calm. I wanted Tsan to take me seriously. “What if I’m injured? The field’s too dangerous.”

A funny look passed over Tsan’s face. “Void,” she said, “if you can’t last two weeks in the field as a Standard Trooper, then you won’t last two days as a Non-Standard Operator.”

I pulled back from the desk when she said this. It made sense, of course. War is war is war. But I didn’t like the way it sounded. I didn’t like it at all. “I thought you said that Non-Standard Operations was safer.”

The pipes ignore me at first, but then the holo starts flashing a message at me: “Do not kick the footrests.” I sigh and shake my head, continuing to kick at the pipes. Two more kicks, and they suddenly pull away. They fold back up into the structure. I’m pleased to see them go. I still can’t push myself up, but at least I’m not being pandered to. I drop to the ground. The holo has returned to show my avatar doing dips. I wave my hand through it and it goes back to the menu. I select a different setting, and wait for the pipes to reposition themselves. They’re now overhead, at shoulder width and parallel. I’ve never really liked pull-ups. I feel more comfortable doing them here, in an empty gym, where no one is watching me, but they always make me feel weak. I jump up and grab the handles, my body swinging back and forth, front and back. I want to be safe. That’s why I’ve gone through all this. And I’d thought I’d found a way. I thought I’d solved it.

Tsan shook her head. “It’s not. If anything, it’s even more hazardous than the general military. The life expectancies of our Operators are longer only because we choose to induct the best soldiers. You showed promise in the forest. But if you don’t think you can replicate that, then perhaps you’d be better off staying where you are now.”

I felt a lump starting to form in my stomach. I’d eaten lunch about an hour previously, but now I was starting to wish that I’d skipped the meal. “I can replicate it,” I said quietly. My throat was suddenly horse.

“Then what’s so concerning?” I didn’t look at Tsan. After a moment, she sits back in her chair, signaling that the matter was closed. “We’ll be arriving at Aiohn tomorrow. Sahlai will bring you to the surface and show you where you need to go. The Standard military will take care of you from then on.” She was staring at me, but I was still looking downward into my lap. I couldn’t even bring myself to nod. “You don’t have to worry,” Tsan said. “I’ll be keeping an eye on you.” As if that was what I was worried about. Tsan not watching me. She’ll always be watching me. Or someone like her will always be watching me. She’s Non-Standard Operations. Her eyes are everywhere. I stood up and left the office. On my way out, I passed by the potted weed. Maroon-green stems, silvery hair coating on the leaves. It looked so much thicker now than the last time I saw it, only a few days before. Amazing how weeds grow.

I’m still just hanging from the pull-up bars. I can’t lift myself up by even a few inches. No matter how hard I strain, gravity - even the artificial gravity of the Seeker - is too powerful for me to fight against. I’m weak. Weak. Me. I know how it happened. I spent several months in solitary confinement, that’s how it happened. That’s the physical
explanation, anyway. But how did I get to be so weak? This isn’t me. I shouldn’t be like this. Unable to do a single pull-up.

I drop to the floor in disgust, walking straight through the holo, ignoring the automated encouragement of my avatar. I don’t bother turning the machine off. It’ll figure out that I’m gone soon, and take care of itself. I turn my gaze to the treadmills sitting off by themselves on one side of the abandoned gym. I hope I can still run.

The floor is humming. I can feel it through my cheek and my temple, even more than I can hear it with my ears. The hum is visceral, vibrating up from below the floor and into my skin, running through me and making my hair tingle. It’s the sound of a ship. The sound of a ship hard at work. A human ship. A ship that once carried ten bomber pilots. One that now carries me.

I don’t know how long I’ve been lying here. I don’t really care, either. I haven’t had any visitors. I haven’t expected any. I haven’t wanted any. The door to the small room opened briefly a while back, and I could hear someone breathing on the threshold. They didn’t say anything, and I waited for them to leave. The door closed, and I was once again entirely alone.

I don’t know how long I’ve been lying here. Time doesn’t seem to be flowing as it normally does. It feels as if the usually straight line has been replaced by a series of disjointed segments and arrows, all pointing in different directions and starting in different places. There’s no sense to any of it. Time is jagged, dragging on in the present while simultaneously speeding through the past. I feel as if I’m in two places at once, two times at once, two bodies at once. I feel as if I should be home right now. I feel as if I am home right now, and, as far from home as I will ever be. It’s ash. The world is ash. How did this happen?

I don’t know how long I’ve been lying here. The floor is humming, and the constant soft vibration makes my cheek feel almost numb. It’s the only part of me to enjoy this luxury. To be numb. The rest of my body is anything but. It’s strange. I’ve heard accounts of people who’ve suffered losses. How they described their feelings afterwards. The way they said it, I might have thought that the floor beneath me would disappear, and that I’d be stuck in a sightless abyss, cut off from all feeling and sensation. Numb. Body, mind, and soul. If only. I’m not numb. I’m feel more than ever. I feel the ship work. I feel the thumps of human feet pacing in a far away hallway. I feel pain. I’m not numb. I’m the opposite. I feel overloaded, as if an ocean of stimulation and knowledge were being poured into me all in one go. I can’t take it all. The most I can do is to slow my explosion. Stars.

I don’t know how long I’ve been lying here. I’ll never know. It’s too much. And the floor is humming. I don’t know how long. Stars. The floor is humming. I don’t know.
Chapter Twenty-One

I get up quickly when the wake-up call sounds out. I’m too anxious to stay in bed. I shower, get dressed, then head to the mess hall where I eat a hurried breakfast. It’s only my nerves that make me rush. In truth, I could probably take my time. Tsan never said when exactly in the day we’d be arriving at Aiohn, but there’s most likely at least enough time to eat in measured bites. But I am nervous. I practically inhale the algae, then jog back to the bunk-bed warehouse. I get busy immediately, pacing around aimlessly between the rows and aisles. At some point, it occurs to me that I should pack. I strip the sheets off my bed, folding them neatly and rearranging the contents of the gray sack so that everything fits. I place the sack gently on the bare mattress, looking around to see if I’ve missed anything. Of course I haven’t. This sack contains everything I own, minus the uniform I’m already wearing. It’s not hard to transport. The sack isn’t even all that heavy. I go back to pacing.

Then, after a moment, I pause. I didn’t comb my hair. Previously, the lack of combs on the Seeker has been an annoyance, but now it’s an actual problem. I’ve done my best to make my hair look somewhat under control, but it still quite messy. And I’m about to be flown down to begin training! I start wracking my mind, trying to think of a solution. If I pulled my hair back, that might help some. But I don’t have anything to pull it back with. I could also try braiding it. But that would take time, and I’ve never really been good at braids. They never look as good on me as I think they might. Nothing ever does.

I hurry over to the bathroom and stare at myself in the mirror, examining the disaster zone. I really do look disheveled. How could I show up like this? I try pulling my hair back with my fist. A bit better. Not a whole lot, but at least it looks like I made an effort. I’ll take that. But what to tie it back with? I take a few strands of hair from the base of my skull and wrap it around the rest of my hair, making a clumsy knot. Better. I take my hands away, turning my head from side to side, studying the mirror. Then the knot fails, and my hair falls back to my shoulders. I start doing it back up immediately, trying to get the knot tighter. But I can’t see what I’m doing, and it’s almost impossible to tell if I’m pushing the strand around itself or some other clump of hair that just happens to be in the way. The knot fails again, almost as soon as I let go.

I feel almost desperate at this point. I need this to work! I pull my hair tight again, twisting it to see if that might help. But then the door to the bathroom opens, and Sahlai sticks her head inside. “Void? You all set? We’ve arrived.”

I freeze. My stomach feels cold. “But my hair…” I trail off, not really knowing what to say. Sahlai looks at me for a second, then pushes the door all the way open. She steps toward me, lips slightly pursed as she surveys the mess on top of my head. Then she makes a twirling gesture with one of her fingers.

“Face the mirrors,” she says. A bit surprised, I obey. I stand up straight and hold the rim of the sink as Sahlai moves behind me. She takes my hair thoughtfully in her left fist, examining it. She looks over my shoulder into the mirror, meeting my eyes. “It’s not as bad as you think,” she says. Then she runs the palm of her right hand over the top of my head, gathering my hair into a single unit, then running her left hand over my head as well until she has it all together. She selects out two groups of strands from the back of my head, one on the left and one on the right. She gives the rest a twist. This leaves a smoother rope an inch above my neck. Taking the two groups of strands, Sahlai wraps them securely around
the rest, making a full loop with each around the main gather. Then she knots the two strands together underneath the ponytail. When she lets go, the knot stays. She tugs on it gently. It doesn’t break. “There,” she says quietly, putting her hands on my shoulders and looking at me in the mirror again. “You might have a hard time getting the knot out, but at least it will hold.”

I stare at my reflection. I look better. Surprisingly good, actually, given the number of months that have passed since I last brushed. “Thank you,” I whisper. Sahlai smiles at me, her eyes glittering. There’s a bit of mischief there.

“You know,” she says, “This isn’t a beauty contest. This is the military.” And with that I burst out laughing. It doesn’t last long, but I bend over the sink as the handful of peals echo around the sterile walls of the bathroom.

“I know!” I say. “I know!” And then I’m not laughing anymore. My face is still twisted into a smile, but it’s not from humor. I could cry. This isn’t a beauty contest. Not at all. This is the military. And if I could never succeed in something as trivial as a beauty contest, then what in the world am I doing here? My mouth is frozen open now, and I’m gasping down at the sink. Sahlai gives my shoulders a squeeze.

“It’s not as bad as you think,” she says again. Then she lets go and steps over to the door. “You ready?”

I stare at the drain in the sink. A small black hole that an infinite stream of water could fall into with hardly a splash. “I need my bag,” I say. I’m a bit surprised when I hear my voice. It’s deeper than I’d intended. Sahlai pushes the door open with her palm, holding it there with an outstretched arm. But I don’t leave the sink. I cling to it as if my life depended on it. I close my eyes and try to calm my stomach. I focus on breathing. In. Hold. Out. Pause. Again. In. Hold. Out. Pause. Again. I try to focus only on breathing.

When finally I push off from the security of the sink, my whole body is in jitters. Judging from the way I feel, I could have just vomited. Sahlai leads me back to the bunk-bed warehouse, and I collect the large gray sack from on top of my mattress. Then Sahlai takes me to the elevator and we begin to descend.

It feels like only seconds later when we’re crossing the Seeker’s landing bay, a massive cavern with a ribbed ceiling over a hundred twenty-eight high. The space is crowded by bustling work crews and soldiers in uniform, all moving between the hundreds of ships that fill the bay. I see fighters here like the ones that flashed across the sky over Alaseel. But there are also larger ships. Some look big enough to have landing bays of their own.

We make our way to one end of the bay. There are rows of shuttles here. They look similar to the one that carried me from the prison. Sahlai heads for one shuttle in particular, and I follow close behind. The crowd is denser here, people gathering into lines and waiting to board. I feel overwhelmed. There are so many moving bodies here. The part of the Seeker I’ve been housed was entirely abandoned, and before that I was in solitary. I’m not used to this many people all at once. I don’t like it.

Sahlai is ahead of me in the line for the shuttle. I stick close to her, only a few inches away. I keep my eyes cast downward. I avoid looking at anyone else. The landing bay is full of noise. I try to ignore it and keep calm.

The line moves quickly forward. There’s an armored soldier standing in front of the ramp to the shuttle, scanning the bracelets of everyone boarding. I’m surprised to see that it isn’t a stävnemā fen. This kind of security detail is what they’re usually assigned to. But
then again, this ship is for Non-Standard Operations. The stāvnemā fen mes are more a part of the Standard military. I suppose that a Mahsahnai like Tsan wouldn’t want them here. It might feel like an intrusion to her. The soldier is wearing dark green body armor, similar to the suits I saw the soldiers in the prison wearing.

A moment later it’s Sahlai’s turn to have her bracelet scanned, and then it’s mine. The detector beeps, and the soldier releases me. I clamber after Sahlai into the belly of the shuttle.

She takes her seat in one of the middle rows, choosing a place with another empty seat next to it. This one’s for me. I sit down as if the seat were made of sugar glass. I rest the sack on my knees, but continue to hold onto it with both hands. Beside me, Sahlai straps herself in, and I take this as my cue to do likewise. The stap is just like the one that held me in place on my ride up to the Seeker. It crosses my shoulders, chest, and waist, holding me securely to the back of the seat. It’s a system designed for crashes.

We wait as the shuttle fills. Then the doors close and we’re off. I can’t see outside. There aren’t any windows. But I feel the nauseating spit-second break in the artificial gravity, between the time when we exit the Seeker and when the shuttle’s own gravity kicks in. It makes my stomach heave.

Soon, we enter the atmosphere. There are quiet conversations among the other passengers on the shuttle, neighbors who must have known one another for quite some time chatting about what they’re heading toward next. One man talks about being offered a promotion to Head Mechanic for a unit of fighters. He’s congratulated by another man who goes on to joke about how he’ll always be stuck where he is now, being forced to scrimp on solder. There’s another conversation behind me, a woman telling a friend about an idea she had for a jogging formation. I try not to listen to either conversation, focusing instead on the rugged gray fabric of the sack.

It’s maybe half an hour later when the shuttle touches down. I feel my body stiffen, and I sit up even straighter in my seat. A tinny voice, the pilot, comes on through the speaker system, announcing our arrival. I look over at Sahlai. She smiles faintly and waits for her harness to deactivate. Mine pops open at the same time, retracting into the shoulders of the seat. People around us begin standing up. Sahlai does, too, and I follow suit.

We exit the shuttle onto a light brown tarmac. I look around, peering through gaps in the milling crowd. A warm breeze blows over the group. I feel it on my neck, and I sniff the air. There’s the smell of ionization and hot metal. These are from the shuttle. There’s also the smell of something else, something far more complex and infinitely more foreign. This smell, I realize, is the scent of an entirely new planet. This is Aiohn.

The tarmac we’re all standing on is part of a mammoth landing field, stretching off in all directions until stopped by the horizon. Shuttles and larger ships are everywhere, neatly arranged in a grid of boxes painted on the ground. These sections each have giant numbers and letters etched at their centers, written large enough to be legible from a thousand feet. There are shuttles taking off and landing all around, spilling out passengers or loading up cargo. Running all around the landing field is a system of single rails, intersecting and splitting off in precisely ordered complexity. There are open-air trains on the rails, each about eight cars long. None seems to have a driver. One of the trains is already heading toward our group, and we all wait until it pulls up in front of us. Sahlai leads me over to a
car where we sit, facing each other. The train waits until all the passengers from the shuttle have boarded. Then it hums into motion, accelerating quickly over the rail. The wind blows hard into my face, warm and full of the scent of cooling engines and waiting spacecraft.

The landing field is full of activity, but stills seems strangely empty. I suppose this is just an illusion caused by the field’s immense size. I’ve never seen a space so continuously paved. Most of Alaseel could have fit here without too much of a squeeze. There’s no sign of actual dirt. It’s all tarmac.

Parked shuttles flash past on the left and right, and I see other trains ahead of us and behind us. There are no conversations on the train. The wind is moving too quickly, flashing away any noises and replacing them with its own roar. Despite my nerves, I wonder what it must be like to ride this train when it’s raining. Without a roof or walls, it must be quite the ordeal to hurtle along on this thing through a downpour. I’d be soaked to the bone in seconds. I’m grateful that the sun is out. There are a few clouds overhead, but they’re white and wispy. It doesn’t look as though this place has seen rain in some time. I remember Aiohn as being tropical, with mist every morning and a pounding sun by midday. Still, I only ever visited the capital city itself. Not the rest of the planet. We must be in an entirely different region. I cling to the sack on my knees.

After many minutes of speeding over the ground, the train reaches the edge of the landing field. There is a groups of buildings here, gathered in a line. They look almost identical to each other, squat, broad, practical, military. Sahlai and I get off when the train comes to a halt, along with most of the other riders. But whereas the other passengers head for the buildings on the right or the left, Sahlai walks toward the building in the direct middle. This one’s a bit larger than the others. There’s a sign over the entrance: “Recruitment Office.” I also spot two stävnemā fen mes, one on either side of the door. I look down at my feet, avoiding their gazes as I follow Sahlai inside.

The light brown tarmac transforms into a polished white floor as we pass through the entranceway and into a reception area. There are two uniformed officers standing behind a varnished wooden counter. They’re working with holos, but one, a woman, looks up as Sahlai approaches.

“Yes?” asks the woman. She sounds slightly bored, glad for the interruption. “I’m here to drop off a recent recruit,” Sahlai explains. “Void from Alaseel. You should have received a message about her yesterday.”

The woman looks back at the holo, pulling up a new space. After a moment of searching, she nods. “Yes, I have it right here. You’re all set.” She directs this to Sahlai, telling her that her job is done.

“Thank you.” Sahlai bows her head slightly, then walks back to me. I’m standing a good eight feet from the counter. I’m very consciously holding the sack by the drawstring, allowing the bottom of the sack to drag along the floor. I’m hoping that this makes me look more relaxed. Certainly more relaxed than if I held it like I would naturally, hugging it with both arms. Sahlai lowers her voice when she gets closer. “This woman will take you where you need to go,” she explain. “After that, just follow orders and you’ll do fine.” I nod. It’s hard for me to meet her eye. “Good luck,” she says, smiling slightly. I nod again, and Sahlai starts walking back toward the entrance. But after a few feet, she turns back around. “Void, we really will be keeping an eye on you. You can count on that. I’d expect one of Tsan’s eyes to show up in the next few days.” She nods encouragingly. Both she and her sister seem to believe that I’m comforted by the idea of being kept under watch. And what a strange way
to put it. "One of Tsan’s eyes will show up." I have no idea what that means. Sahlai continues on to the entrance and disappears when the door slides shut behind her.

“This way, please.”

I turn around to see the recruitment woman walking along her side of the counter toward the right end of the reception area. My feet start walking and the rest of me is forced to follow after her. The counter ends after a dozen feet and the woman leads me through a set of double doors. We’re in a hallway now. White floor, office doors to the left and right. We go straight ahead. The woman talks to me as she shows me through the building, speaking over her shoulder.

“I’m glad you arrived when you did. The timing works out well. Most recruits who come in between the major shipments have to wait a few hours for the next batch to land before they can be assigned. But we only started a new round of processing twenty minutes ago. We’ll just add you to them.”

I get the feeling that the woman is mostly talking to herself. I nod as she speaks, but don’t otherwise respond. The woman continues.

“You should have seen this place a few years ago. Every time a new shipment came in, we’d be swamped for hours. Now we can process everyone in just over half an hour. We’ve gotten to be really efficient about it.”

There’s something in the woman’s tone that sets my teeth on edge. We turn onto another hallway, this one ending at a metal door. The woman pushes it open and holds it for me. I walk past her into a large rectangular room full of people waiting in line. We’ve come in at the side of the room, halfway between the back of the line and the front. The woman starts leading me toward the end. The room is centered on a series of metal railings, setting out a winding path that coils up the line into a more manageable size. Many of the people waiting turn and look at us as we enter. They’re all uniformed like I am, and almost all have longer hair, like me. The woman gestures to the line.

“See this? They’ll all be assigned to a unit within the next couple of minutes. That’s impressive crowd management.”

I look at the back of the woman’s head. “You sound proud,” I say, voice low. We’re almost at the back of the line now. The woman shrugs.

“I like my job. It makes me feel like I’m doing something to help, without having to go all the way to the front lines.”

I pause, taking this statement in. I stare at the back of the woman’s head. “Dtōk oh,” I say. The woman twists around, a look of hurt filling her face. She opens her mouth, but nothing comes out at first. It feels good to see her in shock. Then she scowls at me, all friendliness evaporating.

“Wait there,” she orders gruffly, jabbing her finger at the end of the line, only a few feet away. She pushes past me and strides back the way we came. I watch her go, clenching my jaw and enjoying the gooey feeling in my mouth. I savor the thought that the woman might be in a bad mood for the rest of the day. Given that the rest of us are about to be trained for combat, I think it’s the least she can do.

I duck under the railing and step over to my place in line. Because the line twists back and forth across the width of the room, the line to my right is facing me. Several half-interested pairs of eyes glance over me as I take the back of the line. I look down at the floor, embarrassed. I hope they didn’t hear me. I don’t want to be “the one who swore at the check-in lady.” But they all turn away soon. Except for one. I can see her out of the corner of
my eye. I wait a few seconds for her to get bored and look at something else, but she continues to stare. I have a flash of panic as I wonder what I should do. I don’t like being looked at. I clench my jaw, telling myself that I have to be stronger than this. This isn’t a beauty pageant. This isn’t a game of hide-and-go-seek. This is the military. So I give myself a dare.

I look up from the floor, staring straight back at the woman. She’s about my height, with hair that’s maybe a shade or two darker than mine. I can tell from the slight ripples in it that she’s unaltered. I can also tell this by looking at her face. It’s blunt and strong, unfashionably so. Not unattractive, just unpopular. But look at her ears. Sharp points, full curves. I’m envious. She got lucky with those. She got plain lucky. Without alterations, she could just as easily have ended up with ears like mine. I hope she’s grateful.

I stare at her, but she doesn’t look away. In fact, we’re still looking at each other when the line has progress far enough for the two of us to be side by side. And then I’m past her, and I look forward again. When I do, I hear a laugh from behind me. “I win! You blinked first!” I turn around. The woman has an oversized smile on her face.

“I wasn’t competing,” I mumble. I’m a bit confused, and her smile is making me uncomfortable.

“Ah, sure you weren’t,” she says, nodding. “I still won.” I shrug, turning to face forward again. I can feel her smile on the back of my neck for a few more seconds, and then she turns around, too. The line continues forward. A few steps later, I realize that I’m grinning slightly. I bite the insides of my cheeks, trying to stop. I don’t know what just happened, but I realize that I didn’t mind it. The woman was rude and obnoxious and loud, but at least... I’m not sure. I continue to grin for several seconds until I’m finally able to get control of my face. I don’t make eye contact with anyone else.

The line moves forward slowly. It’s too slow a pace to walk at, but it never fully stops, either. I take another small step every other second, gradually making my way to the front. It feels like half an hour before I’m there. At the front of the room is a counter with six uniformed attendants working behind it. One of them, a man, calls me over. I’m the last in line, but the room isn’t empty yet. There’s another section of the room, to the left of the counters, where the recruits are gathering after being checked in. The groups leave after they’re full, exiting through a set of double doors on the far wall of the room. There are only a handful of groups left at this point. In front of me, the man asks to see my bracelet. I hold out my arm, and he taps the silver loop with a thin black rod. The holo on the counter before him changes. I see a picture of my face come up, and he checks it against me to be sure. Then he tells me I’ll be in Unit 3026-Green. He points to one of the groups. I nod politely to him and pick up my sack. Then I turn and head toward my Unit.

When I’m halfway there, a man steps toward me from the front of the group. He’s dressed like the rest of us, but I notice that whereas everyone else has sleeves ending in a red band, his sleeves end in a pattern of bands, black-red-black. “Are you with 3026-Green?” he asks. I nod again. “Good, then you’re with us.” He gestures for me to join the group, then he turns back to the small crowd and bellows, “All right! 3026-Green! We’re moving!” There had been a handful of murmured conversations taking place inside the group, but they quiet down now as the man continues to give orders. “I want a basic formation,” he says, pointing to one of the group members and then to a spot on the floor. “I want you here, and then I want the rest of you to form two parallel lines behind him.”
group shuffles awkwardly into position. I end up in the right-hand line, about halfway down. Even I, with less experience than a clod of dirt, can tell that our lines are ragged. The man waits for us to straighten out a little more, then continues. “That’s good enough, but it doesn’t look like anyone here has taken geometry. We’ll work on the meaning of ‘parallel’ later. Let’s go!” He turns and starts walking toward the double doors. With a few jerks and stops, the Unit follows him.

When we’re turning into the hallway, I feel a tap on my shoulder from behind, and I turn around to look. In the left-hand line, a few places behind me, is the woman from before. She’s smiling again. “Hey!” she whispers. “What are the odds?” Despite myself, I feel a small, stupid grin creeping onto my face. It’s probably just embarrassment. But the woman sees it, and her own smile grows even broader. Then I hear a new order come from up front.

“No talking in formation!”

I turn guiltily around again, facing forward. Behind me, I hear the woman laugh softly. I can’t tell if it’s aimed at the order or my reaction. Now I’m definitely embarrassed.

We follow the man for a minute or two, finally coming to a stop in front of a wide, painted metal door. The man holds it open, gesturing the Unit inside. “Go in and choose a bunk. We’re running a few minutes behind schedule, so I want the beds made quickly. We need to leave for the Welcome Ceremony soon.”

We all file past him. The room is about twelve feet by twenty-four feet, with four double-bunks on either wall. There’s a pillow and a small pile of sheets on each mattress, but other than these and the bunks, the room is bare. The recruits ahead of me wander into the room, breaking ranks as soon as they pass through the doorway. I look around at my choices. I’m not sure if it matters which one I pick. Then, without warning, someone elbows me in the ribs. I jump. The woman from before points with her nose to one of the bunks. “I call top,” she says, and walks over to it. I stay where I am, watching her carefully. I’ve never met anyone so open. She doesn’t seem to care what anyone thinks of her. I almost admire that. I wish I cared less about how other people see me. I follow her to the double-bunk and start dressing the bottom mattress in the provided sheets, the woman doing the same to the top mattress.

The woman finishes much sooner than I do. She steps back and watches as I carefully tuck the sheets into place, making sure to leave no creases or wrinkles. “You do know you’re going to have to sleep on that thing, don’t you?”

I glance over my shoulder to reply, sounding almost defensive. “Of course I do.” She shrugs.

“All right, then. We all need pointless goals to keep us going.”

I frown, but turn back to my work without saying anything. I’ve always made sure that my bed looks neat. It’s been my habit for as long as I can remember. I’ve never thought of it as pointless before. I know that it will only get messed up the following evening, but, in the meantime…. Well, just look at it. It looks good. I straighten up. My bed is immaculate. The sheets are pulled taut, tucked and folded just as they’re meant to be. The upper bunk, in comparison, is barely made at all.

“Oh, finish up!” The man speaks loudly from his place in front of the door, addressing the few recruits who are are few steps behind the rest of us. “I need to make a couple of announcements before we leave.” We all turn to look at him. The woman next to me has her arms folded in front of her chest. My own hands are clasped in front of my
pelvis. The man makes sure he has everyone’s attention, and then addresses the room. “My name is Aisoh. I have been assigned Full Leader of this Unit. I will be in charge of your training for the next twelve weeks. After that, it will be my privilege to lead you in the field. The way that I see it, it is our job to ensure that our great nation does not fall into a pile of rubble. So I hope you’re all fast learners. I don’t have much time to teach you all you’ll need to know. So here are some rules; If I order you to do something, you do not hesitate. You do it. If I start speaking, you make sure that you listen. You do not ask me to repeat. If I find you misbehaving or breaking regulations, I will make sure that you are punished. We do not have time to waste.” Aisoh looks around at the group. His eyes seem to linger for a half-second longer on the woman next to me, but this might be my imagination. He continues. “So, let’s get right to it. Starting with you,” he points to one of the recruits. “I want you to state your name, your city, and your planet.”

And so we go around in a circle. I’m barraged with names. Hetter, Lee, Mahtah, Zhuem- I can’t imagine how I’ll remember them all. I try to grab the names as they slide past, but they move too quickly. There are a few that stand out, but only because the people they attach to are in some way memorable. They’re one man with incredibly dark eyes and cheekbones that look almost sharp enough to cut straight through his skin. It’s almost lurid how highly altered he is. His parents must have no taste. Just because you can afford to alter your child that much doesn’t mean you should. At any rate, this man is named Kyahsem. Then there’s another man, farther along the line, named Tah. He stands out to me because of how afraid he looks when it’s finally his turn to speak. His eyes are glued to the floor and he only barely mumbles out his name. There’s something about him that catches me, something brutally honest. I feel the way he looks. I pray I’m better at hiding it.

Aisoh listens carefully to the names, nodding after each one is said. I notice that all the recruits come from the same planet. Arkas. I’ve never heard of it before. It must be newly settled, maybe even the past thirty-two years. I only think this because the recruits all name the same city. Typically, Aiohn is quick to add new settlements to planets. I wonder if everyone else here already knows each other. They’re all practically neighbors. But maybe they don’t. Cities can be big. When it gets to the woman’s turn, she states that her name is Darait. Aisoh nods again, and moves on to the next recruit. To me. I say my name and origin, but my thoughts are on Darait. Darait. That’s a boy’s name. I wonder how that happened.

Then the last few recruits go, and Aisoh welcomes all of us to the unit. He explains that training will be conducted at another location farther to the south. The rest of today will be spent in orientation. Aisoh consults a small holo band on his left wrist. “We still have a minute before we need to leave,” he announces. “Are there any questions so far?” To my surprise, Darait raises her hand.

“Sir, did you say that we’re only getting twelve weeks of training?” Aisoh nods. “And do you really think that’s enough time for us to learn everything?” Instinctively, I feel myself take a sideways, shuffling half-step away from Darait. If my years of experience with the stävnemā fen mes have taught me anything, it’s to never ask anyone in the military a question. And to never - never - question their judgment. I half expect Aisoh to arrest Darait on the spot.

But he doesn’t. “I think twelve weeks is all the time we have,” he says. He sounds calm, but also firm enough to close any line of debate. “We need you in the field as soon as
possible. We’ve had to tighten the training period somewhat, but if you try hard and give it your all, you will learn just as much.”

I expect that to be it. Question stupidly asked, question wisely answered. Done. Over with. But out of the corner of my eye, I see Darait nodding her head in large, swooping movements. It’s sarcastic. “How long was training before the war started?”

Aisoh looks at her. If I were in his position, I would be running through a list of punishments in my head, looking for something that would shut down any future impertinence. But Aisoh surprises me again. “I trained for a year and a half to become a Standard Trooper.”

Darait raises her eyebrows. “And you were able to tighten that down to twelve weeks without losing anything vital?”

The room is silent. I can’t believe Darait is being so disrespectful. But, amazingly, Aisoh still looks calm. “Are you afraid you won’t be up for the challenge?” he asks.

Darait shakes her head. “No, sir.”

“Then what are you afraid of?”

A broad smile spreads across Darait’s face. “Absolutely nothing, sir.”

Aisoh considers this. “We’ll see how long that lasts,” he says quietly. Then he turns and addresses the rest of the room. “All right, let’s get moving. The Welcome Ceremony is about to start.”
Chapter Twenty-Two

It’s a big room. Over a hundred feet from back to front, and double this from side to side. The front of the auditorium is a flat wall with a raised stage jutting out of it. The rest of the room is a half-dome, bisected by the front wall. The seating slopes upward toward the back of the room.Nearly every seat is filled. There are lights set into the dome overhead, but they’re so far up that the auditorium is already in semi darkness. Unit 3026-Green is seated in a row, Aisoh taking up the end seat. I’m closer to the middle of the group. Even though my seat has armrests, I keep my elbows tucked up against my sides, my hands covering one another in my lap.

“Big room.”

This is Darait. She’s sitting next to me. This is one of the reasons I’m not using the armrests. I nod, not looking away from the empty stage. Darait hadn’t bothered to keep her voice down, but I make sure to whisper. “Yes, very big.”

“You think it’ll start soon?”

I shrug slightly, trying to complete the motion without moving any part of my body. “I don’t know.”

“I hope it does.”

“Yes.”

From the corner of my eye, I see Darait turn toward me. “You don’t talk much, do you?” I glance over at her. It’s not so much of a judgment as an observation. She’s not criticizing me for staying quiet. She’s just trying to make small talk. Only now, the subject is how hard I am to make small talk with. I’m about to say something back, but I’m saved the effort by a sudden change in the room. The lights quickly fade to black, and the front wall comes to life with a projection of the stage below it. The auditorium goes quiet. A man walks out onto the stage. He looks tiny at this distance, but his image on the wall behind him towers forty-eight feet tall. His image is stocky and compact, sturdy in an unglamorous yet highly athletic way. The man reaches a podium at the center of the stage and turns to face the crowd. His giant dopplegänger stares down at us.

“Good afternoon. My name is General Mast, and it is my privilege to welcome all of you into the greatest military in the known universe.” The acoustics of the auditorium are flawless, allowing the man’s voice to boom all the way to the back. He looks around. “This being said, I know that none of you are here by choice. You were drafted. Many of you would rather be at home with your families, doing your jobs and living your lives.” He pauses. “I understand that. I’d rather be at home, too. But I realize that if the task before us goes undone, our homes, our families, and our lives will all be destroyed. If we lose this war, our way of life is over. This is the nature of the conflict we are in.”

I look at the back of the head of the person sitting in front of me. I don’t need to hear this.

“The humans have made it clear that they will not stop. Peace can only be achieved through force. This is the duty we are charged with. We will defend Aiohn, we will beat back the menace, and we will once more secure peace for our friends and our families.”

Darait leans in next to me. “If family is the best motivation he can come up with, I think I’ll pass.” I try to ignore her. The man on the stage continues talking.
“In my forty-three years with the military, perhaps the greatest lesson I’ve learned is that battles are not fought and won by armies. They’re fought and won by soldiers. By individuals. Individuals working together to achieve a common goal. Each and every one of you can make a difference in this fight. Because of you, we will win. From the bottom of my heart, I thank you.” Here, the general cups his right hand over his left shoulder and bows from the waist. Reflexively, I find myself dipping my head back to him. I see other recruits doing the same thing all around me. Darait stays where she is.

The man straightens up. “Now, please pay attention to this video. It can explain our duty far better than I can.” He gestures at someone offstage, and the lights go down. The projection goes to black. Then, a few seconds later, a new voice rolls out of the darkness, pouring from speakers hidden around the dome.

“For as long as we have been able to stand, our race has gazed up at the stars and wondered if we were alone. For thousands of years that question went unanswered. Aiohn united the planet and then pushed outward, reaching into space and beyond the cosmos.” Images appear on the monolithic wall, gorgeous vistas of planets and solar systems. “As the Empire grew, we began to doubt the existence of a sister world. We searched long and hard, but all our efforts went in vain.” The wall returns to blackness. “...Until eight years ago.”

Here, the wall comes alive with images. I recognize many of them. A crowd packed into Aiohn’s central green, a plane of faces stretching out for over a mile, all listening to the announcement that changed everything, the news that we were sharing the universe. There’s a clip of Tain and Mahdetroh urgently discussing the upcoming meeting between one of our ambassadors and a human representative. And then a series of pictures and videos of the humans themselves. So like us, but so alien. The images all come at once, crowding the screen as the voice continues.

“None of us will ever forget the excitement we felt to learn of our new friends. As a united species, we did everything in our power to foster an open, peaceful, and productive relationship with the humans. We initiated exchange programs, promoted the teaching of their language to our children, and looked forward to a bright and shared future. At first, the humans pretended to go along with us. But they could not keep their true intentions veiled for long...”

The voice fades. The joyful images die away as well, until the auditorium is once more dark. Then, slowly, four, five, six rectangular windows appear on the wall. They’re arranged irregularly, staggered up and down. Through them, I have an overhead view of parts of a crowd. I feel my stomach drop. I know what happens next. The people in the crowd are packed tightly together, shoulder to shoulder with hardly any room to move. They’re all facing the same direction. From far away, I hear a voice addressing the crowd. I can’t make out the words. Only that it’s halfway through a speech. In one of the windows, a man in a coat shifts position. The next second he explodes in a ball of bloody fire. In the split second before the window is engulfed in smoke and screams, I see the blastwave cutting through the people standing around him, slashing through them with the same ease with which I might blow the seeds off a blade of grass. People in the other windows turn towards the smoke. During the live broadcast, I’d missed the expressions on the other audience members. But now I see it all. I see the confusion. The fear. The panic. The horror. And then I see the other bombs go off. One at a time. In each of the windows, a man in a coat shifts position. Balls of flame erupt. Blood spatters over the crowd. Greasy black smoke
fills the air and the lungs of anyone still breathing. The explosions are deafening, but the screams cut through it all, piercing my ears and my heart. The entire wall is smoke now, the windows having gradually expanded to cover the whole surface. I’m sick. A small crack occasionally opens up through the toxic black cloud, and I catch a glimpse of the scene below. It’s chaos. People running in every direction. Trampling over each other to go… where? There’s no one direction people are running in. The threat came from everywhere. No place is safe. There are bodies scattered over the ground. Open wounds and missing limbs. Clothing melted to skin. Faces charred off and eyes made sightless. I’m terrified. The narrator speaks.

“At a celebration held to commemorate one year of peace, the humans killed eighty-seven civilians. It was the deadliest attack on Aiohn in over two hundred years. Any chance of peace and reconciliation died that day. The humans had chosen war.”

The projection cuts away now to a rapid series of clips, each depicting the peak of battle. The first scene shows a blazing fight between two monstrous ships silhouetted against a starry sky, firing barrage after barrage of missiles at each other as swarms of tiny fighters loop toward and away from each other, wheeling and dancing. Each pirouette ends in dozens of fighters bursting into fireballs before being rapidly quenched and silenced by the vacuum. I can’t even tell which side is ours. All I can see is death.

The next scene is shot from a camera inside a soldier’s helmet, an eye-level view of a battlefield. Rubble lies everywhere. Huge chunks of concrete, each the size of a house, are strewn like pebbles over the mud. Iron rebar, hooked and bent, protrudes from the sides of the blocks like rusting fingers. There’s no sound in this clip except for the breathing of the soldier whose eyes I’m seeing through. He’s sprinting from one concrete block to the next, desperately trying to keep cover. I see other soldiers running ahead of him and next to him. They’re all trying to avoid the murder of bullets screaming in from someplace unseen. The soldier makes one more dash and out of nowhere the helmet’s visor shatters, leaving a spiderweb of cracks around one small, round hole. The soldier grunts and the camera tips forward and crashes into the ground. Mud splatters upward. I can see the feet of other soldiers continuing to run. I don’t hear breathing anymore.

After the first two scenes, the tone changes. It’s still death and screaming and horror, but now we’re winning. A camera on a balcony overlooks a street with blown-out buildings and overturned cars. A group of soldiers - our soldiers - is sprinting up the street, human fighters breaking and fleeing before them. The view changes again. Now I’m looking at the side of a grayed concrete building. There’s a hole torn through the side of it, punching straight into the darkened interior. A stream of humans is walking out through the gash, their hands on their heads, as our troops stand ready to accept their surrender. The narrator is back, prompting another change in the onscreen images. A military funeral taking place in a shaded cemetery. An engineer hard at work in an armory. A platoon of soldiers marching.

“For the past eight years, we have fought a war unlike any in our history. In this war, the scale is larger.” A shot of our galaxy, the camera zooming outward. “The weaponry, more advanced.” A titanic ship seen against a bright red star. “And the stakes, far higher. Unlike previous wars, where defeat meant only the loss of territory or strategic resources, the price of failure today is the complete genocide of our people and our way of life.”
A smoldering city in an ashen landscape, the sky filled with dust and smoke. It’s not Alaseel I’m seeing, but it could be. It looked like this. The voice pauses for a second, gathering strength. “But that’s not going to happen.”

The city fades slowly to black, bringing with it a moment of quiet. Then the projection flares back to life, beginning to move through a collage of movement and development.

“These years have been more than just a time of warfare and destruction. They have also been a time of learning and progress, teaching us how to fight more effectively and face this new set of challenges. With reallocations of spending into research and development, we have discovered entirely new materials and technologies.”

A shot of a brave-looking soldier being fitting into a suit of gleaming armor by a team of attentive researchers.

“Our military has grown, becoming the largest it has ever been.”

A panning view of a field packed with soldiers, all standing tall and at attention.

“But perhaps more than anything else, the past eight years have proven that progress against the humans is possible. Through the efforts of our brave troops and tireless generals, we have succeeded in capturing and subduing forty-nine human-controlled planets, significantly compromising our enemy’s ability to strike back.” Here, the projection is taken over by a grid of pictures, each showing one of the captured systems.

“We can win this war. All of us, together. Thank you for helping to restore peace and order to the Empire and for securing the future of the galaxy.”

The music rolls to a finale with a staccato of drumbeats and a triumphant blast from the orchestra. The projection fades down at the same time, and the auditorium lights come back up. Onstage, the general walks back to the podium, his image once again magnified on the wall behind him. I hear him begin speaking, but I’m no longer listening. I’m too busy rewathing one of the scenes from the video in my mind. The scene with the soldier, his helmet pierced by a single bullet. I suppose that’s all it takes. One bullet. Poor man. I find myself wishing that when I die, I’ll at least be granted the dignity of not having my death broadcast to every set of incoming draftees. I catch a sideways glance at Darait. She looks a bit bored, slouching forward slightly in her chair. She doesn’t seem to be thinking about death. She doesn’t seem to be scared.

For a moment, I wonder if she’s just lying. The best liars, after all, are the ones who seem the most honest. And I’ve never met anyone who looks more honest and open than Darait. But maybe she’s faking. Maybe, whereas I become jittery and moody when I’m scared, she becomes outgoing and impetuous. It’s possible. Right?

No. I’m just a coward. Darait’s the brave one. As the general continues addressing the audience, I feel myself sink inward with shame. It’s many minutes before the general’s speech comes to an end. He wishes us all luck, encourages us to work together toward victory, and thanks us again for our service.

Aisoh stands up now at the end of the row, and calls for our unit to get into the triple-column formation again. All around us I see other Full Leaders directing their units to do much the same. We file out of the auditorium and end up back at our room. Aisoh doesn’t waste any more time. He seems to be determined to fit as much into the next twelve weeks as possible. He’s already teaching us about the basic structure of the military and the chain of command. He traces it all the way from Standard Troopers - us - to the very top, ending in the Fourth Aiohn herself. There are a lot of steps in between. Even in our tiny
unit, the chain goes from Standard Trooper to Quarter Leader to Half Leader to Full Leader. We already know who the Full Leader is, but Aisoh tells us that by the time we enter the field, three of us will be getting promotions. Two will be promoted to Quarter Leader, and one to Half Leader. Most of the recruits look around at each other when he says this, as if sizing up the competition. I don’t even bother. I know I would make a terrible Leader, whether Quarter, Half, Full, or whatever. It’s not who I am. I’m better off behind the scenes. Preferably several miles behind the scenes, with a very safe safety curtain between me and any decisions.

When it’s time for lunch, Aisoh shows us to the building’s mess hall. I eat quietly, remembering how much I hated lunch when I was in school. All the people. There’s no privacy anywhere. Thankfully it’s quieter here than at school, but I’m still grateful when it’s over and we can leave. This time, instead of heading to our room, Aisoh guides us back to the auditorium where we watch a long lecture of basic military information. Things like what to do when an officer enters the room. Or how to respond when asked questions. All necessary stuff, but dead boring. By the end of it, the words are blurring together in my ears. It’s like drops of red and blue die being added to a glass of water. They start off clear and distinct, but end up a swirl of mushy brown goop.

Over dinner, Aisoh tells us that we will be leaving early the next morning for the training base. We’re taking a shuttle there, departing right after breakfast. There’s another hour or so of lecture, and then we end up back in our room. Aisoh says that the lights will be going out in sixteen minutes. I look around the room, trying to think of something to do with the only free time I’ve had all day. There are no books to read. There’s nothing in the room except the bunk beds and the gray sacks. I don’t really want to talk, either, but I end up lying on my mattress with my jacket and boots off, listening to Darait ramble on about something. She’s happy to talk even if I don’t respond, and I’m happy to half-ignore her. And the lights are out. All the voices in the room fade away, and it’s quiet. There’s no crack of light shining into the room from under the door. The hallway must be dark, too. I hear breathing all around me, people trying to fall asleep. This is accompanied by the sound of rustling sheets. It’s the first time I’ve slept in a room with so many other people. I’m not sure I like it. There are small sounds everywhere. But I decide that it’s better than the complete isolation I had on the ship and in the human prison. Maybe I can even get used to it.

I close my eyes. It doesn’t make any difference in the darkness. So I open them again. Just for a bit of fun. Eyes open, eyes closed, testing to see if I can make out my fingers as I wave them around my nose. Just playing with the darkness. I open and close my eyes a few more times. Then I roll over onto my side and try to fall asleep. Instantly, now that I’m trying to clear it, my head fills with thoughts. The darkness doesn’t seem so friendly anymore. There’s one thought in particular. One image. The dead man, lying on his face, being left behind by his fellow soldiers as the inside of his helmet is slowly covered over in blood.

The engines never stop. But after a time, I feel them change in pitch. We’re out of the Fold, then. We’ve arrived. I push myself off the floor and lean back against the wall of the small room. Even this small change in elevation sends white sparks shooting across my eyes. It takes almost two days to pass through the Fold. Two days to travel from any point in the standard universe to any other point. An inch or a mile, a league or a light year, it
always takes the same amount of time. That’s two days of lying on the floor. I haven’t eaten. I haven’t been offered food. I haven’t gone to the bathroom, either, but that’s less impressive when there’s nothing going in. No wonder my blood pressure’s so low. And now we’re here. Wherever that is.

Several minutes later, I hear movement on the other side of the door. It opens, and two humans come in. Two monsters. They tell me to stand up. I’m past resisting. Even by going limp. I climb to my feet, my knees creaking as they straighten. The room spins in all directions at once. I’m handcuffed and taken out of the room.

They escort me to a small landing bay, steering me toward a blocky shuttle. It’s an ugly thing. It was designed in the same fashion as the bombers, several of which are parked nearby. There’s no beauty to be found in any of them. Onboard, I’m strapped into a seat. There are other humans in here, too, and a few of them cast hate-filled glances in my direction. One of them, a few rows of seats ahead of me, starts talking at me. Its voice is loud, angry, stupid. I ignore it. It’s only an animal. Animals make noises. Why should the taunts of a beast have meaning?

The two human guards soon order the beast to be silent. But the stares remain, coming from all across the shuttle. I close my eyes. I pretend I’m not here. I pretend I’m anywhere but here. Minutes pass. Then my seat begins to vibrate as the shuttle slowly lifts off. I know that we’ve made it out of the bay when the artificial gravity cuts off. It’s a few seconds before the shuttle’s own generator kicks in. My stomach lurches as I drop back into my seat.

I open my eyes. There are only a few small windows on the shuttle, but they’re enough for me to know that we’re not headed toward a planet. There’s no star nearby. The windows are dark. No star means nothing to orbit it. We must be headed toward something else, then. Another ship, perhaps.

Wherever we’re going, it’s a short flight. Pretty soon the generator shuts off again, and I watch through the windows as we pass into a second landing bay. I can tell right away that this one’s much larger than the one we just left. The artificial gravity catches me from below, pulling me by the stomach into my seat. I might be sick. I look out the window and try to distract myself.
Chapter Twenty-Three

I look out the shuttle window, watching the dry, dusty terrain passing by far, far below us. This doesn’t look like the Aiohn I remember. When I visited the city all those years ago, the land around it was lush and green. I could smell moisture in the air. But the ground below us is just rocky and hot. I strikes me suddenly how large a planet can be, encompassing both a flourishing garden of endless forests and an arid dust bowl that stretches from horizon to horizon and beyond.

I have the window seat this time. Tah is next to me. Out of the corner of my eye, I see him trying to look past me. I sit back in my seat so he can have a better view. “You’re not missing much,” I say. “It’s just a desert down there.”

Tah looks away quickly, embarrassed to have attracted my attention. “Oh,” he says, nodding sheepishly. Then his face tightens. “A desert?” he asks.

“Mmm. It looks like a bunch of dust and sand down there.”

“Oh.” Tah’s looking at the bottom of the seat in front of him. He sounds disappointed.

“You don’t like deserts?” I ask.

Tah shrugs. “I don’t dislike them. I was just hoping for something…” he shrugs again.

“Something else. That’s all.”

Normally, I’d let the conversation die here. But for whatever reason, there’s something about Tah that makes me want to talk. Maybe it’s the fact that he’s even more useless than I am. Compared to him, I feel strong. “Something like what?” I ask.

Tah turns his head halfway toward me. He looks confused for a moment, but then his face clears. “That’s right,” he says. “You’re not from Arkas.” I shake my head. Tah smiles slightly. Then he points out the window to the expanding brown landscape below.

“Compared with Arkas, that stuff out there is the tropics. Arkas was only settled sixty-eight years ago, so it’s barely four percent hydrated. It’s nothing more than a giant ball of bedrock.” He pauses. Then, “You said you were from Aiohn?” I nod. I’m impressed that he remembers. “Do you have water there?”

I nod again. “We do. Most of the planet is covered in grassy plains. There are also forests and a few lakes. We even have two oceans.”

Tah looks at me more closely than before, intrigued. “Have you ever been to one of them?” I shake my head, and Tah grunts. There’s a few seconds of silence, then he looks out the window. “I’d like to visit an ocean someday,” he says.

I nod again. “My parents moved to Alaseel when it was still newly-settled and the land was cheap.” I don’t know why I say this. I just feel like I have to explain myself. “We probably couldn’t afford a house there now.” As I say this, I see in my mind the smoldering field that used to be my city. I imagine the hole in the ground where my home once sat. Where my family once lived. We can’t afford anything anymore. There is no “we” anymore. There’s only me. I look down at my lap and try to focus on breathing.
"You don't have to be ashamed of where you live," Tah says.
I swallow, shaking my head. "I'm not ashamed," I say. "It's just, we're not wealthy, that's all."
Tah looks at me. "Wealth isn't anything to be ashamed of, either."
I shrug. "I know. I'm just not wealthy." Tah continues to stare at me. I don't like it, so I turn away from him and look out the window. There's silence between us. After a few minutes, I begin to see a smudge of color appear over the horizon ahead of us. It's flat to the ground and much darker than the surrounding rocks. At first it looks like a lake, and I'm about to tell Tah this, but something stops me. It can't be a lake. Not in a desert like this. It's perfectly rounded, an ideal circle. And it's not moving, unnaturally still. There are no flashes of light off the crests of waves. It's large enough to be a lake, but it can't be. As we get closer I realize what it is. "We're here," I announce.

Spread out below us is a black sea of solar collectors. I call them "black," but they're really not. There's a special color to collectors, a darkness that draws in light without reflecting or wasting a single particle. It's as if a cloud were drifting over the land, completely blocking the sun from reaching the desert below. There's only one patch in the entire sea, one small island, where the light is not being grabbed and gobbled up. A squat, single-story complex right at the heart of the pitch. Right where we're headed.

The shuttle touches down a minute later, bumping gently against the dust. Aisoh is standing in the aisle, calling on everyone in our unit to unbuckle our harnesses quickly and to follow him. I rush to obey, but it's hard to undo my harness when my hands are jittering. When the shuttle doors open, we're greeted by a rush of hot, dry air. I feel like I just opened the door to an oven. I'm already sweating. Though, in all fairness, this might not be from the temperature. Once disembarked, the different units on the shuttle separate themselves into their own formations. Aisoh leads us toward the complex.

From the ground, the building is huge. It's only a single story, but it extends several hundreds of feet on each side. The heat out here is sweltering, but it gets cooler as soon as we step into the building's shadow. I look around me at the other recruits. No one seems to be affected by the heat in the same way I am. I guess there's no surprise here. They all come from the desert. I'm the only foreigner.

We enter the left wing of the building through a pair of hangar-style doors that reach all the way to the roof of the structure. This must be the garage. We pass a few construction vehicles parked on the poured concrete floor. There's even a small, grounded shuttle waiting off to the side of the large, open space. Then we're led through another set of doors and into the main section of the base.

I let out a relieved sigh as we enter and are greeted by a blast of cooled air. It feels lovely. I really am coated in sweat. There's a tall man waiting for us inside. He welcomes us to our new home, Base A-4173, and introduces himself as the facility's Commander. I don't catch his name. I'm distracted by the sweat on my clothes as it turns to ice. Maybe they
don’t have to keep the temperature this low. The Commander doesn’t talk for long, and soon Aisoh is whisking us off to the barracks wing.

The room we’re assigned to is eerily similar to the one we just left behind at the Recruitment Office. Rectangular, gray paint, eight double-bunks lined up against the long walls. The difference, though, is that each of the bunks here is framed by a tall, black locker on either side. The lockers are easily four feet wide, and are tall enough for me to walk into with plenty of height to spare. None of the lockers have handles. Only a small scanner at the center of the left-hand door.

Aisoh waits until our entire unit has filed into the room, then he speaks. “Okay, listen up. We have a busy day ahead of us, and we’re not going to be the one unit that falls behind. Everyone choose a bunk and pull out a chest.” At first I’m not sure what he means by this, but then I notice another difference between this room and the one we stayed in last night; under every bunk are two bulky chests. Maybe a foot and a half tall, the chests are dark metallic gray with black reinforcements at the corners and edges. Darait chooses a bunk near the center of the room, and I follow her over to it. She claims the top bunk by throwing her sack of clothes onto the mattress. This is fine with me. I place my sack near the head of my mattress, then kneel down and pull out one of the trunks.

The trunk has a solid feel to it, as if I could drop it off a high tower and it would hardly dent. There’s an elegant white ring in the center of its lid, surrounding a light blue circle. I look back at Aisoh. When everyone has a trunk, he tells us to scan our bracelets. I slide my left wrist across the shiny blue mark. It lights up, but for a moment nothing else happens. Then, in the top left-hand corner, burnished brass lettering fades into view:

**Void Alaseel 2105**

My name, my city, the last four digits of my CIN. It’s very precise. A very mechanical designation. The letters stay imprinted on the surface of the trunk even when the scanner’s light goes out. I guess they’re here to stay. I’m just looking away again, back to Aisoh, when the trunk issues a soft clicking sound, like one fingernail flicking another. I try lifting the lid, and it swings back smoothly. It’s a bit heavy, but the well-tooled hinges make it seem easy. Compared with the box holding them, the contents of the trunk are extremely mundane. Stacks of neatly folded clothes, an extra pair of boots, a few other things besides. All necessary, but nothing terribly exciting. I hear Aisoh speaking again.

“These chests will belong to you for as long as you’re in the military, so I suggest taking good care of them. They can only be opened by you, your commanding officer, or another officer granted special authority. I’m telling you this so that you don’t try to hide anything in them. And in case you were wondering, contraband includes almost everything not in your chest at this very moment. If you do try to hide something, I will find it, I will confiscate it, and I will make sure that you are disciplined. Are there any questions about contraband?”
The room is silent. Even if anyone does have a question, I doubt they're stupid enough to ask it. Aisoh nods. “Good. You have two minutes to make your bunks and get everything packed away. We’re on a tight schedule.”

“Sir, what are the lockers for?”

It’s Darait again. She points to one of the over-sized metal boxes lining the walls. Aisoh pauses. For a second, I expect him to order her to shut up and make her bunk. But he doesn’t. Instead, a strange light comes into his eyes. “Something more exciting than sheets,” he says. Then, “Get moving. You’re slowing us down.” He looks around the room, and raises his voice for the rest of us. “Why is Tah the only one following orders? Speed it up!”

I glance over, and see Tah timidly stretching sheets over his mattress. I can almost see him wince as his name is mentioned. Other recruits turn away and focus their attention on their bunks. I follow suit. Bottom sheet, top sheet, pillow. I try to pull it all tight and wrinkle-free, but it’s more difficult when I have to work around Darait, making her own bunk. Then we’re filing out of the room and being shown around the base.

From the outside, the building had seemed to expand forever to the left and right. Now, viewing it from the inside, I’m actually more impressed by its vertical component. There are an absurd number of sublevels, burrowing down deep into the rocky soil. The barracks are on the top floor, along with the main mess hall. Then there’s two floors of administration, two floors dedicated to a gym, several dozen lecture halls, an engineering level, another mess hall - the building seems to go down forever. There’s only one level - somewhere between the planet’s crust and mantle, I think - that Aisoh doesn’t walk us through. He says it makes more sense to return to this one later on, when we’re ready to start the “real training.”

The tour ends with the whole unit filing into a small room. We’re back on the first floor now. Without any windows, the first floor feels almost as subterranean as any of the basements we just left. The only thing that changes is the way in which the air circulates through the hallway. It feels less pressurized up here. I appreciate that they put the barracks on this level, and not all the way at the bottom. When we’re all in the room, looking around at the eggshell-colored walls, Aisoh draws our attention to a high-backed chair positioned in the center of the floor. Aisoh walks over and stands behind it, hands resting firmly on the chair’s back. “So!” He slaps the leather of the chair in punctuation. “Who’s first?”

As it turns out, “first” is for one of the most humiliating procedures I’ve ever witnessed. It’s just not natural for an ōnā mālhā to have the hair cut off their head. Our hair doesn’t grow past a certain length; there’s no need to cut it away. In fact, the concept feels so unnatural that it hadn’t even occurred to me until this very moment that the hairstyle worn by Aisoh and Tsan might be mandatory. How could Aoohn require something so wrong? Aisoh says it has to do with the helmets. Something about hair jamming the hinges and breaking the seal. This seems a pretty weak reason to me. And I’m not alone. Darait
doesn’t like it either. She asks why they don’t just redesign the helmets. Because, Aisoh
explains, it’s easier to redesign you. Then he gives Darait the privilege of going first.

When my turn in the chair comes, I wince as the vibrating shears buzz against my
skull. I feel my head grow lighter as hair sloughs off and falls to the floor. When I stand up,
cold air drags its fingers over the nape of my neck, now an uncovered and exposed stretch
of skin. I feel unexpectedly naked. As if I were walking down a busy street without shoes or
boots. I step back into the group of other recruits. The next victim is already sitting down. A
pair of hands grab me by the shoulders, and Darait turns me to face her. She purses her lips,
surveying the wreckage. “...Not bad,” she says. I raise my eyebrows, and she concedes. “I
mean, yeah, you look like an over-pruned bush, but at least your sideburns are even.”

This makes me laugh slightly, expelling a short burst of air through my nose.

“Thanks. You look fine, too.” I tilt my head, and look more carefully at Darait. Without hair,
her face looks smaller than before, but not in a bad way. It makes her look stronger, more
compact. And now that her neck’s more exposed, I see a surprising amount of musculature.
I hadn’t noticed that before. Darait almost looks like a weightlifter. A little bit slighter, but
still far stronger than me. “You look fine,” I say again. This time, I actually mean it.

When we’ve each had a turn in the leather chair, Aisoh leads us directly back into
the sublevels of the base. Even walking feels strange after the haircut. Whole pounds seem
to have been stripped away, leaving me unbalanced and uncoordinated. Can hair really
weigh that much? And now every breeze feels like an arctic blizzard against my neck. It’s
beyond distracting. I keep turning my head from side to side, trying to recalibrate my neck
muscles. Aisoh takes us down to a floor that looks like a giant machine shop. There
are

thick columns taking the place of interior walls, Leaving the space feeling simultaneously
huge and claustrophobic. There are dozens of workbenches, each loaded with tools and
pieces of broken equipment. In the center of the floor are three giant machines. They’re
nearly as tall as the ceiling, and about twice this much in width. I can’t tell what they’re
doing, but they fill the entire space with the noise of manufacturing. There are technicians
down here, too, sitting at the benches or feeding metal rods into the machines at the center.
Aisoh goes over to one of the workers, talking briefly with her. The technician nods, then
points toward the other end of the floor. Aisoh thanks her, then waves for us to follow him.

We haven’t been in this section of the machine shop yet, and as we get closer I’m
taken completely off guard by what’s waiting. A small army stands before us, armored and
standing at attention. It’s an impressive force, and more than a bit unnerving. They’re
standing perfectly still, not moving at all. As we get closer, I understand the reason for this.
It’s not armored soldiers I’m looking at, but armor itself. Rows upon rows of full-body suits
of armor. But it’s not the kind of armor I’m used to seeing. This armor is shiny and metallic,
un-painted. And where the armor of a stävnemā fen is covered in solid plates, this armor
seems to be woven from hexagonal chips, each about the size of my thumbnail. Aisoh walks
past the first several rows of armor, then stops next to one. He turns around, rapping his
knuckle on the armor’s shoulder. “This is training armor. You’ll be using it until you get into
the field. Darait, you’d asked what you’ll be storing in the barrack lockers. Well, this is it. Go down the row, find your suit, and stand next to it. The names are on both shoulders.”

He waves us into the gap between this row and the one in front of it, and we begin searching for our names. I find mine about halfway down the row. As I stand by the armor and look around, I begin to see that the suits, which before looked identical, are actually all unique. They look, in an abstract sense, like the people whose names they bear. It’s in the proportions between arm and torso, in the size and shape of the helmet. Looking at my own suit is like staring into a bubbling mirror. The armor is obviously larger than I am, taller by several inches and thicker in the neck, limbs, and trunk. But it’s also unmistakably me.

Each miniature hexagon forming the skin of the armor is a perfect geometric form, marked in the center by a small black dot, the same size as the cross-section of a grain of rice. The hexagons continue over the helmet of the armor, transitioning from buffed metal to smooth glass. The helmet is fully transparent, except for the tiny black dots centered in each hexagonal section. If I unfocus my eyes, the dots look like a thin veil draped over the helmet glass.

On Aisoh’s instruction, I tap the band around my left wrist against the neck of the suit, right where its windpipe should be. In response, a flat hologram unfolds in the air before the glass. It’s a list of options. I push my index finger through the “Power” option, and the holo fades. There’s a click, a quiet whirring, and the suit begins to change. Starting at the top of the helmet and continuing down the arms, the torso, and the legs, a seam begins to appear between the hexagons. They unzip themselves, peeling away from each other like the petals of a blossoming flower. Soon, the armor stands fully open, a fruitless rind. The inside is padded with a dark gray fabric, something like felt. Looking at it, I can’t help but think of the exuviae of a giant insect. Aisoh tells us to take off our boots and jackets, and to step inside. I look at the suit suspiciously. I’m not sure I want to climb in there. I’m much happier out here, thanks.

Unfortunately, as the others around me begin unbuttoning, I realize that I don’t have much choice. I take off my jacket, folding it up and laying it carefully on the poured-concrete floor. Several places down from me, I notice Darait casually dropping her jacket in a heap. My boots are off next. The floor is cold through my socks.

Tentative, I turn around, the suit now behind me. I reach my right foot back, placing it inside the boot of the armor. Instantly, the armor closes over it, encasing my foot up to the ankle. I’m forcibly reminded of a time when I was walking through the woods several years back, long before first contact. It was a few days after a rain, and the ground had dried in most places. I took a step, expecting to find solid dirt, but instead sinking halfway to my knee in opaque mud. Even with my foot lodged inside the earth, the ground around it looked perfectly stable. The end of my leg had simply disappeared.

I step my left foot into the armor, and am now covered up to my waist in the metal hexagons. I insert my hands into the gloves. The suit closes over my arms and chest. Now the suit is sealing around my head, zipping itself shut in front of my face. The armor engulfs
me like a fist around a bug. The last of the hexagons slide into place, cutting off the sounds of the machine shop. My world is silence.

The room is quiet. Dark. I’m seated at a small, white table, two human guards standing behind me. My hands are still cuffed. I’m slouched forward in the chair, looking downward at the restraints. The skin on my wrists is beginning to itch. It’s a small room. Maybe twelve feet square. There’s a light set into the ceiling, but it’s turned off right now. It’s been off since I was dragged in here. The only other light source is a lamp on the table.

The door to the room opens, admitting a triangle of light from the hallway. A human walks through the door. I can’t see its face. The light is at its back. It walks over to the table and sits across from me. It places down a styrofoam cup, then adjusts the lamp to point directly in my face. Unnecessary.

“God, you’re filthy.” It’s an offhanded comment. An aside. But it’s not wrong. I’m still covered in dried blood, and black ash still clings to my clothes and hair. The human takes a loud sip from the styrofoam cup. It swallows. “What’s your name?” I ignore the question. “Huh? What’s your name?” Silence. The human waits another second, then gestures to one of the guards. Peripherally, I see the guard pull out a pair of headphones. It puts them over my ears. The human speaks again. This time, I hear its voice in digitally reconstructed Ohnieil. “What’s your name?” I look down at my wrists. They itch. “Tell me your rank.”

“I’m a civilian.” I’m almost surprised to hear my voice. I sound rusty, an old iron fence. I can’t see the human’s face, but I can see its outline as it shakes its head.

“No, you’re not. Nobody attacks a grounded squadron without training. Aiohn doesn’t train its civilians for combat. Tell me your rank.”

I hesitate. Then I realize that there is nothing left to reserve myself for. “I am a civilian,” I say, switching over to the human’s language, “and I am not half as filthy as the humans now lying face-down in the dirt. The humans who bombed my city to ash. Compared with theirs, my hands are as clean as running crystal water.”

The human pauses. Then, “What is your name?”

“Void.”

“What is your rank?”

“I am a civilian.”

“Where did you receive your training?”

“I have no training.”

“Then how did you defeat our troops? Were you alone?”

“I am still alone.”

“How did you defeat our troops?”

“They were unprepared. Humans are blind at night.”

“Why did you attack the squadron?”

“Why did you attack my city?”

“Tactical advantage.”
“Hate!” I pound the table with my fists. Instantly, both guards have their weapons out and pointed straight at my head. I ignore them, standing up from the chair. “You attacked us because of hate! We were a peaceful civilian population! There was no tactical advantage!” The guards are shouting at me, ordering me to sit back down. I round on one of them, the one who put the headphones on me. The barrel of its gun is now inches from my nose. “I did not hate you before,” I hiss. “I hate you now.”

The human’s voice comes from behind me. It’s still seated. It sounds perfectly collected. “What do you think is going to happen to you here?”

I turn back to the human, straining my eyes to see past the glare of the lamp. “I don’t care.”

“Do you have any valuable intelligence for us?”

“No.”

The human nods. “Then you should know that we are authorized to put you down. Our camps are full. We cannot house any more prisoners of war. So unless you have something to offer us, we will euthanize you.” It pauses. “Do you have any valuable intelligence for us?” it asks again.

“No.”

The human reaches a hand toward the cup on the table. I see its skin briefly illuminated by the lamplight. It takes a sip, and lowers the cup back down. “Then we have no more use for you.” It gestures to the guards, who grab me by my shoulders and begin carrying me out of the room. “You have one hour to change your answer,” the human says.
Chapter Twenty-Four

A shuddering blast shakes the world, knocking the ground from under me. I land on my side in the rust-colored dirt. I struggle to get up, using the wall of the rocky canyon for support. As soon as I have my feet back, I look around in the direction of the blast. Not even a hundred feet away, a whole section of the canyon wall has collapsed, spilling tons of rock and dirt over the path. I hear other explosions, more distant. The bombardment is nonstop.

“Everyone up! Everyone up now! Stay with your Quarters! Kyahsem, you come with me. We’re going left.” Aisoh is shouting orders, but even with his voice amplified inside my helmet, I barely hear him. The blast is still ringing in my skull. “Lee, Darait, take your Quarters right. We have to split up. The paths are too narrow for us to stay together as a Full Unit. Each Quarter will take one aisle. Stay behind cover as much as possible. Kyahsem, we’re moving.”

Aisoh takes off, jogging down the canyon, trailed closely by his Quarter and by Kyahsem’s. I look over to Darait. She’s my Quarter Leader. Also with us are Hetter and Zhuem. I don’t know these two men very well yet. Darait waves us over, and the four of us get into a traveling formation, a triangle with Darait at the tip, me behind her, and Hetter and Zhuem to my left and right. Darait’s voice cracks over the intercom. “Lee, you all set? We’re --” Lee and her Quarter are already running down the canyon. Darait shakes her head, muttering something that doesn’t quite come through the static. She waves us forward, and we start jogging after them.

The canyon walls stretch upwards for nearly thirty-two feet, rising on either side of the path at a seventy-five degree angle. The path itself is only eight feet wide, and the walls feel tight around me as we run. The ground is almost perfectly level. It’s made of same compacted stone and dirt as the rest of the canyon. Hard and rusty. None of this is natural. The canyon is a remnant from a strip-mining operation. A human mine. Not one of ours. It was abandoned when the earth grew empty, then revived by the humans as a military outpost when the war began.

Lee and her Quarter have made it to the first intersection, and come to a stop several feet from the edge. The mine is arranged like a series of city blocks, with a perfect grid of paths cut deep into the ground. Right now, we’re heading along a path pointed straight East. The path intersecting us is pointed North. Lee presses her back against the North wall of the canyon, and slides over to the corner of the intersection. I can’t see her face. It’s shrouded by the faceplate of her helmet. We’re all in full armor, painted a dark, lustrous green. The inside of my helmet is tattooed with a series of transparent heads-up displays, overlaying the outside world. One of them tracks the number of rounds left in my rifle’s powerpack. Another projects the health of my armor; any dents or breaks show up here. There are many more, but the displays I pay attention to most are the tags. Each of the soldiers around me has a small nameplate superimposed on the air above their heads,
along with a static picture of their faces. With everyone covered in head to toe in metal and armor, it’s the only way I can tell who’s who.

Slowly, Lee turns to looks around the corner. Almost instantaneously, gunfire starts up, shattering the air. I duck, seeing sparks dance off the walls of the canyon where bullets impact, tearing off chunks of stone and sending up clouds of dust. Lee jerks back from the edge. The gunfire stops. In its wake comes a pause. Silence. I’m gripping my rifle tightly with both hands. I don’t think I’m ready for the fighting to begin so soon.

“Well. How about that.” I hear Darait’s voice on the intercom. She steps out of formation, toward Lee. She had also ducked, but she seems relaxed again now. “Aisoh said each Quarter should take one of the aisles going North.” She points to the intersection, still foggy with rock dust. “Because you got here first, you may have this one. Does that seem fair?”

I close my eyes. Come on, I think. We have enough to worry about without adding an argument with another Quarter Leader. Especially Lee. I might not like her, either, but she is one of the best soldiers in the Unit. She’s earned her rank, perhaps even more so than Darait.

Lee glares at my friend. “We’ll take this one,” she says. “Would you like to walk through before we get to work?” Lee gestures toward the path on the other side of the intersection.

Darait shakes her head. “No, that’s all right. You go ahead and clear the way first. We’ll wait here.” Saying this, Darait plants the nose of her rifle in the dirt, leaning gently on the butt with her forearms. Lee glares for a second more, then points to one of the soldiers in her Quarter. She must have turned on a private intercom channel because I can’t hear her as she continues to gesture and give orders. She then walks over to the center of the path, staying several feet back from the edge of the intersection. The soldier follows her, staying to her left, and together they crouch down as if preparing for a race.

There’s a silent countdown, and the pair bursts into motion, sprinting as quickly as they can toward the open space. They enter the intersection, and the response comes within half a second. It’s deafening. But at first, everything seems to be going well. None of the bullets are finding their target, only hammering into the floor or walls of the canyon. But then there’s another shuddering explosion, much closer than the other ones I keep hearing. The ground convulses under the running soldier’s feet and he trips, crashing to the ground. His rifle spins out of his grip, landing several feet away in the dust. Lee doesn’t even pause. She keeps sprinting, making it clear to the other side.

The soldier is getting back to his feet, but I can already tell that he’s too slow. The first few bullets land home, ricocheting off his armor and knocking him back down. Lee turns her rifle around the corner of the intersection and starts firing at the human nest. The two other soldiers in her Quarter do the same, firing around the sharp corner of the canyon. It’s not enough. The barrage hardly even slows. The soldier is hit again. This time, when he strikes the ground, he doesn’t move to get back up.
I’m frozen. This has all happened so fast. I don’t even know what to do. But next to me, Darait is already in motion. She’s running toward the intersection, adjusting her rifle setting as she goes. Normally, when a laser rifle discharges, the shot is silent. Whatever’s hit might make some noise, but the rifle itself is quiet. This isn’t the case at high power settings. As Darait barrels into the intersection, turning her rifle down the aisle and firing, I hear the loud crack! of her rifle’s capacitor discharging. There’s an even louder explosion as her shot impacts on the canyon wall. I can hear the stone fragmenting, blasting outward over the path. The gunfire pauses, the shooter taking cover. Darait fires again, still running. More stone debris rains down. She’s reached the soldier now, and grabs his forearm, dragging him toward cover. Lee and her Quarter keep up their assault, and Darait makes it out of the intersection. Immediately, she drops her rifle and bends down over the soldier. He still isn’t moving.

Lee shouts an order, and the two soldiers on this side of the intersection race around the corner and start running toward the nest. Lee keeps shooting, maintaining their cover. A few seconds later, there’s another burst of gunfire and a distant scream, a small explosion. The gunfire stops. “Clear.” It’s one of the soldiers on the intercom.

Lee nods. “Good. Stay there. Make sure nothing comes this way. I’ll join you in a moment.” She crouches down by the soldier. I run over to join them, followed by Zhuem and then Hetter. Darait’s taken a section of the soldier’s armor off, exposing the skin of the lower-left abdomen. It’s covered in blood. I can see the hole cut through the flesh even from this distance. Darait takes out a small box, stored next to her ammunition pouch. From it, she produces a squat syringe, an inch in diameter and two and a half inches in length. It’s capped with a tube instead of a needle. Darait inserts the tube into the wound and empties the syringe, filling the hole with small, absorbent pellets. That should stop the bleeding. The soldier shudders. I can see his stomach muscles twitching in pain. It’s horrible to see, but it’s a relief to see him moving at all. Darait presses a bandage against the wound, glaring at Lee.

“What kind of idiot command was that?” she spits. “Let’s just run across the intersection and see what happens!’ What were you thinking?”

Lee stares back. “You know I can’t help it when someone trips. Thank you for your help, Darait. You may leave now.” Her words are clipped, but the also sounds unusually subdued. She wasn’t prepared for things to go this badly. She speaks over the intercom, addressing another member of her Quarter. “Mahtah, get back here. You’re staying behind to look after Fain.”

“We should stay together,” Darait says. “With Mahtah and Fain stuck here, you’re down to a force of two. That’s not enough.”

“Darait, we both have our own aisles to clear. Mine is right here. Yours is over there.” Lee points Eastward down the path. There’s another intersection about sixty-four feet away. “Go do your job, and let me do mine.” Mahtah arrives just as she’s saying this, and he immediately crouches over Fain. Reluctantly, Darait takes her hands off the
bandage, letting Mahtah take over. She points a finger at Lee. The palm of her armor is stained red.

“You are going to get everyone in your Quarter killed.”

Lee stands up, picking up her rifle from the ground. “Go do your job.” Then, “Mahtah, you’ll have to re-bandage the wound. Keep him safe.” Lee turns away and jogs around the corner, heading toward the empty nest.

Darait shakes her head in disgust. Then she taps Mahtah on the shoulder. “Are you all right here?” Mahtah nods. He’s already getting out a fresh roll of bandages. Darait grunts. Then she scoops up her rifle and gets to her feet. “Let’s go,” she says, and starts jogging down the path. Zhum, Hetter, and I follow after her. I glance back at Fain. He’s still bleeding. I look away.

Not first the first time, I feel my attention drawn to the movement of my limbs. Inside the armor, every step I take is powered and strengthened. It’s as if I’ve been working against an elastic band my whole life, and now, suddenly, the band is working for me. I have strength that I never had before. I can climb walls, lift boulders. It’s completely unnatural. Transitioning from having the armor on to taking the armor off is like drifting into and out of a dream. I remember a nightmare I once had, over a decade ago. Something was chasing me. I couldn’t see its face. But it would never catch me because I had learned to run. I learned to bend forward until my arms reached the ground and I was scrambling on all fours, pulling the ground toward me with my claws and pushing it behind me with my feet. To escape a monster, I became an animal.

Darait slows down as we approach the next intersection, stopping half a dozen feet from the corner. We’ve reached the site of the explosion, the blast that knocked me to my knees just minutes ago. The air here is still thick with dust. Across the intersection, the canyon wall has been blown out, releasing an avalanche of rubble and rock onto the path. At its peak, a short ways past the intersection, the ruined pile is easily twenty feet deep. The rubble spills out into the area where the two paths cross. There are some smaller stones over on our side, but the majority of the debris stops half-way across the Northbound path. There’s one boulder in particular, half the size of a small truck, that’s landed in the exact center of the intersection. It’s deep red, severely scarred and cracked, leaning forward slightly as if to offset an unfelt wind. Darait points to the mountain of shattered rock. “That’s going to be a problem. We can’t run across the intersection when there’s such bad footing. We need another plan.”

Zhum points his rifle toward the corner. “Do we even know that this intersection is guarded?”

Darait shakes her head. “No, and we’re not checking. We’re assuming. Checking lets them know we’re here. I’d rather do extra work than give a sniper warning.” Zhum shrugs. He doesn’t seem very interested in strategy.

“Can’t we just do what Lee did?” he asks. “Two of us use that rock as cover, the other two move forward and take out the gunner.” He points at the giant boulder. “Simple.”
“That plan didn’t exactly work out well for Lee,” I say. I’m annoyed that I have to point this out. “It’s not a good idea. Even if we make it to the boulder, the two people rushing will be in danger. It won’t work.”

Zhuem turns toward me. “How do you know it won’t work?” he asks. “Since when are you a trained strategist?”

I sigh. Now I’m really annoyed. We’re wasting time. “We just saw that plan fail. Weren’t you paying attention?”

Zhuem shakes his head, gesturing back toward Fain and Mahtah. “I saw a plan work perfectly, despite bad luck and clumsiness. If Fain hadn’t tripped, Lee’s maneuver would have been flawless. As it was, she still managed to clear the intersection. Sounds fine to me.”

“Fain was shot!” I yell. “How is that a perfect plan?”

Zhuem makes a noise like he’s about to speak, but Darait interrupts. “Enough!” I wince as her voice crackles into my helmet. She must have just turned her microphone volume up. “Both of you need to calm down.” There’s a pause, Darait adjusting her volume to a more reasonable level. “Zhuem, we all know that Lee’s plan didn’t work out. Don’t pretend that it did.” She points at me. “Void, I agree that Lee’s plan stinks, but we don’t have much else. Unless you have another idea, cover-and-rush is all we’ve got.”

“But it’s a bad plan!” I insist. “It won’t work.”

Darait nods. “Right. So give me an alternative.”

Alternative? “I don’t have another plan,” I say, defensive. “I just-”

“Then come up with one.” She interrupts me. “Come one. Give me something to work with.”

I blink. I don’t have a plan. I really don’t. I glance over at Zhuem. He’s staring at me from behind the black faceplate of his helmet. All right, I think. A plan. No problem. A plan. Easily done. I look around. Hm.

The problem with offensive strategies is exposure. The problem with defensive strategies is immobility. We need to find a way of taking advantage of an enemy who stays still. For instance, we don’t necessarily need to attack quickly. It’s not as if the humans are going anywhere. A still target is easier to hit, but not if we’re sniping around corners and dodging bullets. We need to get closer without exposing ourselves. We need another route. But it’s not as if we can attack them from the sides or from behind. It’s a canyon. Those paths are closed to us. We need another angle. I look around. We’re in a canyon. Perfect.

“How’s this,” I say. “One person stays here and provides cover as one person moves behind that boulder. Together, they both provide cover as two people move across the intersection and climb the rockslide. The climbers move to the top of the rubble and find a way of getting on top of the canyon.” I point to the wall of rock in the North-East corner of the intersection. “The climbers crawl North and shoot downward. We can probably take the nest out from that position. And if we can’t, we’d still be able to provide excellent cover as the two people left back here rush the nest.”
Darait looks at me. She pauses for a second. Then she turns toward Zhuem, tapping him on the shoulder. “I know you want to argue with Void,” she says. “Here’s your chance. What’s she overlooking?”

Zhuem looks around for a moment, then points to the jumble of rocks. “Climbing that won’t be easy. We’ll be exposed in the intersection for several seconds.”

“That’s why we have two people giving cover,” I say. “If we take them by surprise and keep them on the defensive, getting out of sight shouldn’t be a problem.”

Zhuem gestures to the top of the canyon. “We don’t know what kind of defenses are up there. They could have planted mines.”

I shrug. “The ridge is a low-traffic area. If they were planting explosives, they would have done it on the paths we’re all running around on. The ridge should be clear.”

Zhuem pauses, thinking. Darait doesn’t give him the time. “All right, that sounds good to me,” she says. “Void, you and Hetter are climbing. Zhuem, you and I are staying here to give cover. Any questions? No? Good.” Darait looks around. “Void, Hetter, get ready to run. Zhuem, I’m going to the boulder. Get ready to cover me.”

I nod, shifting my rifle to the magnetized strip on my back. I crouch down, getting ready to sprint into the intersection. Next to me, Hetter does the same. Zhuem moves over to the corner of the intersection, rifle in hand. Darait also crouches down, pointing her entire body toward the space behind the boulder. She glances around. “Okay,” she says. “Zhuem?” He nods. “Hit them.”

Zhuem takes a breath. I hear it crackle over the intercom. Then he pokes his rifle around the corner and immediately begins firing. I can’t see his target, what he’s hitting, if he’s hitting. But I hear the blasts of rupturing stone and, a moment later, the grind of gunfire. Darait springs out of her crouch and races toward to boulder. The barrage continues, and I see puffs of fiery dirt burst up where bullets strike the ground. Darait slides behind the rock, checks herself, then starts shooting around the side. The gunfire pauses now, the shooter ducking behind a wall. Darait yells at us to move. I don’t wait for her to say it again. I don’t even think. I just start running. I’m out in the intersection now. I don’t look left. Only ahead. The loose rocks slide under my feet, and it’s only some miracle that keeps me moving forward. I jump over the stones, feeling them shift with every step. The gunfire has started again, sporadic as the shooter moves in and out of cover. Darait and Zhuem are also ducking now, but seem to be firing more than waiting. My foot slips, and I fall to a knee. If not for the armor, I would have just dented a shin. I keep going, trying to climb the mountain as quickly as possible. More gunshots. I see a bullet graze a stone just feet from my left hand. Darait’s firing again, her shots rapid. I don’t know about accurate. And them I’m out of the intersection and behind the far wall, standing on twelve feet of broken rubble. I look around. Hetter’s close behind. I pull him up the last few feet and we’re both clear.

“We’re out,” I say. Immediately, both Darait and Zhuem pull back behind cover. In response, the gunfire starts again. I watch as a stream of bullets shatters into the front of
Darait's boulder. Dust and chunks of grit begin to pour off the stone's face. Then the gunfire stops.

Darait glances up at us. “Any injuries?” she asks. I shake my head ‘no.’ “Good,” she says. “Keep going.” She starts reloading her rifle, ejecting a spent power source and replacing it with a new one from her belt. I turn back to the rocks and continue to climb.

I pause again at the peak of the rockslide, surveying the canyon wall. There is still a good twelve feet from here to the canyon rim, twelve feet of sheer compacted rock. It looked like a shorter distance to climb from the ground. Now that I’m here it looks like, well, a sheer rock wall.

“Do you want to try getting on my shoulders?” It’s Hetter. I’ve only heard him speak a few times before, and I’m almost surprised to hear him now. His voice is soft. Nearly delicate. “I might be able to lift you high enough.”

I shake my head. “No. We both need to get to the top. I have another idea. Step back.” I move a few feet away from the wall, taking my rifle back out. I point it straight at the canyon face and pull the trigger. A small portion of the wall explodes outwards, a hole about the size of my clenched fist, showering Hetter and myself with pebble-sized debris. A rock bounces off my faceplate, making my flinch. I hold my breath. I don’t want the whole canyon to collapse. But the wall remain intact. I nod. Good. I point my rifle again and start firing, punching handholds into the rock. When I’m finished, the wall look like it’s been assaulted by a murderous sculptor, hammering out a misshapen ladder. My mother would be appalled. I pause, then squeeze my eyes shut and shake my head. Not right now, please. Maybe later. Just not now.

I return my rifle to the strip on my back, putting my hands on the newly-formed dents in the wall. I take a breath, then start heaving myself upward. I discover quickly that the handholds I’ve made aren’t very good. I have to kick and crawl the whole way, slowly inching up the canyon. Even with the suit pulling with me, the climb is a slog. Finally, I get my fingertips over the top of the ridge. Careful, I raise my head. The top of the canyon is empty. A flat, rocky plateau in the shape of a giant square. To the left and right and all around are other plateaus of identical shape and appearance. The sky above the mine is a dirty yellow fog, the air filled with dust and smoke. There are a few canyons in the mine that are billowing up black clouds of ash. Then, at the center of the mine, almost straight ahead of me, is a concrete block-like structure. The base itself. It’s only slightly taller than the surrounding canyons, but covers three whole blocks of the grid. I squint at the structure. There’s something on top of it, a vent of some sort. Or maybe a communications tower? Doubtful. It looks too fat to be communications.

I haul myself the rest of the way onto the ridge, keeping my belly flat to the stone. I stay as low as possible. Hetter comes up after me. Once on the ridge, he starts standing up. I grab him and forcefully pull him back down, hissing into the intercom. “What are you doing? Stay down!”
Hetter shrugs, but still obeys. “Fine,” he says, “but there’s no one up here. We’re safe.”

Darait speaks up in my ear. She’s been listening in. “Hetter, listen to Void. I want both of you staying low and out of sight. Don’t take any chances.” Hetter shrugs again, but doesn’t protest.

We start crawling toward the far left corner of the plateau, staying many feet away from the edge. It takes a while to crawl like this, but anything else isn’t worth the risk. When we reach the far end of the plateau, I reach my arm behind me and grab my rifle. Hetter follows suit. Slowly, we edge our way closer to the rim. I peek over the lip of the canyon and look down.

There are three humans. They’re lying behind a wall of sandbags, their guns lying on top, pointed down the canyon. The middle human is looking through the sight of a machine gun, which is strapped on top of a short tripod. The humans look filthy. Covered in dirt. Red mud from the canyons. Each one is wearing a bulky metal exoskeleton, making their bodies look twice as big as they really are. And probably making them eight times as strong. Each one of those exoskeletons looks powerful enough to easily pick up Darait’s boulder. What the exoskeletons don’t do, however, is provide much in the way of protection. They’re strapped on over standard uniforms. The humans are most likely wearing some form of armor, but it’s hidden under the fabric of their clothing. I’ve never seen exoskeletons like these before.

I speak into the intercom. Even though it’s unnecessary, I find myself whispering. “We’re in position.”

There’s a moment of static, then Darait answers back. “Good. Do you have a clear line of sight?”

I nod. “Yes, we do. There are three targets.”

“What are they doing right now?”

“Waiting for you to pop back out.” I pause, a moment longer than I need to. “Should we open fire?”

Static. Then, “Yes. Take them out now.”

I nod again. “Yes, Ma’am.” I lay the barrel of my rifle on the ridge, peering through the sight at the scene below. “Hetter, I’m taking the middle one.”

“Understood.” I feel Hetter positioning himself next to me. “I’ll take the far one.”

I center the crosshairs of my rifle on the upper portion of the human’s back, between its shoulder blades. I can see the sweat that’s come through its uniform, under the arms and along the spine. We’re almost directly over them. I feel my heart beating in my stomach. It’s an easy shot. “Call the timing, Ma’am,” I say.

“Fire.”

I squeeze the trigger, hear the crack of the capacitor. See the human collapse as a hole is torn through its spine at the base of its neck. See blood splatter. Hetter makes his shot, too. The human crumples. Also dead. I see the third human jerk away from its
companions, nearly stand up in its surprise. Hetter and I both hit it. My shot lands on the left shoulder, blowing away the exoskeleton and revealing white bone. Hetter’s shot takes it in the side of the head. The human shudders and falls, seeming to implode. It twitches for a moment. Then it is still.

I don’t move. I stay lying flat on my stomach, rifle pointed down into the canyon. “All clear,” I hear myself say. I hear Darait speaking over the intercom. Zhuem, too. Well done. Good job. Next to me, I see Hetter starting to get up. I tell him to stay down. He ignores me. Maybe he didn’t hear me. Maybe I didn’t say anything. He continues to rise. I glance over toward the center of the mine, to the main base. There’s something moving. I blink. One of the communications towers is rotating. Only, it doesn’t look like a comm tower anymore. I see its barrel turning around. Turning toward us. My mouth is dry. My throat feels moldy. The end of the barrel flashes, a burst of fire. I scream. “MOVE!”

Without waiting for a response, I scramble to my feet and launch myself off the top of the canyon. An instant later, before I’ve even reached the top of my arc, I hear a massive explosion erupt behind me. The blast wave reaches me first, rushing through the air and pummeling into my back. Next comes the ball of fire. Chasing after me, catching up to me. Swallowing me. I feel the heat through my armor, feel it burn the skin on the back of my neck. See the flames surround me, brighter than the surface of a star. For a fleeting second, I wonder if this is what my parents saw. The very last thing they ever watched. And then the blast has grabbed me and is throwing me forward, blasting me out like a shot from a musket. I hurtle toward the opposite wall of the canyon, crashing into it and bouncing off. I fall like a stone, bouncing and spinning off the seventy-five degree slope. When I hit the ground, I feel every joint in my body separate. Every vertebra in my back and neck slide across one another like dry crackers off rimless plates. I continue rolling. I don’t stop until I hit the other canyon wall, smacking into it with a sick crunch. I lie still. I’ve forgotten how to breathe. I think I’m dying. Directly in front of my face is the rock wall. Reddish brown. Textured with pebbles and bits of gravel. There’s a long crack running down my faceplate, cutting the outside world in two. There are several other cracks spinning off of it, silver branches on a silver tree. The displays are dead. I can’t feel my left arm. Everything else is in pain. My heart is beating rapidly. Painfully. But it doesn’t seem to be moving blood. It’s just flapping in the wind.

Something grabs my ankle. I’d scream if I had breath. I’m dragged over the ground. I’m completely limp. Behind us, where I was lying a moment before, I hear a deep rumbling. I can feel the sound in my cheekbones, so I know the noise must be deafening. But I’m already deaf. I hear almost nothing. At first I think it’s another missile. But then I see dust, not fire. Rockslide. The canyon is collapsing. I’m being evacuated.

I’m dragged several more feet, but then a second person reaches me. Together, they begin carrying me, moving quickly over the dirt. They round a corner and lay me down next to a wall. They bend over me. All I see are their black faceplates. I can’t tell which one is Darait. Which one is Zhuem. I don’t see any sign of Hetter. One of the soldiers is leaning
toward my face. It looks like it's yelling at me. I don't hear anything. It shakes me. I grunt in
pain. I'm breathing again. I guess that's a good thing.

my shoulder to power the motion. The soldier leaning over me grabs my hand. It must be
Darait. "V-id? -re yo- all ---ht? Wh-t -app-n-d?"

I close my eyes. I'm not ready to talk. I should be dead. A fall like that should have
killed me. My bones should be broken, sticking out through my skin. My spine should have
snapped. It must be the armor. It must have reinforced my bones and kept my joints from
overextending. Too bad it couldn't stop momentum from carrying through and liquefying
my organs. Some feeling has returned to my left arm. Now I hurt everywhere. Breathing's
especially painful. I think I have at least one cracked rib. "Gimme a second," I mutter.

Darait leans back, working on the controls for her suit. Then, "Void? Can you hear
me? Your words are coming in garbled. I think your intercom's broken. I've switched to an
external speaker. Can you do that too?"

Her voice is coming through clearly now. External speaker. Good idea. "Command," I
murmur, trying to speak clearly. I've always hated voice prompts. And now my lips are
slurring the words. "Switch broadcast channel to external speaker." I hear a computerized
voice in my ear, repeating my order. The voice is a little tinny, but otherwise intact. My
helmet's speakers are fine, then. Just the intercom that's broken. I blink up at Darait. "I can
hear you," I say.

Darait looks relieved. "Void!" She sounds relieved, too. I've never heard to sound so
emotional. "Void, how do you feel? That fall should have killed you! What happened up
there?"

"Do I have internal bleeding? My displays are dead." I feel like I should be one giant cavity,
an aquarium of shredded tissue inside a shell of skin. I can't confirm this, though, because
my helmet isn't working.

Darait shakes her head. "According to your armor, you have some pretty heavy
bruising and some bones out of place, but otherwise you look okay." Bones out of place.
That sounds right. Like my entire spine. I can already feel my back muscles starting to
twitch and spasm, attempting to pull my vertebrae back into line. It feels like I have an
army of furious beetles working under my skin. "What happened up there?" Darait asks.

"There's an anti-tower on the main base," I say. "Hetter stood up. It saw us."

Darait sits back, crouching next to me. She takes a moment to absorb the
information. Then, "Can you stand up?" she asks. I give my head a tiny shake. "Okay," she
says with a sigh. "Then we're going to have to move you. We're going to get you to Fain and
Mahtah. You'll be safe there. Zhuem, you and I need to continue moving forward." Zhuem
nods and stands up. Darait looks back at me. "How do you want us to carry you?"
I’m about to start protesting, saying that I don’t want them to carry me anywhere, no matter how they go about it. I don’t want anyone to touch me. But I never get the chance. Gunfire breaks out to the West of us, back toward Fain and Mahtah. As I watch, a group of three humans runs around the corner of the intersection cleared by Lee. Mahtah has been sitting on the ground next to Fain. He doesn’t even make it to his feet before a dozen bullets have ripped through his armor. He falls backward into the rock and slides down, dead. The guns then turn toward Fain. I see him lift an arm in front of his face. It doesn’t do him any good. Zhuem is just grabbing his rifle as the next burst of gunfire sounds out. I see Fain spasm, blood splattering the stone around him. Zhuem is shooting now, walking sideways as he fires, moving into the center of the path and towards the other wall of the canyon. He only has time to take two steps before one of the humans levels the nose of a massive tube at him and squeezes the trigger. The missile streaks down the canyon, leaving a trail of fire behind it. It move so quickly that all I have time to do is fear. An intense jolt of fear detonates in my small intestine, scorching out through my body. It’s so visceral, so intense, that it feels as though someone’s kicked me with an iron boot.

But Darait has time for something more than fear. She’s already right next to me, but she changes her position so that she’s lying over me, her body completely covering mine. Over her shoulder, I see the ball of flame rocketing closer. Then it hits Zhuem and explodes with a violent flash and shattering roar, filling the canyon with a wave of white fire. The blast hits Darait like a battering ram, smashing her into me with such force that she bounces off, landing several feet away from me. I, too, am lifted into the air, thrown into the wall of the canyon, twisting, before I land on my side with a crash.

I hit the ground, and am still as a corpse. New cracks have appeared in my faceplate, and an entire piece of the glass is missing, leaving a jagged hole about the size of my thumb. My heart is beating hard and loud in my chest, vibrating so fiercely that I feel my whole body shaking in time with its rhythm. My breath tastes alkaline. The smoke from the explosion is clearing, and I can see the humans running toward me. Still I don’t move. They get closer and then are on top of me, their boots thudding into the ground just feet from where I lie. They don’t stop, but keep on running, disappearing around the corner of the intersection that I just fought to capture. They must think I’m dead. Blistered and cracked armor, shattered faceplate. Broken body. Am I not dead?

Slowly, I reach an arm out and touch Darait on the knee. She doesn’t respond. I push against her leg, feeling it move. Feeling the lack of resistance. I pull my hand away. My fingers curl in revulsion. I feel something inside me break. Like an icicle used to bear weight as a column, bear weight that would crumple even stone. My breathing becomes more rapid, and I feel myself pushing off from the ground, fighting toward a standing position. And then I’m running. I’m running. I’m running over the hard-packed dirt, running and stumbling and limping and falling and getting back up and running even faster. I take turns at intersections, not pausing once. I turn, I run straight, I turn again. Running. I need to find safety. I need to find someone. Running. My pulse is jumping in my neck, my bones
grinding against each other, my lungs scalding from the sulfur in the air and the blood in my mouth. I need to run faster. Faster. Farther. I need to get out of here. I need to get out. I’m running flat out, barreling over the ground, sprinting now. I need to get out.

I turn around another corner and collide head-on with a massive shape. My feet fly out from underneath me and I land hard on my back. The shape falls, too. I’m already clawing my way back up, scrambling to regain my feet. On the ground next to me is a human in a full exoskeleton, metal ribbing extending over its arms, legs, and torso. It’s just as shocked as I am, but is now starting to get up. I turn and run away. I’ve only made it a few steps before my foot smacks into something hard and heavy. The human’s gun, lying on the ground where it landed. I trip, falling forward, sliding over the ground. Desperate, I struggle to get up again. But then the human plows into me, tackling me at full force. It hits me in the side, propelling me into the air. We hit the ground and roll, tumbling over and under one another.

We come to a stop with the human on top of me. Its full weight is on my body, and it’s trying to bring its arms down toward my head. I’ve grabbed its forearms and am pushing back up, straining to keep it away. It’s a losing battle. The human’s armor is stronger than mine. Maybe if I were healed. Maybe if my armor were held together by more than hope. As it is, I feel myself being slowly overpowered.

The human jerks its arms back suddenly, tearing its right hand away from my grip. It pulls its fist back and throws a punch at my head. I move my head just in time, and I feel the iron fist of the exoskeleton skittering off the side of my helmet. My left hand is free now, and I release a backhanded blow at the human’s face. It’s helmet only covers its scalp and forehead, and my armored hand connects with its nose and mouth, breaking the nose and upper lip. The human cries out, pulling backward involuntarily. I take advantage of the opportunity and push hard off the ground, flipping us over so that I’m the one on top. I start bludgeoning the human with my fists, punching, hitting, clawing at anything I can reach.

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I know I can’t win this on strength. I need to cheat. I turn my focus away from the rifle pressing nearer and nearer to my neck, and toward the one weapon I have left to me. My wrists are flexed right now, bent backward as the human bears down on me. I fight to straighten them, straining to get them back into the neutral position. The rifle is now mere inches from my neck. I’m sure the human could push it straight through my armor. Slowly, too slowly, my wrists are straightening. Every degree gained is a battle. Then, just as I begin to feel pressure building against my windpipe, my wrists are in position. I scream the command into my helmet. Immediately, foot-long blades launch out from the sheaths on my forearms, powering their way upward. They catch the human in the chest, crunching through fabric, skin, muscle, and bone. One strikes under the right pectoral muscle. The other pierces the upper sternum. The human’s chest is so close to mine right now that the blades tunnel through its entire body, protruding several inches from its back. The human quivers. It twitches, coughing once. A thick gob of blood spills from its mouth, splattering onto my faceplate and staining my view with red. Its eyes are spinning, but the rest of its body goes limp. Its neck drops down, its head lolling toward mine. It’s not breathing anymore.

For a second, I lie on the ground with the human above me, suspended on the pair of spikes. My breath is shaking in my chest. I roll the human off of me, landing it on the ground with a thud. I try to yank the blades free. They don’t come out easily. I hear more bone cracking as first one and then the other tears out. They’re dripping. I stand up slowly, carefully, feeling the ground ripple under my feet. My breath is loud in my ears. I stare around at the canyon, uncomprehending. I stagger over to the center of the canyon. My head is twitching on my neck, jerking between looking one way and the other. I look desperately, but I don’t see anything. I hardly even see the rock walls. I stand there, stumbling in small circles, blades still extended, still dripping. My mouth is open. I’m breathing heavily. My head is light. I feel my breath shaking, all my muscles twitching and spasming.

I hear gunfire behind me, feel the first bullets raking over my ruined armor. A few are stopped. The rest pierce, burrowing through me like white-hot coals. Pain erupts throughout my body, searing and crazing. I’m falling forward. The gunshots are booming and echoing between the rocks. I’m falling, but I never hit the ground. My world goes black. Gravity disappears like a candle in a hurricane. I’m still falling. Then gravity roars back to life and I plummet.
Chapter Twenty-Five

I land on the metal platform with a resounding crash. I can’t have been suspended more than a few inches when the simulator let go of me, but the fall still aches. My helmet clears, and light comes flooding back in. The pain lifts, too, evaporating from my muscles and bones, leaving only shadows and mist behind. My entire body is shaking. From head to toe. My breath is coming in raggedy gasps. I feel like I’m about to vomit. I crawl across the platform on my hands and knees and put my palm against one of the walls, leaning against it as I dry-wretch. Sour, acidic liquids leak up my throat, making me cough.

I push my way up into a standing position. Fumbling, I mess with my armor’s controls. Finally, it unzips and I stumble outward, gasping for air. I sit down, hard. I hug my knees to my chest. I’m cold.

The platform I’m sitting on is about twelve feet square. It’s the base of a cubic chamber with one wall missing, opening out onto the aisle of a long room. The chamber is raised one step up from the rest of the floor. Across the aisle from me is another chamber, just like my own. There are also chambers to my left and right. Sixteen in total. Many of the recruits, having died early, are walking up and down the aisle, talking to each other, watching the simulations still in progress. The soldier directly across from me is still alive in the simulation. I can tell that the person is female, but I don’t know who it is. She’s in full training armor, obscuring her body, and her glass helmet is covered in a projection of the battle. From outside the helmet, the projection looks distorted, as if seen through a fisheye lense. But I know how realistic it can be when you’re in the middle of it.

Her armor is suspended a few feet off the platform, and she’s interacting with objects that I can’t see. She’s walking on air, holding a rifle to her shoulder that only she can feel. It’s all in the armor. I know this. It’s the simulator interacting with the grains in the armor’s hexagonal chips, pushing and pulling at them until the textures of a false world feel true. Aisoh explained it to us soon after we received the training armor. He was showing us the final floor of the base, the one we’d missed on our first tour. He sounded proud. The simulators also use something similar to the artificial gravity generators on ships to mimic the feelings of acceleration, making us feel as though we’re stepping forward even though we never leave a twelve-foot box. He didn’t mention the pain stimulation. I had to find this feature on my own. The first time I was injured in a simulation, I thought I’d actually broken my leg. Then I was shot through the chest and I thought I’d actually die. I still don’t know how this part of the simulator works. All I know is that I hate it. I’m still shaking.

Darait strolls towards me from the other end of the room. She’s still in her training armor, and sits down next to me. “You okay?” she asks. “You don’t look so good.” I bite my lip and give my head a rough nod. I don’t look at her, choosing to continue staring across the aisle at the active simulation. Darait stares at me. Then she pokes me in the muscle of my shoulder with her index finger.
I glare at her. “What?”

She shrugs. “Just checking. Is there anything I can get you?” I shake my head. Darait shrugs again, and doesn’t press it further. We sit quietly for several seconds, watching the invisible battle unfold on the platform across from us. “I’ve already spoken with Hetter,” she says suddenly. “He says he’ll try not to be stupid again.” I nod, but there’s no feeling behind the movement. “I still think it was a good plan,” Darait continues. “Certainly more creative than what other Quarters came up with. I was actually talking to Fain just now, and he says his Quarter tried just running and - “

“Darait,” I say, cutting her off. She looks at me. “I don’t want to hear about it right now.” She looks a little let down, but she still flashes me a smile and nods her head. We revert back into silence. The woman across from us is running now. I can’t tell if she’s being chased or is giving chase herself. It all looks the same from out here. I glance over at Darait. I know what I need to say. I’m just a coward. I take several more seconds to psych myself up. Then, “Thank you,” I whisper.

Darait turns toward me. “For what?”

Now it’s my turn to shrug. I look down at my knees. “For saving my life. Thank you.”

Darait blinks. “Oh,” she says, and laughs. “No problem. I’m sure you’d do the same.” I nod. But in my heart I’m less sure. I don’t know if I could ever lie on top of someone like that, using my own body as a shield from a bomb blast. Even for my only living friend.

“Of course,” I say. Neither of us says more. We’re quiet, watching the woman across from us. Suddenly, her right shoulder jerks back as if struck by something, and she loses her balance. She stumbles, firing her invisible rifle. She’s struck again. And again. Then she falls to her knees and goes limp. She floats in the air, hovering above the platform while the simulator slowly lowers her. When she’s still two or three inches off the metal, the simulator drops her. She lands with an echoing clang.

The next day, I’m awakened by the morning alarm. I lie in bed for a moment, holding close the warmth of my sheets. Then the room light comes on. Sleep’s impossible now. Resigned, I swing my legs over the edge of the top bunk and hop down to the floor, swaying to keep my balance. Aisoh and a few others have beat me out of bed. But not too many. I still have hope, I think, of reaching the showers before too long of a line develops. If I move quickly. I reach under the bed and drag out my trunk, scanning my bracelet over the white and blue concentric circles. The lock gives a solid click! I swing the lid back and reach inside for a new change of clothes. I’ve grabbed hold of a pair of pants and I’m just starting to pull it out when something catches my eye. I freeze.

For a split second, all I do is stare blearily at the object. Am I still asleep? Then it registers more deeply. I feel a surge of fear squirt through my gut. I hold my breath, the primal urge to freeze when ambushed. I hear people moving around me, getting out of bed, retrieving clothes, setting off for the showers. But I stay perfectly still.

Lying in the right-hand side of the chest, right on top of a pile of folded shirts, is a small black box. It’s about eight inches across with an octagonal top, outward-sloping walls,
and a smaller octagonal base. It’s an oily black, like well-polished obsidian. Centered on the lid is a circular white and blue scanner. Beneath this, etched in bronze-colored letters, is my name. Void.

I let my breath out slowly, trying hard to understand. How did this get here? It wasn’t in there last night when I went to bed. I’m sure of it. Nor should it be here right now. It’s impossible for it to be here. When I closed the lid on the chest last night, locking it securely, there were only shirts, pants, and other clothing inside. Someone must have opened the chest in the middle of the night and inserted the black box. Someone was next to my bed while I slept. This is part of what frightens me. Being so vulnerable. Being so powerless. But what frightens me even more is the intent behind the delivery method. The box could have been delivered any number of ways. Any number of less personal ways. There’s no message attached to the box. There’s no need for one. The box itself is the message.

“What is that?”

I slam the lid of the chest closed so fast that the room resonates for a second with the loud boom. I hold it closed with both hands and stare up at Darait, my eyes wide. She’s sitting on the edge of the lower bunk. She’s looking at me quizzically. “Nothing,” I say eventually, swallowing and pressing my lips together. “It’s nothing.” Darait glances down at the chest and then back to me. She isn’t stupid. But, to my surprise and relief, she doesn’t press herself. She just gets out of bed, retrieves her own clothes, and leaves the room, looking back at me only once more. The door swings shut behind her.

At this point, most of the recruits have left the room. I wait until I’m the last one here before opening the chest again. I open it carefully, as if it’s a bomb waiting to detonate. I’m even more careful about getting out a shirt, sliding it slowly out from under the dark package. Then I close the chest again and quickly exit the room.

The showers are filled by the time I reach them. I wait anxiously in line. When it’s my turn, I shower quickly, dress, and jog over to the mess hall. I’m looking around for an empty table when Hetter calls me over. He’s sitting with Zhuem and Fain. Darait’s there, too. I don’t talk much during breakfast. I try eating quickly, shoveling down the moistened algae block. I excuse myself right after I’ve finished, when the others still have half their breakfast uneaten. I bus my tray and leave the room. I can see Darait watching me the whole time.

Once I’m in the hallway, I jog back toward the barracks section. With luck, I’ll find the room empty. Most people are in the mess hall right now, enjoying a few minutes of free time. When I reach our room, I glance up and down the hallway, making sure no one else is around. Then I press open the door and slide inside, closing it carefully behind me. It’s as I’d hoped. I’m alone here. I lean up against the door, catching my breath and looking down at the space under the bunk bed. Down toward the chest.

As the seconds pass in silence, I begin to feel silly. I have nothing to be ashamed of. Nothing to hide. So why am I sneaking around? I’m overreacting. Feeling slightly
embarrassed, I step farther into the room, crouching down in front of the bed and pulling out the chest. I swipe my bracelet over the scanner, hearing the *click* of the lock disengaging. Gingerly, I swing the lid of the chest open. I look inside and feel my heart drop. The black box is still there. I’d half hoped it would be gone. Silly.

I cradle the dark box with both hands, lifting it out from the chest. It’s fairly light, no more than a pound. I hold it up, seeing how the bronze lettering of my name shines darkly. The white and blue scanner on the lid seems to wink at me. I look around the room one more time, making sure that I’m the only one here. Then I press my left wrist against the blue circle. It glows briefly, accepting my identification. The glow fades. I wait in nervous expectation. But the box just sits in my hands, doing nothing. I wait several more seconds, then give it a tiny shake. Still nothing. I tip it half onto its side while lifting it higher, twisting my neck to look at the bottom. There’s nothing there. Just more smooth blackness. I tip the box back upright, staring at it in disappointment. I run my hand over the top, feeling for something to grasp, something to pry open. There’s nothing to find.

Suddenly, the box lets out a quiet hiss, a burst of air escaping. The smooth lid, which I’d taken to be a continuous piece, now splits into eight angular petals, the box blooming like a dark flower. The petals curl gently as they bend outward and down. The petals move slowly away from each other, gradually revealing the contents inside. As I look into the box, I can’t help myself. I let out a quiet “oh” of astonishment, cooing at the most beautiful thing I’ve ever laid eyes on.

There, swaddled in the depths of the black flower, curled up as if in sleep, is a bird. A beautiful, beautiful bird. I can’t take my eyes off it. It’s a dark, blue-black color, iridescent like oil in some places, completely matte in others. The darkness is broken here and there by a random pattern of silver streaks and rivulets, sometimes tarnished, sometimes bright, all making the overlying darkness seem like nothing more than a dusting of soot in the process of being rubbed away from a pure silver body. It’s a mechanical creature. That’s clear enough. But its detailing extends down to the tufts and veins on individual feathers. I’ve never seen anything so finely crafted. So beautiful.

Without thinking twice, I reach into the box and stroke the bird’s neck with the knuckle of my middle finger. It doesn’t feel like metal. It’s soft. Soft like actual down. The bird is warm, too. Warm as living flesh.

Suddenly, the bird twitches. I jerk my hand back, startled. My fear of the box was overshadowed for a moment by my astonishment at the perfect creature inside. But now it returns. As I watch, a shuddering spasm passes through the bird, starting at its head and running down the length of its body, straightening limbs and fluffing up feathers. The wave of spasming has exited the bird’s longest tail feather now, and the creature lies still. I hold my breath. A few seconds pass, nothing more happening. But then I see its throat starting to puff in and out. The breathing is slow at first, but quickly becomes more rapid. And then it opens its eyes and turns its neck to look up at me.
Its eyes aren’t what I’ve been expecting. Back home, all the artificial birds had milky white eyes and dull corneas that range from off-white to sickly yellow. But the eyes staring at me now are as bright and lively as liquid silver. Perfect shining orbs, each one more beautiful than the rarest jewel. I’m transfixed. The bird stares at me, cocking its head to one side. Clumsily, it stands up, talons clicking against the bottom of the box. It’s charming. Despite all my reservations, I find myself being drawn toward the bird, mesmerised by this unexpected treasure. Dark and vibrant rainbows glow from the swirling silver streaks, made all the more radiant by the intense black dusting. It’s beautiful. Such a beautiful little thing.

“What’s that?”

I jump, spinning around and hugging the box to my chest, trying to hide it in my arms. Darait’s standing a few feet away from me. I hadn’t heard her enter the room. I was distracted. I stare at her, my mouth opening and closing without a sound. For her part, Darait’s full attention is on the box.

“What is that? Where’d you get it?”

For a long moment, I just stand there, unmoving. Then, slowly, I shake my head and wipe a hand over my temple, pushing my hair back into place. “It’s, ah, it’s nothing,” I say. “Why are you back here? I thought you were at breakfast.”

Darait stares at me. “I was,” she says. “What’s in that box?”

I shrug. It’s not a convincing movement. “Nothing.” I say. “It’s not important. Why don’t you go back to the mess hall and I’ll join you in a second?” As I’m speaking, I see Darait’s gaze gradually wander from the box to the space above my head, then come to rest on the air to my right. At the same time, Darait’s expression has changed from one of suspicion to one of amazement. My stomach sinks. I glance down at the box in my arms, already knowing what I’ll see. It’s empty. I look to my right. There, hovering in place at head-height, is the bird. Its wings are beating furiously, blurring together in a silvery-black haze. Despite the incredible speed of its wingbeats, the bird makes almost no sound. A gentle humming, quiet enough that I’d missed it. It’s still looking at me, glancing only now and again at Darait, not interested in her. Just like I might look at a blank wall. Slowly, I put the empty box down on Darait’s bunk. “Darait,” I say carefully, “I promise I don’t know anything about this.”

She points a finger at the hovering creature. “What is that?” Her voice is quiet. I shake my head. “I don’t know. I found the box in my chest this morning. I don’t know anything about this.” I realize that my voice is almost pleading.

“How did the box get in your chest?”

“I don’t know. It wasn’t there last night.”

Darait’s eyes are locked on the bird. Cautiously, she moves her pointing hand closer to the bird. The bird responds by gliding gently backwards, out of her reach. Darait lowers her hand. As she does, the bird edges closer to me. I can feel the rushing air from its wings against the side of my face. “I think it’s trying to land,” Darait says.
“What?”

“Hold out your arm.” I hesitate. “Do it,” Dariat insists. Reluctantly, I extend my right arm toward the bird. The creature blinks, tarnished-gold lids slipping over silver eyes. Then it floats toward me and lands on my forearm. It grasps the skin hard in its talons, swaying slightly for balance. It stares at me with those big, moonlight eyes. I feel its weight. Feel its warmth. Feel the living pulse of its claws. This doesn’t feel like a machine. This feels like a presence. As solid as Dariat or myself. Its wing beats slow, and I see now that it’s not just flapping two wings. It’s flapping six. Each wing is slender and elegant, folding together against the bird’s back to look just like any ordinary pair. But there is nothing ordinary about this creature. Watching the bird feels like watching magic. A quiet laugh escapes me. It’s more of a startled giggle than anything else. “Well,” Dariat says. “At least we know who it belongs to.”

I look over at her, shaking my head. “But…” For a moment I can’t find the right words. “But I don’t want it.”

I hear a sharp click from the door latch as the handle turns. My heart jumps into my throat, and in the second before the door opens I grab the bird and hug it close to my chest, imprisoning it behind my arms. Dariat spins a round, bending her knees slightly as if getting ready to jump out of the way. The door swings open and Aisoh walks in. He looks like he wasn’t expecting to see us. “Good morning,” he says. “Why aren’t you in the mess hall?”

I’ve stopped breathing. I don’t even have the wherewithal to mumble some half-hearted response, so I just stand in total silence. The bird squirms in my arms, complaining. Aisoh hasn’t noticed it yet, and he glances between me and Dariat. Then something else catches his eye. He looks next to me, staring at the bunkbed. The box. Aisoh freezes, and for a second all three of us stand as if turned to stone. Aisoh recovers first. Deliberately, he turns away and closes the door, holding the handle and leaning against it. There’s a moment of silence. Then, “Who found the box?” he asks, still with his back to us. His voice is quiet. He sounds calm, but there’s an intensity to the way he holds his shoulders that wasn’t there a minute ago. I don’t say anything. Aisoh turns around. He looks at Dariat. And then he looks at me. He looks at my arms. “Are you holding it?”

I still don’t answer. I pull my arms tighter around the tiny creature. Aisoh waits for a moment, then he pulls the door open again. “Dariat, give us a minute alone.” Dariat looks over at me, hesitating. I look down at the floor. Then she leaves, and Aisoh closes the door behind her. He turns to face me, and takes a step forward. “May I see it?” he asks.

I want to shake my head. I want to tell him ‘no,’ turning around and running away. But instead, all I can manage is to stand exactly as I am, unmoving. Aisoh takes another step forward and reaches out a hand to take hold of my left wrist. At first his grip is soft, but it grows stronger as I resist him pulling my arm away. But resistance is weak, and soon my arm is being pinned to my side. Aisoh stares at the bird, now resting near my right elbow. The bird looks back at him, its big, silver eyes studying this new figure. A small and wondering smile breezes over Aisoh’s face. He stares at the bird for a moment, then
abruptly lets go of me and takes several steps back. The bird takes this as its cue to wriggle free of my grip and flit over to one of the bunkbeds, where it watches us from a perch. I cross my hands in front of me, collapsing my shoulders and rubbing my wrist. “Where did you find the box?” Aisoh asks, conversational. He’s still watching the bird.

“It was in my trunk this morning,” I say. My tone is defensive.

“How did it get there?”

I shrug. “I don’t know. It wasn’t there last night.” Aisoh nods. There’s quiet in the room. “I didn’t ask for it,” I say.

“No. Of course you didn’t.” Aisoh shakes his head. “Asking never helps.” He says this last part almost to himself. Then he takes a deep breath in through his nose. “If I may ask, do you know who’s recruiting you?”

I blink, and suddenly it clicks. Tsan said that she would keep an eye on me. I’d assumed that it would be through the normal surveillance methods. Like the cameras I’ve seen all over this base. Or through regular reporting from Aisoh. Apparently not. “Yes,” I say.

“Would you like to tell me?”

“...No.” I hesitate for a moment, but my answer is firm.

Aisoh nods. “Do you want the job?”


Aisoh studies me for several seconds, then looks over at the bird. “I’m not going to lie to you,” he says. “I’ve wanted a bird like this to show up for me for many years. But no matter what I do or how well I do it, I just can’t seem to get anyone looking my way. I think that you should be much more grateful for the opportunity you have here. There are people who would die for this chance. Don’t be spoiled.”

I tense my jaw. I don’t like being told off like this. I’m not being spoiled. He doesn’t know what’s going on here. This is Non-Standard Operations. I’m being recruited for a dangerous career that could get me killed will require me to hurt people. That’s not something I want. I don’t care about offending all the people who do.

“You say you need this job,” Aisoh continues. “Why?”

“Because the life expectancy is marginally higher than that of a Standard Trooper.” I say this as sarcastically as I can, but Aisoh nods, serious.

“You won’t find many people saying this, but that’s often as good a reason as any.” He looks at me. “Would you like my help?”

“With what?”

“Training. I don’t know where you’re going, but you’ll need to know more than a Standard Trooper. I could offer you additional training.” He glances over at the bird for a moment. “And in return, you could tell me what you did to attract their attention.”

I stand still. I want them both to go away. The bird and Aisoh. I want to be left alone. I don’t want to train for Non-Standard Operations. I don’t want to learn how to kill. But I know I don’t have a choice. I’m a soldier now. It’s already happened. I’ll either stay a
Standard Trooper and die on the front lines in a matter of months or be transferred to Tsan and survive for a little over a year. Those are my options. I take a breath. “I attacked an encampment of ten human fighter pilots and used their own weapons to murder them.”

Aisoh’s face remains blank. He simply nods, and says, “I assume that there is a longer version of that story.”

“Yes,” I say.

“Then you can tell me the long version after our first lesson. Agreed?”

No, not agreed. I’m never going to talk about that night. I’m not going back to that forest. “Yes. Agreed.”

Aisoh nods again. “Good,” he says. “We’ll start tonight. Meet me at seven o’clock by the simulators. Bring your armor.” Aisoh turns to leave, and has made it all the way to the door when he stops. “Oh, and just so that we’re clear,” he says, “don’t expect any sort of special treatment. As far as I’m concerned, you haven’t earned any of this.” Then he leaves the room. The bird jumps off the bunk bed and glides over to me, landing on my shoulder. So close to my ear, its wings sound like a hurricane.
Chapter Twenty-Six

In a way, the arrival of the bird changes nothing. The training continues. Every day is a mix of technical lectures and simulation training. Wake up. Shower. Breakfast. Lecture. Sim. Lunch. Lecture. Sim. The routine stays the same. What changes is the experience. After Aisoh left me with the bird, he eventually came back with the entire unit, and had me stand next to him as he explained that I was being vetted for a promotion. I wanted to kill him right then and there. Tsan, too. It’s not that I’m ashamed of being chosen. It’s that of all the recruits staring at me while Aisoh gives his talk, I feel as though I deserve this least. And I know that they all feel the same. These looks don’t go away. During meals. Lectures. Inside the simulations. I see people looking at me, and I know exactly what they’re thinking. Even Darait looks at me differently. When I leave the room for my first lesson with Aisoh, as everyone else is lying in bed after dinner, talking or joking, Darait watches me in silence as I get into my training armor and leave.

The bird follows me everywhere I go. It swoops ahead of me through the hallways and waits for me to catch up. It watches me eat. Sometimes it gently pulls at my sleeve until I look at it. It loves when I pay attention to it. This annoys me at first, the constant reminder of its existence. But pretty soon, after the other members of my unit stop calling me over to eat with them, I’m just happy for the company. Right now it’s a bit annoyed by the training armor. As I stand in the elevator and wait for the doors to open on the simulation level, the bird struggles to get a good grip on the smooth metal of my forearm. It flaps its wings for balance, slipping forward and backward. It soon gives up. It takes off with the rest of its dignity, and spends the rest of the elevator ride hovering near the ceiling.

Aisoh’s already inside the simulation when I arrive, pacing in midair over one of the platforms, his helmet obscured by an artificial view. The bird watches as I climb onto one of the simulation platforms, its silver-gilded head tilted to one side. Then my helmet is obscured by the now-familiar black fog and I feel gravity slipping away as I rise into the air.

My boots crunch against the red-brown gravel. I look around. I’m surrounded by canyons of compacted stone and dust. The sky overhead is obscured by smoke, and I can feel the ground shuddering as distant bombs go off. My heart sinks as I realize that I’m back in the human base. There’s something different about it this time, though. It doesn’t feel like I’m in the battle. The explosions are too soft. The sounds are too distant. It feels more like I’m an outsider watching the battle.

“This is where you make your first mistake.”

I turn around. It’s Aisoh. He’s standing near an intersection, watching an intense but strangely-muted battle unfolding in the dirt. A giant, iron-encased human is bearing down on a smaller armored figure. The second fighter looks burned to a crisp, and sections of her faceplate are cracked and broken. I blink, recognizing myself. I feel my body tense as I
watch the human's metal fists land punches and blows that I didn't even notice in the moment.

"Why aren't your blades out?" Aisoh turns around to face me. The battle continues behind him. "Why haven't you killed it already?"

I open and close my mouth wordlessly for a moment, unable to tear my eyes away from the violent scene. "I wasn't thinking," I mumble.

"You shouldn't need to think. Getting out your blades and defending yourself should be instinctive." Aisoh brings up a holo over the left wrist of his armor, selecting an option from a controls menu. Immediately the world around us freezes. The human has just thrown me off of its chest, and I see myself hover in mid-fall, hurtling toward the ground. Aiohs glances over his shoulder at the surreal, suspended scene. "Also, why did you leave your gun behind after the rocket went off? Why are you unarmed?"

I'm still staring at my double. There's nothing elegant about the position I'm frozen in. I've seen pictures of people falling before, or diving into pools of water. They always looked weightless, as if some inner virtue had freed them from the constraints of gravity. Not me. I look as heavy as the monolithic stone walls surrounding us. I shrug. "I wasn't thinking."

Aisoh nods. "That's true. You weren't thinking. You were panicking. That's why you died." Aisoh selects another option from the holo's menu. The human and my double disappear, leaving Aisoh and myself alone in an empty canyon. He continues. "I won't tell you that you need to avoid panicking. I personally don't believe that it's possible to stay perfectly calm during a war. Instead, you need to learn how to panic effectively. Panic can be a good thing. It can make you run faster and fight harder. But only if you use it. Never let panic use you."

I listen to this politely, and nod when he's finished. But I don't see how it's going to help. I don't believe that I could ever have control over my fear.

"Other than forgetting your gun and running around without any plan, you were doing pretty well in this simulation until you had to deal with hand-to-hand combat," Aisoh says. "So I think that's where we'll start. Get out your blades. Or would you rather leave them sheathed?"

It's a taunt, and I feel my cheeks flush slightly. I'm glad the faceplate obscures this. I whisper the command into my helmet and feel the harsh jerk as the long knives slither out of their holes on the backs of my forearms. I bend my knees slightly, balancing, waiting for Aisoh to move. For his part, Aisoh walks in a slow circle around me. He hasn't extended his blades yet. I start turning to follow him, but he tells me to face forward. I obey, but I turn my neck to watch him for as long as I can.

"You're standing too straight. Bend forward." I adjust my stance, but Aisoh shakes his head. "No, not like that. You're sticking your but out. Straighten your spine. Bring your coccyx down. No, that's too much. Like this. See? Your weight's forward over the balls of your feet, but it's balanced so you can move in any direction. ...Yes, that's better. Now bend
your knees more. That’s way too much, Void. Your knees should never pass your toes. That’s a great way to destroy the cartilage.” Aisoh steps back to get a better look, leaving me frozen in this unnatural position. “All right. Now where are you going to hold your arms?”

Hesitantly, I hold my arms in front of me, with the blades crossing at about mid-chest level. Aisoh shakes his head.

“No. Are you trying to be defensive?” I’m not, but I nod anyway. “Then why are you showing me the flats of you blades? Never show the flat sides of your blades to your opponent. If I land a blow there it could break the metal. Where would you block a blow?”

“The edge?” I venture. It seems like a reasonable guess, but Aisoh’s shaking his head again.

“We went over this in lecture. Never block with edge of your blade. You’ll only dent it. What are your blades for?”

“Fighting.”

“More specifically?”

“Attacking.”

“Yes, but how?” Aisoh pauses, but I don’t even try faking an answer to this one. He sighs. “You should really know this, Void. Stabbing. Your blades are for stabbing. You might get away with a little bit of slicing, but their primary purpose is stabbing. So why would you hold them in front of you like that?” There’s no good answer for this. I drop my arms to my sides, frustrated.

“So, how am I supposed to stand?”

“You tell me. What’s the strongest part of your armor?”


Aisoh nods. “And which one’s stronger?”

“The forearms.”

“Why?”

“Because that’s where we block,” I say, feeling stupid for only now remembering. There’s just been so much information to take in these past two weeks.

“Good. So show me how you stand.” I get back into the unnatural crouch and hold my forearms in front of my chest, my fists just above chin-level. “Much better. That’s for defense. And how about offence?” I bring down my right arm, pulling my elbow closer to my side and pointing the tip of the blade at Aisoh’s chest. My left arm is still up. Aisoh nods.

“That’s one way of doing it. Now, I want you to kill me.”

I blink, hesitating. Aisoh settles back on his heels, gesturing me forward. “Come on,” he says. “I’ll let you have the first one so you get a feel for it.” I hesitate a moment longer, then, reminding myself that it’s only a simulation, step forward and take a half-hearted swing at his left shoulder. Aisoh makes no move so stop me. The blade connects and bounces off his armor with a shuttering jitter. It throws both of us slightly off balance, but
nothing more. Aisoh shakes his head, starting to become impatient. “What did I tell you about slicing? These blades are for stabbing. Try again. Kill me. This should be easy, Void.”

I step back, maintaining my stance but not attacking. I look at the armored figure in front of me. I can’t see his face, but I know that it’s Aisoh under that helmet. I take a deep breath. *It’s just a simulation.* I lunge forward and thrust at his abdomen. The first half-inch of the blade disappears into his armor, knocking Aisoh back a few feet. My blade’s slightly stuck, pulling me with him. We stand like this for a moment, awkwardly locked together. I hear the intercom crackle as Aisoh sighs. Casually, he puts his left hand on my shoulder. I look up at his faceplate, expecting another reproach. Instead, out of the corner of my eye, I see his right fist thundering toward my gut, blade extending. I feel a red hot hammerblow land just below my stomach, sending a rod of fire shooting through my abdomen and spine. I gasp and crumple forward, paralyzed by the volcano of pain that’s burst forth from my intestines. I can’t breath. Lightning is spurting down my spinal column. I feel my eyes bulging, feel the ground collapsing under my feet, feel myself falling, falling, falling - and then, before I realize what’s happened, floating. I can’t see. It’s dark. Slowly, with excruciating reluctance, the pain begins to pull back. Then I’m falling again, and I crash to the rocky ground. I’m coughing for air and gripping my stomach, virtually writhing in the memory of pain.

“See, you have to put weight behind it. You can’t just tap. Use your whole body.”

From my place on the ground I look up and see Aisoh standing over me. I groan, and pull my hand away from my gut. There’s no hole in my armor anymore. I look around. Sure enough, I see my dead body lying on the other side of the canyon. There’s a small puddle of blood underneath it. It’s sickening to look at. I close my eyes and try to catch my breath. I’ve died before in the simulator, of course. I’ve been injured. But somehow, it’s never hurt quite this much. Maybe because I’ve never had the chance to experience the dying process. I’ve been obliterated by a bomb blast. Or shredded by gunfire. Death is always fairly rapid, never stretching on for more than a second or two. A knife is worse.

I slowly get to my feet. Aisoh asks me if I have a feel for the amount of pressure I need to apply. I nod. He repeats that I need to put my entire body into it, that I need to commit more. Then he tells me to try again.

I straighten up and settle back into the defensive crouch, circling several feet from Aisoh’s reach. But he makes no attempt to attack me, and does nothing to defend himself as I get closer. Instead, he tells me to remember to use the fist controls for my blades. These are pressure sensors in my gloves. Relax my hand and the blade retracts. Clench my hand into a fist and it come shooting back out. He says that leaving the blade in until just before impact will give me greater power and accuracy. Reluctantly, I whisper the command into my helmet, activating the feature.

I loosen my hands, sending the blades sliding back into their sheaths. I look at Aisoh. He’s just standing there. I hesitate for another second, then dart forward and throw my right fist toward the center of Aisoh’s chest, tightening my grip in the inches before impact.
The speed of the blade’s extension combines with the speed of my fist, battering against his breastplate. I feel the impact radiate up my arm as the blade pierces, sinking several inches through Aisoh’s sternum. The blade lodges in the armor and the bone, and I’m pulled to the ground as Aisoh shudders and collapses. He falls in the dirt and I land on top of him, clumsily trying to yank myself loose.

“Just relax your fist.”

I start, twisting around to see Aisoh standing several feet away. I hadn’t expected for him to be back so quickly. When I died, it felt as though I was falling for years. Aisoh points to my hand.

“Go on. Just relax.”

My hand is still balled into a tight fist. On his order, I loosen my fingers. The blade retracts rapidly back into its sheath, yanking my arm down to Aisoh’s chest. My hand slams against his breastplate and the blade dislodges, sending me staggering backwards, off-balance. The dirt crunches under my boots.

“That was much better. But for the future, your first target shouldn’t be here.” Aisoh bangs his fist on his chest, near where I stabbed him. “My armor is strong here. In a real battle, I wouldn’t have given you the windup you needed to pierce it. Where’s my armor weakest?”

I’m a bit out of breath for some reason, and it takes me a few seconds to reply. “Front of the neck, back of the knees, and sides of the abdomen.”

“And any slot between major plates of armor. I stabbed you between the last plate covering your ribcage and the first plate covering your gut. Understand?” I nod. “Good. Then I want you to attack me again, and this time I’ll start defending myself.”

I’m still trying to breathe, but I settle obediently into the crouch. Aisoh shifts into a lower, more balanced stance. Waiting for me. It’s just a simulation. I suck in a deep lungful of air, holding it. Two. Three.

I lunge forward, jabbing with my right fist. Aisoh’s left arm swings down easily, slamming into my wrist and sending my blow off-course. At the same time, Aisoh’s right fist comes in for a counterblow, aiming directed up toward my ribs. I’m barely able to get my left arm down in time to block. I dodge backward, out of his reach.

“Don’t be so obvious. Try something unexpected.”

I’m not sure I care right now about being obvious or not. I’m just trying to make it through the rest of tonight without being stabbed again. I jump forward, bringing my left arm arcing up and over, blade extended. Aisoh blocks it with his right forearm, but I’m anticipating his response this time, and I’m able to ward off the jab from his left arm more easily. Still more-or-less on balance, I quickly retract my left blade, moving my arm under Aisoh’s, and punch toward his right armpit. Aisoh spins out of the way, using his momentum to land an uppercut with his left fist on the side of my helmet. His blades aren’t out, but the blow still hurts, and I stumble backward.
“Better. But you forgot about my entire left side. You didn’t defend yourself. Try again.”

I’m still dizzy from the blow, but I start to circle Aisoh, never turning away from him. He’s only defending himself right now, but I still feel nervous. I dance forward, punch my right and left fists in quick succession. Aisoh blocks them. As I’m still falling forward, he grabs my forearm and yanks me forward, throwing me onto the rocky soil in a heap.

“You lost your balance. Never attack if you can’t keep your feet.”

I slowly stand back up, frustrated. This isn’t a lesson. This is a humiliation. I get back into the crouch, settling myself, balancing. Then I sprint forward, grabbing Aisoh around the waist, meaning to tackle him to the ground. Instead, he simply leans forward into my assault, absorbing my momentum. Quickly, before he can readjust, I step to the side and throw him forward. This knocks Aisoh off balance, but only for a second, and he rounds on me, a punch already aiming for my faceplate. I dodge to the side, leaning forward and elbowing a second blow off course. I extend my left blade and swing it down toward Aisoh’s knee. It bounces off his armor, but it gets his attention. That’s all I wanted. My right fist is still high from having elbowed away a punch, and I redirect it toward Aisoh’s helmet. My blade extends, and Aisoh pulls back just in time to send to metal skittering off his faceplate. Even though it didn’t do much good, seeing the jagged scratch on the hardened glass fills me with a brief moment of pride. But then I see Aisoh’s right fist flying toward me, and I realize that I don’t have time to defend myself. His blade extends now, and the last thing I feel is the icy fire of the knife ripping through my throat and punching through the back of my neck.
Chapter Twenty-Seven

The first time we win against the simulator, nearly three weeks have passed since training began. It’s one of the easier scenarios. We’re ambushing a caravan of human soldiers and mining equipment, traveling through a rocky forest. They weren’t expecting us, so we’re able to pick off several of the active guards from behind cover before they even realize they’re under attack. After this, though, the scenario devolves into a firefight, with the humans sheltering behind the heavy equipment. From this fight and others similar to it, I’ve realized that when you’re shooting from behind cover, it’s not skill or strategy that determines whether you survive or get shot. Yes, the more skilled people in our unit make it through more often than not. Lee and Mahtah, for instance, almost always survive. Others, like Tah, are usually among the first to be struck by a bullet or blown to bits. But skill and survival are only correlated. The one does not determine the other. It’s also luck. It’s just bad luck that a grenade lands next to Darait in the first few minutes of the assault. It’s just bad luck that a bullet is flying by at the exact moment that Kyahsem chooses to lean around a boulder to fire. It’s just luck that I make it through. That Tah, against all odds, survives this scenario with no more than a scratch along his breastplate from a grazing bullet. And when the gunfire stops and all the humans appear to be dead, it’s just luck that it’s Hetter and not me who turns the corner around a flatbed truck loaded with a bulldozer, coming face-to-face with a wounded human holding a grenade. I was five steps behind him. That’s all it took to leave Hetter dead and myself unscathed.

There are other scenarios that rely more heavily on skill. Sometimes, we’re paired with another unit, tasked with coordinating our movements in large-scale assaults. These exercises are harder in many ways, but there’s also a less personal sense to the danger. In a large group, as in a school of fish, it’s always more likely that someone else will be eaten instead of you.

My strength has returned by now, and I’m able to keep pace with the rest of the unit. More, I find that I’m faster and stronger than many of the others, even the altered soldiers. I guess Tsan was right. I’m glad, in a way, to have an advantage. But on the other hand, I know that it’s nothing that I deserve. The bird is a constant reminder of this. It’s always there, never leaving my side for a moment. At first, I found the bird annoying. The way it’s always looking at me, always getting up close to me. But then, every now and again, it will do something unexpected. It will nuzzle me with the soft crown of its head, or gently hold my finger in its beak. Or I’ll wake up to find it sleeping in the crook between my neck and shoulder, its warm, tiny body pulsing against my skin. It’s in moments like these that I get the strong sense that the bird likes me. More, that the bird loves me. Genuinely. Not in an artificial, pre-programmed way, but with a sense of true adoration. The bird looks at me so honestly sometimes that I can’t help but feel a little something in return. How clever you are, I’ll think, stroking the bird’s neck with the back of a finger. How clever to have won me
over. You don't want me to leave your sight, and now I don't want you to leave mine. How clever, little bird. You beautiful bird.

Training, of course, continues with Aisoh. At the end of a long day of scenario training, it’s all I can do not to flop down on my bed and stare blankly at the bottom of Darait’s mattress. But I always get up and stumble back into my training armor. I’m grateful for the help. Really, I am. But I think I would appreciate it more if I didn’t also have to focus on everything else at the same time.

Aisoh works with me on the more specialized skills that inevitably get rushed over during group training. My marksmanship steadily improves, though it never seems to satisfy Aisoh. And my accuracy always falls again when I’m put in a gunfight, or when I’m shooting at a human instead of a circular target. Aisoh says it’s all in my mind. That I need to stop apologizing for myself, stop holding myself back. I know that he’s right. Whenever we’re sparring, I never fight with actual strength. I don’t want to hurt him. I know it’s a simulation. I know I could snap his neck and he’d be fine. But I’m used to a world where courtesy and reserve were encouraged, and where I was nearly arrested for giving a man a tap on the nose.

Despite this issue, Aisoh seems pleased with my progression. My natural speed makes me a better fighter than he’d expected, and it’s not long before I can fight him for close to a minute before getting killed. When we do hand-to-hand combat training as a Unit, I always come out near the top, only bested by Lee, occasionally by Mahtah, and once or twice by Kyahsem. I’m also beaten a few times by Darait, although I can’t tell whether she actually beat me or if I let her win.

I wouldn’t be surprised if it were the latter. Since the bird’s arrival, Darait and I have become more distant. She’s still friendly towards me, and there’s nothing impolite. But I’ve noticed that she talks less around me than she used to, and that she’s more likely to eat meals with another member of the group than with me. She’ll still eat with me if I sit down across from her, but I can tell that I’m not her first choice. I find myself being drawn more and more to the bird, accepting it as company.

At night, after I’ve returned from Aisoh’s training and am lying, exhausted, on my bunk, I frequently find myself staring up into the darkness, listening to the sounds of breathing from around the room and holding the bird in the cup between my hands and my chest. It lies still, emitting a soft warmth and gently pulsing with breath and life. I’ll wonder about Zach. Whether he’s all right. He didn’t deserve any of this. He’s a decent person, just working to make the best of his situation. He saved my life. And what did I do for him? You saved him. He’d be dead without you, I tell myself. He’d be dead, and then what? What can be so decent about a deadman? He’s better off because of you. But I never fully believe it. I’ve lied enough to other people to know when I’m lying to myself. Zach deserves better. He deserves a long and happy life, free to be good and to obey his conscience. Not to be tricked and guilted into betraying himself. You did what you had to do. You helped him. Shut up. I’m wrong. I know I am. Admit it.
The bird would stir, twisting its head to better look at me. Stretch a talon. I even saw it yawn once. I knew it was an artificial movement. The bird never sleeps. But it was endearing, seeing that silver beak open wide, a tiny silver tongue curl as the bird drew in a deep breath.

What a beautiful lie the bird is. I've never known a truth to be as good. Why can't all lies, all falsehoods and fabrications be as perfect and beautiful as my silver bird? I'd almost take this lie as my truth, live in a world engineered for comfort. There would be no pain or fear or loss. There would be no death, only a parting for something better. I'd give almost anything to truly believe in this world of lies. To truly believe in the bird on my chest. The bird that even now pretends to sleep. But I know it's awake. Lies never sleep. It's comforting, in a way. At least there's something that will last forever.

Mornings always come, bringing new scenarios that seem to arrive straight from hell. In one, I'm trapped in a disabled spacecraft, with no gravity and only limited oxygen. None of us survive this scenario. We're not meant to. We're simply meant to control our fear as we suffocate. I push myself off the corridor walls, desperately searching for anything, anything, that could help me escape. I get stuck for several minutes in one of the larger rooms, too far from any wall to push off, slowly spinning out of control. It's a waste of oxygen. Eventually I bump into a table and am able to propel myself toward the door, but even escaping from the room is futile. There's no way off the ship. The escape pods are gone. The hanger is destroyed. And there's no help that can reach us. Afterwards, I heard that this scenario is used as a diagnostic tool, meant to identify soldiers who panic too much under pressure so that they can be medicated. I myself come uncomfortably close to flipping out. It's only a small window in the ship's hull that saves me. I grab onto the edges of the frame and stare out into the crisp darkness of space. It's a wonderful view. I stay there even as I feel the oxygen levels in the air I breath beginning to drop. I get dizzy, nauseated. I continue to stare. The ruined ship is slowly spinning, and the stars wheel before me like a jeweler's showpiece. I'm one of the last to suffocate. Aisoh tells me it's because I lowered my heartrate. Such beautiful stars.

Mornings always come, bringing new lectures on strategy and tactics. I learn that if we're ever walking blindly through a minefield, we should walk in single-file with the lowest-ranking members first. I learn about the different classes of weaponry, the advantages and weaknesses of each. I learn that if we're ever desperate enough, the powerpacks for our rifles can be used to make medium-grade explosives. I learn how to patch my armor, which formations to march in at what times, and even what plants I can eat on our planets and the humans' without being poisoned.

Mornings always come. And then, out of nowhere, so does graduation. The twelve weeks are up.

I sit on the floor of the small cell. The lighting here is dim, and I hug my knees to my chest with my eyes closed. I'm so tired. I wish I could sleep. I wish I could fall away and
ignore everything, oblivious. No dreams. No nightmares. Just sleep. I rock slowly back and forth, pushing my back against the cell wall. Sleep. Please, let me sleep.

I hear footsteps coming toward my door. I open my eyes. The door is a weave of thick, painted bars, showing me the hallway outside. The heavy footsteps come closer. A human male walk in front of my door, coming to a stop and turning to face me. There's light enough to see here, but for some reason I can't make out its face. It's fat, stretching against its shirt, and it holds a styrofoam cup. The human pauses, taking a drink. Then, “Do you have any valuable intelligence for us?”

“No,” I say.

The human pauses again. There’s quiet in the cell. I stare up at it, hating everything about the creature. It takes a breath. “Then you leave me no choice.”

I laugh. “You have a choice,” I spit. I’m not going to allow it to talk like this. “You have all the choice in the world,” I say, voice dripping with contempt. “You’ve just already chosen. You’re all alike. You’re all the same. You could let me live. But you choose to kill me because you’re a human.” I shake my head, eyes fixed on the shadow outside my door. "Don’t lie to me. I know you. You chose to start this war. You chose to burn my home. You chose to kill my family. You have a choice. I know you.”

My hands are shaking with the force of my words, but my voice never gets above a loud whisper. The human looks at me. It takes another sip of the drink. It doesn’t say anything for many seconds, stretching the quiet. Then, “Your name is Void,” it says.

“Yes.”

“It’s a strange name.” The human sounds perfectly conversational. Matter-of-fact. This bothers me even more than the comment itself. “What does it mean?”

“It’s a kind of bird,” I say, my tone transforming the words into an insult.

The human nods. “What does it look like?”

I hate this creature. “Dtōk oh.”

The human nods again. It lets a breath out. It sounds like a sigh. “I did not bomb your city,” it says.

My lips twist into a mockery of a smile. “But you will kill me for punishing the ones who did.” The human stares at me, and I glare back. It doesn’t move or react. It just stand there. Then, abruptly, it turns and walks away. “I know you!” I yell. But it keeps walking. Painfully, I stand up and rush over to the bars, pushing my face against them, straining to see farther down the hallway. But the human is gone from my sight. I scream into the darkness, “I know you!”
Chapter Twenty-Eight

I have to squint to see the bird in the half-light. The overhead lighting has just gone down as the largest auditorium on the base prepares for the ceremony. I’m stroking the bird’s back, staring into its silver eyes as it looks back up at me. Its eyes catch the light even in this darkness, continuing to shine. A figure walks onto the stage at the very front of the room, and I reluctantly tear my attention away from the beautiful creature perched on my finger. Graduation is about to begin.

It wasn’t until last night that I was reminded of today’s importance. Aisoh mentioned graduation right as everyone was getting ready for bed, just before I followed him to what I was only then realizing to be our last training session. It dawned on me vaguely as he was speaking that Aisoh had, in fact, told us about graduation a week back, and then again a few days ago, and the morning before, as well. But on each of these occasions it had still seemed like a lifetime away. Graduation wasn’t for another week. Then, graduation wasn’t for several days. Then, I still had a good twenty-four hours. Only now, as I was climbing into the simulator after Aisoh, did it sink in that time was up.

Aisoh had replaced our sparring with something more realistic a few weeks back. Now, instead of fighting each other, I fought human avatars. Aisoh would watch me and give feedback. The training was helping, definitely. On a good day, I could fight three armored humans simultaneously. My record is four. But I was still making stupid mistakes, like allowing my elbows to pass behind my shoulder, or not committing enough to a blow.

For our final lesson, I’d expected something similar, or maybe a bit harder, to test what I’d learned. But when I landed in the simulation, I found myself standing in the middle of an ash-covered field. I looked around. In every direction lay a smoldering plane of ash and charred soil. Smoke lay thick in the air, obscuring the sun and blackening the sky. As I looked closer I saw lumps lying in the field. I realized that they were bodies. Hundreds of them. Blackened and fried, as if all had been caught in an infernal blaze. But there were also pockmarks in the ground, holes and divots scattered like rain. This was a bombing. A massive, horrible bombing.

“Do you feel ready?”

I turned around. Aisoh was standing several feet away. “For what?” I asked.

“For graduation. Do you feel that you’re prepared?”

I looked around at the destruction. I tried not to, but I couldn’t help myself. “No,” I said. My voice was quiet.

Aisoh shook his head. “You’re not. You hardly know anything.” I looked at him. This wasn’t what I’d expected. “You’re ignorant, and you’re naive,” he continued, “And you’re going to die.” I stood very still as Aisoh took two steps towards me. He paused, then raised a finger. “But,” he said, “It is my belief that, unlike so many of us, you will die after the war is won,” he turned his palm face-up, “or lost.” He turned his hand over, then lowered it to
his side. “You’re not ready. And you never will be. But from what I’ve seen, you’re ready enough.” He looked me over, then said, in a much quieter voice, “I hope that helps you sleep tonight.”

I swallowed. “Thank you,” I said. I meant it. I was genuinely grateful.

Aisoh was looking at the ashy ground. “Seeing as this is our last training session, I thought I’d give you a gift. A sort of good luck present.” He raised his wrist and summoned the holo, selecting a command. Immediately, the scene around us dissolved, melting away into a gray darkness. A new world materialized in its place, taking form, taking color. I gasped, my eyes opening wide.

“Ohh.” I hardly noticed the sound escaping my lips. I was captivated by the lush, vivid, and strikingly alive forest I was standing in. Strong trees with rippling bark, a canopy of emerald leaves against a brilliant blue sky, shade and sunlight mixing on the forest floor. A soft wind blew through the trees, and I heard their bows creak and spit. I felt the soft, cool earth beneath my boots. “It’s perfect,” I whispered to myself.

“I can give you one hour,” Aisoh said. “I’ll let you know when time is up.” I turned around, but Aisoh was already gone. I was alone in the forest.

I walked among the trees, letting my hand trail along the trunks, feeling their presence and rough texture. There were no paths through the woods, but no underbrush, either, so walking was easy and natural. By the massive, moss-covered boulders scattered here and there, I knew that these must be glacial woods, and that there must be a lake or a river nearby. But I walked uphill, wanting only to lose myself in the trees. I breathed deep inside my helmet, pretending that I could smell the dirt and the leaves. When I stopped to put my hand on an ancient, gnarled tree trunk, I imagined that I wasn’t wearing a glove, that my skin was touching something real. I stood there, hand outstretched, eyes closed, listening to the sounds of the leaves in the wind.

On stage, the base Commander is speaking. His image is projected on the wall behind him, looming sixteen feet above the first row of the audience. The Commander’s speech is full of bright descriptions of the Empire, of heartfelt calls to action to protect our homelands from the invading barbarians. He congratulates us for having completed the first step on our journey. He trumpets our military’s past successes, listing the names of victory after victory. Near the middle of the speech, I hear the old, familiar slogan: If we work hard, together, we will win this war. I don’t listen to much after this. It’s all the same. I’ve heard it before.

After the Commander has finished his speech, and after we’ve finished applauding, it’s time for the reading of the names and for the official promotions. We never leave our seats to go up to the stage, but our names are read out, Unit by Unit, along with which position we’ve been assigned to. Over the course of training, we’ve been put in different roles, finding out where we work best. I hated my couple of days as a Quarter Leader. I suppose I did well - we won slightly more scenarios that week than was our average, and with slightly fewer casualties - but I despised every minute of it. People were relying on me
to tell them what to do, people who were quite capable on their own, thanks. I was responsible for our every mistake, for our every stumbling error. The pressure was horrible. As the list of names goes on and on, I find myself biting my lip and hoping that I’ll be called out as nothing more than a Standard Trooper.

My hands get tired of clapping after the first two Units, and my palms are almost numb after the eighth. Finally, the Commander gets to our Unit’s place on the list. Aisoh’s Quarter is announced first. The names surprise me a little: Tah, Hetter, and Trin. I don’t know Trin very well, but I know her well enough to be aware of her clumsiness. Tah and Hetter I do know, and both of them have a tendency to die earlier in the scenarios. It’s not because they’re not trying. Tah especially, I see him working harder than any of us. They’re just not soldiers. I hadn’t expected Aisoh to take the weakest members of our Unit into his own Quarter.

Our Half Leader is announced next. It’s Lee. No surprise here. She is without a doubt the most skillful of us, the fastest and the strongest. She’s not necessarily the most charismatic, but I suppose Aisoh’s hoping this will change with practice.

Kyahsem gets First Quarter Leader. Then Second Quarter Leader is called. It’s Darait. I turn around in my seat, meaning to congratulate her, but I stop when I see her face. Her mouth is open slightly, her eyes tensed. She looks horrified. She sees me looking at her and recovers quickly, though, even managing a weak smile. I smile back, hoping that I look sympathetic. I do, of course, understand how she feels, but I can’t help but think of how grateful I am that it’s Darait who’s been chosen, and not me.

I hear my name called as a Standard Trooper in the Second Quarter. I smile, genuinely this time. This is exactly what I’d wanted. Not a command position, same Quarter as Darait. Good. Also with us are Zhuem and Mahtah. I nod as I hear them called. I can work with them. I know Zhuem better. He’s a little bit quiet, like me, and follows orders well. He runs quickly. I heard him make a joke once, which I enjoyed. I can work with him.

I am slightly more reserved with Mahtah. He’s Lee’s brother, with many of the same alterations. He’s a good soldier, probably better than me, but there’s something about him, something in the way he looks at me, that I don’t like. It’s as if he doesn’t respect me. Maybe I’m not altered enough. My hair is too wavy. My eyes are too dark. I get it. I’m ugly by his standards. I’m too natural, without sculpting or design. I know this. But does he really have to notice it so much?

In total, the fanfare of the graduation ceremony is kept to a minimum. The Commander reads the names from the list, we clap, the list ends, he gives a short speech, we clap again, and then we file out of the auditorium for an early lunch. Given how lackluster the day has been so far, I’m surprised by the food we’re given. It’s actually… good? Yes, it’s unexpected. There’s a silky nut puree, a small bowl of assorted berries, cooked greens, and a wonderful salad made from a chewy-crunchy kind of seaweed that I’ve never had before. It’s not salty at all, and is even slightly sweet, with an oily scent that reminds me of butter.
The mess hall is filled with loud conversations, people talking and laughing. Even in our unit. People are celebrating, congratulating each other on having made it through. I don’t understand this. Don’t they know that it’s not the hard part that’s ended, but the warm up? Why do they feel so much more prepared than I do?

Compared with the rest of the hall, our table is quiet. Darait, Mahtah, Zhuem and I are sitting together, but we all focus on eating. Occasionally I steal glances at the others. Darait has her eyes cast downward towards her meal. She still looks shocked, as if she can’t believe that she’d be promoted. She’s not eating much. Mahtah is also keeping quiet, avoiding looking at the rest of us. He almost seems to be attacking his meal with his fork.

Aisoh gathers together the unit a few minutes before the lunch period is over, walking us down to the armory. We’re slightly ahead of the other Units, and when we arrive we’re greeted by an army of statues. Hundreds of suits of field armor are arrayed in a grid across the polished concrete floor, black faceplates gleaming in the overhead lights. The armored plates are a deep beige-brown, with redder spots and greener patches, darker here, lighter there, all faded and mixed together to hide lines or edges. It’s almost hard to tell where one suit ends and its neighbor begins. With one of these on, I could blend in almost anywhere; in a forest or a field, on a city street or in a desert. The only sharp lines are on the helmets, cutting the glass of the faceplate to show stylized and perfect foreheads, cheekbones, and chins. In other words, a face that’s not mine.

Soon I’m standing in front of a suit that has my name and rank engraved on its shoulders and chest. I scan my bracelet under its chin, selecting an option from the menu projected on the faceplate glass. I watch as the plates of the armor slide over and around each other, clicking and humming, opening up a person-shaped hole. The interior of the armor looks like padded black fabric, similar to the training armor I’m used to. I take off my jacket and crouch down to unlace my boots. I set them aside, carefully folding the jacket and laying it over the tops of the boots. I stand up. I turn around and step backwards into the armor, putting first one foot, then the other, both hands, my torso, my neck, my head. I feel the armor vibrate as it closes around me. It feels like sinking into thick, heavy mud. I can feel the suit pressing against my skin, pulling me close and restricting my movement. Then the helmet closes over my face, and I have a moment of intense claustrophobia before the suit’s displays come up. Then, rapidly, my claustrophobia shifts into intense dread.

I look around me, feeling the suit powering my movements, adding its strength to my own. I know from experience that this armor will let me bend steel beams, run effortlessly for hours, punch through concrete walls. I suppose that the experience might be exhilarating, but I’ve only ever felt this kind of power in the simulator. I feel my heart beginning to race. I’m conditioned now, associating the suit only with danger and death. I don’t think this is what they’d intended. But as I look around the room, seeing other suits of armor beginning to move around as other soldiers step inside them, I can’t help but know, instinctively, that I’m at the beginning of another bloodbath.
Quickly, I try a new command movement we learned in lecture a few weeks ago. I brush the first two fingers of my right hand over the part of my helmet where my ear would be. The helmet responds by peeling open, retracting from my face and pooling around my neck and shoulders. I breath deeply in the fresh air. I’ve never taken my helmet off before. The training armor doesn’t have this feature - you have to take the armor off entirely. And because the simulator is a projection inside the training armor’s helmet, we’ve never been able to remove our helmets inside there, either. Having my head free calms me down slightly. Listening to the natural sounds of the armory, instead of the selectively magnified sounds that the armor shows me, is soothing. I take a few deep breaths. The bird flutters up to me, yet another reminder that I’m standing in the real world. The bird never appeared in the simulations. It was one of the ways I found to know when the world was real and when it wasn’t. I hold out my arm and the bird lands on my finger, swaying and looking up at me. It loves me. But standing in the armor, I find the sight of it physically repulsive. The bird no longer signals that I’ve made it out of the simulator. Now, the bird simply means that any danger around me is real. Never again will a bullet to the brain only temporarily kill me. Never again will a broken bone heal as soon as my helmet goes black. Training’s over. I’ve graduated.

Aisoh leads us back to the barracks as the massive room fills with other Units come to claim their armor. He tells us when we arrive that we have the rest of the day off, but that we should be packed and ready to leave first thing tomorrow. Then he leaves the room.

There’s not much I can pack. Other than the bird, I don’t have any personal items. Everything else I own, my clothing, an extra pair of boots, is already in the trunk, with the exception of my sheets. But we’re leaving tomorrow, which means that I have one more night to sleep here. I don’t have much to do, so I end up lying down on my bunk, stroking the bird and listening to the light chatter from around the room. Despite the fear festering in my stomach, I eventually fall asleep. It can’t be for more than a few minutes. I dream of a marsh, of cold mud and a gray sky. I know that I’m the only one here, the only one marching through this icy dirt and splashing water. I rub my chest with my arms, trying to keep warm. I need to find warmth. I’m afraid I might die of the cold.

I wake up shivering, a musty taste in my mouth. At first I’m not sure what woke me, but then I see the rest of the unit getting up, standing at attention. The conversations have stopped. Blearily, I stand up. Aisoh has come back, and he waits until we’re all ready. I’m one of the last to stand.

“There’s been a development,” Aisoh announces. “Our deployment has been moved up. We’re shipping out in half an hour on a carrier called the Linahdest. You’ll be briefed once we’re onboard.” The room is silent. I he serious? I wonder for a moment if I’m still asleep.

“Sir?” It’s Darait. “I’m sorry, I don’t understand. I thought you said that we had the rest of the day off.”
Aisoh nods. "I did. And now I’m telling you to finish packing. The schedule has changed. You have eight minutes before we leave."

My heart is racing. It feels as though it could explode at any moment. Yet all I’m doing is lying here. I’m on my side on the concrete floor, my legs folded and my body curled into a small C shape. I’m facing the wall. Even though I act as if I’m asleep, my eyes are wide open. I fight to breath slowly.

It’s been some time since the human left. A few hours, I’d say. Or maybe it only feels that long. It’s impossible to tell time here. My heart pounds in my chest. I’m exhausted, but I no longer want to fall asleep. I want to live. I don’t want to die here. I don’t want to die anywhere.

I hear a noise down the hallway. A door opening. Then multiple footsteps. Several pairs of boots. My heart beats even faster. The footsteps get louder, louder, until they’re right outside the door. They come to a stop.

"Ma’am, please stand up and face the wall with your hands behind your head."


"No, Ma’am,” the voice replies. “I’m here to transport you. Please face the wall.”

I close my eyes and stay exactly where I am. I can feel my heartbeat vibrating through my stomach. My voice is louder now. “Then someone else will kill me, and you’re here to bring me to them."

"Ma’am,” the human sounds annoyed now, “your execution has been stayed. You’re being moved to a more secure facility for long-term holding."

I open my eyes. I don’t understand. "...Stayed?"

"Congratulations, Ma’am. Please stand up and face the wall."

I still don’t move. I feel dizzy all of a sudden, as if I was expecting one more step on a stairway than actually existed, and have just tried to step on thin air. I can’t be understanding this correctly. "What does ‘stayed’ mean?"

"It means that you’re going to be imprisoned, not executed. For the last time, Ma’am, please stand up and face the wall. Put your hands behind your head.”

Slowly, I push myself up to a seated position, then carefully stand up. I look only at the wall in front of my face, afraid that the spell will be broken if I look anywhere else. Stayed? I don’t understand. I put my hands on the back of my head. As soon as I do, hear the cell door being unlocked, and footsteps coming inside. Someone grabs my wrists and cuffs them together. Then I feel hands grasping my shoulders, firmly pulling me away from the wall, turning me around, and marching me out of the cell. I stare at the floor, seeing only the outline of the human guard that’s stayed outside the cell, and only the boots of the human behind me. I’m moved quickly down the hallway. I don’t resist. I allow myself to be steered and propelled, all the while feeling completely disoriented. “How did this happen?” I whisper.
“I’m not familiar with your case, Ma’am,” the guard behind me says. I don’t say anything more. I can’t. I don’t understand. The guards usher me into an elevator. When the doors reopen, we’re in a landing bay. I’m led toward a small craft, looking like an oversized box with thrusters. The space onboard is divided into miniature holding cells, each half the size of the cell I just came from. Many of them are already occupied by human prisoners. They watch me as the guards bring me to an empty cell and lock me inside. My handcuffs stay on. I make eye contact with no one, staring fixedly at the floor. I don’t understand. The minute the guards leave the ship and the door closes behind them, the humans start talking at me. I sit down and close my eyes. I could throw up. My heartbeat is making me sick. The humans continue their cacophony of taunts.
Chapter Twenty-Nine

I push my way through yellowed reeds, staggering and tripping in the icy mud. My wet clothes are stuck to my skin, hardened into a layer of ice that cracks and groans, holding me back as I try to push my way forward. A cold mist suffuses the air. It blocks out the sun and freezes me from the inside out, clogging my lungs and covering my throat. With every step I take my feet sink shin-deep into the mud. The reeds are stronger now, fighting back at me. They push me down. They lock arms like a shield wall, shoving, throwing me, stabbing at my feet.

But I can hear the fire. I can see its glow. I stumble forward, battering the reeds, slashing at them with my forearms. Mud splashes over me. I can taste the moldy earth, feel it freezing my gums and coating my teeth. I push harder, and suddenly I’m standing in a clearing. The ground is dry here, and the hard-packed dirt slopes down to a raging bonfire, shining bright and strong against the icy fog. I move toward it, my feet numbly stumping over the ground. The flames fill my vision, intoxicating and seductive. I feel the fire’s warmth radiate towards me. It stokes my skin, pressing against me. I feel the ice in my shirt starting to melt, drops of water forming on the bottom of my shirt, dripping down to splash against the ground. I hold my hand out in front of me, the hand still grasping the stone. I step closer. My fingers begin to thaw, feeling returning to my skin.

“What do you want!”

A loud yell cracks through the clearing. I turn around in a series of jerky, uncoordinated movements, nearly losing my balance. The stone slips from my grasp, landing on the ground with a thud. It rolls closer to the fire. I stare at the figure standing a half-dozen feet away, a dark, indistinct silhouette. I can’t even tell if it’s a man or a woman. “I - I’m sorry,” I stammer. My tongue and lips can hardly move. “I don’t know.”

“What! DO! YOU! WANT!”

The figure shouts the question again, louder this time, making sure each word stands out. I can’t tell if the figure sounds angry or not, but it almost doesn’t matter. Just the sight of the shadow fills me with fear. “I just want to be warm!” I scream. “Please! I’m so cold! Please, let me be warm again!” I’m begging the shadow. I don’t know what I fear more: The figure in front of me, or the thought of leaving.

“You cannot stay here forever.”

I shake my head, feeling tears trying to push through the mud clogging my eyes. “I just want to be warm,” I say.

“When will you leave?”

“I never want to be cold again,” I beg.

“When will you leave?”

“I don’t want to die in the cold!” I scream at the figure, feeling my body vibrate and shudder. The shadow looks at me.
Then all you can do is jump into the fire and burn.

I open my eyes. I’m lying in bed, shivering. My blanket fell off. I’m surrounded by total darkness, but I can feel the scale of the warehouse-sized room around me, filled with the sounds of breathing and rustling sheets. Everyone else is asleep. I don’t know what time it is. Whether it’s late or early. The bird squirms in its nook between my neck and right shoulder, then I feel it headbut me gently on the chin. It ruffles its feathers and settles back down. So sweet. I reach onto the ground and pull my blanket back on top of me. I close my eyes and try to fall back to sleep, ignoring my racing heart by listening to the faint creaking and rumbling of the Linahdest. I still feel cold.

We took our trunks and our field armor with us, loading onto a shuttle parked on the baking tarmac outside the base. As the shuttle left the atmosphere and the rattling and vibrations ceased, I caught a glimpse through the window of our destination. Two ships, orbiting Aiohn next one next to the other. It was almost comical to see how different the two were in appearance. One was a massive castle, with a curving hull and cavernous bay doors. Its thrusters alone looked several hundred feet long. One glance at this ship told me that its entire purpose was to fight, crushing opponents under its sheer bulk.

In contrast, the other ship was hardly worth noticing. I missed seeing it, actually, until we’d gotten much closer. I held my hands out at arm’s length, comparing the sizes of the two ships. The first ship could only be covered by my full fist, and even then I had to bring my hand toward me slightly to fully block it out. The other ship easily disappeared behind the last knuckle of my thumb. As we got even closer, I saw that the smaller ship was made up from pieces of other ships. One end was made in a boxy, rigid style. The other end was smoother, with fewer corners, painted a blue-green. The two ends looked as though they’d been bolted together, and I could almost see the lines where the plates had been soldered. It was a strange look, like a man wandering around with his neighbor’s head and his sister’s arm stitched to his torso. This amalgam was to be our home.

The shuttle landed in one of the bays. We disembarked, carrying out trunks to one of the barracks-warehouses I grew familiar with on Tsan’s ship. It has a whole different feel now, with soldiers occupying most of the bunks, walking around and idly talking. Three other Units came up with us, and as we unpacked, we were treated to a welcome message from the Captain, delivered over the ship’s intercom. I paid less attention than I should have. I stepped out of my field armor as the captain talked, putting back on my jacket and boots. The warehouse was slightly chilly, and the tall ceiling made it feel drafty.

When I wake up today, I hear that we’ve entered the Fold. Two days until we arrive, then. Soon after breakfast, all the Units are called to one of the landing bays, where the Captain addresses us again, this time in person. Amiyah. That’s her name. She’s shorter than I’d expected her to be, judging from her voice. She has dark, straight hair, nicely altered cheekbones. It’s strange, I think. I wonder why her parents didn’t make her taller.
“There’s a small colony on the outskirts of the human-controlled territory,” she says. “It’s not much more than a single city with surrounding farmland, and until recently it was not considered a valuable target. But two weeks ago, the humans started using it as a staging area for raids into our space. Several of the farms have been converted into landing areas for medium-orbit maintenance crafts, and an orbital dock has appeared to service larger troop carriers.” Images appear on the wall behind her as she speaks. One is of the planet itself. Amber, she says its name is. The planet’s surface is divided into desert and ocean, with a thin strip of green encircling the coasts. Judging from this alone, I guess that it’s probably a fairly young colony, less than a hundred years old.

“Amber itself has almost nothing in the way of defensive capabilities. Again, until recently, it was almost exclusively a civilian planet. However, since the construction of the landing areas, two large warships have been circling the planet. With these ships in place, we were unable to attack Amber without the risk of taking heavy losses.” The images behind Amiyah change, showing two views of Amber, probably taken at different times. “But,” Amiyah continues, “The two warships left their stations early yesterday afternoon. They were likely drawn off by the ongoing heavy fighting in the Fourth and Fifth Grids. Preliminary reports suggest that they left Amber without any major secondary defenses. We were deployed less than an hour after this report came in. We are now thirty-eight hours away from the planet. We are traveling with the Dohbaist, and when we arrive it will be our mission to Amber from our list of threats.” I realize that she’s referring to the larger ship I saw. “The Dohbaist will focus on destroying the orbital dock and any atmospheric defenses. It will then fall to us to bomb the city, destroying the landing areas. If we have time, we will also sterilize the site with radioactivity, discouraging any reconstruction.”

I feel a shiver go through me as she says this. Sterilize? But this isn’t a petri dish. This is a city. I find myself wondering if Alaseel was being used as a staging area. We wouldn’t necessarily have known, I don’t think. Large structures in orbit can be invisible from the ground, and Aiohn wouldn’t have told us if there was construction underway. I get a pain in my stomach as I think about this.

“As Standard Troopers,” Amiyah says, “Your job will be to stand on reserve in case the bombing does not go as planned. I do not, however, expect to be deploying you. Our task is not to capture Amber, but to permanently disable it. A ground offensive should not be required.” I hear some grunts come from around the assembled soldiers. None of them seem to mind this news. As far as they’re concerned, the only good kind of mission is one where they get to stay securely in orbit. I’m almost surprised to find myself in disagreement. Isn’t a safer mission something that I’d desperately hoped for? Yes, it is. But I’m finding it impossible to be happy about any part of this bombing. I’d almost rather go down there and fight the humans myself, face-to-face. At least give them a chance. That chance was never given to Alaseel. Aren’t we better?

Captain Amiyah soon dismisses us. With nothing to do until we’re closer to the edge of the Fold, I find myself in the gym. There aren’t many people here right now. Most of the
recruits are taking this opportunity to rest. I shake my head, correcting myself. Soldiers. Not recruits. We've graduated. It happened.

The bird follows me in the gym, landing on the handle of a piece of equipment. I'm mostly alone here. There's a man in the far corner, using his fists to beat away at a punching bag. I hear him grunting with every punch, throwing his entire weight into the assault. He looks fierce as I first watch him out of the corner of my eye, but then the trained portion of my brain takes over, and I start noticing the flaws in his technique. His wrists aren't straight enough, and he puts himself too far forward on each blow. Aisoh spent weeks training me out of that habit. If he fights like this against a real opponent, he won't have time to respond to any counter-blows.

I turn away from the man, removing my jacket and powering up one of the treadmills. I can still hear the punches landing on the weighted bag behind me. I pause for a moment. Then, surprising even me, I walk closer to the man and call out to him. “Excuse me?” He continues punching. Maybe he didn't hear me. “Excuse me?” I call again. This time he stops, catching the bag and looking over his shoulder at me, annoyed.

“What?”

I drop my gaze, embarrassed and vaguely pointing towards his hands. “Your wrists aren’t straight enough,” I say. “It's not safe to punch like that.”

The man looks at me, a disbelieving expression on his face. “Dtōk oh,” he says, then turns back and resumes beating against the punching bag. I stand for a second, watching him from behind as he destroys his joints. Then I go back to the treadmill. The bird’s eyes never leave me as I run. I run for the rest of the morning and straight through the afternoon. When I finally stop, my clothes are soaked through as if I’d jumped into a hot, sticky lake, and I can’t keep my hands from shaking like leaves in a high wind. But I feel calmer. By my count, I've run far enough from home to have reached the model for Reyin’s stone tree.

The days pass. Before I know it we're coming up on the colony. When we’re only a half-hour out, Aisoh orders us to get into our armor. The Standard Troopers will be standing by in the drop ships, just in case we’re needed. We each get a rifle and a handgun, a handful of power sources. We also get a backpack of supplies. All of these tools, unlike our suits of armor, are only handed out when we’re about to leave a base and go into the field. We’re never allowed to have a gun of our own. Holding the weapon in my hands, I’m struck by how real it feels. How its weight pulls down on me through the shoulder strap. How its rigid frame refuses to bend in my hands.

Aisoh forms up or unit, and we start jogging from the barracks to the landing bay. I hear the thud of hard boots on either side of me, echoing off the walls of the ship and reverberating through my sternum. Then I feel the unmistakable buzz of our ship leaving the Fold. A slight shudder runs through the ship, soft like the rumble of a distant train. We've arrived. I hear my breathing in my helmet, I see the bird keeping pace with my left shoulder. Then I hear a colossal explosion, screaming in the voice of twisted iron and steel,
hammering through the ship like a tsunami through the ocean, a blastwave of sound and air that slams into us a fraction of a second before the floor bursts upwards and the hallway twists, throwing us through the air like socks in a tumble dryer.
Chapter Thirty

The physical hull to almost any spacecraft is less than a centimeter thick. It’s strong enough to withstand the force of the vacuum, but offers almost nothing in the way of protection against anything more dangerous than a meteoric pebble or a chuck of ice. To defend itself from anything else, a craft will always deploy a Shield.

A Shield is a deceptively simple device. It’s a physical barrier that envelopes a spacecraft, often several layers thick, made up of millions of tiny robotic vessels, none larger than two spread hands held side by side. Each component of the shield is shaped into a hexagon, and they lock together to form a dense wall. Any single component can easily be destroyed, but its place in the wall will instantly be taken by another component, ensuring that no gap ever develops. None of the components are complex, and are readily mass-manufactured by a ship’s onboard Crafters, sometimes at a rate of several hundred per minute.

Shields were used to protect ships from larger meteors and other threats before the war, both by Aiohn and the humans. But shields were never designed for warfare, and an ad hoc battle strategy grew around them. When two ships come into confrontation, their Shields fight a bloody war of attrition, literally smashing into each other while both ships pump out as many new components as they possibly can. When one vessel’s Shield starts to break up, the other ship fire just two or three missiles, breaching their opponents hull and killing everyone on board. There’s not much subtlety in this form of warfare. Generally, the bigger the ship, the better its odds of winning. This is why the other spacecraft we’re traveling with is so enormous. That space onboard isn’t being used to house troops or carry dropships and bombers. The goliath next door is packed full of Crafters.

The one flaw in the use of Shields for defence comes into play in the first few seconds after a ship leaves the Fold. The components of a Shield cannot travel through the Fold on their own. A spacecraft must withdraw all of its components inside its hull before it enters the Fold, and can only redeploy its Shield after it has fully exited. This means that in the seconds after a ship leaves the Fold, nothing stands between its skin and enemy fire. This remains true no matter how large a ship is. In fact, larger ships take even longer to fully deploy their defenses than smaller ships. We could probably have the first few layers of our Shield up in less than eight seconds. Our larger neighbor, the Dohbaist, would probably take twice as long. Under normal circumstances, this delay should never be an issue. But when we came out of the Fold, we didn’t have eight seconds. The explosion was almost instantaneous.

I fly through the air, feeling myself become weightless as I hurtle away from the floor. At first I think I’m falling, but then I keep moving upwards, and I crash into the ceiling. I bounce off, stunned, listening to the keen of twisting metal that reverberates up from all surfaces of the ship as if the hallway had been transformed into the skin of a drum.
I spin in the air, seeing the world outside my helmet flip upside down. My left foot smacks into the wall of the hallway, initiating a spin along a new axis. Where's gravity? I think in a panic. Where's gravity?

I collide with another soldier. I can’t see who it is, but they grab onto my waist. I feel my center of rotation change. My spin slows down, but my traveling speed increases. I throw my arms in front of my helmet as I crash into the floor. The impact loosens the other soldier’s grip, and we tumble apart, rebounding in different directions. I twist my head, looking for anything I can grab onto. But the hallway is smooth. There are some doorways, but I have no way of propelling myself towards them.

As I spin, for just a quarter of a second, I can see down the entire hallway. I see dozens of soldiers flailing through the air, struggling to grab anything nailed down. And then, about eight feet away, I see something so bizarre that time seems to slow down. The bird is flying upside down, all six of its wings beating in a crazed figure-eight motion, stabilizing its position. It’s not tumbling anywhere. It doesn’t need gravity to fly. It’s doing the best of any of us. And its focus, even in the midst of all the scrambling chaos, is entirely directed to me. The bird stares at me as I spin around. It stares at me as I fall. I stretch out a hand to it, but it’s much too far to reach. Then I’ve spun around again, and am facing the other direction.

I realize that my intercom is exploding with shouts and yells. Someone’s talking - maybe Aisoh, maybe Darait - but I can’t make out their words over everything else. Then the lights in the hallway go out in a series, one after the other. It’s pitch black without them. I tumble and I fall in the darkness. I have no idea which way is up, where anyone else is, where - I slam into a wall, the back of my head ringing against the hard metal. Around me, I begin to see soldiers activating the lighting on their suits. Now I see spinning lights in the darkness, lights in the shapes of people. I try turning on my own lighting, but I stumble over the command words. I can’t speak.

I sit on the floor of the closet-like room, running my hands over the orange jumpsuit. Even though I’m completely naked, shivering in the chill air, I make no move to put it on. I’m still dripping from the disinfectant gel that they sprayed me with in an adjacent chamber. Thick and clear, it dripples out of my hair and down my body like saliva from a giant beast. It stings my eyes and burns my tongue. I rub my eyes, trying to clear them of the gel. But my hands are also covered in the stuff, no matter how many times I run them over the jumpsuit. All I can do is smear the gel around.

I feel a slight tug on the core of my body, like a hook sunk deep into my stomach. The tug gets stronger, and I realize that the gravity’s been turned back on. I fall to the floor, crumpling in a heap, struggling to push myself up onto my knees. Overhead, the lights flicker. Then every fourth light comes back on, dimly illuminating the hallway. The light
seems more blue than usual. In the distance, I can still hear the reverberating roar of ripping steel.

Aisoh’s yelling over the intercom, telling us to get to our feet, to get back in formation. I stagger as I heave myself upright, looking around at the jumbled tangle of bodies squirming to unknot themselves from each other. There’s something loud in my helmet, a rushing sound, fast and rhythmic. It takes me several seconds to recognize it as my own breathing.

We find our way into formation, and Aisoh leads us down the hallway, running now. I duck my head every time the floor vibrates and the sounds of dying metal intensify. My heart is pounding in my chest. The bird has returned to my side, easily keeping pace with me as we run together through the ship. We round a bend toward the landing bay, and Aisoh pulls up short. He signals for the rest of us to stop. Ahead of us, instead of a continuing hallway, is a giant door that spreads from one wall to the other, completely blocking the way forward. I know what this is. I saw it in a simulation once. It’s an emergency airlock door. It means that there’s something wrong on the other side.

Aisoh goes up to the door and finds the small holo projector set next to the door by the right-hand wall. He pulls up the holo and examines it. Then I hear his voice crackle over the intercom. “Everyone be quiet,” he says. “I’m opening up a channel to the ship’s command.” He pauses for a moment, working with the holo on his left wrist. Then, “This is Full Leader Aisoh with Unit 3026-Green. I’m under orders to load my Unit onto drop ships in the landing bay, but there’s an airlock door in our path that’s reporting a full vacuum in the hallway past it. Please advise with new orders.”

My stomach locks up as Aisoh says ‘full vacuum.’ What does that mean? How could there be a vacuum just past that door? It doesn’t make sense. Ships keep out the vacuum. That’s what they do. There would need to be a hull breach for something like this to happen, and I know that’s simply impossible. Why is Aisoh saying that there’s a full vacuum?

I listen to a moment of static on the intercom, then a new voice comes through the speakers in my helmet. “Understood, Full Leader. We acknowledge your request. Please stand by and wait for new orders.”

Aisoh pauses, seeming to tilt his head slightly. “Sir, thank you for the acknowledgement,” he says, sounding much more uncertain than he did a moment ago. “How long will we be standing by? We are in close proximity to a damaged section of the hull. I do not consider our location to be stable.”

Another moment of static on the intercom. Then, “Understood, Full Leader. Please stand by and wait for new orders. This intercom channel is being closed.”

“Sir - “ Aisoh begins, but the intercom crackles with static, then goes quiet. He’s been disconnected. Aisoh stands for a moment in the middle of the hallway. In the dim lighting, his outline seems to almost blend in with the shadows. Then the floor vibrates again, more powerfully this time, and the walls around us emit their painful screech of metal grinding
against metal. It’s much louder here than it was before. The overhead lights flicker
dangerously.

Aisoh doesn’t wait for the vibration to stop before he’s talking on the intercom
again. “I want everyone back in formation and following me. We’re standing by someplace
else. Let’s go!”

I get into formation behind Darait, and together we all jog back the way we came. I
stumble whenever a new wave of vibration rushes through the ship, nearly falling over
myself. I have no idea where we’re going. The lights blink and crackle every few seconds,
with some or all of them snapping off and back on. We jog through the long hallways. Aisoh
takes several turns, but he never says where he’s leading us. Then I hear a voice crackle
through the intercom.

“All those crew members. This is Captain Amiyah speaking.” Aisoh stops
running, and raises his fist to signal the rest of us to follow suit. “We have taken extensive
damage to the rear of our ship, including the landing bay and main thrusters. Our Shield is
currently holding against a large number of atmosphere-based nano-missiles originating
from the skies over Amber.” She pauses. The lights spark out again, then come back on.
“The colony’s defenses are much more sophisticated than we had been led to believe. They
were activated even before we left the Fold. The Dohbaist was targeted first and has been
destroyed. Its remaining Shield components have joined with our own, and we estimate
that we can withstand the planet’s defenses for another seven to ten minutes.”

The floor under my feet shakes again. I feel as though I’m caught up in an earthquake,
and I lean against Darait to keep from falling over. The Captain continues speaking. “We
have been in contact with Command, which has advised our response.” She pauses again.
The Captain sounds shaken. “I hereby order all Standard Troopers to report to the escape
pods. Directions to the nearest pod banks are being sent to Full Leaders. We will be
launching the pods toward the colony, accompanied by the remaining components of our
Shield. Your mission is to destroy the colony and await extraction. Aiohn is sending
additional ships, which will arrive in two days’ time.”

The ship shudders again, and this time it’s Darait who has to grab my shoulder.
Aisoh’s looking down at his holo, at the new orders that have just come in. He signals us to
follow him, and we continue jogging. The Captain is still speaking. Her words echo through
my helmet as I run.

“To all other crew members, you are ordered to remain at your posts. Several of our
banks of escape pods have been destroyed. We have enough pods left for the Standard
Troopers, but no more. It is important to our mission that all other personnel remain
behind.” She hesitates, and I hear the intercom crackle as she takes a breath. The floor
bucks sharply, driving me to one knee. I stand back up and keep running. “I will also be
staying behind to guide the ship away from the colony. With luck, the shield around the
escape pods should draw the attention of the missiles while we move out of their effective
range. Remain at your posts.”
The intercom goes quiet, and I know that she's signed off. The overhead lights are more frequently off than on now, and I catch only glimpses of the soldiers running with me. Their silhouettes are illuminated as if by flashes of lightning. The walls around us continue to thunder with the bellows of tearing metal.

Aisoh soon guides us to the escape pods. I realize that this is where he had been taking us, anyway. There's already a crowd in the antechamber, and it isn't just Standard Troopers. There are technicians here, too. Administrators. They're all pushing against the armored Troopers, shouting and trying to get to the pods. It's chaos. Several Units have made it their jobs to hold the crowd back so other Units can board. I feel my heart race at the sight of so many people being turned away from the escape pods. It's not right. I hear Aisoh swear over the intercom, but the noise gets lost in the overwhelming cacophony.

Aisoh orders us into a new formation, and we start shoving our way through the crowd toward the defensive line. It's almost impossible to get through. The thick crowd pushes back at us, and even though I try not to touch anyone, I have no choice but to push several technicians out of my way. The individual members of the crowd don't stand a chance against us, with our powered suits of armor, but together, with all of them pushing at once, knowing that their lives depend on it, it's a struggle to gain even a few feet.

Then I hear screams from up ahead. I look and see that several of the soldiers charged with holding the crowd back have raised their rifles and are shooting into the throng. I see a man get hit in the shoulder. Then I watch the woman next to him as her head snaps back, a charred hole blown through her temple. The screams are deafening now, but almost none of the members of the crowd turn and run away. Instead, they rush the line of soldiers, dragging them down and beating at their armor.

"Let's go!" Aisoh yells into the intercom. He starts pushing through the crowd more quickly now, almost throwing people out of his way. Other members of the unit follow him, but I lag behind. Darait grabs me by the arm and starts dragging me toward the escape pods.

"Wait!" I say. "We need to help these people!" Around me, the crowd has turned into a sea of running and shoving bodies, piling toward the defensive line. They're not put off by the rifles; they're crazed by them. They want to get off this ship just as badly as we do. More.

Darait shakes her head, not looking around at me. "There's nothing we can do. We need to hurry." She continues dragging me. I half-stumble after her, not looking where I'm going, focused only on the madness around us.

Suddenly, someone plows into me from behind, grabbing me around my waist and tackling me to the ground. I land on my side, stunned. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Darait go down, too, under a wave of gray uniforms. The crowd isn't just attacking the defensive line anymore. It's attacking every soldier in sight.

I'm terrified. I can hardly move. I don't know what to do, what to think. How am I here? How did this happen? Another clump of gel slides out of my hairline and down my
I reach up and push it away from my eyes. It comes away on my finger, and I flick it to the floor. I can already feel the gen starting to dry on my skin. My skin feels raw and burned by the gel’s acid. How did this happen to me? What did I do?

I start to get up, but my assailant grabs me by the shoulders and throws me back down. He’s a man, I notice, with brown eyes and black hair. A straight nose. He grips my helmet in both hands and starts slamming the back of my head into the floor. I yell at him to stop, but he either can’t hear me or won’t listen. With the next impact I see white sparks flash in front of my eyes. I grab the man by the forearms and pull his hands off of me. He struggles, but my armor easily overpowers him. I throw him off my chest and struggle up to one knee.

The man has barely hit the ground before he’s back up and launching himself at me again. He knocks me to the floor and punches my faceplate as hard as he can. My neck flips back with the animalistic force of the blow, and the back of my head strikes the floor again. I swing a backhanded blow at the man, connecting with his jaw. This gives me the moment I need to stand up, and we face each other, crouched, slowly circling each other. I’m breath hard and fast, and I see a small drop of blood forming at the corner of the man’s mouth.

“Wait!” I shout again. I’m holding my hands in front of me. “I don’t - “ The man roars and charges at me. I bend forward into his tackle. We collide, grappling for a moment, the man grabbing me and I grabbing him back. Then, I twist my torso, flinging the man into the crowd. He collides with several other people, and they go down under his weight. My assailant is the first to get back up. His beautiful black hair is in complete disarray now, and the small drop of blood on his lip has grown into a red smear across his chin and teeth. The man yells something I can’t make out and sprints towards me.

All I mean to do is hold out my hands to keep him away. I push my arms in front of me and the man collides with them at full speed. I feel my feet slide over the floor, carried backwards by his momentum. But the struggle I expect to follow never comes. I open my eyes. I realize that they’d flinched closed. The man is still standing in front of me at arm’s length, but instead of looking fierce or vicious, he simply looks surprised. His mouth is open. He’s staring at me with this strange look on his face. His skin has gone white. This makes his bloody lips stand out like lanterns in a dark forest. Then he slumps backwards and falls away. I feel my arms being pulled after him, and, as he falls to the floor, two long, wet blades slide out of his torso like pickles spilled from a jar. I stare at them, uncomprehending, blood dripping from the ends of my swords. Why are they here? How did they get out of their sheaths? I didn’t activate them. ...Did I?

The door to the room opens and a human guard steps inside. “Why aren’t you dressed yet?” It says. “Get going. Right now.” It stands there as I, naked, put on the jumpsuit. I stare down at the floor, desperate to look at anything other than the human. I’ve never felt more ashamed. I have to stand up to pull on the pants. I can see the guard watching me. I
feel horrified. The human points to another item on the floor. "Shoes," it says. I sit back down and tie the poorly-fitting shoes onto my feet. When I stand back up, the guard orders me to hold out my hands. It puts back on the pair of handcuffs. Then it pulls me out of the small room, to where a second guard is waiting.

All I can hear is the roar of air through my ears. The crowd in front of me seems to take a deep breath in, staring at the dead body of the straight-nosed man. Then someone else tackles me from the side, and I feel myself go down under a pile of driving fists and booted feet. My breath rushes through my ears, deafening me, and the crowd blocks out the flickering light from overhead, leaving me in silent darkness. I feel as though I’m being buried alive. I’ve never been so afraid of a small space. I squeeze my eyes shut, feeling the thumping and pounding on my armor.

The next thing I know, I’m back up on my feet. My arms are swinging, and I feel the change in resistance as the blades slice through air, then flesh, then air again. I’m fighting, cutting, stabbing - I punch a young woman in the face, and the blade set above my wrist pierces her nasal bone, lodging halfway through her skull. I rip the blade out and whirl around, already hacking into someone fresh.

I lunge from one member of the crowd to the next. They’re moving so slowly, and their skin tears so easily. They’re nothing they can do to stop me. They have no weapons. They have no armor. They can only rush forward and hope to bury me under their weight. Another crew member falls, and I gather my legs under myself and launch my body forward, pouncing on another one, staving in her ribcage before ripping her body off the floor and throwing it over the crowd.

Arms encircle my chest from behind, locking me in a strong grip. I pound my elbows backwards, trying to beat away my attacker. Distantly, I hear something - a voice - sounding in my helmet. “Void! Stop it! We need to leave! What are you doing?”

I continue to struggle. My attacker is dragging me backwards, and I can’t regain my balance. I elbow my attacker again, and they respond by twisting around and throwing me to the ground ahead of them. I roll and quickly get to my feet, crouching and spinning around to face this new enemy.

“Yes! We need to leave! GO!”

I know that voice. It’s Darait. She’s pointing behind me, toward the bank of escape pods. “MOVE! Why are you still here? Go!” I hesitate. Not for long. Just long enough to see the valley that’s been cut in the crowd behind her. Cut by me. Farther away, the crowd stands packed closely together. But there’s a nearly straight line that extends for sixteen, twenty feet, a line of dead and dying bodies, some lying alone, others splayed over one another. All have horrible gashes cut through their skin and muscle. The floor shines with blood, glittering in the strobing twinkle of the overhead lights. I can’t breath. I don’t understand. What happened to them?
Darait’s taken hold of my arm again. She’s pulling me away from the bleeding canyon, dragging me toward the escape pods. I’m not resisting her anymore, but I’ve forgotten how to walk. My legs can only stagger and twitch as I’m pulled farther and farther away. Stupidly, thinking that this is somehow important, I retract my blades into their sheaths. Blood squeegees off of them and ribbons briefly through the air before splattering onto the floor.

I try desperately to slow my breathing as the guards force me down the hallway. I don’t understand. What do I do? I see an elevator up ahead. My stomach churns.

We’ve reached the pod bank by now. It’s a tall, wide, and shallow room with a scaffolding-like series of metal stairs and catwalks climbing up the opposing wall. Each level of catwalks gives access to round hatches set into the wall. My breathing’s so heavy that I can hardly climb the stairs, and Darait has to almost carry me to a pod. We’re among the last soldiers to board. Only the Units in the defensive line are left, and they’re quickly starting to pull back. The crowd is thinning. Half of its members are now lying on the ground, bleeding or dying. The other half is hanging back, held off by the sight of rifle barrels. Darait pushes me into an escape pod. It’s a cylinder, about seven feet long, with four seats arranged in a circle, facing inwards. Mahtah and Zhuem are already here and strapped in. The hatch to the escape pod is set in its ceiling. There’s gravity in the ship itself, but it dies away as soon as I move through the hatch. The rapid change makes me sick to my stomach. I flip around in the cramped space, moving into one of the seats. Darait comes in directly after me. She pulls the hatch closed. It locks with a sharp hiss. I thought I’d been deaf up till now, that the only thing I could hear was my own breathing and the rush of blood through my ears. But I now realize that I was also hearing the screams and shouts of the crowd. These sounds are cut off completely when the hatch closes, as suddenly as a knife through jam.

The humans push me into the elevator, and turn me around to face the doors. They stand behind me. One of them pushes a button. The doors begin to close. I don’t know what to do. I’m petrified.

I struggle to fasten my seat’s harness over my chest. My fingers feel numb. I can’t look at any of the others. Out of the corner of my eye, I see the bird hovering near me. It’s still here. I finally get the tongue of my harness into the buckle, pulling the strap tight. Just in time. A high-pitched buzzer goes off in the small space of the escape pod, lasting for two seconds. Then I feel blood rush up into my head as the pod launches away from the side of the ship.

There are small windows set into the walls of the pod, between the seats. I stare into the one across from me as the pod accelerates, shaking and vibrating. Through the window,
I see a firestorm in space. I can see the Shield - a huge bubble against the black sky. The bubble is lit by hundreds of explosions, a constant flurry of small, raging infernos. The missiles beat against the Shield like a blue gas flame against tracing paper.

I can see the other escape pods. There’s a whole cloud of us, all launched at the same time. We’re closer to the Shield now. I can make out individual hexagons. They look so small, so weak against the blaze. As the the escape pods approach the Shield, the wall of hexagons bulges outwards, making a pocket for us to fly into. The pocket extends, the hexagons all working together to form an eggshell around us. The entire Shield distends and reforms around the pods, growing several layers thick. I can still see the fire raging on the outermost layers. I can also see the ship from here. I see the last of the Shield peel away. Half a second later, small explosions burst against its hull, tiny spheres of fire and plasma detonating against its delicate skin. It’s already lost.

The cloud of pods races towards the planet. Missile after missile lands on the Shield, and I begin to see small cracks opening up in our protective bubble. I feel my escape pod hit the planet’s atmosphere. The shaking intensifies, and the cramped space is filled with a constant, never-ending roar. I watch through the window as the first missile slips through a crack between two components of the Shield, striking a pod less than a hundred feet away. The pod is engulfed in flame. When the fire subsides, the pod has been ripped to shreds, reduced to a haze of spinning metal shards. I see four bodies come tumbling out. If they weren’t killed by the explosion, they’re certainly dead now. Our suits can’t withstand the vacuum. Their blood will have boiled into mist the instant their hull cracked. The bodies burn and tumble through the atmosphere alongside the spreading debris cloud from their pod, leaving streaks of fire in their wake.

By now, the shaking of the pod makes it impossible to see straight. Everything is a blur. The force from falling so quickly is incredible, like I’m being compressed and squeezed through a long tube. The shaking is so powerful that the only thing I can do is hold onto my harness with all my strength. Half-blind, I see a bright flash through the window. An instant later something glances off the outside of the pod, echoing like an explosion in my ears. Maybe it was a piece of broken metal from a devastation Shield component, or a chunk from a ruined pod.

The elevator doors close. Fear.

I squeeze my eyes shut, struggling to block out the shaking of the vessel, the roar of the burning atmosphere, the sight of a tiny crack spreading over the window. I try to block out the knowledge that I’m falling. I try to block out the knowledge that I might never land.

I fall.
End of Book One