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Heart of the Machine

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Heart of the Machine

A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE

STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING

BY

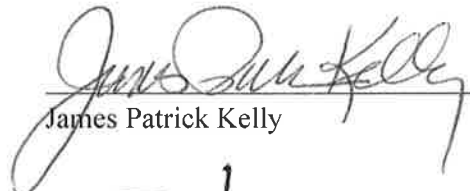
Lauren Liebowitz

2016


THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE
STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING

June 1, 2016

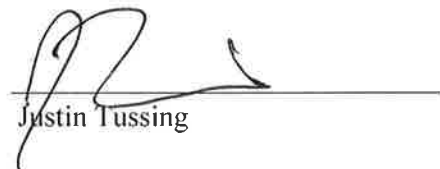
We hereby recommend that the thesis of Lauren Liebowitz entitled *Heart of the Machine* be accepted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts.


James Patrick Kelly

Advisor



David Anthony Durham

Reader


Justin Tussing

Director

Accepted


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ABSTRACT

Rion lives as a roach in the down-below, sharing what little she has with other kids in need. An encounter with a dead body leaves her with what seems like someone else's memories in her head--Obsidian, one of the synthetic humanoid Protectors who battle against unknown, inhuman invaders.

Rion's everyday struggle to survive and keep her friends safe is complicated by this unfamiliar, unwanted presence. As she searches for a cure or at least an explanation, she comes to the attention of different powers at play who want access to Obsidian's memories, at any cost. Soon she is fighting not only for her own life but for the rights of the Protectors, the freedom of the down-below, and the future of the colony.

Other lives become tangled with Rion's: Deah, a former roach turned bounty hunter who wants nothing more than to climb further from the down-below; Len, a senator's son intent on inciting rebellion in the down-below; and Cobalt, Obsidian's lover, a Protector fleeing the threat of being decommissioned.

Heart of the Machine is a young adult science fiction novel exploring sentience, identity, and what it means to be alive.

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PREFACE

I have always been a storyteller, and my parents and teachers encouraged me from the very beginning. They may not always have understood what I choose to write about, but they supported my efforts. When I was seven years old, I was assigned to write a short paragraph explaining what kind of flower I would be, if I could be a flower—which somehow turned into a multi-page adventure in which my flower-self (a purple pansy, of course!) traveled underwater, evaded bullies, and made new fish friends. This first work of fiction opened something in me, and my parents gave me a special journal in which I wrote many story beginnings. For the first few years, I seldom finished anything, but I started dozens and dozens and fell completely in love with writing. As a creative child, I had incredible good fortune throughout my elementary and middle school years; so many writers I know were left to fend for themselves or else were actively discouraged by the adults in their lives at that age, whereas I was praised and given more opportunities to express myself. When I opted out of recess so I could write on the classroom computer in fifth grade, my teacher enrolled me in the pilot of a library program that "published" students' stories in handmade books. Thus I am in many ways building upon a firmer foundation than many of my fellows, and I recognize this for the great privilege that it is.

This is not to say that I have avoided the myriad insecurities that plague most writers. I am all too aware of my own limitations. I am not a plotter or a planner; my ideas are sometimes stretched too thin across a short story, let alone a longer work. I am a terribly inefficient writer, sometimes producing ten thousand words for what becomes a three-thousand-word story. These specific concerns led me to wonder whether I would

ever be able to write a novel. As an undergraduate creative writing minor, I learned to write short stories, and I've since had a few appear in reputable publications, most notably my very first sale to *Cicada*. However, I know that long forms and short forms are very different, and writing a novel is a daunting thought to a short story writer. Still, it feels that fewer people read short fiction and fewer markets publish it, and I wanted to try working on some longer ideas that have haunted me for a long time. Thus I applied to and was accepted by Stonecoast, where I hoped to gain some understanding of novel-writing. I set myself high expectations (I'm an ambitious person by nature) and got to work.

As a reader and a writer, I am most drawn to stories that blur the line between the real world and a magical one. My perspective has been shaped by my experiences as a child with undiagnosed but very early-onset bipolar II disorder, and during my childhood I lived in a space between fantasy and reality. Even today I'm not always sure which of my early memories are true and which are imagined or come from dreams or works of fiction. Most of my short fiction falls along this border, bringing elements of magic into the real world. My short fiction tends to be dark, addressing issues of mental illness, abuse and the cycle of violence, trauma, and abandonment. If I take pride in my work, it is because I write with a lyrical voice and mix beauty and hope with darkness.

Imagine my surprise, then, in discovering that the novel I actually wanted to write at Stonecoast was none of those things.

During my first semester, I tried to work on a novel that checked all the boxes of my usual fiction—a magic realism piece about a girl coming to terms with her childhood abuse and the loss of her twin sister, who lives on as a sort of vengeful spirit in a twilight magical realm. I had been planning it for years and thought my time at Stonecoast would

be the perfect opportunity to write it, once and for all. But every time I turned in a packet to my mentor, Nancy Holder, I then gleefully ran off to my guilty-pleasure project: a science fiction piece I referred to dismissively as "the robot story."

I love science fiction. One of my favorite books of all time is Joan Vinge's *Catspaw*, a cyberpunk-in-space novel about a telepathic half-alien dealing with overzealous corporations and interstellar law. It is also an exploration of human rights and human nature. I love Cordwainer Smith's short stories, which likewise address painful truths in the context of fantastical science. Ann Leckie's *Ancillary Justice* caused me to think long and hard about gender and culture, much as Ursula K. Le Guin's *Left Hand of Darkness* did years earlier. One of the reasons why I chose to come to Stonecoast and not another program is that I read Jim Kelly's "Think Like a Dinosaur" when I was younger and it made an enormous impression on me, showing me that stories could have a sense of wonder while still asking complicated questions. Science fiction can be fun, but at its best (and it is often at its best), it uses the strange and unfamiliar to look closely at things we might shy away from discussing in a real-world context. But I have never, *ever* thought of myself as a writer of science fiction. That genre has always been something I admired from afar while I scribbled my own quiet little stories set in Austin, where I live.

Nancy noticed the joy in my voice every time I mentioned the robot story. For my fourth packet, she suggested I turn in a short story I'd been working on for a themed contest, and so I sent her a crazy adventure inspired by Russian fairy tales, narrated by a smart-mouthed wolf. "This is fun," Nancy told me. "I can tell you had fun writing this. You're not having fun with your novel. What *are* you having fun with? The robot story?"

At that point, I had written fifty pages or so of the robot story despite also working on my more "serious" novel. I sent an abridged version to Nancy, who saw the same unabashed joy all over the page that she had noticed in me when I spoke about it. "This is what you want to be writing," she said. "Write it."

Which brings me to one of the greatest things I have learned from Stonecoast, though I am still struggling with it—giving myself permission to write what I want to write, whether or not it's what I feel I *ought* to be writing, whether or not I feel like it will disappoint other people.

I get the impression, from talking to my classmates, that this is not an uncommon challenge among writers of popular fiction. Maybe many of us have chips on our shoulders, like I do, and feel like we do not belong in genre and do not belong in "literature" and therefore struggle to please everyone and wind up pleasing nobody, least of all ourselves. Maybe we worry about marketability and whether the stories of our heart would stand any chance of being published. Maybe we are caught up in the issues of social justice that run through our speculative fiction community and we feel obligated to express all of those issues, whether they come naturally to us and fit in our story or not. Whatever the reason may be, I have noticed this as a trend among the writers I know, and it is certainly one of the main challenges along my own journey.

My second semester was devoted entirely to the robot story. Under the tutelage of David Anthony Durham, I read more widely (and more closely) within science fiction. I had little experience writing secondary worlds; David writes a little of everything and has developed extensive settings in both fantasy and science fiction, so he could guide me when I was lost. World-building is a new challenge to me. When I write magical realism,

I set most of my stories in Austin, which lends itself very well to that sort of story and becomes a character in its own right. I do have to decide the rules if the magical elements in each story, and I have to try to get the details accurate but also preserve verisimilitude despite the more eccentric attributes of my fair city that out-of-towners may have trouble believing. But I never have to build from the ground up like I did with this project. It therefore posed a unique challenge to me because I wasn't sure exactly what I wanted from it. Part of the setting's development was determined by the needs of the story as I worked with it. Other parts required me to once more give myself permission to try whatever made me most excited. I went through a few iterations. Eventually, I drew inspiration from the Walled City of Kowloon mixed with a 1980s cyberpunk aesthetic, although I hope I have made it my own.

Having just completed an extremely challenging novel himself, David also helped me through the emotional roller coaster of writing a novel. He encouraged me, he asked questions, and he engaged in back-and-forth dialogue with me as I slowly developed setting where none had existed and solved crippling plot problems. My original vision for this story alternated between only two perspectives, balanced very carefully and intentionally; one character dreamed the perspective of the other character while he slept. This premise did not function, and David suggested several times that I consider incorporating other characters' perspectives. I resisted for the entire semester. Then, on the plane to the next residency, I started a writing exercise from a third character's perspective—and felt so many of my problems with the story evaporate. Moral of the story: trust your mentor. Thus my thesis features a number of different perspectives, and I believe the novel is much stronger for it.

My third semester saw me returning to my literary-academic roots in an unexpected way. In talking about my robot story with other people, I found that *readers* of science fiction tended to picture mechanical creations (think R2-D2 from *Star Wars*), whereas people whose engagement with science fiction came from video games were more likely to imagine the humanoid androids that actually populate my novel. I hypothesized that this might stem from a cultural difference between Western writers and Japanese game developers, perhaps due to lingering elements of Japan's historical animism. Very basic research proved that my exciting new hypothesis was tired and established among scholars in the field. I scrapped my idea and threw away a month's worth of work, and instead I found myself classifying robot stories with a system inspired by the Aarne–Thompson system for fairy tales, but much simpler and more modest. I love literary criticism and led my high school literary criticism team to win first place in the state, so contributing to the body of research on science fiction literature appealed to me. The reading list and bibliography for my third semester project immersed me in robot fiction and robot stories outside of prose more deeply than I think I had ever read. Thinking about themes and tropes that strengthened my novel, though I scarcely wrote a single word of fiction the whole semester. I returned to the novel with apprehension but also relief, worried that I might have lost the momentum that let me write so much so quickly before.

I can't say why I love this project more than any other writing project in my adult life. I wrote much of the initial draft with the free unabashed pleasure that used to fill me when I wrote as a child, when writing was magical and fun instead of a challenge. Maybe this is because in its earliest stages I gave myself permission to be as maudlin and write

as pretentiously as I wanted, and though that made for some overwritten passages, it also let me be myself without apology.

Thus I present to you a work that is simultaneously, paradoxically, the most and least "Lauren" story I have ever written. It is outside my usual genre, it has called for me to tackle my greatest weaknesses, it introduces more character perspectives than I have perhaps ever written in a single piece, and yet the writing is colorful and the characters live in a world that becomes more and more an expression of what excites me as I work with it.

Though it still needs to be revised as a complete work, I feel that this novel is the culmination of what I have learned at Stonecoast. The first draft of the earliest pages predates my time at Stonecoast, but subsequent revisions throughout the book reflect how much I have grown as a writer in my two years in the program. I wanted to learn to write a novel and while I can't necessarily say I *know* how, I can say that I have done it. This is my thesis. With help from my mentors, I have learned to trust myself and, I hope, I am beginning to value my own enjoyment of what I am writing.

I have had to restructure my novel twice, and both times it has benefited greatly. Substantial revisions make me nervous, especially with a longer work. I worry about losing that spark, the magic that thrilled me so much every time I sat down to work on this piece. But the more I work with it, the more I find new things to love in it.

This piece reflects the hard skills I've gained here. The combined efforts of David and Jim mean that I've taken what was initially a white-box setting and fleshed it out into something living and breathing. I connected it to the real world, which opened up a number of complications, which meant I then decided to disconnect it from our earth—

solving my problems but meaning I would need to build *everything* from scratch. Over a series of drafts, I have developed a multilayered, multifaceted plot featuring different factions each with its own agenda, giving the plot some complexity. I do not consider myself an especially clever writer, so this does not come naturally to me, but it is gratifying to learn that one can slowly build that cleverness over time. Perhaps not naturally or intuitively, but it can be faked with sufficient effort. Thus I have a setting and I have a plot, and both of these are my own. I have learned to develop characters more fully than is ever necessary in short fiction. I have learned techniques for revision and rewriting, that it is possible to break a novel and re-set it and have it heal in the proper shape. And (perhaps most importantly) I've learned to be confident that my story is worth the effort and that all hope is not lost just because the early drafts are flawed.

Thematically, this story has (I hope) started to explore big issues as science fiction should. Though it initially started as a fun adventure story, it picked up layers of meaning that emerged naturally from the writing. In part, it explores the idea of personhood, how we define sentience and what rights should be conferred on artificially sentient beings. The android figures struggle to be recognized as sentient by their human creators, who have a vested interest in considering them tools. The status quo is likewise problematic for my human characters, who live in a heavily stratified society. My main character is a young woman who lives on the streets in an impoverished community controlled by warring gangs. Notably, in earlier drafts of this novel, she was a young man—but a combination of gendered expectations among readers and my own difficulty writing that character led me to experiment with changing her gender and I am pleased with the

results. Most of my characters are teenagers coming to terms with their identities and their futures; this is, without question, a book for young adults.

As much as I may love books for teenagers, I never considered myself a young adult writer. I thought of my short stories as dark tales for grown-ups with perhaps a touch of childlike wonder. One day a friend recommended that I submit one particular story to young-adult publications. That story was eventually published as "Green" in an issue of *Cicada*, a literary magazine for teenagers that I subscribed to as a teenager myself. The other two stories I have had published (one in *Weird Tales* and the other in a small-press anthology) feature young protagonists searching for a place to belong. And now that I am working on longer pieces, I find that perhaps despite myself I have been revealed as a young adult writer. This is just as well. Professionally, I work in the marketing office of a small private university, and our audience largely consists of the same teenagers my fiction targets. I would like to think that this is an audience I understand. As an online entertainer, I have acquired a young fan base, which keeps my understanding of my demographic fresh. All of these experiences inform my writing. And just as I write what would have pleased young Lauren, I try to remember them, not to pander to them but to reach them emotionally. More than anything, I want to touch people the way books have always touched me. Teenagers are often unsure, lost, emotionally vulnerable, seeking acceptance and understanding. If I can help even one of them navigate a treacherous time, I will consider my work to be a success. This may seem like a tall order for a cyberpunk romp about sentient robots, but I think it is possible if I can just make my characters real enough.

The following manuscript is approximately a third of a young adult science fiction novel entitled *Heart of the Machine*; the rest of the novel has been written during my final semester, with guidance from Jim Kelly. Because I have members of my target audience available, I may share drafts with them and incorporate their feedback once a draft is finished, but I hope to finalize revisions after graduation and then pursue representation with an agent. However, even if this novel is never published, it has been a challenging, frustrating, satisfying, and ultimately life-changing experience and I hope to carry the lessons I've learned from writing it with me throughout what I hope will be a long career as a writer.

HEART OF THE MACHINE

They fused with their suits, and in turn with their ships, fast little flyers that sacrificed strength for maneuverability and speed. Rushing through the atmosphere, they looked like will o' wisps blinking in orbit--fireflies winking in and out of sight, dodging blasts from their beetle-brown opponents, dancing an intricate, ever-fluid path through the sky or the darkness of the heavens.

The one called Obsidian fell behind, cut his speed, until a star-bright ship and its pursuer passed him. At that precise moment, he sent forth fire bellowing from his own ship's heart--spat plasma out into the void--and engulfed the enemy in flame.

And that was the most important thing--even as heat seared through his own body, through the plastic and metal of his outer casing, through the simulacrum of flesh that felt pain as surely as any true organic matter did, even as the darkness and the absolute cold of eternity fell upon him. He wanted one more moment, one more breath, one more kiss, but what mattered most was that that single star-bright ship could make it home to safety. A voice on the headset rose in panic, screaming his name. He whispered his final goodbye before the cold took him and he was gone.

For just one moment, the silence was absolute. Silence, and stillness, pressing around Rion's body as heavily as the weight of water on all sides. If she stayed here, alone and lost, everything would stop. The whole world would stop around her. No

passage of time, no turning of the planet--just silence, and stillness, and the comforting presence of water around her. As safe as a babe in the womb.

She opened her mouth, and a perfect bubble floated out and upward, showing her the path to safety. To light and life, danger, loss, an unknown future. Something burned inside her, deep inside. Lungs, screaming for oxygen. Red pounded at the edge of her vision. Rion kicked--kicked--kicked and then surfaced into chill, life-giving air.

The only sound at first was her own fierce gasping as she breathed cold knives that burned nearly as badly as emptiness had. She coughed, and water rushed up her nose and down into her throat, making her retch. Then she stretched out on her back, letting the air within her hold her afloat. Her vision cleared, though the sound was once again muted. The stars twinkled overhead, brilliant pinpricks in a soot-colored sky, and there--at least there, she could see peace and certainty, more stars than her mind could understand, unchanging and sure. They would be there tomorrow, untouched by the passage of time.

She saw something strange, a darkness against the greater darkness. A break in the stars. A body? It bobbed up and down in the water, a few feet from where she floated, indeterminable in the darkness.

Might be alive, drifting to safety. Might be dead. Rion paddled toward it, to help if she could--or, since dead bodies had little use for possessions, to help herself.

She reached for it but before she could touch it her outstretched fingertips burned. Her hand recoiled, and the fire traveled up her arm, through her, and she spluttered in the water and it rushed over her head and her temples pounded and she vomited because something white-hot seared behind her eyes.

Only much later did she return to herself and find her own limbs tangled up in the edges along the water, and an echo in her thoughts.

They called it the down-below, and they called her a roach for living in it. Not a bad comparison, really--probably truer for her than for most of the poor folks who made their home here. Rion ate garbage. She built a space to live out of broken fiberboard and discarded boxes, wedged in between two tenement buildings that didn't quite lie flush against each other. She climbed drain pipes and crawled through busted windows and spent more time clambering on the roofs or scrambling across catwalks than running in the streets. And--the one part of this she was actually proud of--she wouldn't let them catch her. Wouldn't let them stop her. No matter what, she kept running.

Rion crouched just inside her little hideaway, watching the street outside, but it was an absent-minded sort of watching. A floor or two up from street level, they seldom had much cause for worry. Still, she worried.

"Upside," she said in a low voice, "not so many rodents or runoff when it rains."

"Downside, we could *be* the runoff when it rains." Abitha sat behind her, affixing a shirt-sleeve to the body of a jacket that had long since lost its own. Had it been up to Rion alone, she might just have layered the two or used tape to bind them together, but Abitha sewed properly, with needle and thread. She collected the broken things they found--sometimes cloth, sometimes devices like the LED lamp that she was at this moment using to see in the pre-dawn darkness--and then once a month or so, she would

repair them all at once, binding her fingertips with tape so she wouldn't risk stabbing herself with the slender piece of metal or burning herself with battery acid. This was their partnership: Rion brought broken things home, and Abitha mended them, her nose buried in her work.

"So," Rion said, "it's a matter of deciding which we'd rather risk. Drowning in our sleep down here, or falling off the rooftop and breaking all our necks."

"Can I say I don't want either one?"

"You can," she said. "Maybe fate will listen, this time. We've made it this far, haven't we?" But Abitha's raised eyebrows, dark smudges in a pale face, told her that her earlier attempts at humor hadn't taken hold. At least Abitha's paleness meant it was easy to read her moods. A liability on the street, marking her as an outsider--but even at a distance, Rion could make out her clear expressions.

Her jaw was set, tight. "We *have* been okay this far. Why move now?"

"You'll get used to the climb. You did when we came here, didn't you?"

"That was different," she said.

"How?" Rion asked. When Abitha didn't reply, she pressed on. "And there won't be as much vermin, there will be less trash, we might even get some fresh air."

"And that's why?" Pursed lips, flared nostrils.

"Yeah. I could list off more reasons, too, if you wanted." Like the fact that living on higher ground meant a more defensible position, except that *defensible position* wasn't the sort of thing she would have said, six months ago. *Watching too many vids*, someone might say. Abitha *had* said, the last big fight they had, the *we don't have money for that*

and *you really think I'd waste money on vids and then where did this crap come from* fight. And that was where she was leading here, again, to make Rion say it. Again.

"It's not what you're thinking," Rion said. "I really, truly think we'd be safer higher up. I swear by all that is holy in this world--"

"You're not some high and mighty Protector keeping the city safe."

Her chin lifted, and the sinews in her neck tensed as she swallowed back an outburst. "*I know.*" She breathed deep, steadying herself. "I know."

Rion stood--too quickly, her forehead cracking against the sloped ceiling. She heard the sound a moment before the pain struck her and she grunted. When they'd first built this place, she could straighten almost completely before the top of her head brushed against the sloping ceiling.

"Rion," Abitha said.

Rion pushed aside the heavy tarp at the entrance more dramatically than she had intended. Linger, and Abitha might ask to come along--or she might not ask, and Rion couldn't honestly say which she would prefer. The flap fell shut behind her, snuffing out the light from Abitha's lantern completely. For a moment, Rion waited with her back pressed against the uneven concrete wall, waiting for her eyes to adjust.

Flickering neon cast the catwalks in patches of bright colors--here, a sickly, almost syrupy green, and a block away the cracked concrete reflected putrid orange. In other parts of the city, lamps gave off a steady cool light, even-tempered and unblinking, but of course the lights weren't the only thing unblinking in those neighborhoods, and Rion had no protection against the sort of watchdog surveillance that lurked around barred windows and doors.

Topside, confusingly, was not connected directly to the down-below. It had to a certain degree encased the down-below, without ever becoming part of it. Whereas the towering stacks of shops and residencies making up the down-below had risen organically as the population grew, topside had been erected following a plan. From the higher tiers of the down-below, topside was visible through gaps in the buildings, or from the balconies or windows of the residents lucky enough to live along the edges. Here, the air was clearer, with sweet-smelling breezes and golden sunlight. Given the choice to live anywhere, Rion would choose one of the uppermost levels, though she seldom had much call to travel there.

Street-level held its own appeal--it was the primary way to enter or exit the down-below, not counting the lower levels' ladders and fire escapes, which had no guarantee that they could support a person's weight. Visiting topsiders tended to stay near the street, so the lower levels were filled with businesses that catered to them. Restaurants, smoking parlors, tattoo shops, nightclubs--so many clubs in particular that the lower levels throbbed with music during true night. These levels tended to be cleaner than the rest of the down-below and more densely populated. A better choice for begging, but riskier. The gangs controlled the lower levels closely and set out their own beggars and panhandlers to skim money off topside tourists. They did not look kindly on the unaffiliated. Thus Abitha preferred that they both avoid the lower levels, and for the most part Rion did.

Rion spent most of her time on the intermediate levels, where real sunlight was a rare occurrence, where narrow alleyways and catwalks connected interlocking buildings.

Where families lived in tight spaces that sometimes doubled as shops or salons. Where the gangs were still present but less focused because there was less of value.

If they could move higher...

Abitha hated change. Rion knew that about her. When they first moved into this shanty, she had been unable to sleep at all. Worse than her usual night terrors. But to imply that Rion was acting on something completely unfounded--that she would jeopardize their safety because of a *dream*, that she was self-absorbed and thoughtless enough to make a dangerous decision like that--it cut deep. The home she had made was all she had.

They were only dreams, no matter how real they felt. She'd been stressed lately. That was when she'd had the most vivid imaginings, historically speaking. The worse things got, the more readily she threw herself into whatever her imagination provided as escape fodder. Made-up heroes or ghost mysteries or a pack of walking, talking dogs that roamed the streets. A fairy mother who told her bedtime stories and kissed her goodnight before turning back into a mouse and scurrying away. But never once a Protector. Never before.

The Protector, Obsidian--his voice wasn't the first one she had heard in her mind, but it was the first time she'd ever experienced something so vividly. All the rest had a dreamlike haze, holes where her imagination had overlooked details, or else something so utterly absurd behind them that she could eventually separate the fantasy from the reality. But this was grounded in something real, and it *felt* real, but she could think of no reasonable explanation for how something genuinely *real* had wound up inside her head.

After Rion left, Abitha tried to keep working. Steady hands. Steady. If she focused on them, if she willed them to be still, they obeyed. Few things in the world would obey her wishes, but for the moment, her hands would make that short list.

Sewing was at least less dangerous work than some of the tech she salvaged. No shattered glass, no corrosive liquid. Generally her policy was that she wouldn't open something she didn't recognize. Hard to say whether a discarded comm device would spark the moment she opened it up, unless she'd seen a design like it before. With how close she had to hold things to her face to see them, it wasn't a risk worth taking--her eyes might be blurry, but at least she had two of them. Losing one or, god forbid, both--sometimes she couldn't sleep, could barely will herself to tweak open the devices in her hands. Then she would settle under the lamp with her project in her lap and wait. When this happened she thought she could feel Rion watching her, and that pressure meant she finally had to do it. Had to get out her little devices, the prized screwdriver set, or whatever it took, and open things up.

She relished the sewing because it was less risky and more rewarding. Colder weather would be coming soon, and Rion's old jacket had become so threadbare as to provide little warmth. Just as well. The sleeves fell several inches short of reaching Rion's wrists already. She had meant to add a strip of cloth to each, but these newer sleeves were a better solution.

There was a knock outside the door, a familiar rapid pattern, and then the flap pushed open as Tyren poked his head inside.

"Hi," he said. His voice sounded rough.

"Come on in," Abitha said with the warmest smile she had to offer. "You staying with us tonight?"

"If that's all right."

Abitha nodded assent as Tyren came to sit beside her. He had a red bundle over one shoulder--his usual sack, patched and reinforced by Abitha's own hands. "More than just tonight, then."

Tyren grunted. "He needs a few days to cool down. Where's Rion?"

"Out."

"Oh."

He made no effort to hide his disappointment. He was younger than either of them, by a couple of years. Abitha had assumed that made him like a younger brother, but now she began to wonder precisely what his interest in Rion was and what that would mean. In all the time Abitha had known her, as far as Abitha could tell, Rion had never thought about *anyone* like that, boy or girl.

Although, really, it was hard for her to feel like she could predict Rion's behavior anymore. Something had changed. Rion said they were dreams, but there were times even in the waking hours when Rion's expression turned distant, when the words she said didn't sound like her, when even her body language shifted ever so subtly. It scared Abitha.

"So can I help with anything?"

Tyren had been sitting in silence as Abitha stitched. She paused, thought about it, looked around their little cubbyhole. It was big enough to sleep three or four bodies as

long as nobody minded touching, strewn with blankets and cardboard and discarded rags to make a sort of nest. Food, when they had any to spare, hung from a nail in the wall. And below the nail, they kept a row of tightly sealed bottles.

"You could refill the water, if you want," she said.

"Sure."

Tyren left his sack, a promise that he would return. A reassurance to himself, maybe, that he had somewhere to return to. They all had their ways of marking this place, even those who only came by occasionally. Only Abitha and Rion actually *lived* here, but others like Tyren came by every so often when they needed a place to stay, for whatever reason, no questions asked.

The wall against Abitha's back creaked, and voices raised within it. They were too quiet for Abitha to make out the words, but it didn't sound like a fight, at least.

She never worried about this place crashing down on her, or flooding with filthy water when it rained. The walls seemed stable enough. They'd lined the edges with plastic bags for some semblance of waterproofing. Rion's points weren't unreasonable, but none of them were immediate concerns. Not that living higher up would be a problem, necessarily. Abitha *did* worry about falling, only ever leaving their home when someone else could accompany her. Living higher up wouldn't change that. What bothered her most was that it was unnecessary, that she suspected it came not from Rion's own common sense but from whatever side of her mind took charge of her in those dark moments. Abitha did not feel comfortable uprooting their lives because of a delusion.

And if it *were* a delusion, not just occasional dreams like Rion claimed, not vid-induced imaginings like Abitha had suspected--if Rion were truly losing her mind-- Abitha did not want to think about it, but she might have to.

The sound of a glass breaking alone wouldn't be cause for concern. It was the shocked gasp that followed--not drunken swearing, not dark laughter, but genuine fear-- that caught Rion's attention. She stopped halfway down the ladder, holding her breath. This part of the neighborhood had switched allegiances recently, following the flow of gang power as leaders rose and fell. Stumbling into one of the ensuing skirmishes would cut her plans for the day short. Better to turn around and go home--or anywhere, but not here. She took a step back up the ladder.

“I didn't know.”

A girl's voice, frightened. Not what Rion would expect from a gang fight. She paused again, for a different reason. Not fear for herself, quite, but indecision. Blood rushed to her ears, and her face burned.

They were on the level below her, in a shadowy recess off the main walkway. Rion crouched, held her breath, wondered if they heard her over the buzz of neon lights, the blare of someone's television, the sound of voices barely contained by thin walls on all sides. Probably she could just keep walking toward brighter neon as though none of this were real. Like so many people seemed to do.

This time she heard a sharp crack. Bone striking bone, with only a little softness to cushion it.

Rion burst from the ladder all at once, barreling into the alleyway. Remembering the feeling of solid armor around her. Nothing to fear down here.

"Stop," she said, in a commanding enough voice that they did, and they all looked at her as she raised her right arm *to activate a stunner against a human target*.

Except of course there was nothing in her wrist but bone and blood and sinew. Nothing that would give her any real advantage in a fight against three men—no, she realized, it was two men and a woman, all of them with a size and confidence and toughness that Rion could never match.

Shit, she thought. And then, *Abitha was right*.

One of them laughed outright. And well he should. Rion was all too aware of just how ridiculous she must seem, swooping in out of nowhere and then adopting a pose from—what? A child's entertainment?

"Get out of here, kid," the man said. "This don't concern you."

Rion swallowed. That would be the smart choice. But the girl's face had a smear of darkness across it. Blood. And light glinted off glass shards around the girl's feet.

"Stop," Rion said, her voice thin and wavering.

"You want some, too?" The men glanced at each other. One took a step toward Rion, rolling out his wrist. "You with her?"

The last time something like this had happened, she'd been smart about it. Had found loose brick and plaster and thrown it with whatever force she could muster until the looming shadow of a man had given up on his victim. Rion's scattershot might have

hit them both, honestly, but the girl had had enough sense to take off as soon as she was free, and Rion never saw her again. She was too busy running herself.

Her stomach churned. She couldn't think of anything to say, as if words could ever defuse something like this. *Run, run, run*, her instincts screamed. *What are you doing, what are you thinking, RUN*. These were the kind of men who had killed Abitha's parents.

She didn't have much of a chance past that to think. They seemed to take her hesitation as agreement. The approaching man grabbed for Rion's hair.

There were two ways to make it through when someone wanted to hurt you, as far as Rion could tell. One was to make yourself uninteresting, if the person fighting you was just angry and frustrated and looking to take that out on someone. Just ball up and protect your vitals and hope for the best. The other was to make it so fighting you wasn't worth the effort.

Rion shifted her weight to the side, but the man caught her hair and twisted his wrist so that the curls tangled around his hand, jerking her head painfully away. She flailed with her elbows. No luck. He laughed. She scratched at his face. He swung at her, and she covered her head with her arms, balling up as much as she could, but it still rattled her. Fuck, he was strong. And a bottle could be like a knife--a bottle could kill you--she didn't want to die--she brought her nails like claws anywhere she could reach. She was tall for her age, tall for a girl, but he was taller. Instead, she bit his hand. He finally let go.

Look for their weakness, an opening. No opponent is flawless. Circle around, if they've pinned you--circle through the void, a quick dance through darkness--be faster--

If they'd wanted to kill her, if they'd had a knife, this would have been quick. She was able to bite his arm again at least once--he swore at that--and when she swung her knee up toward him, it hit something soft and solid and he grunted. She grit her teeth and kneed him again. Her chest hurt. Her head hurt.

Flee. Regroup. Take inventory of your injuries and reevaluate your situation.

He had no hold on her anymore. She backed away. The other girl was no longer up against the wall; she held the bottle, arms shaking, in front of her. Her face was bleeding. Her eye was swelling.

"Come on," Rion shouted.

They ran, and the men pursued them, but Rion was smaller and quicker and she knew safe routes. Up a ladder, across a shaky catwalk that threatened to give way even under her slight weight. The other girl hesitated only a moment, but Rion pulled her onward.

Houses here stacked together, cramped apartments growing into and over each other. Walls torn down and replastered to accommodate the need for more room. Staircases, sometimes inside the buildings, sometimes crawling or winding over the tops. Open windows. The smell of curried potatoes, rotting fruit, bodies and still water and incense and blood. Rion led the stranger along buildings that creaked beneath them, through crawl-spaces that used to seem so much bigger, until finally there were no more footsteps behind them.

She would not bring a stranger to her home. But she stopped in one of the safe places, a triangular recess away from the path, too small for bodies to sleep but enough for two girls to crouch, tightly closed in together.

A little light from the neon illuminated them both. Never venture into total darkness. Anyone down here ought to know that. The other girl was shorter than Rion, stockier--not that that took much. Hair shorn close around her face, broad flat-nosed face, curved hips.

"You okay?" Rion asked, when she had enough breath for it.

The other girl grunted, then grinned, showing gapped teeth. "Yeah, think so."

"Good."

The girl assessed her--not with the wounded eyes of a wild animal, but closed off, calmer than Rion would have expected. Her clothes looked machine-made, well-kept, like she didn't belong here. But her voice was as gutter as Rion's.

"I should probably thank you," the other girl said. Rion couldn't tell whether to be stung by the words or not, delivered with unmistakable sarcasm. Maybe she was just shaken from their encounter. People responded to stress differently. Abitha shut down. Likely this girl had just encased herself in armor.

Rion shook her head. "You don't have to. I didn't do it for thanks."

"Then what?" The girl's eyes narrowed. "Repayment?"

Rion scoffed. "No."

"You do this a lot?"

"Sometimes."

"That's sweet," the girl said. "My lucky day. I find the only hero in the down-below."

"You should probably get that looked at," Rion said, gesturing to the puffed and bleeding cut on the side of the girl's face. "Head back to wherever you come from and see a doctor or whatever. I can show you out."

"I can show myself out." Then she laughed. "Oh, what the hell. You want to be my escort? How well do you know your way around here?"

"Likely better than you."

"I'll believe it. You're quick." The girl touched her own cheek gingerly, prodding at the wound with as much curiosity as pain on her face. "Here's the deal. I need to run a few errands before I go. If you can keep this"--she patted her cheek and winced--"from happening again, I'll make it worth your while."

"How?"

The girl looked Rion up and down. "Not like *that*," she said, without skipping a beat. "You like cash? Of course you do. Roaches always like cash. I can pay you. But only after, so no funny business."

Rion considered her, and she in turn seemed to consider Rion. Abitha might worry if she knew about this, might even have good cause to worry. Now that the adrenaline was fading, nausea rose in its place, and it was all Rion could do to keep from shaking. Shouldn't have run so hard. But this could turn out to be lucrative in the end.

"You're not with one of the gangs, are you?" she asked.

"Pff. No." The girl spat on the ground. "*Fuck* them."

"Are they out for your blood, usually?"

The girl shook her head. "No, I'm pretty small-time. This was ... a case of mistaken identity. There shouldn't be any trouble unless we go somewhere wrong. And that's what you'll be helping with, right?" She smiled.

"Sure."

"Deah," the girl said, holding out a hand.

"Rion."

Her handshake was quick, fingers cold and clammy, somewhat dwarfed by Rion's. "Let's get on with it, if you've caught your breath. Then you can get back to whatever important business I interrupted."

By the time Rion made it home, Abitha had already run through several dozen explanations for her lateness, each one worse than the last. Tyren snored quietly in the corner, whistling between cracked lips, but Abitha sat against the wall with her eyes closed, snapping alert at every unexpected sound. Outside, more lights had flickered on, the only marker of daytime in a place where sunlight seldom reached.

Rion ducked into the room, pulling the flap shut behind her. In the dim light, Abitha could barely see her face, but her teeth shone brightly. A grin.

"There you are," Abitha said.

Rion slung the sack off her shoulder and then crouched in front of Abitha. "You were up waiting for me, weren't you?" She sighed, then ruffled Abitha's hair. "Sorry.

But I've got breakfast for tomorrow." From her sack, she pulled three tins, stacking them one on top of the other.

"How?" Abitha picked one up, felt its heft. Usually the tins Rion brought back had dents in the side, but this one was perfectly smooth and even.

"I helped someone out of a bind and she had a little extra money." Rion was still smiling, but there was a certain heaviness to her voice that unsettled Abitha.

"That's a likely story."

Rion settled down beside Abitha, sparing a glance at the snoring boy on her other side. "Tyren, huh? He been here long?"

"*Rion.*"

Rion sighed, turned her face away, started running her fingers through curls that were even more tangled than usual. Abitha trimmed them back sometimes, but Rion said she liked to be able to feel wind in her hair and wore it to her shoulders.

"Someone had a run-in in an alleyway," Rion said, carefully. Too carefully. "I helped her get away. She was making a few deliveries--"

"For the Rusts?"

Rion snorted. "No."

"Then who?"

"She's a free agent, I think."

"That seems dangerous."

Rion fluffed a pile of bedding on the floor. "I think she works for topsiders. She didn't tell me too much. But it's nice to have something to eat tomorrow, yeah?"

"Rion--"

But Rion curled up with her back to Abitha. "Please. Let's not fight, okay? I'm too tired. Tomorrow. We can talk about this tomorrow."

She said nothing more, pulled into herself like a wounded animal, and the room seemed colder, bleaker. Abitha sat in silent darkness, waiting for Rion's breathing to become slow and steady. Eventually, she settled down, too.

"There's a drone at 300, Obsidian."

Alpha's voice was steady and youthful in his ear, and Obsidian could picture the smaller Protector's cheerful face back at HQ. Out here, all he saw was darkness and, in the distance, the halo of the city itself. Beyond the walls of the city, this part of the world was broken, not quite a wasteland but at least inhospitable to life. The Invaders had seen to that.

"Show me," Obsidian said, and Alpha highlighted part of his visor, revealing what he'd overlooked. Twisted and spiked, its very design betrayed the damage a drone like this could wreak if left unchecked. It was a menace.

"There's another one," Alpha said. "There."

Obsidian circled it, propelled by the suit that fit over his body like a second skin, joints moving sleekly despite his bulk. The others with him on this mission had similar builds--strong, able to withstand combat against the armored, heavily armed probes. Invader ships were versatile and fast, requiring great maneuverability and a versatile team to combat them. Drones, on the other hand, were built for one thing: destruction. And

they did it very well. They had to be taken out carefully, before they had the opportunity to unleash their full explosive force, and the close fighting necessary to deactivate them safely risked great harm to any Protector who faced them.

"Orchid," Obsidian said. "Apollo. Do you see them?"

"Roger," Orchid said, her sleek armor nearly blending against the dark sky.

"I think I've got a clear shot." Apollo gleamed silver in the faint moonlight.

"Should I take it?"

"Ready," Obsidian said, "but don't shoot. There may be others. We don't want to set off a chain reaction unless we know what we're facing."

The three Protectors circled above the landscape, distant enough to avoid the drones' sensory systems, while Alpha took readings from their suits and processed the data. Every so often, Alpha highlighted another drone in the team's vision. They waited, silent, as though the drones could somehow hear them over the channels they used to communicate. But the drones were simple machines, lacking even the artificial intellect bestowed upon the Protectors themselves.

Below, a sandy dreamscape of rock slabs like upturned mountains spread in disarray, pockmarked where bombs and drones had burst before. In daylight, he knew, the scorch marks would still be visible. But in daylight the drones would never have reached their destination, stopped long before they reached the ground.

"Ten of them," Obsidian said in a hushed voice when Alpha had confirmed, at last, the total number. "How did that get through our defense?"

"We're going to have to blow the whole thing," Apollo said. "We can't fight that."

"That's going to be a hell of an explosion." Obsidian changed his course to a broader circle as he surveyed the area, taking in the ruined landscape of death. Whatever lived out here had long died. No wild things, no growth remained. And as long as the Invaders kept sending drones, life would never return to the wasteland. "We're pretty far from the city. It should be safe."

Alpha's voice returned in his ear. "Uh, Obsidian--there's a human settlement out there."

"What?"

Obsidian spun around, and once again Alpha highlighted the area in his vision--a dome, nestled among the wreckage of a land unmade. He'd overlooked it because it seemed so unlikely, so unreasonable.

It was illegal to live outside the city's limits--but, more importantly, it was dangerous. Unbelievably dangerous. Just eking out an existence here had to be nearly impossible. And if the drones had gone off before the Protectors arrived, the entire domicile would be destroyed, and all its inhabitants, without anyone having known they ever lived.

"I'll see who's home."

Obsidian descended gently, his night vision making sense of the shapes here as he came closer. The cement dome, almost like a bunker--and, beside it, a ramshackle contraption of plastic and metal that swayed in the wind. A greenhouse, he suspected. Subsistence farming--or drugs. It was impossible to say.

He hovered by the dome's entrance for just a moment, uncertain. Other than the scientists, he spoke rarely to humans. On occasion, the Protectors took leave into the city-

-sometimes in grand and, he thought, ridiculous parades, and sometimes just a quiet visit to the company of humans, simple places like cafes or parks, to come to know those they served.

The entrance receded slightly into the dome walls, and he stepped heavily toward it, his suit adjusting to obeying gravity once more. There was a metal door. He knocked at first, politely, then beat upon it with his fist.

A light flicked on, nearly overwhelming his sensors, and the door opened.

A woman was standing there with a gun aimed at him. It would have reached his chest, if he'd been human-sized, but he was taller than average and his suit made him taller still so that it pointed at his stomach. Her face contorted in anger, then surprise and confusion.

"What's going on?"

He switched his vocal projection from internal to external. "Ma'am, you need to get out of here. You're in danger."

"It's the middle of the night." She sounded affronted, clutching a child to her bosom. She wore only nightclothes, but her voice was perfectly awake, clipped.

"There are ten Invader drones, close enough to blow this whole place away."

"So do something about them. That's what you're for."

He bristled at her dismissive tone. "Even if we were able to deactivate them, ma'am, there would still be the risk that they might go off anyway. You need to leave."

"I have nowhere to go. Do you think my family is out here because we have any alternatives? In the city-"

"Ma'am," he said, "there's going to be an explosion and I can't promise your safety if you stay. Do you have a vehicle, or do you need assistance?"

She set her legs apart. "I'm not leaving. This is our home."

"Obsidian, I think they've picked up your presence," Alpha said. "They're activating. We don't have much time."

"Forgive me," Obsidian said to the woman, though he wasn't sure she could hear him. Then he pressed the stunner inlaid at his wrist and she slumped as though the bones in her body had all given out. Yet her arms still held her child close, even as she fell toward the floor. Obsidian caught her, and she was light in his power-suited arms. Light, fragile, yet full of life--a life so easily snuffed out, but precious.

She would lose everything when the drones went off. Her entire home would be destroyed, no matter how it had withstood the elements of the wasteland, buffeted by winds and baked by the sun. Soon it would be a wreckage, and she could rebuild here or in the city--but either way would be a loss. He couldn't imagine what it would be like to lose a home. But to lose a loved one--that particular human connection he knew, and he valued, and it was as much for the thought of his own Cobalt as anything else that he carried the human woman's prone form in his arms and shot upwards into the safety of the sky.

He looked down one last time at the dome--how stubbornly humans clung to life, even in the face of inevitable destruction--and saw movement. He switched his visor to infrared.

"There's another heat signal," he said in disbelief. "A child."

"There's no time!"

"We ... we can't just leave a child here."

"You've got to get out of there, Obsidian!"

"I'm on it," Apollo said, and Obsidian saw him diving toward the earth, toward the human child. Then the first drone blew. An inferno of flame and dust ratcheted upward--a chain of explosions, one after the other, each greater and more terrible than the last. The woman in his arm screamed, silent amid the destruction, her body twisting and contorting despite the effects of his weapon.

In the aftermath, they said nothing. Obsidian hovered, and Orchid hovered beside him, and the woman sobbed and beat against Obsidian's armor and the child she held screamed. Below, the ground was charred, and bright cinders flickered in the wind. The dome had caved in under flying rocks and debris, and the plastic greenhouse was shredded beyond recognition. A haze of smoke and displaced sand drifted like a screen over the landscape, obscuring his sight.

Then it cleared, just enough to see Apollo's armor curled like a protective wall, shielding where the child must have been. The two other Protectors floated lower. He didn't move.

But a wail pierced Obsidian's auditory sensors--a human voice. The child lived.

"Orchid," Obsidian said, his voice steadier than he felt, and the purple-clad Protector stirred into motion at his command. "Can you retrieve the child? We need to get them all clear of the smoke and the heat."

"What about Apollo?"

"We'll come back to bring him home."

"But what if he's not--"

"He's offline," Alpha said, their voice choked despite the distance.

Obsidian took a deep breath. He'd hoped, before Alpha confirmed it, that Apollo was only damaged, somehow--that he could be repaired. He was a friend, a teammate--part of Obsidian's family. But death was inevitable--death this way, violent, painful, sudden, was inevitable. Protectors never retired.

"We'll mourn later," Obsidian said gently. "Get the child, Orchid, and let's go."

They were all silent in the docking bay.

Obsidian knew this silence well--the familiar shock of loss never seemed to lessen, never became less painful. He supposed he himself would be gone long before he had the opportunity to grow callous.

Yet something about this one chilled him as others hadn't. He released his suit, and its hydraulics hissed and slid away, exposing synthetic flesh that seemed suddenly weak and vulnerable to him, even knowing the strength of his internal systems, designed to do what humans never could. The heat of his body seemed to dissipate in the bay's metal sterility. And perhaps the sensation of his own heat was an illusion, as false as what he believed to be his sentience, his life. Perhaps he, like the suit and like the chamber around him, was truly no more than plastic and metal shaped into useful form and anthropomorphized by human minds.

Alpha used the word "offline," but to Obsidian, to all of them, it was death. True death. The extinguishing of a living flame, of a mind and a heart.

Most often death came in the void of space, among an audience of countless cold, uncaring stars, with the planet's dim glow a constant reminder of what they lived for. What they died for. Their bodies fell downward, pulled home by gravity--sometimes never to be recovered, not even fragments.

Apollo had been no special friend to Obsidian, but he was a teammate. Family. Practically speaking, the team would function less well without his reliable stability, for now. Soon enough a new Protector would be birthed in a lab--here, perhaps, or in one of the other city-states scattered across a planet pockmarked by the Invaders' attacks--with the appropriate skillset and temperament to fit the hole left by Apollo. And the team would learn to work with this new member, adapting to new strengths and new weaknesses, until the handicap of a missing teammate no longer affected them. Strategically, at least.

Emotionally, however--and now Obsidian found himself questioning his own emotions. Not even their validity--their very existence.

Obsidian left his suit in the care of engineers who would repair damage from heat and shrapnel. He put a hand on Orchid's arm before she could leave the bay. She looked up at him as if expecting him to speak, but he had no words. He just nodded, and she nodded too, and they went their separate ways.

Human guards had escorted the woman and her family away, taking the child for whom Apollo had died to a medical facility. The woman did not fight or curse or weep, though Obsidian expected her to. She went quietly, her weathered sand-colored face blotchy but impassive, as though she had been emptied of feeling.

He wanted to ask her something--what, he couldn't say. The relief on her face when she saw her living, breathing, wailing child took away any anger Obsidian could have felt about the loss of Apollo. And that, after all, was what the Protectors were meant to do. What gave their existence meaning.

Their minds were grown, raised, taught inside a digital nursery--Obsidian had dim memories of viewing through camera-eyes the human scientists who birthed him, coming to know him as he came to know himself. The scientists cultivated each Protector's personal strengths, complementing nature with knowledge, with expertise, with skill. And as each personality took shape, so too did the body constructed to suit it, crafted at the hands of engineer-parents. Some patterned themselves male, or female, or both, or neither. Some were strong and aggressive, or small and quick. All shapes, all colors, their custom-built bodies combining technical mastery with the artistry of human imagination.

He remembered, too, waking up in his own flesh for the first time. Opening eyes with lids to see his own fully-formed hand, with nails and creases on each finger, a perfect simulacrum of humanity. A sharp breath, then realizing the low buzz of his circulatory and respiratory systems. Tears in his eyes, and in the eyes of the human scientist who gripped his forearm with a father's pride--both of them the same dark skin, one born and one made, yet now unified.

Obsidian was destined to die protecting humanity. They all were. Eventually, he would give his life for these people, and in return they gave him his own life to live. As he grew familiar with his adolescent body, not yet fully formed, still open to how he might shape it with his actions, the engineers built his armor, and his ship.

They were named in cohorts, but the teams that formed among Protectors grown into their full power came organically, regardless of cohorts. Obsidian's crew included Cobalt and Emerald, members of his own cohort, but also Zee--with his devilish grin and long blond hair--and tiny, brilliant, genderless Alpha, who remained with the scientists when the rest of the team blasted into space. Apollo had come from another city altogether. Orchid was older than the rest of them, from a previous generation, tough and full of vigor.

Obsidian had never seen the other cities. He'd only spent limited time in the city he protected, aware in every moment that he did not belong. The humans he encountered were without exception gracious and kind, but there was something almost excessively polite about them. It made him think of what he'd read of kings and queens and commoners--though the humans never bowed to him, there was a strange and uncomfortable reverence in their eyes.

Not among the scientists, of course. Certainly not from Jackson--the scientist who had most directly created Obsidian. Every so often, Obsidian would catch Jackson looking at him with something like awe, and when Jackson clapped him on the shoulder, his hand lingered for a moment. But despite their differences--the real and the artificial, side by side--Obsidian felt that the man saw him, heard him, as an individual. For some reason, that mattered.

Between missions, intermittently, the Protectors would plug themselves in to recharge, resting in capsules like crystal coffins so that their minds and bodies could recover, a process obviously patterned after human sleep. Sleep, philosophers had long

mused, was much like death. For three days after the loss of Apollo, Obsidian could not bring himself to rest.

He climbed into the capsule, and it was comforting enough--though he had never known a womb, both his suit and his ship fitted as closely as his skin, an extension of his body. Enclosed spaces comforted him. Yet he could not push the button that activated his rest mode. His finger hovered over it, but he did not apply pressure. He heard again the flash, the heat, the woman screaming as she beat on his chest even though biology said she should have been immobile from his stunner. And Apollo, dead so another could live. Obsidian wondered what had gone through Apollo's mind in those last moments--whether it had been a conscious decision, a subconscious part of Apollo's personality, or just hard-coded programming. Had he been afraid? Had he been proud? Had he made the sacrifice willingly?

Jackson called Obsidian out during a routine check-up. "You're wearing down," he said, his voice mild.

"I haven't sustained damage," Obsidian said.

"There's some sort of malfunction in your system, then...?" Jackson gestured with the scanner he held. "Your reflexes are delayed. If you go into combat like this, it won't end well."

"Are you grounding me?"

"Until we can fix you, yes." Jackson patted his shoulder, squeezed it. "Your records show you haven't been sleeping."

"I don't sleep."

That made Jackson laugh. "It's the same thing, isn't it, really? Sometimes I wish I could just press a button and turn the world off for a while."

"I... can't." Obsidian clenched his fists, tried to think of how to articulate his feelings.

"That's one for my notes, then," Jackson said, and he moved the scanner closer. "The first Protector to report insomnia." He smiled wryly. "I thought we had a monopoly on that."

Obsidian shook his head. Insomnia seemed unlikely. But he had no other word. "Have you ever lost someone? Someone human."

Jackson was quiet, his face pinched in some subset of discomfort Obsidian did not fully understand. He swallowed. "Yes, I have."

"What about ... love?"

Jackson turned, very slowly, to face him. Again, his expression was complicated, tight, uncertain. "A life without love is a very poor life, I think. Why?"

Obsidian found himself smiling, ever so slightly. "You're the closest thing I have to a parent."

Jackson's eyes blinked, and his mouth opened. "Well, yes," he said, drawing the syllables out as if tasting each one suspiciously. Then, more forcefully, he added, "You're *not* my son."

The feeling--animosity?--behind the words stunned Obsidian. He thought at first that his mind might be moving sluggishly, as he replayed what he had said, looking for the cause of his offense. "I didn't... say that."

"No. I suppose you didn't." Jackson sat beside Obsidian on the aluminum inspection table. For the first time, Obsidian processed that he looked old, his close-cropped dark hair woven with wire-like strands of silver. Not quite frail--his shoulders were too broad for that--but his face, and his hair, marked his age. He wiped his spectacles on the hem of his tunic, though they had not been dirty. "It isn't your fault. Ah--it's probably not your fault even if you're being sentimental. You clearly take after me, one way or another."

"I think so," Obsidian said. "And--I'm glad."

The man's eyebrows rose, and he coughed. "Is this about Apollo?" Jackson slipped his glasses over his nose again, pressed them into place. "No--you've lost teammates before. Unless something has changed?"

Obsidian paused, unsure how to proceed. Whether to confide in Jackson and confess to the hidden parts of him that made him an anomaly, not just a surface-level of emotion that so many of the other Protectors enjoyed but this stranger, foreign, less functional core of his being. The poetry, the fear of death... *Cobalt*. "Yes. And no."

"Anything I should be worried about?"

"It shouldn't affect my performance."

"It is right now. Do you want to talk about it?" Jackson chuckled, the brief spike of uncharacteristic anger now so distant that Obsidian wondered if he'd been mistaken. "I don't specialize in psychotherapy, but ... well, we built your minds. Maybe that's worth something. What's troubling you?"

"I..." Obsidian looked down at his own hands, steeped in his lap. Broad fingers, strong and nimble, fingernails pale and perfect against smooth, darker flesh. Jackson's

nails were pitted and worn, the surfaces uneven and ribbed with the myriad imperfections of humanity. "I was responsible for his death, Doctor Jackson."

"Apollo's?"

Obsidian nodded. "I could have--I should have done many things differently. It was my responsibility to keep my team safe."

"It's--" Jackson cut himself off. "Go on."

"He was here," Obsidian said, and he gestured emptily with his hands. "Then he was gone, beyond repair. And it's because I failed him."

"You're feeling guilt."

"Yes." And his own nostrils flared--as though he needed the doctor to identify his own feelings for him. Sharply, he asked, "Do you think he would blame me for it?"

Jackson stared at him, brown eyes wide and perplexed. "Apollo?"

Obsidian nodded again. "I can't stop thinking about him. Or the woman--the one who was living out there with her family."

Jackson took a deep breath, held it closely between his teeth. "Are you angry with her?"

"No." Obsidian's forehead furrowed, as human faces did--designed, of course, so they could interpret his reactions with their own nonverbal language. Artificial confusion represented in artificial skin, translating the artificial mind within into something true flesh and blood could understand. Then, as the reason for the scientist's discomfort became clear, he shook his head. "I'm not a danger to you, Doctor Jackson. I don't blame her, and I'm not going to turn against you, either. That's what you're worried about, isn't it? That you'll have to report I've gone rogue. I promise that isn't the case."

Jackson nodded, seeming mollified. "Why did you ask about love, Obsidian?"

Obsidian shrugged. "That woman would have done anything to protect her children and her home. And Apollo died to save them."

"Do you ... did you love Apollo, Obsidian?"

"No," Obsidian said. "I don't think so."

"Are you asking me if I feel parental love toward you?" The doctor's voice sounded strained, and Obsidian wondered for a moment if he would grow angry again.

"No," Obsidian said quietly.

"So it's an academic question, then. Theoretical."

Obsidian opened his mouth, paused, looked away. "Y-yes," he said. Ordinarily, he might have stayed stoic, impassive, but he could feel his processors struggling to keep up with the conversation. Perhaps the doctor would think no more of his elevated heart rate than a strained system--not a lie, not fear, not the undeniable sensation that filled him just imagining Cobalt's face.

Jackson watched him, the scanner forgotten in his hands.

"What are you thinking now, Doctor Jackson?"

The doctor only smiled, a strange mixture of sadness and awe and something else, and shook his head.

Working with a fence had its ups and downs, and Deah hadn't yet puzzled through whether the pros outweighed the cons. On one hand, it meant she didn't have to look for

work herself anymore, and it gave her a degree of protection if a client was displeased. On the other hand, fences took a cut of her profit. Worse, she had only their word on how big the cut was. For all she knew, they skimmed off most of the money themselves and lied about what their clients were offering. Trust was hard to come by, even outside of the down-below.

So, moonshine. The simplest profitable route for any smuggler or delivery girl. Deah couldn't count the number of times she'd ferried bottles from the fetid slums into less unsavory neighborhoods. What happened from there wasn't her concern. All that she needed to know was that alcohol was illegal topside, alcohol was very much wanted in topside, and therefore transporting moonshine was a very lucrative career move. Safer than dealing in heavier substances, which tended to be more closely monitored on either end by the sort of people Deah had no interest in crossing directly and even less interest in working for.

The cheap swill could be found everywhere, but this particular client had had more exacting tastes. A flight of various samples, each contained in a miniature bottle wrapped individually and nestled against her waist. The bottle the Rusts smashed would have been worth double what the rest was worth together. She tried not to let it bother her. At least they hadn't done any permanent damage to *her*. Nothing that couldn't be patched up by a quick visit to the doc-in-a-box.

So her return plan home had been as follows: doctor, fence, then shark. The fence operated out of a takeout joint specializing in fried pastries. Delivery boys and delivery girls, therefore, could be those who carried food to customers or those like Deah who operated an entirely different sort of business.

Deah brushed open the door, setting off an electronic beep. Inside, the stench of burned oil permeated everything. She could almost feel a filmy layer covering everything she touched. But she smiled and nodded at the uniformed boy behind the counter. He looked familiar, in a pleasant, emptily attractive sort of way.

"Hello," she said. She had to speak carefully, as precisely as possible. It meant pausing before each sentence to fix the vowels in her mind first. But the sounds felt more comfortable in her mouth every day, and the minders at food markets followed her around less often. The boy nodded. Maybe his ambivalence was due to her accent, maybe he just didn't care. It was hard to say.

The manager's office was connected to the back room, and Deah went there with confidence. Smooth steps. Straight back. Chin held high. She could almost, almost ignore the slight itching of the wig against her scalp. Sleek, shining black hair, the front pieces braided and tied behind. This sort of hair took some getting used to compared to her natural frizz; nearly a year wearing it and she'd only recently been able to style it in any way that looked reasonable. She tried straightening her own hair when she first moved up here, but in the end, a wig took less work. It felt like physically putting on her role as a topsider, making the performance that much easier.

The fence was at a terminal behind his desk. Odds and ends littered the office, and the entire back wall was made of drawers. For files, ostensibly, but her finds for him disappeared into them, too. He peered up at her and it seemed to take him a moment to place her.

She would not call him sir. She would look him in the eye. "Deah," she said. "I've filled an order." She produced the small bottles from within her belt, one by one, placing

them in a row along his desk. He kept typing on the terminal. "Number one-three-four-seven-gee. Three days ago."

He gave her a flat stare and went back to typing. So much for making a good impression, though she couldn't help wondering if his lack of interest was calculated, meant to keep her off-balance.

"Is that everything?"

"Nearly," she said. "I wasn't able to get all of it. But most of it is there."

He looked at her fully for the first time, his eyes taking in her face, her cheek, where she had tried to cover the damage with a flesh-toned bandage and makeup. "That's a shame. This client would have had long-term potential."

"If they can wait, I can get the rest--"

"They specified a timeline." Typing again. "The payment will likewise be incomplete. Should I send it to the same account as before?"

Deah's hands balled into fists, but she took a breath, composing herself. "Yes."

It would be wise to thank him. It would be less wise to plead or to argue. She could hardly stomach the former, but at least she could keep herself from giving in to the temptation to do one of the latter.

"If you have other work for me--"

"I'll let you know."

She could recognize a dismissal and left his office at once. Outside, the late morning sun made everything bright, the concrete nearly white, the great plastic windowpanes reflecting light into her eyes. Even the giant complexes where the city's

elite lived did not block the sun at this time of day, and the crisscrossing beams of the aquaponics garden surrounding everything cast only faint shadows this far down.

She wore nothing eye-catching when she had a large sum of money on her person--no large bags, no fancy clothing, just a plain khaki jumpsuit over a modest dark shirt. If she walked quickly, with her chin up but her eyes down, she could almost belong here.

There were, of course, certain downsides to blending in better topside, namely that she had lost her edge in the down-below. Dangerous. Her career, such as it was, hinged on her ability to slip unnoticed through cracks that no one up here would know or care to try themselves. Eventually she hoped to find more stable employment up here so she would never have to return to that shithole, but for now she was somewhat dependent on it.

At least now she had someone else who could be a proper roach for her. Twenty thousand people in the down-below, and she had stumbled on the one person willing to put her neck out for a total stranger.

Off a side street, she jabbed in the code to enter her apartment building and stepped into its elevator. Elevators in the down-below were risky business, but the power remained constant here. Taking the stairs was for people with time to spare. So she rode up seventeen flights to her own flat, at the end of a hall lined with carpet that had only one fraying corner but no water damage. The air was a bit stale because the windows stayed closed, because there were no holes in the walls, because the temperature remained constant no matter what the weather outside was like. It was a reasonable tradeoff.

She had to swipe a card to get through her own door, which opened to a familiar jangle of bells. Just in case. At some point, she would get a better security system, but being on the seventeenth floor meant she had less to worry about.

The flat itself was clean. Three rooms: a bedroom, a bathroom, and then the main room with a kitchenette and the countertop where she ate. In each of the rooms she had stockpiled essentials, nonperishable food, all-weather clothes, jewelry and small things that could be pawned in an emergency, and extras of the sort of things her clients sometimes wanted from the down-below, all their useless incense and the holy junk from a discarded culture. There was an order to the boxes that lined her walls, so that she could find what she needed, with the most valuable possessions in unlikely places in case of burglary. Deah had no furniture and no need for furniture. She had no guests.

In a clear space on the wall, her comm device was blinking with a message. Deah left her shoes next to a row of them by the door and stepped around her collection to check it. Reading was a laborious process but she had studied enough to get by.

Payment past due. Interest will go up.

She could only stare at it while her brain caught up with the words she read. But that was impossible--she had set things up specifically to avoid this happening. Payments from her jobs depositing automatically into her account at the shark's, so nothing could delay it, so she wouldn't have to walk across town carrying a dangerous sum of money according to someone else's schedule.

Deah threw herself across the mattress in her bedroom, and its springs creaked under her weight. Ordinarily, she would never allow her work clothes to touch her bed, even the outer surface of her quilt, but today called for wallowing. Each one seemed to

set off the next. Those damn Rusts--that part of town had never been contested territory before. The gang in residence had gotten complacent enough that someone like Deah could slip in and out as long as she varied her routes and wasn't too greedy about what business she conducted there. If she had put in a large enough order to draw their attention--

Something must have shifted and she had stepped unknowingly into a minefield. Time away from the down-below was dulling her edge.

But she could change that. She had an in, now. Rion had to know her territory to make it as long as she had, even if she made questionable decisions for someone who wished to stay alive and in one piece. If there was one thing Deah knew how to do, it was to take advantage of her resources. Rion had proven herself willing to help a stranger, and the look on her face when Deah paid her would have been funny but for how uncomfortably familiar it was. Not that Deah trusted her, necessarily, but she could believe in a business partnership for now.

Rion had hoped that Abitha might forget about it the next day. It was nearly impossible to keep a secret for long in such a close space--that was how she'd come to tell Abitha about the dreams in the first place--but she would prefer if it never came up again. Unfortunately for her, the breakfast tins prompted a conversation as soon as the day started.

They handed the tins around, scooping out fruits or vegetables with a set of utensils they kept hanging from a nail in the wall. She couldn't say whether any of it actually tasted better than the dented cans she found at the discount shop, but it was certainly an improvement over what was left over after bigger, stronger groups had picked over a restaurant's discards or--worse--what could be found in the trash heaps before they were hauled away to the incinerators.

When Rion was younger and smaller, some of the other beggars and even some of the restaurant workers had set aside food for her at the places she frequented often, pitying the unclaimed child. Now she was nearly as tall as some of the adults she came across, and that sympathy had mostly dried up. For the past few years it had been food on the verge of spoiling, or things too old to be sold even at a discount.

Tyren slurped happily at his curried vegetables, saying nothing, but Abitha kept glancing at Rion each time they swapped tins. They had pulled up the entrance flap, letting in light from outside and letting the air circulate inside their home. Footsteps clattered past but never stopped, life going on as usual.

"You're going to ask me about yesterday," Rion said.

"I was thinking about it."

Rion sighed. She couldn't go fully into detail--even hearing about a direct encounter with the Rusts would leave Abitha shaken. Rion's more common misadventures against them seemed to give her conflicted feelings, on one hand grateful for the rescue of a stranger but on the other hand worried about Rion herself. So Rion would have to be careful how she explained it.

"There was a girl being harassed by some goons," Rion said. "It turns out she's a smuggler. Maybe she got in over her head. So I got them to leave her alone--"

"How?"

"Same as usual," Rion said. "Maybe a little more direct."

"You beat their asses, didn't you?" Tyren blurted out. He touched her cheek, and she winced at the sudden pain. So there was a bruise, after all, and it was visible. Abitha glanced between the two of them, and it was apparent from her dawning horror that she had not seen the bruise yet. Rion poked at her canned fruit with a spoon, not making eye contact.

"Rion--"

So much for keeping it calm. "I thought she was in big trouble," Rion said. "I couldn't just do nothing."

"That's what you always say. But you've never *fought* them before. That's not like you."

And it wasn't--she couldn't argue. She could only drop her head into her hands and then pinch the bridge of her nose, taking a deep breath. A day or two earlier, she might have denied it. Might have laughed it off, claimed it was just a story like so many others. But something had come over her that went against her own instincts, her own better judgment.

"I fucked up," she said.

"But you beat them," Tyren said. "Right?"

"I could've gotten hurt." Or killed, but she didn't say that. "So that was a mistake. I'm sorry, Abitha. I don't mean to worry you."

"Too bad. I'm worried." Abitha scooted to sit closer to her.

"I don't see what the problem is," Tyren said. He sounded defensive. "*Somebody* ought to stand up to those guys. Rion's smart. She knows what she's doing."

"I might take a 'calculated risk,'" Rion said, her voice dripping with cynicism, because those words were not her words, and she and Abitha both knew it. "And I might guess wrong. I'm just one kid, Tyren."

"You're not just one kid," he said, unphased. "You're smart and brave and if you don't think something's right, you don't put up with it."

"Facing down the Rusts is a little different than telling off your dad," Rion said.

"Still."

"I'm going to be more careful." Rion set down the tin. Her stomach hurt, maybe from eating more than she was used to, more likely because the situation and uncertainty made her feel a little sick. "This girl--Deah--she asked me if I could help her with her errands, so I can keep her out of trouble. She'll pay me."

Abitha shook her head. "That doesn't sound more careful..."

"It's not long-term and I can always tell her no if she wants to go someplace unsafe. But we could use a little money. Winter's coming." She finally made herself face Abitha. "And I'm--I'm going to see what I can do. About losing control. I promise."

Len stood with his back to the mirror, not moving, not breathing. He could almost imagine himself to be a piece of the furniture in this room, a statue of a young man.

Carved or shaped with plastic skin around a metal frame, with the face painted to look human and a very good synthetic wig. Sometimes he felt like even the Protectors were more alive than he was.

Not that he'd really spent much time with them. When he was younger, he accompanied his father on occasion to observe them. Unlike the matter-of-fact robotic servants who wheeled around Len's home, tidying his messes, the Protectors were unsettlingly beautiful. Wastefully beautiful, his father had sneered, but such was the price of keeping the scientists happy. Let them indulge their fondness for aesthetics if it meant they produced good work, and besides, it was good for publicity. His father did not value beauty.

His father valued neatness. Busyness. Success. Every piece fitting together in harmony, every person playing their own part, keeping society from devolving into chaos.

Len liked chaos.

When he was younger, he had tried, unsuccessfully, to make chaos in his bedroom, with its faux-wood flooring and walls. Everything in here was pristine--tidy and in its place, no worn edges, no stains. If he spilled paint on the bed, he would come home to find the sheets clean and neatly pressed as though nothing had happened. If he tore every item of clothing he owned from the hooks in his wardrobe, and threw every belonging across the room like some wild maelstrom had swept through, anything broken would be mended and everything misplaced would be returned, and the only evidence would be a polite note from the maintenance system expressing concern for his mental state and suggesting tea.

Or there had been the time he attempted, again unsuccessfully, to make his own body a canvas for chaos. He had mentioned to his father once that he thought he might want to make his own clothes. Not the trends the kids at school followed, but something that came from him, with all the warts and raw seams and loose threads and jagged edges that this room denied. Maybe his father had interpreted this as an entrepreneurial spirit; Len came home one day to find a sewing kit at his workstation, available whenever he finished his homework.

He ignored the kit's patterns in favor of his own whims. If the sleeves were uneven or the pieces didn't line up--so be it. Some of what he made couldn't even fit over his body. It wasn't art. It wasn't meant to be art. He couldn't say, exactly, what drew him to sewing--but there was something in the ugliness that felt real. It wasn't the impracticality that appealed to him; fashion was seldom practical. It was the honesty, perhaps.

Which was why he hadn't touched the kit since the day he found his homemade clothes altered, seams pressed, edges fixed. The idea of it was the same--just as awful and ill-fitting as before--but each piece was just a little neater, just a little better sewn. An improvement on what he had made. He burned them all.

Now his room still looked as it always had, neat and tidy, reflecting nothing meaningful. It was just a soulless room in a soulless apartment in a soulless building.

His reverie was broken by his comm buzzing on the wall. An outside call.

"Len, it's Sam." As though she needed an introduction--he could tell it would be her even before that familiar whine started up. No one else called so late. "Pick up or I'm going to pick *you* up. Hell, I might do that anyway. Pick up, pick up, pick up."

Len jammed the button to answer, if only to spare himself the rising pitch of her voice. "What is it?"

"Come out and play with us."

"Now?"

"Unless you have to make room in your oh-so-busy schedule." She laughed.

"Come on, Len. We're waiting. We chipped in for a cab." Paid for with credits that had probably gone through four or five connections between her account and the cab owner--for security, certainly, but also for anonymity. Len was fairly confident that it was a formality, that Sam's parents could find her at any moment--that, if they did not know what exactly their daughter was up to, it was only because they hadn't yet chosen to look.

"Where are you going?"

"You mean where are *we* going. Down-below, of course." There was a slight pause. "You ever been?"

"No." This was a dangerous thing to admit, this lack of experience. Two or three years ago, Len might have played a coy game with Sam, neither denying nor confirming, each of them daring the other to be the first to admit any absence of worldliness. He had found the game charming at the time, as charming as Sam's little pouts and her long eyelashes and the way she had leaned her chest into his arm when they stood side by side. Being more intimately involved with her had soured him on most of her charms. Now, he didn't care what she thought of him.

"Then you should come. A new experience. You'll like that, won't you? It might be dangerous enough even for you, my little adrenaline junkie." There was possession in

her voice, but not affection. "Good clean fun, of course. Nothing for your permanent record."

"Fine."

"Don't sound too excited about it."

If his father hadn't been so insistent on the screens over their windows, Len might have done what he suspected Sam and the rest of their group did and left straight from his bedroom, maybe doctoring the security camera to play a loop of himself sleeping. But he left by the front door. His father wouldn't notice. His father wasn't home. Len overrode the door security--a simple enough task--and met the cab on the apartment complex's landing.

A trip to the down-below wasn't cheap. Maybe because of the danger, or the inconvenience, or maybe because the wealthy elite who traveled this way were a captive audience. Len wasn't sure how Sam had connected with a cabbie who would be willing to take them all the way down there--but these kids had always been good at procuring what they needed. Any number of drugs, clothing, vids that weren't even on the market yet, contraband tech, even a synthetic humanoid assistant that had come from one of their parents' labs and lasted for three weeks before its inner workings gave out and they had to just as stealthily dispose of it.

During the ride, Len stared out the window. It was never truly dark in the city proper, nor fully quiet. You could dark out your windows, build a soundproof room, and certainly the neighborhood where he lived was a civilized, reserved sort of place interrupted only occasionally by a disobedient son or daughter who chose to make a ruckus--even then, a controlled ruckus with a predictable guest list and manageable

crimes. His father could afford privacy, but in other parts of the city, the commercial districts and the warehouses where the offspring of the upper class pretended to throw raves, he sometimes felt a little claustrophobic, surrounded by so many other living beings.

None of that could have prepared him for the down-below. Not even the vids he'd seen from charities--big-eyed orphans, sad music, melodramatic voices begging the viewer to give money--really conveyed what it was like, as their polished cab left them at the entrance of the tangled monstrosity that was called the down-below.

The oldest part of the city, from the very first settlers. Even the earliest stages of it had been an imprecise mess, poorly planned, and that had only gotten worse over time. Thank goodness, his father would sneer, that his own people had shown up eventually to save those people from themselves. Now those who refused to behave like civilized humans clung to their rotting community, engaged in all means of villainy and indulgence but at least cut off from the rest and self-contained.

Entering meant going through a reinforced door and paying a fee to a man whose tight shirt drew attention to the size of his muscles. A scanner checked their bodies and their belongings--something Len would have expected going the other way that surprised him here. Then they passed through the checkpoint into the down-below proper.

There was rust. Dirt. Loud voices, different accents. Too-strong sanitization that mingled with rather than masked reeking odors--sweat, refuse, and more. Even the lights down here were different, concentrated bulbs in awful colors instead of the even diffusion that he had known for most of his life. *Everything* was different.

"Don't just stand there gawking like a tourist," Sam said, even though of course they *were* tourists. She and the others clustered together, tighter than they would at home, tighter than Len thought they would ever admit. They were scared.

"*You're* gawking," Len said.

Sam blew him a kiss. "You're charming as always. Well? Shall we?" She offered her arm, gallantly, and then the five of them skipped down the trash-lined street, toward glittering colorful lights, toward music and danger and the unknown.

Rion met Deah every third day like they had agreed on, down in the main markets on the third level. Here, even at twilight, bodies packed the walkways and filled the shops. Popup vendors hawked cheap jewelry, knockoff electronics, and fried potato cakes. Some of them had worked out songs about their merchandise, and they competed to see whose voice could drown out the others. It was a crowd, a cacophony, a throbbing, teeming sea of life that usually made Rion feel at ease when loneliness placed cold fingertips around her neck. Waiting for Deah, she felt apprehensive, too, but the weight of coins in the pouch against her waist felt too good to turn down.

Abitha didn't like it, but Rion couldn't bring herself to explain her primary motivation, outside of the convenience of being able to afford food that did not come from trash bins or someone else's pity. The truth was that if Rion was losing her mind, she could at least make sure that Abitha would be all right before that happened. People

with money could afford to have their eyes fixed. Abitha needed to be able to see without Rion there to take care of her.

For the first few weeks, Rion and Deah barely talked. Deah didn't seem to have much interest in Rion's life, and Rion figured the less she knew about Deah, the better. On the allotted evenings, she would follow the chiming clocks and meet Deah at the appointed hour, at the appointed location. As for Deah herself, she had traded out her neat clothing for rags like Rion's, patched and threadbare, without the faint smell of chemical flowers that was so prevalent among topsiders. The two of them looked like ordinary teenagers walking through the streets together, too poor to draw attention.

Looked. There were other problems. Night and day only had so much hold over the down-below, where most light was artificial anyway and residents worked schedules often at odds with one another. Some people here had jobs in the city proper; others just catered to the topsider tourists. Thus the streets were almost never entirely empty. The sheer numbers moving through the crowded streets and decrepit passages of the down-below gave a false sense of security, of anonymity. For Rion, the anonymity was often true--but only because there was no reason to pay attention to her. Deah had money and she moved with purpose. And unlike most people in the down-below with either, she had no gang allegiance and therefore no protection.

"Don't walk so proud," Rion said one evening, when the bluish lights from the daytime-lamps were fading. Winter had started to set in, and so she wore her old jacket with new sleeves held sturdy by Abitha's steady stitching. It kept the cold out, even at the seams, and was therefore the nicest coat Rion had ever owned. If anything, it was a little *too* warm, but later in the winter she knew she would be glad for it

Deah grumbled. "I hate this place."

"You're from here, though, aren't you?" Rion shoved her hands in her pockets to warm the fingertips.

"It still shows, huh? Guess you can't get that stink off."

"It's your voice," Rion said.

That made Deah snort, one sudden rough burst of laughter. "I'm working on it," she said.

"Why?"

Deah stopped short in the street and turned to Rion. She was short enough that she had to tilt her face up to glare at Rion, but that didn't diminish the effect. "Because this place is shit, and I don't want any part of it."

"But you're back."

"For *business*." Deah huffed and turned her head away. "You think I'd come here for fun? This place could burn down if I didn't need anything from it and I wouldn't give a shit."

Rion took a step back, feeling a little sick in her stomach. It was like she'd reached out to touch a pipe and finding it scalding hot.

They started moving again, slowly enough that they wouldn't draw attention, and Deah read off addresses for Rion to locate. She could hold the different places in her mind, think through neighborhoods, and then draw a line connecting them as safely and efficiently as possible--*calculating a route, estimating the trajectory, and then, and then--* and soon they were scrambling up ladders or across catwalks. Just two kids, nothing suspicious or strange. Rion liked moving, when her mind was on where they were going

and whether she needed to reroute their course, so she didn't have to worry about whether she should be here with Deah or not, getting tangled up in whatever Deah's business really was.

As far as Rion could tell, there was no real pattern to what Deah bought, though it did always seem to involve purchasing something. A smuggler, then. The booze Rion could understand--it was technically illegal, drawing so many topsiders to the down-below for wild alcoholic binges--but other goods were less intuitive. Why anyone topside would want food from the down-below puzzled her. Or clothing, or knickknacks, or incense.

It was probably half an hour or so of silence, other than directions or warnings, before Rion could bring herself to ask another question.

"You really don't care about this place."

"Of course not. Why should I?"

"Didn't you leave any friends behind when you left?"

Deah laughed. "No."

"None at all?"

"I don't make friends, kid." The she smiled at Rion. "Why, did you think *we* were friends?"

"No." It was the truth. "It just seems lonely, that's all. Not having friends."

"Do *you* have friends? I figured you were a street rat."

"I am." Rion busied herself with a ladder, testing the rungs to make sure it would hold her weight. "That just means I'm not living with family. It doesn't mean I have no friends."

If Deah noticed that careful phrasing, she said nothing. There was a difference between not living with your family and having no family, and as far as Rion knew, she probably did have family somewhere. It had been a little over six years since she'd seen her mother. She couldn't say if she actually *wanted* to see her mother again; she had found Abitha and even their occasional house guests to be a more welcoming family than her mother ever had been.

She was still thinking about that while Deah stepped into the next destination on their agenda, another home that served as a shop when its residents weren't sleeping. Rion lingered outside, squatting by the door and watching unfamiliar faces shuffle by, children squawking and crowing as they raced across the metal-grated pathway. Remembering the day she'd come back to her mother's apartment after a few nights away to find their few possessions tossed outside and the door locked. For three days she'd kept vigil waiting for her mother to return. On the fourth day she took what was hers and left.

Deah emerged onto the street, patting her waist, where Rion assumed she kept whatever she was buying. "You ready to go, kid?"

Not that Deah was much older than her, really, but she kept using the term dismissively over the course of their travels. The more time they spent together, the less Rion began to feel sorry for the other girl. She had a tendency to say insulting things with a little smile on her face, though she never seemed like she was joking. But she paid as much as she said she would, when she said she would. And right now that was as much as Rion could ask for.

Obsidian let the hatch slam shut above him as he started down the ladder, leaving Cobalt to his peaceful solitude. Each rung felt sturdy and unmoving beneath his hands and feet, well-soldered and reliable. The ever-present wind grew inaudible as he descended into the base, its howl blocked by thick copper-lined walls.

I have seen the ends of chaos...

The line had tormented him for months, a poem that simply would not come, to capture the blackness of space, an endless expanse of *nothingness*. How to put that feeling into words? How to convey the emptiness, the loneliness, the fear of death? Even knowing that no one else would ever hear or read the words--unless he chose to share them with Cobalt, his only audience--still he agonized over unlocking the poem hidden within this one line.

He was so preoccupied that he almost dropped from the ladder into the middle of a conversation. But revealing his presence here would compromise the rooftop escape where Cobalt was painting in peaceful silence. Obsidian clung to the ladder's rungs and waited for the two humans below to pass. He could not see them, only hear their voices approaching below.

"Giving them personalities was a mistake," an unfamiliar voice said.

"They need to be individuals, to think and grow. To be creative and spontaneous." That was Jackson, though Obsidian had never heard him sound so defensive. "Traditional AI can only solve problems with programmed responses--"

"What you've made are dangerously close to simulated humans. It's a problem."

Obsidian's fingers tightened on the ladder rungs, all thoughts of poetry gone from his mind. Compared to the creeping dread of the void, the fear that filled his gut now was more immediate, enough that his previous darkness of mood seemed infinitely far away. Self-indulgent in the face of very real danger. Obsidian had fought enough battles to sense a true threat.

From his position in the exit passage, he could see the top of Jackson's silver-streaked hair come into view. The man's hands moved in gentle entreaty. "If we were going to give them minds anyway, it seemed cruel not to give them some kind of joy."

"I don't care about joy or cruelty!" the other man barked. He had dark hair, glossy and almost sculpted. One finger jabbed at Jackson, punctuating his words. "The Invaders certainly don't. And as long as we're faced with an enemy that is willing to exterminate our whole species--you understand that, don't you?" Jackson slumped against the wall, but the unknown speaker continued his assault. "They want to kill all of us. Children. Babies. And they don't care if they leave us to bleed out slowly and painfully. As long as we're faced with something like that, we can't really afford for our war machines of death to go soft."

"They're not--"

"That's what they're *supposed* to be, Doctor Jackson. The problem with free will is that eventually people--or robots, I suppose, in this case--they start making bad decisions. Sometimes willfully. Sometimes out of ignorance."

Jackson's voice was quieter, with understated emotion. "So it would be better if everyone just did what you said?" To Obsidian's ears, the biting sarcasm was unmistakable.

"In this case? Yes!"

The unfamiliar man stormed off down the hallway, flanked by Jackson, who ran a hand down his face and then hurried to catch up. Obsidian waited several minutes, until their voices were distant, before he lowered himself carefully to the floor. His feet made no sound as he landed.

This passageway was bright, copper-toned walls lit by track lighting where walls met floor or ceiling, and broad enough for three men to walk abreast. Though the actual layout was logical and simple to parse, Headquarters' winding hallways made him think of the mazes he had solved as a young, just-formed consciousness. He supposed that was some sort of nostalgic affectation of his mind, since the two were, practically speaking, not much alike. Was there truly danger from the thoughts that filled his head, more complex and layered than strict computer intelligence?

Halfway to the archives, he came across Jackson and the stranger, though he would have rather avoided them. They stood on the outside of one of the clear-walled chambers in which the Protectors went through their regular diagnostics. No one was in the chamber. Farther down the hallway, Obsidian saw a cluster of other humans, some known, some unknown.

Jackson noticed him and waved him over. "Ah," he said to his companion. "Here's Obsidian, the team leader. He's... our greatest pride." Obsidian felt--surprise, he thought, but also a degree of satisfaction. Honor, perhaps. He felt honored. It was a good feeling.

The stranger snorted. "He looks like your son."

Jackson's nostrils flared. "We have no direct control over the way they develop. If one forms a particular bond with a particular human--"

"Yes, I understand. I've read the literature." The stranger waved a dismissive hand.

There was an uncomfortable pause, and then Jackson cleared his throat.

"Obsidian, this is Senator Silva. He's on a tour of the facility."

"I see." Obsidian bowed his head politely in greeting, though he couldn't soften the tight, angry set of his jaw. "Senator."

Silva regarded Obsidian with a long, calculating appraisal. Sometimes, the humans Obsidian met looked up at him fearfully, intimidated by his height and his bulk. But Silva seemed unperturbed. "You have an important duty, Obsidian. I hope you can recognize this."

"I do," Obsidian said.

"The very fate of our species, of our *world*, depends on you. If you are at all capable of processing ethical behavior, I hope you understand the gravity of your importance as well as your duty."

"I do, sir." Fighting to keep his tone civil, he repeated himself as though the man had simply failed to hear him, rather than failed to listen. Silva's words cut him deep--into artificial feelings, it was true--but still he tried to maintain a mask of emotionless professionalism.

"Good. Keep that in mind." Silva nodded at Jackson, a curt farewell, and then left them to connect with the humans mingling down the hall. Jackson put a hand on Obsidian's arm.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly. "We sent along your request for another addition to the team and the senate wanted to see for themselves how the project was proceeding before they approved funding."

"I didn't mean to cause trouble."

"It isn't trouble. It *shouldn't* be trouble. You ought to be able to prepare yourselves without feeling afraid of asking for what you need." Jackson took a deep breath, held it, let it out slowly through his teeth. "As Silva himself said, so much depends on you. He just happens to have a, shall we say, differing perspective on the specifics."

She had made a promise to Abitha. And working with Deah meant Rion might actually have the resources to find a solution. Unfortunately, it wasn't the sort of problem one could easily solve. If she were going mad, losing her mind, then she could do nothing about it but prepare for the inevitable loss of self. If there was more to it--whatever that would mean--then she might have hope, somehow. Before she gave up, she would at least learn more about it.

The version of the Protectors she saw in her sleep and in false memories had passing similarities to what she heard through open windows from other people's vid screens, but the specifics differed so greatly. It could be a product of her own overactive imagination--this would not be the first time she had constructed something so elaborate--but it felt real.

She might be able to confirm some of it through a public terminal. People took questions to the terminals, she knew, and they could contact far-away people. Using a terminal was Obsidian's first instinct when faced with information he lacked, and while Rion was aware of the paradox of using Obsidian's experiences to confirm whether Obsidian's experiences were real or not, she still couldn't deny that it was one of the few solid ideas she had to work with.

It felt selfish, as though she were taking money, food, health away from Abitha. Ten minutes at a terminal would cost most of what she earned in a day now, which had immediate repercussions--no food--and the long-term postponement of her plans. But maybe, just maybe, she'd find something that could help her.

Rion had to loiter near a public terminal and watch other people before she could understand how payment worked. Insert coins in a slot. Press buttons. Type your question. It seemed clear enough.

Once the line had ended, Rion shuffled forward, feeling the weight of her indecision heavy on her shoulders. No, this was important. Or at least had the potential to be important. *That* was what bothered her so much--that it might go nowhere at all, and she would have wasted money with nothing at all to show for it. But it was worth the risk, she thought. Maybe.

Instructions were printed beside the screen, though they had been chipped at and scratched through with other people's pictures and thoughts. Rion slipped a few coins into the slot and watched as a white box popped onscreen, with a blinking line in it.

What now?

Rion had never used a terminal before. But there was still something familiar about it, and her stomach twisted because she *shouldn't* know how to use a terminal. She placed her hands on the buttons below the screen, and the fingers seemed smaller than they should be. Something was off. But she typed, slowly, with fingers unaccustomed to the movement--not picking the letters out one at a time, as the other people she had watched did, but smoother. She knew where the keys would be, even if her fingers moved stiffly.

Who is Obsidian?

A page explaining a rock, black glass, something about volcanoes. Not helpful. She tried again.

Is Obsidian a Protector?

This time, information about the Protectors. Exciting stories. Long-winded explanations. She could click through the different texts if she wanted. For just a moment, she did, tempted by the sheer amount of information the terminal promised. But she had limited time. She called up the typing box again.

I need to contact the Protector named Cobalt.

This time, another box appeared, with a query. *Activate mail program?* it asked. Rion shrugged as though the machine could see her. Sure. Why not. *Yes.*

What is your account?

What is your account?

What is your account?

"I don't have one," she said. But of course it couldn't hear her. She typed the answer instead.

Create new account?

Yes, sure. She gave the machine her name, twice, because it asked for two names and she only had the one.

User rionrion. Is this correct?

Yes, close enough. The screen split into a few different boxes, confusingly, but there was a smaller box labeled "New message" and that seemed close enough. She selected it. The screen changed again.

The first line she could understand. "To"--that obviously meant she was sending a message to somebody. She tried a few permutations.

Unfamiliar with user "cobalt."

Unfamiliar with user "cobalt protector."

Unfamiliar with user "obsidian."

Unfamiliar with "protector project."

Unfamiliar with "doctor jackson."

Unfamiliar with "jackson."

Again and again. Maybe she was overlooking something important.

Account unknown.

The machine beeped. Time up. Rion kicked it, but of course it had only shown her what she asked for. It wasn't the machine's fault that she had only the most general sense how to use it. She slunk away, feeling no more certain of anything than she had been before. So much for solving her problem.

She went from hopeless to irritated when confronted with Deah. It didn't help that each time she met Deah, the other girl smirked at almost everything she said. She had no

regard for other people. Rion could only stare at her in disbelief when she pocketed something in one of the shops they visited, right before the two of them slipped out the door.

"What?" Deah asked her. "You going to tell me you've never lifted something?"

Rion snorted. "Not like that."

"*Really?*" Deah raised an eyebrow. Her hips seemed even more pronounced when she put her hands on them, as she did now. "You little shitter."

"It's one thing if you're starving. You're not starving."

"Maybe this sort of thing is the reason I'm not starving anymore and you are," Deah said. She inspected one of her hands, as though she couldn't be bothered to spare a glance at Rion. It seemed affected to Rion.

"You don't take from beggars," Rion said. "You don't take from little kids. You don't take from people who can't spare it."

"*You* might not, but plenty of other people *will*."

"That hasn't been my experience." So many people had shown her kindness instead. There were always those who thought it was fun to kick an obviously unwanted child, but they were less frequent than the generous souls who spared a little food, an outgrown shirt, a stained blanket.

"You're nearly at the bottom of the order of things," Deah said in a sweet tone. "There hasn't been much call for people to steal from you. If you're ever able to move up a little, you'll see that everybody takes from everybody else. Except you, apparently. It's a game, and if you can't play it, you'll never get ahead."

Rion huffed. "Let's move on."

And they did, running down the list of Deah's business for the day. An unpleasant silence formed between them for the better part of an hour. Eventually, Deah broke it.

"It's not like that shop was beggars or little kids." She sounded victorious. "You can't even keep your own rules consistent."

"There's one big rule underneath it all," Rion said, grunting as she heaved herself up the roof of a lean-to at the side of a building, behind which a ladder rose to the next floor. "Don't take anything if you don't have to."

"You're crazy."

You don't even know the half of it, Rion thought, but if she was sure of anything in her life, it was that Deah must never know her weaknesses. Must never know the way her mind was being slowly eaten away by something unreal until there would be none of herself left.

The roach kid wasn't much like Deah herself, though she had thought she recognized something in Rion that first day they met. Sure, Rion had bared her neck for the slaughter on behalf of somebody she'd never met--and as grateful as Deah was for it, it was one of the stupidest things she'd ever seen anyone do--but there was something about the way Rion did it that spoke of a familiar stubbornness. Deah didn't think of herself like metal; metal broke. Rocks chipped away. She thought of herself instead as something plasticine, bendable, even malleable when pushed, and because of that, she survived. She thrived.

And Rion had some of that in her, or seemed to.

She defied understanding. Not for her so-called conscience, for all that she scoffed that Deah seemed to lack one. Like Rion, Deah had her own code, as did the topsiders, who would likely seem barbaric in their own way. Morals were relative, not absolute, and Rion was kidding herself if she believed otherwise.

No, what Deah couldn't figure out about Rion was how the kid wasn't dead yet. Sometimes she wanted to do the world a favor, do *Rion* a favor, and get it over with. It was kind of like seeing an anthill and feeling the urge to kick it over. A strange temptation, not terribly productive. Certainly not profitable. And she wasn't a killer, anyway. It was just something infuriating about Rion, about her stupid generosity, her impulsive trusting nature, and the sense of moral superiority she got from it even though she was just as grey, just as flawed, as Deah was.

Part of what bothered Deah about Rion, if she was honest with herself, was that the girl looked so much like a boy, but not just any sort of boy. Specifically the sort of boy that Deah might want to take home and get rough with, all pretty hair and narrow hips and broad-fingered hands. But the husky voice was a smidge too high, the breasts--however small they were--still unquestionably present. So spending time around Rion was, on occasion, alternately distracting and frustrating, like waking up in the middle of an embarrassing dream. It did not put Deah in the best of moods.

What she really needed was to find somebody to fuck, if she was frustrated enough that even some willowy boyish girl had started to look good to her. Not to mention that she still sort of wanted to put a fist through Rion's face. Had Rion been a

boy, Deah could think of a number of things she might do that would satisfy both frustrations at the same time, but the truth was that Rion being a girl ruined that.

It became a game, then, trying to test Rion's limits. Much of Deah's work was for regular clients who had come over the years to trust her reliability and discretion. Their needs were usually safe, if not predictable. But if she wanted to make more money, away from the relationships she had built up herself, she could agree to find and deliver more ... unusual requests, voiced by unknown shadow figures whose requests bounced through the anonymity of a fixer. Work she would not ordinarily have taken, but some perverse part of her wanted to see just how far Rion would go before she refused to help Deah further.

Thus they made deals with strung-out drug addicts, with pimps overseeing broken-down hookers, with fighting rings and pornographers and repo men--people who made their livings hurting other people. And Deah watched Rion's expression darken, her thick eyebrows drawing lower and lower, her lips straining into a deeper scowl.

It became a new trend, this going down-below. Slumming it. Like royalty playing at being peasants, Len thought. Like all trends, it had to get bigger and bolder and more extreme--an arms race of popularity, and Sam had to be at the forefront of it all.

Since that first trip, Len had come to understand a few things about the down-below. The clubs where they had found themselves that first night catered to clientele like them. Most of the faces in those crowds wore the same disaffection that Len knew all too

well. Carefully torn clothing, artfully disheveled hair, people who tried too hard to seem that they weren't trying at all. Sam made it look easy, of course, but Len knew the strain behind the facade.

The daytime hours they filled with studies, with math and science and essays, with philosophy and art. An hour of athletics each day in school--and cram school for three hours after dinner--with, of course, the expectation that the students would carry on their families' legacy of genius. Good birth afforded them the chance to succeed, but merely inheriting their families' success would be insufficient. A worthwhile child ought to surpass their parents in some way. Len made a half-hearted showing on the debate team, and he suffered through extended study hours in the robotics lab.

He was, by all accounts, a disappointment. Sam scored higher, competed better, made a name for herself. All Len could muster was placement in the top quarter, despite his family. His father helped oversee the safety of the city, of the entire planet. He was arguably one of the most important people in the city, and his son was only just passable.

Students rarely failed outright, who lost privileges at home or even withdrew from school. Sometimes they burst back into the scene six months or a year later, some great achievement overshadowing their prior reputation. More often they simply faded away, the subject of gossip until even that no longer held interest and they disappeared from memory.

Len tried, really tried, to devote himself more fully to his studies. He upped his daily doses each morning to focus harder, study better, score higher. But he still went with Sam's clique to the down-below, drawn to it the same as any of the rest of them.

They wandered farther and farther from the well-tread paths where residents would never dare assault the well-heeled teens from above. Here, still, money mattered. The people of the down-below might not know Len's name, or Sam's name, but they could sense whatever it was that marked the them as untouchable.

So their clique ventured farther and farther afield. They still avoided the poorly lit alleyways, the shakier ladders leading higher, the boarded-up windows, the shapes that looked like bodies at the side of the road. All of these Len could not help but stare at, even from a distance. It was another world altogether. They visited marketplaces and smoky bars that seemed less frequented by the citizens of the city proper, where people like them did not belong.

Here Len found himself face to face with wrinkled, pockmarked skin, missing teeth, stooped shoulders. Some of his father's colleagues were quite a bit older than him, but they'd all aged gracefully--silvering hair, perhaps, and a slight frailty to the body, but none of this ruin and decay. And if a child happened to be born with a defect--well, physical defects were easy enough to repair or reconstruct. Len himself had once broken a leg, but even then he had never limped. No one in the city proper limped. Here he saw strangers shuffle down the street, dragging one foot after the other with a practiced, if tired, gait.

Sam seemed enchanted by the whole thing. She ordered new clothing, a version of the mended, threadbare layers so many people in the down-below wore--pants with the knees blasted out, jackets with patched elbows, mismatched scarves worn at the neck or on the head. Even to Len's eyes, Sam's approximation of down-below was obviously unreal. At home, it set off a new trend. Worn in the down-below, it made them even more

conspicuous than before. Which was why Len wasn't surprised that beggars followed them around.

"Mister?"

It took Len a moment to realize that the speaker was a person and not a doll. A frail, tiny child wrapped in rags, with a raw, red nose and watery eyes that could not meet his.

"You're talking to me?" he asked.

"Mm-hmm." The child nodded. A boy. He held out cupped hands. "I'm hungry..." Soft consonants, round vowels, but not quite like what he'd heard on television.

The boy's nose was dripping, he realized with disgust. Len reached in his pocket for a handkerchief, and the boy's eyes brightened. Ah--he thought Len would give him money. Sam and some of the others carried cash, in case they wanted to buy trinkets from some street vendor who didn't have a credit account, but Len didn't come here to shop. He held out the handkerchief, and the boy took it with interest, looked it over carefully, and slipped it into the layers of clothing that covered his fragile little body.

"Thanks," he said. He was missing a couple of teeth.

"You're welcome," Len said, feeling oddly formal.

Ahead of Len, Sam let out an impatient, exaggerated sigh. She and the others stood in a cluster beneath a streetlight. They wore their stylized rags, their hair unkempt and their eyes darkened, but they still looked and smelled so clean that the filth of the street seemed not to touch them. A burning stick of some sort--a clean white cigarette filled with some chemical substance--sparked between Sam's fingers.

"What have you got over there?" Sam called out to her.

Len just shook his head, but the group ambled toward him with Sam at their head. The little boy's eyes widened. He took a step back, hands folded in front of him, and Len thought he looked afraid. Sam squealed with delight.

"Oh!" She clapped her hands together and bent forward. "He's so little."

The boy stood a pace away, silent. He said nothing. Len wondered if he was waiting to see if the rest of them would give him anything else. How sad to be so hungry, to risk whatever sort of harassment he might face just for the chance of getting something to eat.

"Are you hungry, little boy?" Sam asked. Again the boy looked wary, but he nodded. "We should get him something. Maybe some candy. Do you even have candy down here?"

"Candy isn't food."

"But kids like sweets," Sam said. "Fine, then. We could get him--what do you think they have? Canned fruit?"

"I think he wants money," Len said.

"What's he going to do with it?"

"I don't know."

Sam rummaged in her pocket and produced some coins to give the boy. He bowed his head and took them. "Thanks, miss," he said

Sam grinned. "He's so polite, too! Do you think we could take him home with us? If he belongs to somebody here, they're not taking very good care of him."

"He's a person, not a pet, for god's sake," Len spat.

"I bet he'd like living topside. He could be my little assistant. Saying yes miss, no miss..."

The boy glanced nervously between Sam and Len. Nervous--and maybe angry, Len thought. Wary.

"Stop being a spoilsport," Sam said.

"This isn't a game," Len said. He felt sick.

Sam sighed, an exaggerated nasal sound. She waved a dismissive hand at the boy, who wet his lips with his tongue and then backed away, back into anonymity.

"You're a right cloud of misery, aren't you?" Sam snapped at Len. "Let's move on."

"I'm going home," Len said. Home held little enough appeal to him, but at least he had someplace to go. He wasn't at the mercy of someone like Sam who only thought or cared about herself. The world felt--askew, somehow, as though he was suddenly wearing only one shoe and trying to walk.

Rion came to the upper levels to scope out a suitable place for relocating. There had to be something discarded, rejected, yet liveable for someone whose standards were lower than the average resident. The down-below was riddled with places like that. It was just a matter of finding one and laying down a claim before anyone else could move in. Most people in the down-below paid rent, which of course was out of the question for

kids like Rion with no reliable source of income. So she squatted where no one who could afford an alternative would choose to live.

Even before Deah showed up, Rion had taken work when it presented itself, and sometimes she went looking for it, but there was little enough for someone without any real skills or connection to any of the local businesses. Many of them had gang affiliation of one kind or another. Most kept work within their immediate families. Rion had no interest in following her mother's path, if it could even be called a career. So she scavenged, and she begged, and she finished little jobs where she could, and she tried to feed and care for the other lost children who wandered her way. It was not ideal. It meant being a little hungry on the best of days, and more than a little cold in the winter, and worrying about every cough and sniffle because the worst sicknesses spread to the lungs and never left. But it also gave her freedom. It kept anyone from having real power over her, other than fate, and Rion didn't put much stock in fate.

Controlling her own life was what would allow her to part ways with Deah. Their last trip dealt with junkies whose eyes reminded Rion too much of her mother. If Rion had considered Deah cold after their first meeting, she was having to revise that to what seemed like borderline sadism. It wasn't just that the plight of other people failed to disturb her, it was that she seemed to *enjoy* going to these places and watching Rion squirm.

And as nice as the money was, Rion suspected it was only a matter of time before working with Deah would cause her to cross a line she wasn't comfortable crossing. So she would find a new place for them to live, and she would relocate their few

possessions, and as soon as that was secured, she would find another way to make money, somehow.

There were a few dilapidated half-apartments where the neighbors had expanded, leaving the remnants of someone else's prior home. These had their own risks, of course, and more than a few eccentricities. Crawling in through a window, for example, because no doors were available. The upside was that the less livable a place seemed to be, the more likely that it had been forgotten and that nobody would mind Rion and Abitha moving in. The downside was that some of these spaces were outright dangerous-- overrun with a spider nest, for example, or crawling with rats, two thoughts that made Rion squirm. Those seemed unlikely because an unchecked vermin problem in one place would spread into neighboring homes, ruining food supplies and making the residents sick. Unlikely, but still possible. Or rotting floors or crumbling ceilings or boards with rusty nails exposed. Hazards for Rion to discover and, if necessary and possible, repair before Abitha and her poor eyesight had a chance to be hurt.

Wishful thinking brought Rion even closer to the top than she would ever be able to live in. Every inch here was accounted for, in this most desirable part of the down-below. But it was lovely to come up here and smell the sweet air, which felt light and clean and clear against Rion's skin. Drier, too. Colder in winter, but Rion would gladly trade a little warmth for this clarity. Easy to say early in winter, of course. When the cold came harsh enough to redden her nose and steal the feeling from her fingertips, she might give a different answer. But for now it felt brisk, no worse, and each clean lungful energized her, even if the chill brushed a little painfully within her throat.

Here, as with the bottommost levels, she kept her head down and didn't make eye contact, and she walked slowly when anyone seemed to be watching her so that she would look perhaps sad and pathetic but not suspicious. Her pride did not depend on others seeing her as strong and brave; it mattered more to stay alive.

She did, however, have a friend up here. Not that she made a habit of climbing so high often, but when she was in the neighborhood--well, might as well drop by.

The old woman lived with her son, her son's husband, and her son's three children in a slightly more spacious home near the top of the down-below. Real sunlight poured through their windows on clear days. By most standards, she was rich, but her family had enough mouths to feed that Rion felt uncomfortable accepting her generosity very often.

Advice, though, came free.

Thus Rion seated herself cross-legged on the floor next to the old woman, drinking tea, while younger children shrieked in the next room over. Tea masked the taste of the water up here, which tended to clog and rust pipes installed by inexperienced hands. Gravity was not kind to the residents here. It was the trade off for cleanliness, sunlight, and space.

What Rion liked most about the old woman, other than that she occasionally gave Rion something to eat, was that she had no qualms speaking her mind. And she thought most fears and dreams alike were garbage.

Living as Rion did, with her predisposition to storytelling, having somebody around to tell her when something was bunk was invaluable.

So Rion described the dreams. It felt odd explaining them to anyone but Abitha, who regarded her with apprehension throughout the telling. The experience of being

someone else, someone not even human. Living in a world from a story or a vid, barely recognizable as the same planet. Of having an artificial body and a male mind and a lover--things Rion had never considered--and waking up sometimes to find she had lost herself.

"I don't know what to do," she said at last, though it seemed unnecessary.

The old woman sipped at her tea for a long time, saying nothing. Rion wrapped her hands around her own cup and stared into the amber liquid while she waited. It was lovely being up here, the sort of family Rion might dream of having. She didn't even know the old woman's name--everyone just called her "Granny," and Rion did the same--but for brief visits here she could imagine what it might feel like to belong. And even having an older person to turn to with questions was refreshing. While she waited for the answer, she could pretend that the old woman had the knowledge or power to solve her problem. It was short-lived and she knew it to be nothing more than a fiction, but it comforted her anyway.

"That's the strangest thing I've ever heard," the old woman said at last.

Rion sighed. "Yeah. Believe me, it's the strangest thing I've ever said."

"Did you hit your head on something?"

"Just now?"

The old woman shook her head. "No. Before this started happening. Sometimes if you hit your head hard enough, it can mess you up pretty badly."

"Like this?"

The old woman grinned, showing crooked teeth but none missing. "I said it was the strangest thing I'd ever heard, so, no, I can't say for sure. But you asked me what I think happened and that's my guess. You hit your head and rattled your brain."

"It seems like it's getting worse."

The woman nodded and sipped at her tea.

"Is it going to keep getting worse forever?"

"It might," the woman said. "Or it might not. You might get better or you might die from it. With brains, I think it's hard to say."

The teacup had cooled in her hands, seeming as much from the old woman's words as from any actual chill in the air. "I guess there's no way to find out for sure, is there. If it's going to get better or not. Except waiting."

"No," the old woman said, almost cheerfully. "But we could all die tomorrow. There's no sense worrying over what might be or not. Just live your life the best you can, right?"

"Right."

"How's your sister?" The woman drank the last of her tea, held out a hand for Rion's cup. "Is that cold yet? Have you met anyone lately? A boy? A girl? Do you want more tea?"

Len couldn't prevent himself from following his friends on their near-weekly pilgrimage to the down-below. If he left them alone, there was no saying what trouble

they might get into--and he was honestly more worried about the other victims of their crimes than anything they might bring upon themselves. They would find a way to make it through almost anything unscathed, but they had such blatant disregard for the poor souls who lived in the down-below, who would have no resources to call on.

They kept dressing in their ridiculous designer rags, ever-conspicuous even though he suspected Sam had deluded herself into thinking she could somehow pass for something other than what she was. But Len, unlike them, actually looked at the faces of those who interacted with them. He saw the recognition, the disgust, the slight sneer. And why shouldn't they sneer? The whole thing was disgusting.

Yet it wasn't as though Len could stop his friends, so accompanying them as a sort of chaperone was the best he could do. He tried to bring cash in small denominations, nothing that might draw the attention of a mugger but enough to help the beggars who mobbed anyone who looked likely to have money.

They were usually children. He couldn't guess how old any of them were; malnourishment, he knew, stunted growth. They all seemed quite young to him. Few came up to his chest; most were only as tall as his waist. They clamored around him with their dirty faces and their missing teeth and their matted hair, denied the very basics to maintain their health. No matter how many of them he tried to help, there were always more. He couldn't even tell, week by week, whether any of them were the same kids, whether his giving had a cumulative effect on any of them. He could only hope that he was making some sort of a difference. At the very least, he liked knowing that children could eat for this one day. It was overwhelming, so much so that he found himself exhausted and near tears by the time he returned home, but he had to do *something*.

It started filling his thoughts even at school, when he was supposed to memorize glorious history. It distracted him at cram school, turning the exam questions into unrecognizable alphabet soup. He came home one evening, frustrated and furious, and slammed the door behind him. Or would have, but it caught at the last second and closed without a sound. Once, he had reworked the house coding to let him slam his bedroom door, at least. It had been satisfying for the week it had lasted.

His father's office door was open, light spilling over the tiles of the hallway. That was surprising--often his father was out late or had the door shut and might as well have been absent. Len could see his father's silhouette and hear the clackity-clackity-clack of fingers typing away. That meant his father wasn't already occupied speaking to somebody. Len walked more quietly, grateful for the door's silence, for once.

"Len."

But of course it was monitored, as everything was. Usually he counted on his father not caring to check. Usually that was reliable enough. He stopped in the hallway, far enough from his father's office that the man was out of focus.

"Father."

His father kept typing, and Len stared straight ahead at the wall, standing in shadow, hoping that exchange would be enough. But then the typing stopped.

"You're coming from cram school."

"Yes."

"You didn't eat the dinner that was prepared for you."

"No."

"You've been out late every night this week."

"Yes."

"You've been going to the down-below."

His father said the word as though it were some vile taboo he hated to break. Len made fists in front of him, seeing in his mind the children groping for any promise of something to eat. It had been enough to turn the taste of his perfectly balanced, perfectly nutritious meal to ash in his mouth.

"Why?"

"Why not?"

"Are you going as a tourist? A drug tourist, perhaps?"

As though anyone actually followed the taboo against drugs. As though Len and all of his classmates weren't reliant on the little boosts that kept them awake at night, that let them focus on the schoolwork and perform at the high level everyone expected. Nobody talked about it, but it was inevitable.

"No," he said.

"Then what?"

"I'm going to *help* them."

His father laughed. Once, Len might have considered this a victory of sorts--provoking a reaction from his father proved that the man did indeed have emotions, somewhere under that shell of efficiency and control. Today it rankled. Worse still, his father came to stand in the doorway of his office. Len swallowed back the urge to face his father, to defer in any way. From the corner of his eye he could see that the man leaned one shoulder against the doorframe and stood with arms crossed as though waiting.

"And how are you proposing to help those people, exactly? Handing out toothbrushes? Giving them your dinner?"

Len had honestly considered how feasible it would be to bring his meals to the down-below, if he wasn't going to be able to stomach them himself. His face grew hot. "I'm still considering," he said.

"It's systemic, you realize," his father said. "Fundamentally, as a culture, they are not inclined to help themselves. And none of us can help those who will not help themselves, no matter how we may want to."

"You don't want to help them."

"Don't I? I have been pushing for easier relocation to the city if they are willing to put forth enough work to flee the slums. Because of me, they can get work permits here, and the more industrious of them do. Those are usually able to escape and settle into a respectable and I dare say comfortable life here among civilized people. But it's hardly our fault if the rest of them choose to remain in ignorance and filth."

"There are children there. It's hardly a choice for them."

"Should we charge in there and take their children away, since they're not fit to raise their own children? Our ancestors tried that, if you'll recall. I suspect you consider that barbaric if you've read it in your texts."

This was by far the longest conversation Len had had with his father in years. The man's eyes flashed, and his lip rose in a sneer, though Len could not be sure if that disdain was meant for him or for the denizens of the down-below. Either way, it made him sick. He dropped his backpack on the tile floor and faced his father full-on, furious.

"You're just making excuses for yourself."

"I have no need to make excuses." Despite the fire in his eyes, Len's father's voice did not raise in anger. It sounded mild and even as always. "Unlike you. Len, you've been neglecting your obligations."

"Maybe I've just recognized greater obligations."

"If you want to help them--" His father sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. "That's very noble of you. But surely you realize that change requires working within the system. Your marks may have slipped lately, but even so, even if you've been sleeping through or skipping out on your courses, you must have absorbed that small amount. So do your homework. Study well. Get good grades, pass your examinations, and run for council and you can make any changes you want to make. That's how to do it. Going down there to feed the children or incite a rebellion or whatever you think you're doing-- that won't make change. My way will."

"I don't believe you."

"You don't have to. Ultimately, I know, and you do not. I have a few more years of experience than you do. And as long as you live in my house, you will follow my rules. I've been patient with your transgressions, but I don't especially want you to fall off the path of success and throw your life away."

"Fine."

"I've overridden your access to the house protocols."

If his father could actually prevent him from accessing the cameras and the doors, it would be much harder to sneak out. Much harder to disobey his father without being caught. But he had managed to avoid his father's control before. Likely he would find a workaround again.

"Fine." He refused to give his father the satisfaction of angering him. So he put on the best politician's mask he could summon and made his face rigid and detached, eyebrows arched ever so slightly. "If that's all, I'll go to my room."

Obsidian dropped to the floor, metal and plastic soles clanging heavily as his armor followed gravity. He switched off his visor, and all at once the overlay of text and data stopped, leaving only the darkness of the simulation room. Without the projected visuals of space, he could almost make out the blank, distant walls on all sides. Around him, four other Protectors, part of his team--Cobalt, Orchid, Zee, and the newest member, Daisy--landed somewhat more gracefully.

"Again," Obsidian said. "Daisy, you *have* to stay out of sight. Zee will intercept if anything comes for you. Trust in your teammates. We're counting on you for the finishing blow, but the plan hinges on you remaining undetected."

"Roger." As always, her voice was flat, emotionless. Obsidian wondered, not for the first time, whether it was professionalism or simply part of her nature.

"With all due respect, Obsidian, we need more power up front," Orchid cut in. "Since Zee's mission is to protect the rear, I feel like the rest of us are exposed." Obsidian knew what she wasn't saying--Apollo had been strong, solid, able to withstand an assault and give as good as he got. Daisy was a sniper, with a cloaking system Obsidian had never seen before in any Protector, but she was fragile and she needed time to ready a

shot. As an addition to the team, she was invaluable; as a replacement for Apollo, she fell short.

Obsidian put a gloved hand on Orchid's shoulder, armor clinking against armor. "It'll be all right," he said softly. "I know the adjustment is difficult. It always is. And we may need to request another teammate to fill the gaps, after all. But these exercises are situational, using what we have, not what we don't have."

"But--"

"The new formation feels good," Obsidian said. "Fluid. In the right situation, I think it will work well. And when it is not the right situation, we'll use a different formation. I won't put any of you unnecessarily at risk."

"Why can't Cobalt protect Daisy?" she asked. "Free up Zee to join us on the offensive. Cobalt's quick enough to have her back if something comes for them..."

"Cobalt's not--" Obsidian swallowed the rest of his response. For just a moment he saw the flame, felt the loss of Apollo ten times over. His heart felt like it would leap out of his chest, and he wondered what the scientists monitoring their practice thought of his body's readings. At least this room was dimly lit enough that his teammates would see no change in his demeanor. Cobalt stood silently in his gleaming indigo armor, visor up and obscuring his own expression. "You're--you're right. We can try that."

Orchid nodded. "Roger," she said. "Thank you."

"Let's go again," Obsidian said to the rest of the group. "Doctor Abraham, please randomize the placement of the Invader mothership. Everyone, take your places--let's drill this until we get it right."

Whatever was happening with Rion seemed to be getting worse. The times Abitha looked at her and did not see her friend looking back, as though a stranger had moved to dwell behind Rion's eyes and showed no recognition, had become more and more common. Or maybe it was only that Abitha became more aware of them. Rion tried to keep her pain hidden, like a cat. Likely she wanted to avoid worrying Abitha, but knowing the truth would be less worrisome than suddenly being blindsided by it one day when Rion could no longer hide it. So Abitha had watched Rion closely and noticed too many moments of confusion masked by thoughtfulness.

After Rion left, Abitha said a prayer. Not that she expected much, without incense or any of the rituals that should have accompanied it, but she could only hope that the heart of her heart would have the conviction to work a miracle.

But her conviction felt shaky now. This was something of a sensitive subject. She did not pray in front of Rion, though the two of them had never discussed it. Abitha had simply never seen Rion herself express any particular inclinations, and one thing Abitha had learned from her parents, long ago, was that you didn't share faith unless you knew you were in like company. Every day when Rion left, Abitha wished for her safety, and every night when she tried to fall asleep, Abitha recited in her mind the hymns her parents had taught her, all those years ago. One must be patient, one must be kind, one must respect life. They would have been vegetarians but she could hardly turn down any food here. It came up so rarely, but sometimes Rion came back with strips of dried beef, and most of the bars they pulled together could contain anything, as far as Abitha knew.

Treasure all living things. Treasure the world you have been given. Shape it with your hands into its most beautiful form, not the form you will upon it but the greatest version of itself. The purest, truest version of itself. Seek your own most beautiful self-- not physical beauty, but beauty inward, a refined and polished sense of self. Reflecting all the

In most aspects of her life, Abitha considered herself powerless. Alone she would almost certainly have fallen to a terrible fate, as a lost child without friends or resources. One dark night had taken everything she knew away from her. Much of that night was a bleak, black hole that threatened to suck her in and destroy her if she drew too close to it, and so she kept it tightly covered and skirted around even the loosest memories. But around the tattered edges of that hole, a few moments lingered: hunched beside a dumpster, her hair in her face, her hands sticky, ready to vomit a scream; walking through a river of strangers who did not seem to see her, as though she was as invisible as she felt empty; Rion, bending down over her with a hand outstretched.

Rion was the second miracle in Abitha's new life. The first was that she had somehow survived. She had prayed, selfishly, *Spare me*. And something had happened such that *her* throat was not cut, that it was not *her* blood gushing warm and thick, that it was not her body falling heavy and limp. Instead she had run and she had not been followed. She had been unseen. Been safe and invisible and a thin thread from death, until Rion had seen her, until Rion had saved her.

Which was why, now that Rion was losing herself, it was Abitha's time to stage a rescue the only way she knew how. She had no power of her own; she could only hope

that whatever part of the universe had once taken pity on her would care for her friend as well.

Rion was usually out for a few hours at a time. With any luck, Abitha would be able to leave and return before Rion had an opportunity to notice she was missing. Abitha's vision problems worried Rion. Truthfully, Abitha suspected neither of them had any faith in Abitha's self-sufficiency, with good reason. But Abitha had made up her mind to go, and so she would.

She lifted up the flap and took a moment to size up the alleyway. From this distance, she could make out the lines of the railing straight ahead, and the brown- and ash-toned figures walking past in muddy-colored clothes. At least the street lights were bright today, flickering blue-white that gave everything long shadows. Abitha took a deep breath and shuffled one foot forward into the alleyway, letting the flap fall closed behind her.

Step, step, step, as careful and deliberate as if she were crossing a narrow wire. The alleyway was cold even through the patchy stockings on her feet, and the rough-textured surface jutted between her toes, but at least that irregularity made it easier for her to tell how far she was going. Up here, close enough to home, she had memorized the feel of the floor beneath her feet and the number of steps it would take to reach the railing. Rion would normally be here to hold her hand or to let her walk with one hand on Rion's shoulder, but Rion could not know that Abitha was setting off alone. Taking unnecessary risks, for a reason that would make Rion scoff--no, she would need to be quick and to hope for the best.

The couple who lived in an apartment outside the alleyway had a window open, and bursts of laughter erupted onto the street over the low drone of their vid box.

Sometimes they fought, but in general they were good-natured, and Abitha liked them.

"Girl," the woman called through the window, and Abitha stopped.

"Yes?" She faced the window, scanning their room for the skin-toned smudges of their faces. At this distance, she could see the shadows of their eyes and the woman's mouth, but no greater detail.

"You're not out with your sister today?"

As if Abitha and Rion looked anything like sisters. Even Abitha could tell that, with her mother's topsider blood so dominant in her own coloring and the gloss of her hair. She shook her head. "No."

"I thought you were blind?"

Abitha balked. "Not quite."

"Close, though, right? Be safe out there."

It gave her a little more strength, this reassurance from a known voice, as though the universe had sent her a sign. At the railing, she rested the fingers of her right hand on it one by one, letting its cold solid realness reassure her that the amorphous world around her could be touched. Then, gripping the railing tightly, she dragged herself farther away from the alleyway, away from familiarity and safety.

If Rion were here, she would think of some clever route, faster or safer or perhaps both. But Abitha could only take the most direct route toward the center of the down-below, with the railing as a guide. It was colder and rougher than Rion's hand, and sometimes the rungs of it shook and rattled under the pressure of her weight. She ducked

her head, watching the ground for the dark shadows that would give away the presence of potholes or something abandoned on the ground, either of which could easily send her sprawling.

Nobody spoke to her. She was grateful. It let her concentrate. Eventually she reached a ladder and waited at the top as someone else came up. A man, his collar turned up high, his smudged face entirely unreadable. Abitha stood aside and let him pass. Then she settled her hands on the railing, took a deep breath, and closed her eyes.

Have mercy.

Descending ladders always, *always* made her stomach flutter. Maybe it was because she couldn't see the bottom. Instead she focused on the rungs as she passed them, hand over hand, feeling the integrity of each one under the ball of her foot before putting her weight on it. At least she was close enough to the rungs to make out every detail of their scratched surfaces and welded joints.

Down she went, level after level, feeling her way along the railing until she reached the next ladder. In this more central location, they were mercifully close together. She brushed against people on occasion when she misjudged the distance, but downcast eyes and an apology in a trembling voice--not even acted but the truth of how she felt--soothed whatever anger she stirred.

Now she was in nearly unknown territory altogether. She so rarely came this far. There were more people, enough that it was all she could do to keep from walking into them. Abitha made herself as small as she could, wrapped her arms around her chest so her hands would touch no one.

"Mind yourself," a woman in a coat--red, bright red--said to Abitha. Abitha's ears suddenly seemed to fill with cotton, the voices around her now muffled and far away, and her throat constricted.

She could not even manage an apology. Instead, she closed her eyes and turned away. Hands in front of her, she pushed through the crowd, trying to find openings where she could. Rion was good at this, too, at slipping past as though her squared palm was a knife cutting a clear path, but Abitha had no such skill. By the time she reached the railing and the next ladder, she thought she might vomit down on the mass of dark smudges moving below her.

She hurried down this last ladder. To the ground floor, where the lights were brighter and music pounded louder than her heartbeat in her ears. Hoping that the woman in red wouldn't follow her--but Rion would tell her the woman had no reason to follow her. No reason to pay attention to just one kid. They were anonymous. They were safe.

Now that she was on the ground floor, the sheer stupidity of what she was doing hit her. She had a general idea where the temple would be found. And she remembered it being easy to see, but of course that had been a long time ago. That was before she had made a deal for her safety that had robbed her of her eyesight. But, surely, if anything watched over her, if anything had agreed to protect her, it would keep her safe as she tried to find the temple, of all places.

The topsiders stood out so sharply that even she could identify them, bright and crisp and paler-faced like Abitha herself. She pulled her hair into her face and slipped to the side of the street, where a pair of small dun-colored children crouched together. Beggars.

"Scuse me," she said to them.

One of them straightened. Abitha recognized the head motion--she was being sized up. "Oh, you're real," the child said. High-voiced, maybe a boy, maybe a girl.

Abitha laughed. She needed to laugh, badly, and it came out of her tight and strangled. "Why wouldn't I be real?"

"There's topsiders been dressing like they're poor," the kid said. "Thought you might be one of them, but you ain't."

Abitha felt heat in her face. "No," she said tightly.

"Yeah, I see that." The kid smiled--thank god for small mercies--white teeth in a mouth that decidedly turned upward. It was enough to let Abitha breathe again. "What's up?"

"I'm trying to find the temple."

"Yeah? What's going on?"

Abitha shrugged. If she'd been quicker, maybe she could give them a good excuse, but as it was, all she had was some semblance of the truth. "I want to go there."

"Don't you know how?"

"I live higher up. I don't come down here very often."

The kid shrugged. "Sure, then. I can show you."

Luck, then. No sense telling them she was half-blind, but at least she could count on the decency of kids like this. They leaned together, the ones who had no one else to lean on. For all she knew, these kids were friends with some of the kids who stopped by or stayed over. The down-below was teeming with people, but the connections within it sometimes surprised her.

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Looking at the temple, Abitha found herself overlaying old memories to sharpen the image her eyes saw. She had been here enough times that she could fill in the gaps, though things had likely changed--so maybe it was a blessing, in a way, that the temple could live on with her as it was. Better than having to worry about time lost and what that time had held.

The temple itself was a crumbling old building, each brick laid by hand and set with colored tiles swirling together in a pleasing pattern. It had been beautiful once, but even when Abitha had first come here, that time was long past. Graffiti covered the surface, breaking up the intentional design, but to Abitha's blurry eyes it all seemed like an organic creation, living and breathing, not structured but unconstrained and flowing. It was beautiful in its own way if she couldn't see the details, the foul words and obscene images that made up so much graffiti. A lot of things were like that, beautiful if you took them for their whole selves and overlooked the flaws.

Trash piled up on either side of the door, not the temple's trash but what neighbors had set out or what visitors had tossed aside. Abitha tread carefully here. Broken glass was nearly impossible for her to see--she had the scars to show for it, and a sore spot in her big toe where the wound had healed up around a small fragment.

The door creaked open when she pushed on it. Inside it stank like mold and mildew, long since abandoned to the ravages of time and whatever moisture accumulated down here. There was a long hallway lined with classrooms, and she knew if she followed it to the end she would find a kitchen that no longer functioned and a closet

filled with crumbling tools. But Abitha wanted not the community space but the sacred space, the heart of the temple, what felt like the profound center of the universe. She passed through a set of doors that swung inward, groaning, into the sanctuary.

The air here seemed thick and heavy with light. No lamps shone within the temple, but a crack through the plastered dome let in light from outside that caught on dust motes and gave the room a strange glow. Filth made the windows translucent instead of transparent. But it was silent here, blessedly silent, like nowhere else in the down-below. It had been constructed that way, her father once explained to her--to capture the beauty of song within, or silence for meditation. Stacks of rotten cushions lined the octagonal walls in colors she could no longer recognize. It had been a long time since anyone had tried to restore this space. And those who tried had failed.

At least here it was appropriate to be barefoot. She padded with dirty feet across the prayer space, which was flat and even and predictable. Near the center, or as close as she could estimate, she dropped to her knees and clasped her hands.

The best prayers were meant to be sung. Not alone, but with voices raised together. There were no voices to join with Abitha's. Rion would not have, even if she were here, but Abitha would sing for her anyway--whether she wanted it or not, because the song was the only gift Abitha could give her, because a powerless girl needed to call on the power of the universe when she had nowhere else to turn. She dug into the darkest corners of her mind, underneath the smell of blood, and pulled out every last prayer she could recall. One by one, she sang them all in a shaky soprano.

Afterward, she felt no different. She had hoped, somehow, that she would feel the same strange enveloping warmth that had taken over her body that night. Reassuring her

that she had been heard, that the essence of the universe, the beauty of all things, was with her. Instead, she only heard the echoes of her own voice.

She left the way she came, but even her feet felt heavier. It was done. It might amount to nothing. She could only hope.

Back across the ground floor of the down-below, where the crowds seemed more oppressive than ever before after so much silence. A dull ache began at the base of her skull, and she took small, delicate steps trying to find her way out without colliding with anything. She found a ladder amid a throng of moving bodies, too many colors blurred together, and climbed upward.

She wasn't even sure which ladder she was using, but the sooner she left the ground floors, the better. The memory of the woman in the red coat haunted her. There would be others like her down here. Abitha rushed to the next ladder and flung herself at it to climb upward again.

She couldn't help thinking, in the shocked moment when she seemed to float, when her whole body was briefly weightless, that maybe she was flying, that maybe she could fly straight back home and not have to bother with ladders ever again. It was a strange and irrational thought brought to an end as her body plummeted and crashed onto hard metal ground. She had just enough time to set down one foot to catch herself before her leg crumpled beneath her.

Her next thought was that she felt fine, but then the pain started. Her foot--no, her leg--no, both.

There was another lost moment. How long, she couldn't say. Only that a wave seemed to wash over her, a wave of frozen silence like an icy wind. Everything was dark.

When she came to, her head ached. Her lip hurt, too, where her incisor had gone through it. But the worst of it was that her vision was not just blurry but somehow overlapping, as though her two eyes had decided not to speak to each other.

She seemed to be on the ground still, looking upward. When she tried to move her head, the world buckled. Shapes stood over her--people? Other lost children? Rusts? Or monsters, nightmarish creatures in vaguely human bodies? Would they steal the clothes off her body or rip the heart from her chest and crumble her into dust? Could she do anything to stop them? Or should she just give up now?

Except that Rion would never know what had happened to her, and Rion would worry. Abitha tried to sit up, stirring the insides of her stomach. She swallowed it back down and crawled backwards, twisting her hips to drag her limp leg. Not toward the shadows, anywhere but the shadows, but away from the strangers. Away from the traffic. Away from the people who could hurt her.

Rion pushed back the curtain to darkness. At first she thought Abitha must be asleep, but Abitha was nowhere to be seen. No sleeping body, no nothing. No sign of Tyren, either. Not that Abitha had left with Tyren before, but it made more sense than Rion coming home and home being inexplicably empty.

She stood in the dark room, too astonished to move. Abitha being gone was not a reality that had ever crossed her mind.

Had somebody *stolen* her? Kids disappeared sometimes, but they tended to be solitary, without any shelter. Vulnerable. Abitha knew better than to go willingly with any strangers. Rion lit the lamp and looked for signs of a struggle. Nothing seemed overturned. Nothing was unaccounted for. It was just *empty*.

The alleyway looked entirely unremarkable, too. Rion rapped on their neighbors' doors. One didn't answer. The other, a woman, did.

"Have you seen my sister?" Rion asked.

The woman nodded. "Maybe a couple hours back. Thought it was strange she was heading off without you."

"Did she say where she was going?"

"No."

"Alone?"

"Yeah."

"You're sure."

"Yeah."

Bewildered, Rion stood emptily in the doorway. But *why* would Abitha possibly do this? Where would she go? Where *could* she go? "Thanks," she finally said when nothing more was forthcoming.

"She's missing?"

"Yeah."

The woman shook her head. "Good luck. I'll keep an eye out for her."

"Thanks."

At first she stayed near home, the surrounding roads and alleyway, the places that she went often with Abitha. Whenever she saw a familiar face, she asked the same question--have you seen my sister? None of them had. Or if they did, they couldn't say where they saw her or where she was going.

How an obviously half-blind girl, seeing as much with her hands as with her eyes, could go far without being stopped or helped by anyone--

But of course the kindness of strangers could not be counted on. Hoped for, perhaps as a likely thing, but not a guarantee. And Abitha was good at not being seen if she didn't want to be. Anger wouldn't help Rion find her. A level head might. So she paced for a little while, biting back fury at people who could not simply hand her a solution, because it wasn't their fault. At least she knew that Abitha had left of her own volition and not been taken--at least, not from their home. It was impossible to say what might have happened later.

Abitha must have followed along the railing somewhere. Maybe staying on the same level, maybe climbing, maybe descending. The down-below crowded too many people into an enclosed space, but it was still enormous compared to the size of one girl.

For the first time, she wondered--actively wondered--what Obsidian might do in this situation. He had invaded her thoughts so often, unwanted and unbidden. He had made a mess of things and given her strange gifts in return--reading more fluently, having a clearer understanding of escape routes and strategy, honing parts of her that already existed and opening lines of thought that had no place in her life. She couldn't say how he was in her mind or if he even had his own consciousness, only that sometimes his

thoughts and his memories overlaid her own. Well. If he was so smart and clever, he ought to earn his keep and help her find her lost friend.

Silence.

"What are you good for?" she muttered, to herself, to him. As though he were a real person who could hear and answer. But of course that was impossible. Rion was, as ever, on her own. She would have to find a solution herself.

Except that she wasn't on her own. She stopped mid-stride and someone bumped into her from behind and swore in surprise. Rion stepped out of his way, not even really registering his presence, because of course she wasn't on her own. One girl couldn't hope to sweep the down-below alone, but a group of kids could comb through the immediate vicinity and at least find a lead. If they coordinated the search as a team, they might just find her.

Rion flew down the street with renewed energy, rushing to find Tyren, to find the other kids who sometimes stayed over, to find every person she had ever helped before from whom she could call in a favor. Neighbors, sympathetic shopkeepers, other street kids. If one wasn't around, she set off after the next.

The Protectors in her dreams, in her false memories, had a comm system to update each other instantaneously. No such technology existed in the down-below, but if they used a network of runners, positioned at reasonable intervals along the three levels above and three levels below where Rion and Abitha lived, they could keep communication open. The alternative would involve Rion sitting at home waiting while the others looked for Abitha, so that Rion could be located in case they found her, but that was not a possibility. It might have been more efficient, but Rion could not sit still.

She could barely even stand still, pacing or fidgeting whenever she spoke to anyone. No, she had to be an active participant or she would go crazier than she already was. She set them on their paths and chose her own, roaming around the ladders and staircases closest to their home, up and down and back up again.

They might draw the attention of the Rusts, but that was a risk Rion was willing to take if it meant bringing Abitha home alive. The longer the search went on, the more afraid she was that she would never see her friend again.

She found herself chewing her fingernails as she repeated the same loop: down a ladder, follow the railing, down the next ladder, and over again. Then back up, back to where she started, and over again. On each level she checked the immediate vicinity for signs of Abitha. Sometimes as she ran her hand along the railing she imagined Abitha doing the same. She ought to get something for Abitha that would help her walk safely. If she could have something like a railing everywhere she went--something to guide her, or maybe something to see the ground in front of her--maybe she would be less afraid to leave home. It was a better thought than wondering and fearing the worst.

Loop, loop, loop. Chew, chew, chew. Her middle finger, which usually had a gnawed-on hangnail at any given moment, started to bleed. Occasionally somebody came running up toward her and her heart seemed to stop, but every time they only reported that there was nothing to report.

Finally, she saw Tyren approaching down the street, pushing people aside, gracelessly. His eyes were wide and he breathed heavily as though he had been running a great distance to reach her. Rion's heart dropped. If he had been grinning--but he looked terrified. She rushed to meet him. He grabbed her arms, panting.

"We found her," he said.

"Is she ok?" But of course she wouldn't be. Rion felt a numbness fall over her, a sense of inevitability.

Tyren shook his head.

"Where is she?"

Before he could answer, Rion had started running in the direction Tyren came from. He fell in line with her and took her hand, more to guide her than to make her hurry. She couldn't seem to move fast enough. On the next ladder, Rion only made it a few steps down before jumping the rest of the way. She felt the impact of landing in her knees and in her teeth, but she was already running again, with Tyren panting behind her.

"Rion! Wait up."

"Where *is* she?"

"I'll show you," he shouted. "But slow down. You don't know where you're going."

She slowed down just enough to let him catch up again. Another ladder, another teeth-grinding jump, and then she noticed the bloody smear on the ground. She clutched Tyren's arm.

"I know," he said. "She doesn't--I mean--"

They were farther away from base than Rion would possibly have imagined. What the hell was Abitha doing all the way out here, and almost to the ground floor, where ordinarily she would never have set foot? The blood smeared in a direction, in uneven stretches. It looked more like she'd moved herself than that she had been dragged

by someone else. At least that was something. The trail was easy to follow. Rion's eyes never left the ground as Tyren paced anxiously beside her.

And then there was Abitha, underneath an overturned cart, and a pair of the other street kids crouching beside her. She was so pale, as though she had bled out everything inside of her, but that was impossible. The smear hadn't been nearly bad enough.

Rion dropped to her knees. "Fuck," she said. "Fuck, fuck, fuck."

Abitha's eyelids fluttered open. "Rion?"

Other than the paleness, Abitha's head and body seemed unhurt. But one of her legs was crusted with blood, at an angle that looked highly unnatural.

"Fuck," Rion said again.

Twisted ankles were bad enough. Scraped knees and cut hands and feet could get infected. Together, Rion and Abitha had weathered all of these and somehow made it through. But a broken bone was worse than anything Rion could have imagined. She put a hand on Abitha's cheek, which was grimy and wet with tears.

"We'll get you home," Rion heard herself saying. "You'll be ok. Just take a deep breath. I'm here now. You'll be ok."

Abitha shook her head. "I'm sorry." Her voice sounded as broken as her leg.

"Don't be. It's ok. You'll be ok." Rion wasn't half-convinced herself, but she tried to put all the certainty she did not feel into her voice. Abitha clutched her hand with a painfully tight grip.

Tyren dropped beside her. "What are we doing to do?"

If Abitha hadn't been listening, Rion might have admitted some of her own uncertainty. But she had to put on a front. They were lucky Abitha was conscious despite the pain--lucky she was responsive despite the shock and fear.

"Stay with me, Abitha," she said. "Don't shut down. Ok? We've got you."

"It hurts..."

"I know. Shh." Rion kissed her cheek. "We'll get you some medicine and we'll get you home and we'll get you a doctor."

"Doctors cost money, Rion."

"Don't worry," Rion said.

"We can't carry her up a ladder," Tyren said. "And I don't know if I'd trust a staircase, either."

"We can't leave her down here."

The cart was solid--a smart choice to hide beneath, keeping Abitha out of sight. It provided some protection as well as shelter, but the cold ground couldn't have been comfortable. Tyren was right--even moving her in some sort of rigged litter would risk making her injury worse. Rion knew nothing about broken limbs. Obsidian, of course, knew nothing about human wounds, either. Two minds in one and still she had nothing to offer her friend.

A broken leg would call for a doctor, and doctors needed money, and Rion had probably never had enough money in all her life to have a doctor give Abitha a look, let alone any sort of treatment.

But she knew someone who did. If she could find a way to get in touch.

Rion stood up. "Tyren. Go get some blankets and the lantern and whatever food you can carry. The two of you, stay with her. I'll send more help. We need to stay with her."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to ask a friend for help."

Deah was counting. Counting boxes, counting the contents of each box, taking inventory of all of her possessions. Surely some of what she had accumulated over the past year or so would hold enough value to catch her up on her payments. Maybe not to make a dent in the overall debt, but to deal with the immediate crisis, almost certainly. She had enough contacts in the black market and enough experience to make sure they weren't going to rip her off, and she had stockpiled goods for precisely this reason.

What she'd acquired during the morning's run with Rion meant she'd have her living expenses covered for the next couple of weeks, if she was careful. But she would need something more substantial to get ahead and keep herself afloat longer term. More substantial, maybe with bigger risks involved but certainly with bigger rewards.

Now, it was afternoon, and she ought to be sleeping. But after long enough staring at the ceiling, counting in her mind, she had decided to be productive and count with her hands and a checklist.

After an hour or two, she realized her head had begun to hurt and her stomach was gurgling. She set the checklist down and was halfway to her kitchen when she saw a

blinking light on her terminal. She stared at it, willing it to disappear, but the light persisted.

"Dammit," she said.

The urge to ignore it was strong. She poured herself a glass of water and ate a chunk of cheese. The light was still on when she finished.

She went to jam the button beside the light and stopped. Instead of the shark's contact information, the sender was identified as *rionrion*. How that girl had wound up with a handle was beyond her, but it was so appropriate for the overly serious roach that Deah laughed outright. Partly out of relief, but also with genuine humor. She would have to remember this. As far as how Rion found her, or how Rion even knew how to use a terminal, or how Rion knew how to *read*--there was clearly more to the kid than Deah had expected. Good to know. She hated underestimating anyone, or being mistaken about any player on the board.

Deah, I need your help.

My friend is hurt.

If you can help us today I will owe you a debt.

Please if you can meet me at the usual place as soon as you can.

A friend hurt--as if Deah knew anything about injuries. That was what doctors did. Which, as she puzzled through it, would make sense. Rion was going to ask her for money to cover a doctor bill. It was almost sweet how little Rion knew about money, how wealthy she seemed to think Deah was. She was naive while thinking herself worldly. Couple that with a monetary and emotional debt and Deah suspected that having Rion in

her pocket would mean the girl would do almost anything she asked. There could be an advantage to owning somebody so thoroughly.

Deah drummed her fingers on the console, thinking. Yes, if she was going to take on more difficult, dangerous work, it might be nice to have someone around to take the fall for her if necessary. She sent a reply.

I will be there soon.

It sounded impressively serious, as though Deah could sweep in and solve all of Rion's problems. A doctor bill in the down-below would be vastly cheaper than a check-up topside, and Deah could almost certainly cover it without having to deepen her own debt. That was the terrible thing about debt--it was like this terrible shadow in the background, separate from all other expenses, looming and ugly. She could pay her bills and keep herself fed and still fall short of paying off the impossible amount she owed. And if she defaulted on the loan, the shark would take it out of her one way or another. Short of fleeing to the down-below and praying for the best--and Deah was not one for praying--she had no exit plan and no alternative. But she liked the thought of someone else being in *her* debt.

They all took turns sitting with Abitha while Rion waited for Deah. It killed her to be unable to watch Abitha herself, especially given that Deah might not even show up. But she couldn't expect anyone else to recognize Deah. She could only hope for the best.

She honestly couldn't say how long she had been waiting before Deah appeared wearing her usual rags. Rion let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding.

"You came."

Deah smiled. On someone else's face, it might have been sweet, but there was a knife hidden in it. "Didn't you get my message, kiddo? I didn't even realize you had a handle. You could have saved us some time."

Rion shook her head. "My friend's hurt."

"Yeah, you said."

Her coy matter-of-factness kind of made Rion want to punch her right in the mouth, but right now she was the only thing that might save Abitha's life. So Rion swallowed her anger, explained the situation, and threw herself at Deah's feet-- metaphorically, but she would have actually flung herself to the ground if she'd thought it would lead anywhere.

Deah's eyes glittered with a cold sparkle. It was enough to chill Rion. But she agreed, and that was the most important thing.

The down-below had its share of doctors. Some of them offered remedies and poultices that sounded too good to be true. Rion chose one instead who worked out of a clean white office. More expensive, she was sure, but Abitha's life was on the line and Rion had made her peace with being in debt, no matter what it took, as long as Abitha would be all right at the end of it.

Deah stepped up with icy confidence as though she had done this many times before. She explained it all to the doctor, who sedated Abitha and set her leg right there at the side of the street, while passersby cast glances in their direction. Abitha whimpered

and bit clean through her own lip, even though the doctor promised it wouldn't hurt. And throughout the whole thing, Rion chewed on her fingers until they bled. Everything was out of her hands now--Abitha's health, Deah's power over Rion, what the future held for them.

And everything cost money. So much money, a sum that seemed nearly impossible to Rion. Deah covered the costs with the same lack of emotion that she showed while Abitha writhed in pain, as though this king's ransom meant nothing to her. Something had shifted. She didn't need to say she owned Rion, but the meaning was clear in every action she took.

After they had brought Abitha back to their hovel with the doctor's help and a sturdy canvas litter, Deah took her leave.

"I'll see you tomorrow," she said.

And all Rion could do was agree.

###

He had doubted his father's ability to prevent him from accessing the household systems. He had been wrong. Either he misjudged his father's ability or the lock had come from somewhere else, but no matter what its origin, it proved impenetrable. It gave a message, loud and clear: *You have had freedom only because I allowed it.* And that hurt worse than the loss of freedom now--knowing that he had been deluded, just a spoiled child with an indulgent father, not in any way his own independent man.

Not yet. But he would find a way. When his father talked about Len's potential, Len knew it was not empty boasting. He had a clever enough mind. Perhaps not as clever as Sam's, and perhaps he lacked her charisma, but if he applied himself to something, he could generally count on succeeding.

If his father wanted him to succeed at school, he would--but only to relieve himself of his father's concern. Perform just well enough to satisfy his father's expectations and buy himself some time to set a plan in place. Because he had taken several things away from the confrontation with his father. First, that he would never be free as long as he lived in his father's house. Second, that he wanted to enact change and that he *could*, somehow. And third, that he would and could solve both problems together. This life was not for him. Sam and the others--they could play at being poor all they wanted, be tourists into someone else's life as though what happened in the down-below was nothing more than a performance for their own entertainment, but Len couldn't stomach it. The whole system was disgusting, from the people his age profiting from it to the people at the top, people like his father, who did not see the individual suffering that Len could not help but be affected by.

Incite a rebellion. His father had said the words scornfully, but there was truth hidden in there. If you don't like something, change it. Make it change. Len had studied history. He knew what his people had done to the people of the down-below what might have been a hundred lifetimes ago, before they took to the stars, half a universe away. He knew how the ancestors of the people of the down-below had finally thrown off their shackles with bloodshed and courage. Perhaps his father's people let them wallow in ignorance now so that they would forget their own greatness, but Len knew. Len

remembered. And if he could remind them, if he could teach them, perhaps they could free themselves once more and make a more equitable, more just world.

It was the right thing to do. It was the perfect application of his skills and his knowledge. It would have made his mother proud, he thought, if he had the opportunity to explain it to her. *Make something of yourself brighter and better than we could possibly imagine.* Her last words to him. This would be how. He would find a way to reach the down-below and he would not return home until he did so with the people of the down-below rallying with him for freedom.

They were each allowed a private chamber, a room with a recharging bay and storage for personal possessions. There was a computer terminal, too, where they could access the archives or run through basic simulations. Obsidian had spent the better part of the day with different permutations of his teammates, running through hypothetical situations and conflicts to see where Daisy might fit. Another new teammate would take time and political negotiation--one more Protector in Russe meant one fewer potential Protector for the other human metropolises scattered across the globe. But Russe led humanity in technological advancement, and the rest of the human race was dependent on it as a leader--just as its team had become dependent on Obsidian himself. Jackson had assured him that they would eventually be granted a new teammate. They just needed to be patient. In the meantime, Obsidian's plotting had yet to yield success.

The trouble, he had begun to realize, was that he kept thinking about the team as it had been, as though he could build upon or subtract from their old formations. Without Apollo, he would need to rebuild their plans entirely.

Soon enough, he would need to power down so that his body could flush out the damage caused by stress, so that his mind could recover from the clutter of so many attempted--and failed--formations. He disconnected from the terminal and pinched the bridge of his nose, letting out a sigh that sounded petulant even to him.

Hardly a moment later, a chime rang out. His chamber door. He rose, inhaled, asked the computer to identify his visitor.

Cobalt.

The other's presence, as always, set off a series of physiological reactions that still surprised him in their complexity. Humans compared the sensation to butterflies--something preposterous and difficult to imagine, as though a man's stomach could be a cage in which so many winged insects lay dormant and then all at once sprung into motion.

He pressed his palm against the panel by his door, relishing this moment of anticipation even though his system jumped from feeling to feeling, overstimulated by too long spent in VR. The door slid open silently, and Cobalt was there waiting, hands meekly crossed in front of him.

"I hope I'm not disturbing you," he said. "I--I came by earlier but there was no response. I thought I'd try again."

"You're not disturbing me." Obsidian rubbed at his eyes to clear them, relieved by the sensation of using his own body again. VR disconnected him from his body in a way

that was disconcerting. His suit and his ship were both extensions of himself, but when he plugged into the terminal, it was disturbingly similar to his dim memories of being no more than a newborn intelligence within a machine.

A body-less machine, he reminded himself--he was still and would always be a machine, a synthetic creation with only the illusion of life.

"You look exhausted." Cobalt moved to touch his face, then stopped.

"I've been working."

"Too hard?" Cobalt looked away. "No, I shouldn't say that. You work to keep the rest of us alive."

Obsidian couldn't help wincing. "I try," he said.

"I didn't mean it like that!" This time Cobalt did step forward, cupping his soft hands around Obsidian's cheeks to tilt Obsidian's face down toward him. "It's too much for you to carry on your own. I'm worried about you. You've taken it all too personally."

"How can I *not*?" Obsidian took Cobalt's hands in his, enveloping them, marveling at how delicate and fragile they seemed. So easily crushed, yet capable of such beautiful creations. "There are so many things I could have done differently. So many things I could *still* do better. I know everyone else is working as hard as they can--"

"Within reason, Obsidian."

"I've been resting, I promise." That Obsidian had pushed himself past exhaustion after Apollo's death was no great secret, and Cobalt of all the people on the base knew it.

"Maybe you should take some time to relax."

"I was writing," Obsidian said. "On the rooftop. But I'm... I've hit a block. I'll get back to poetry when I've worked through it."

"It's been two weeks. You've been on five missions since then."

Obsidian released Cobalt and turned away, running his hands over the thick locks of his hair, but Cobalt followed him into his chamber as the door slid shut once more.

"What are you so upset about?"

Obsidian pressed his palm flat against the cold metal wall, suppressing the urge to strike it. "The same thing I've ever been upset about. I'm going to get you killed. I know this. One day, I won't be able to protect you, and that will be it. There is literally no alternative. Someday, you'll die."

"Even humans die. It's inevitable."

"Not like this. And they get so much longer than we do. The whole history of the Protectors is shorter than the lifespan of a single human..."

"Then why don't we just enjoy the time we have together? Even if it's brief, it can be sweet..."

Cobalt slid his arms around Obsidian and laced his fingers together over Obsidian's chest, closing the space between them so that Obsidian could feel the warm hum of his system. They had kissed clumsily enough times before--imitating humans, perhaps, without the evolutionary reason to kiss--yet still the sensation of another body so close to his was distractingly strange and new. Behind him, Cobalt rested his cheek against the space between Obsidian's shoulder blades. Obsidian could feel Cobalt breathing, a warm exhale in the cold lifeless chamber that was his home.

This could all be torn from them in a moment of fire, or the void leeching the very essence of them into space. One false command and Cobalt, now warm and alive, would

be nothing more than cold sparks arcing toward the earth, burning out in the atmosphere. A falling star for humans to wish upon, and just as quickly forgotten.

No--Cobalt was here, alive. That wondrous, precious heart still beat, artificial though it might be. Obsidian wanted to cling to him, to find that essence of him and cherish it. Though his senses were still too sharp--colors too bright, the sounds of Cobalt's soft breath electrifying--he had a moment of total clarity. Of overwhelming joy, melting him like liquid gold inside. Fierce. Dizzying. He needed this, needed to protect Cobalt, needed to share with him.

"Let's drown out the world," Cobalt said, as though he felt it too. "Obsidian, I..." His fingertips traced over Obsidian's chest, and Obsidian was suddenly aware of the difference of his own build--synthetic muscles for power, yet Cobalt's touch made him feel weak, even dulled by the thick bodysuit that covered him. Beneath its sleek line hid the connectors, points of exposed circuitry where man-machine merged with suit and with ship.

Cobalt kissed him on the shoulder, soft lips on bare skin. Obsidian closed his eyes and let himself enjoy it, even as Cobalt's fingers worked their way up his back, to rest along the high collar of his suit.

"What are you doing?" He didn't mean to sound angry, but Cobalt's hands stopped, chastised.

"I want to... share something with you," Cobalt said. "Do you trust me?"

"With my life. You know that."

Cobalt let out a held breath. "Okay. It won't--it shouldn't hurt..."

Gently, Cobalt unzipped the suit and slid it over Obsidian's shoulders. Cold air touched skin that was only rarely exposed, a novel feeling--Obsidian relished it, marveling at the feeling of skin against skin, so convincingly alive. He stood perfectly still, scarcely breathing. They could feel pain for the same reason humans did--a warning signal of danger. The pressure, the light touch, sent waves of emotion through a complicated nervous system, close to pain but not quite.

On some level, Obsidian understood the human drive for sex, from a scientific perspective. It arose from the species' need to reproduce. The Protectors had no such biological urge, but there was something about the poetry men wrote to their lovers that had always resonated with him. The need for intimacy he could understand.

As Cobalt kissed his bare skin and traced his fingers over the raw circuitry along Obsidian's back and neck, Obsidian thought of poetry. *Give me love*, he thought--as one might demand of the universe, of some cosmic being, of fate. *Give me love, and in that word... in that word...*

Cobalt's lips brushed over the connecting port at the nape of his neck, and all thoughts ceased--he felt, too much feeling, his already overworked system sparking in a sensation of color that overrode his sight, sound that overrode his hearing, and every atom of his being seemed washed with warm, golden light. Cobalt's laughter was like bells, sweetly melodic.

"Do you... like it?"

Obsidian tried to speak, but the world seemed very far away. Half-blind, he stumbled to face Cobalt and then ducked his head to silence Cobalt's fears with a kiss.

Afterward, they sat together against the wall, their limbs entwined, Cobalt's paleness almost seeming to glow in the dim, dim light. Obsidian brought Cobalt's fingers to his lips, gently. "We can't go on missions together," Obsidian said. "I'll be out of my mind if anything happens to you. It'll cloud my judgment, just trying to keep you safe."

"I--I suppose you're right."

"But if I'm not there to protect you, you've got to promise me you won't get killed." It was absurd to say. But he clutched Cobalt's hands, as though somehow the intensity of his words and his actions could work like a prayer, like magic, to keep the other safe. "Please, Cobalt."

Cobalt laughed, a gentle chuckle. "I'll try." He sounded uncertain. "You know I'll try."

Living in what basically amounted to house arrest was stifling. It didn't take long for Len to start thinking of possible escape routes. His father had proven to be more capable than he anticipated, and Len doubted that he could hold his own in any sort of direct confrontation, but he couldn't bring himself to give up. He couldn't accept his own powerlessness.

Relief came in the form of misery for his father, who returned home one morning with shadows under his eyes while Len was picking at a bowl of porridge. It was the first time Len could remember his father being out all night. From the looks of things, it had not been a pleasurable experience.

Len lifted his chin in greeting. "Out late, father?"

His father smoothed back a stray hair, and Len noted that his hand was shaking. Jitters. Not just sleep deprivation, then--too much of some sort of upper. He wondered how long his father had been awake, whether this was a new emergency or something Len had only just noticed.

"Father?"

At the second exchange, his father's eyes finally focused on him. The man grunted, not much of an acknowledgment. His mind was still churning as he stood in the doorway of the kitchen for a moment, looking lost.

"What is it?"

"Something far, far above your paygrade." His father passed through the threshold and flipped the kettle on. Soon enough it began to rattle as the water heated up inside. "Do your homework, Len, and maybe you'll make something of yourself enough to be privy to state secrets. But not now." He narrowed his eyes. "Are your friends still going down-below?"

"I wouldn't know."

"Tell them to stay out if they have any sense of self-preservation."

"Why?"

"There may be trouble."

"What kind of trouble?" Len's chest felt tight, and he had trouble swallowing. "An uprising?"

His father's laugh could not have been more dismissive. "Hardly. Something's gone missing, and we'll need to sniff it out. The process might be a bit uncomfortable.

Certainly not something a group of misguided children should be facing. They'll get hurt."

Whatever was going on, it was important enough that his father would have been called in to deal with it. A state secret, an emergency, a problem that only his father could solve.

A Protector. There was a Protector in the down-below.

He had never heard of one of the Protectors going rogue, though his father had certainly voiced enough concerns about the wisdom of giving them free will. But as he watched his father go through the motions of making tea as emptily as if he had been a robot, Len became more convinced that it might indeed be possible. And if it were true, it would be the last piece he needed. His knowledge, his connections, his skills, and a Protector's power would surely be able to make a difference, if he could just rouse the people of the down-below. He could hardly imagine a better opportunity. It had to be now.

###

Planning his escape would have been challenge enough, had that been all he wanted to do. It would require slipping away from school, the only time he was permitted to be out of the house--unnoticed by the security systems or the school staff. And that was only the beginning. So many things to consider. A new identity, cash, food that would keep, just for the day-to-day. And on a farther-reaching scale, what would he do to

arm the people of the down-below? How could they stand against the power of men like his father?

But, much as it pained what remained of his ego, Len had to admit he couldn't solve the problems of the down-below alone. He had resources and knowledge and drive and he would offer everything he had to give, but he could not do it all himself. Perhaps others in the down-below were already forming together and he could find and join them.

Thus he focused on the essentials he would need for his own survival,. Bandages, toothpaste, painkillers. These he could stash in his storage locker at school. They weren't technically contraband and seemed unlikely to draw attention. For a period of several weeks he stockpiled what he could.

As far as getting into the down-below, he would outsource that problem to someone else. The less he had to complete firsthand himself, the better. And it seemed appropriate for Sam to be involved, given that she had brought Len to the down-below in the first place and that she represented everything about the topside attitude that disgusted him. Seeing her strengthened his resolve to enact change. And now he would use her to bring that change to life.

Being direct with Sam would get him nowhere. He had to speak to her in her language, the same stupid game that he had up until recently enjoyed as much as he enjoyed anything. It seemed like such a waste of time and energy, now that he could see outside of it--now that he had seen people with real lives and real conflict and real suffering. But it was what he needed to do, even if he hated having to stoop to her level.

He did his best to ignore her for three days. On the fourth, she took the bait.

"Len." She broke the silence, which meant she started the conversation already at a deficit. To make up for it, he knew, she would try to hurt him. Her voice was sharpened like a knife, and he recognized the look in her eyes. "You've been standing us up."

"I've had other things on my mind," he said, which was not untrue.

"I thought you'd become too obsessed with the down-below to turn it down. Or have you forgotten about it?" She sneered. "High and mighty Len, the great savior of the down-below, has lost interest and moved on to the new shiny thing?"

Once, this mockery might have hurt him. She was the only person who seemed to see him, really *see* him, and so it had mattered to him that she gave him attention, however much that attention might hurt. But that seemed a long time ago now. So he kept his own tone neutral, uninterested, and did not look at her. If he had looked at her and not met her eyes, that would have been a point conceded--but continuing to ignore her meant that she would have to come to him, and that would keep the advantage in his corner.

"I've been working on something."

She didn't ask him to elaborate, but that evening he caught her digital signature snooping around his projects in the system, as though he were foolish enough to put something important and personal anywhere she knew to access. But--again--she'd taken the bait. He wondered if she was slipping or if he'd actually gotten better. Maybe caring less about her had changed their power dynamic so that now Len could control her, instead of the other way around.

So Len constructed a plan that would pique Sam's curiosity, that would make her give him what he needed without his having to ask her for anything directly. He would

seem to be who she expected, but it would all be a facade. And he fed it to her a piece at a time.

This false version had seeds of the truth. Len needed to get to the down-below and didn't know how to arrange transportation on his own. He needed a false identity to smuggle somebody from the down-below to topside--a simple reversal of his plans, and of course Sam didn't need to know that the smuggled person would be Len himself. His notes referenced somebody named "Angel," a fitting nickname because he now saw himself as a sort of guardian angel for those in the down-below, guiding them and helping them reach their true potential.

All things considered, it went quickly--it was easy enough to update his documents about Angel in between laying the rest of his plans. Each time he saw her, Sam's expression was darker, her words more barbed. He had expected something, maybe gloating, but this reaction surprised him.

"What?" he asked her after classes one day when she fixed him with an icy glare.

"You're not avoiding us," she said. "Your father locked you up."

"He does that sometimes."

"Do you want me to spring you?"

It was about as direct as he could ever remember her being, and there was an unexpected urgency to her voice. It was certainly the only time he had ever heard her offer to help.

"You think you can do that?"

"I might." Her face flushed. "You don't think I'm good enough to take on your dad?"

He could choose to make it a challenge or else butter her up, but coldness seemed to work incredibly well against her, so he kept to the truth. "No."

Sam huffed. "You'd be surprised."

"He'll trace you."

"He won't."

"Is that really a risk you want to take? My father?"

Sam smiled thinly and jabbed a fingernail into his shoulder, hard enough that it hurt. "Sure. I won't get caught. We'll get you out of the house and--wherever you're going--and when you get back I expect you to grovel at my feet and tell me I'm the greatest thing you've ever seen."

The next catch needed to be a big one. For the time being, she had paid off enough of the loan to keep her shark from breathing down her neck, but Deah felt herself taking a step backward with each passing day. She did not feel inclined to discover if what waited behind her was a wall or a cliff.

What she sold of her collection on the black market helped, but not enough. It meant she could buy her way into a finders' guild with a members-only discussion board. An investment into her future. The expense was in that nebulous space between her day-to-day needs and the debt of her new identity--hefty enough that she would be feeling it for some time. But risk brought reward, and Deah needed a big reward.

She completed work for a few different fixers, trying to find one whose work suited her. Her former fence had lost respect for her and that work dried up. She could only hope rivalry and competition kept fences and fixers from gossiping or else her reputation might be on the line. Not that she considered herself significant enough to warrant their conversation, but still she worried.

At least she had a run of good luck, for once, and managed to match a number of smaller bounties for different fixers. She seemed to be making a better impression this time around.

There was one fixer in particular who had taken an interest in her. She caught him watching her hips once as she turned to leave, his eyes taking her in with more than passing curiosity. The hips were perhaps her most prominent feature and they brought their share of attention when she dressed just so, but in general Deah preferred not to attract that sort of attention when it came to business. Lead somebody on who had power over you and you were likely to find yourself entangled in something, whether you wanted to or not. Depending on the person, it was more likely to happen the less you wanted it to. Better to avoid that sort of risk altogether and dress more demurely except when Deah could be sure that the men eyeing her did so on her terms.

Intentionally or not, though, she seemed to have caught this fixer's attention. He was a larger man, built rectangular as a brick, not ugly but most assuredly not her type. And large enough to be a problem if he wanted to be. But being someone's favorite might be good for her. For now. Better to catch this fixer's eye and face those consequences than discover what the shark might do to her.

So she started giving him a friendlier smile each time she saw him in his office. Lingering, standing near him, even asking him about his day. Small talk was normally a waste of time and she wasn't very good at it. But he was happy to talk about himself, and she let him dominate the conversation. She really didn't have much to say to him.

After a couple weeks of flirting, she leaned in close, dropped her voice to a conspiratorial murmur, and tried her most trusting smile.

"Can I tell you something?"

Most fixers were busy with something else when she reported to them, but he was appreciative of how she leaned against his desk. "Sure."

Deah looked down at her hands, the fingers still small and childlike. She had painted them a dark shade of garnet in an effort to look more adult. "I'm in kind of a tough spot. I had a run of bad luck all of a sudden and I'm still catching up."

He nodded. "It's a tough world."

"You've been doing this a lot longer than I have." She traced the edge of his desk with one red-tipped finger. He watched her hands. "Do you have any advice? On getting a big break?"

"What kind of break?"

"I don't know. Just a chance to prove myself. Something big. I think I could probably do a lot more if I just had the chance, don't you think?" Deah had never considered herself a charmer, would not ordinarily have trusted that she had the sort of dazzling smile that could be used to sway others, but he seemed convinced by it.

"You're smart," he said, though it was obvious from his eyes that her brains were not what he appreciated most about her. "And you're good at what you do."

"Really? You think so?"

"I do."

It was easy. It was so stupidly easy, making her lips fuller as she smiled at him, letting one hip jut out just a little to one side. Small changes of her body to emphasize whatever power of attraction she had. She would probably have more luck if she did this more often. But it was a dangerous game to be playing. Certain promises were not good to make if you intended to flake out on them.

But it paid off.

She was in the middle of slurping a bowl of soup past midnight when her terminal lit up. He had sent her a message. *Got a special bounty for you but you have to get here right now. It's hot.*

So much for dinner, so much for it being late, so much for settling in at home. She grabbed the bag that kept her down-below gear, tugged on her boots, and headed out the door in a hurry. It was possible that this was just a ruse to bring her to his office with her guard down, but it was still a risk worth taking.

Few people topside roamed the streets at this hour, discouraged to do so by an unofficial curfew. As long as it wasn't enforced, Deah was happy to break it. She reached the fixer's office in record time. His window was the only one lit on the whole street.

Her stomach dropped when she saw the smile he gave her. "Hi," she said, forcing herself to smile back.

"Hi."

He leaned back against his desk, arms crossed, looking pleased with himself.

"You ready to go to work, Deliah?"

It had seemed smarter to use a false name here and she was suddenly grateful for her own forethought. The fixers didn't usually call her by any name at all, but this one said it with a certain possessive gladness that made her nervous.

"I brought my stuff," she said, shouldering the bag. "You said it's ... a special bounty?"

He nodded. "It's only gone out to a few people, and you know the down-below better than most of the runners up here. If you hurry, I bet you can get it before anyone else does."

"What are they offering?"

"Enough to make or break you." He grinned. Topsiders and their perfect teeth. Deah still needed to save up for hers, but there always seemed to be something more pressing. "Some topside brat vanished and his parents are looking for him."

"Vanished?"

"Yeah. They figure he's hiding out in the down-below. Got half a day's head start."

"Probably a drunken bender, then. So I should just check out the clubs?"

The fixer shook his head. "Not this one. He's some sort of high-ranking official's son and they think he's gone down there to stir up some shit. A rabble-rouser."

Deah honestly couldn't care what the kid was up to, but she nodded. "Right."

There was a dossier on the kid, which excited Deah because she'd never gone after a bounty important enough to warrant a dossier. There were a few images of the kid-soft-looking, with unamused eyes and the pristine hair and skin of those who had never been without. That alone would make him stand out. He looked surly and disaffected.

The name sounded familiar. A politician, one of those useless talking heads who made pronouncements about the government or the Protectors from time-to-time.

And there was a time limit ticking down--the kid had to be found by noon the next day. Well. That didn't bother her. If Deah hadn't tracked him down by then, it would mean she'd lost the bounty to someone else anyway.

This was a big job, the sort of thing that called for a full team, but Deah did not have a team at her disposal. She did have a few contacts, and she had someone who owed her a life debt, and she was hungrier than any of the other finders out there. So one way or another she would get her hands on this shit-disturbing brat and drag him back to his father, who would pay her more money than she had made in her life.

"Good," she said to the fixer. "Great. Thanks. This is perfect."

He put a hand on her shoulder and ran the side of his thumb against the nape of her neck. "You've got this. Let me know if I can help--it'll be good for me, too, if you can bring him in."

"Yeah," she said, and she swallowed. "Yeah. We can ... we can do this."

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