



University of Southern Maine
USM Digital Commons

Stonecoast MFA

Student Scholarship

Fall 2017

Proper Zero

Cameron Pierce Gibson
University of Southern Maine

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.usm.maine.edu/stonecoast>

Recommended Citation

Gibson, Cameron Pierce, "Proper Zero" (2017). *Stonecoast MFA*. 47.
<https://digitalcommons.usm.maine.edu/stonecoast/47>

This Open Access Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Scholarship at USM Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Stonecoast MFA by an authorized administrator of USM Digital Commons. For more information, please contact jessica.c.hovey@maine.edu.

Proper Zero

A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULLFILLMENT OF

THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE

STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING

BY

Cameron Pierce Gibson

2017

THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE
STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING

December 1, 2017

We hereby recommend that the thesis of Cameron Gibson entitled *Proper Zero* be accepted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts.



David Anthony Durham Advisor



Theodora Goss Reader



Justin Tussing Director

Accepted



Adam-Max Tuchinsky Dean, College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences

Abstract

In an alternative future Earth, a warring augmented humanity finds itself forced to take sides in a larger conflict between celestial beings, creators of the world. This novel follows the journey of Ahri Doloran-Spero as she traces back her complex lineage through the memories of her dead mother, Lorandael Doloran. Through her mother's memories of her own childhood as a child soldier and three other child soldiers—Titus, Shura, and Khaene—Ahri witnesses the war between humans paired with powerful celestial beings, factions of augmented humans, and perfected, sentient artificial intelligences unfold across three generations. Chronicled as a series of disclosed data files of Ahri's recorded memories, *Proper Zero* is a fictionalized *A Long Way Gone* or *On Killing*, exhibiting the harsh realities that accompany children participating in genocidal warfare, while also exploring the innate human bias against killing. As Ahri struggles to discover and understand her family's war-torn past, Lorandael attempts to teach Ahri about humanity's present and potential future—lessons and memories Ahri will pass on to her daughter, and so on and so forth, for generations to come.

Acknowledgements

To my family for always supporting my endeavors into the wild and uncertain, and being a light in the dark when I found myself lost (and for always being willing to read anything I shoved impatiently into your faces). To Lisa Boyd for sparking my interest in reading and writing all those years ago. To Ed McCourt for showing me my path and being my compass along the journey. To Maxene Kupperman-Guiñals for sheltering me when I found myself in need and showing me new worlds and cultures I would otherwise never have the courage to explore. And to the Stonecoast students and faculty for allowing me to learn from all of your genius and for providing an accepting atmosphere for writers like myself to flourish, experience, and find our voice and unique signature.

Table of Contents

Preface	Page 1
<i>Proper Zero</i>	Page 11
Bibliography	Page 137

Preface

Proper Zero is a work that I began well before I entered the Stonecoast MFA program. In its original form, the work was entitled *Leaves and Blades: Winds of Change*. Completed at 417 pages, *Leaves and Blades* was my first attempt at writing fantasy fiction. At the time, I might have called the work emotionally driven, lyrically compelling, and wondered why it remained unpublished, but in my first semester workshop with David Anthony Durham he said of the work, “This is an ambitious work. Difficult for even a seasoned fantasy fiction writer to pull off...” I would later learn this was essentially Durham-speak for, “Nice try, but try again.” At the time, I was a nonfiction writer and a mediocre poet by trade, so I was well aware that I had no idea how to write fiction. But with my ambitions never dashed, and David and Nancy Holder leading my first semester workshops, I set myself to advancing towards the moniker of seasoned fantasy writer, which has culminated in the following sections of *Proper Zero*.

Over the course of the Stonecoast program, I’ve started three novels, two screenplays, a graphic novel, and written multiple short stories, but at the end of every semester, I have always returned to *Leaves and Blades*. Since I began writing, the story of Titus, Nevar, and Shura has been the story my heart wants to tell, and my evolution as a writer and a person has paralleled with the evolution of *Leaves and Blades* into *Proper Zero*.

My first semester under Nancy Holder was an introductory course in understanding genre fiction. With Nancy, I read many of the cornerstones of both the

science fiction and fantasy genre. We worked on advancing my understanding of the skeletal structure of genre fiction narratives. As a writer, I am highly inquisitive, rebellious towards standard convention, and extremely particular about what works and does not work for me. To my amazement, Nancy, being as flexible a writer and mentor as they come, never failed to have a solution for any question or concern I posed during my time studying under her. As a result, my knowledge of crafting fictional narrative and my understanding of story arc and reader expectations grew, and for perhaps the first time, I understood the shortcomings of my past fiction works. Together, through another iteration of *Leaves and Blades* that has since branched into a graphic novel, and the early drafts of a brand new science fiction novel, I finally began to grasp the inner workings of fantasy fiction and science fiction (and how to punctuate dialogue). More importantly, I learned what I like and dislike about various works and styles within genre fiction. During my time studying with Nancy, I formed a strong base understanding of how to plan and frame a narrative in a way that works for me. And towards the end of my semester with Nancy I began planning the frame for *Proper Zero*.

During my second semester with Theodora Goss, I found my place and voice in fiction. Dora pressed upon me the importance of research—being familiar with the setting of your work at an intimate level, a concept I was familiar with from nonfiction writing but one I had not considered much as a fiction writer. I began the semester by trying my hand at fairy tales. I loved listening to Dora read her fairy tales at residency, and I had read many of her poems online. So at the start of the semester, I thought I might find myself as a fiction writer through fairy tales. The thought was somewhat true. Through two or three revisions of a fairy tale short story I had written for a workshop, I

learned a great deal about myself as a writer. I realized it was not necessarily the content of the fairy tale that drew me to the work. It was the sound of Dora's writing, the lyrical nature of the prose that caught my ear and my eye. I realized I don't much like writing fairy tales contextually, but I live for that moment when my pen births a beautiful line that fully captures an idea I wanted to put forth. I ended the semester with Dora by starting a fantasy novel about a wizarding city run by a New York-styled mage mob. Through this narrative, I realized one of my strengths as a writer—creating strong characters—which Dora reaffirmed. Upon this crux, I began to consider what kind of fictional narrative I wanted to write. I also started the process of brainstorming changes to character archetypes from previous works for inclusion in *Proper Zero*.

At the beginning of my third semester, I had hit a wall with my fiction writing. I could not find a way to produce the quality in content that I desired, and I was incredibly discouraged. I found myself reading almost entirely literary fiction, poetry, and nonfiction. I really struggled to find genre fiction texts that fit my taste, and even those, outside of *Slaughterhouse Five* by Kurt Vonnegut, did not speak to me as a writer. It was time to take the next step, up my game—develop *my* own voice and *my* own style—but I could not figure out where to start.

The ten days I spent in Ireland for third semester residency changed the way I thought about writing entirely. We met Kevin Barry, who gave a lecture on voice and his writing process. I met and had dinner with Ian McDonald, who gave a lecture on his style, a style I resonated with and admired, and his writing process. But it was the poet Theo Dorgan who really changed my perception of writing and the writing process during his guest lecture when he said something to the effect of, “Do you know what

your sentences are doing? Because if you don't know, your reader certainly will not.”

This was a concept I had never considered in my fiction or nonfiction writing—sentence-based writing. I had spent most of my time as a writer at Stonecoast looking at the big picture. I was making sure my plot peaked at the right moments, making sure the characters' motivations made sense, making sure all the powers were presented up front and explained, making sure the narrative arc progressed at an appropriate pace. While these things are certainly important, as I looked back, I realized my best work as a fiction or nonfiction writer had always come when I worked on a sentence-to-sentence level. Following this train of thought, I decided to focus my third semester project on exploring style—how other authors approached writing, what they considered when they wrote, what their goals were, and how they achieved a distinctive, recognizable voice in their prose. I leaned again on my intuition and requested a mentor who I felt had a clear distinct voice and style that I loved hearing and reading. This pursuit saw me paired with Susan Conley.

Between my third semester research project conversations with Susan, I turned the corner and discovered myself and my voice as a fiction writer. While there is still a great deal to refine about my particular style and voice to make it clear and definitive, I found that I am very much along the T.S. Eliot “make it new” train of thought. I enjoy works that bend and push genre expectations and/or incorporate elements of multiple genres into the work like Maggie Nelson's *Jane: A Murder* or Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*. Most importantly, I learned that as a writer, I am sentence and scene focused as opposed to plot focused. When I write, I use external conflict to evaluate internal growth. My focus and goal is always to write short, tight, emotionally impactful

scenes that convey and explore internal psychological character conflicts surrounding traumatic happenings. I also like to write narratives in unconventional, irregular ways—whatever means best help convey the action within the narrative. Rarely are my narratives told with a linear structure or in a standard conventional format.

Fourth semester residency quelled all doubts I had in the divergent pathways I had selected for my fiction, which speaks to the unspoken telepathy the Stonecoast staff seems to possess. In one residency, we had seminars on “Genre Bending” led by Shannon Ratliff, “Writing the Transgressive” led by Cara Hoffman, “Understanding and Using Metaphor” led by Justin Tussing and Rick Bass, and “Sentences as a Unit of Thought” led by T. Fleischmann, all of which confirmed everything I had been questioning as acceptable elements in my writing. These seminars continued to act as my Nancy Holder, my Theodora Goss, and my Susan Conley in giving me context, examples, as well as strategies with which to understand writing in irregular forms and make them my own.

Now, I believe *Proper Zero* is a culmination of four semesters of pursuit to discover and write my own personal brand of fiction, the beginnings of developing my own unmistakable signature, which has circled all the way back to David Anthony Durham, who has served valiantly as my thesis mentor and had to approve this iteration of *Leaves and Blades* for presentation to the world.

Proper Zero is a generational memory log passed down over the course of four generations. Cataloged through the memories of Ahri Doloran-Spero, the narrative connects the important memories and experiences of Titus Spero, Lorandael Doloran, Shura, and Khaene Doloran—all current or former child soldiers struggling to understand

their place in a war-torn world and deal with the repercussions of decisions made by past generations.

Neil Gaiman once said in an interview, “I’m making stuff up but I will tell you true things,” rather than do the journalism thing of “sources are telling the truth.” Since I began writing fiction, my aims have been quite similar. *Proper Zero*, first and foremost, is fictionalized nonfiction. I read a great deal of nonfiction, as it is my background, so I’ve read accounts like Ishmael Beah’s *A Long Way Gone*, which is a memoir chronicling the experience of the author as a child soldier in Sierra Leone, or Dave Grossman’s *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*, which speaks about human hesitancy towards killing and the psychological effects of being forced to, and I’ve personally worked with veterans during my time as a tutor at Jacksonville, Florida. So when I read works of fantasy and science fiction, I tend to nitpick at the elements of journey or combat that don’t make logical sense. Most pressing, in many of my favorite YA texts such as *Harry Potter* and *The Hunger Games*, specifically *Catching Fire* and *Mockingjay*, I’ve had grievances with the psychological responses to the trauma the characters endure over the course of the series. *Proper Zero* is a fictionalized account that seeks to evaluate what magical combat between young adult protagonists might look like and how that combat might affect the young psyche, according to nonfiction accounts of children who have experienced combat. In the work, I seek to remain as true to the psychology as possible when crafting character reactions, but I also try to present multiple archetypes because not all reactions are the same.

I’ve written *Proper Zero* to bring voice to subject matter that most readers would rather ignore. I have a particular passion for warfare and the soldiers who fight. As a

person who has many friends in the military, who has worked with combat veterans, who has played with an active duty soldier, and as someone who has played sports at a high level, the repercussions of the warrior mentality, as it is often called, is something that I understand better than most. As a form of escapism, writers and readers often glorify combat and the idea of the soldier being the ultimate hero. We read these renditions of combat because for a moment, we want to be the hero. We want to be the person that shoulders the burden of saving the world, but at the same time, we often want to ignore the fact that burdens are heavy and triumph comes at a dire cost, especially when we talk about children participating in warfare. We romanticize the idea of the young adolescent taking up the mantle to fight an evil villain in order to save the world, we put these children through traumas and stresses, but the reader often can rest easy because at the end of the day the protagonist's story, our vicarious journey, generally ends happily or, at the very least, the protagonist survives after accomplishing their mission.

I personally am not a big believer in escapism. I tend to be more of a realist, and that is rarely how the story ends for the military hero. Most times to bring about change, a hero of any sorts must pay the ultimate price, endure the ultimate sacrifice, from which there is no return. And that sacrifice ripples, affecting that person's family, friends, and children. Even for the heroes who do survive their heroic journey, they never come back the same, which is a reality we cannot and should not ignore in fiction. I'm a believer in facing the realities of the problems and conflicts, looking at the realities of our heroes, particularly those involved in warfare, before, during, and after their conflict is finished. Following in the tradition of Alan Moore, who observed many of these same topics in the super heroes of *Watchmen*, I'm interested in representing the reader with *why* a soldier

fights, *why* they are willing to sacrifice and pay the ultimate price, and what the personal repercussions are of that sacrifice. I'm interested in drawing attention to how we can better receive and accommodate our heroes beyond just a handshake and a "thank you for your service." I know that most people won't pick up *A Long Way Gone* or any number of memoirs, so if I can present the same story in fiction, maybe a person who is unaware of soldiers' struggles will think differently about the subject matter.

I also postulate on a number of other topics including: 1) How the psychological effects of killing might manifest themselves in a child soldier possessing incredible magical powers? 2) What I would call the Dumbledore question: "Is it right for older generations to willingly pass their failures on to younger generations without giving them a choice?" 3) How far is too far when it comes to human augmentation? 4) What will communication in the future look like and how will it function?

The work's content is heavily influenced by nonfiction such as *On Killing*, *A Long Way Gone*, *A Rumor of War*, and so on. Stylistically, however, the work draws from works such as *The Sound and the Fury*, *The Dog Stars*, *The Kite Runner*, and *The Strange Case of the Alchemist's Daughter*. Since the work is written in first person, I seek to bring each character to life not only through dialogue, but through how the dialogue is presented as well. I want the unreliability of each narrator to highlight how memory is a faulty mechanism, and how individual perceptions of events differ greatly depending on which side of the conflict one represents.

My strength as a writer has always been the lyric essay. In a sense, *Proper Zero* is a fictionalized lyric essay. Each section functions as a series of interrelated chapters. Each chapter consists of a series of tightly woven, interrelated scenes. The chapters are

largely fictionalized personal experiences or accounts I've read, seemingly unrelated individual stories, woven together into a cohesive narrative by theme and placement. And Lorandael's right-adjusted text essentially functions as my personal exposition on those occurrences.

This format makes organization and pacing much more manageable for me over the course of the work. I've always struggled as a fiction writer with moving characters from one place to the next. But after reading *Your Name* by screenplay writer Makoto Shinkai, which uses nontraditional scene breaks effectively to pace the story, I realized I don't always need to show the hallway to get my characters from one room to the next. I can just write the scene in one room then pick up in the next room where that scene left off. It seems like a simple enough concept, one I was familiar with through nonfiction, so I decided to incorporate the lyric essay style into my fiction. It seemed like the perfect bridge between a style I am comfortable with and the story I wanted to tell.

The trickiest part of writing a piece like this is speculating on how individual societies will progress or change over the course of the next few centuries. How close do I keep the cultures to present day as far as names, customs, rituals, even topography while still accounting for the cultural change and blending that accompanies warfare? Humanity evolves in fits and bursts at a much slower rate than people tend to assume, so while the technology has advanced in this world and humans have migrated and blended, I try to blend traditional culture—diet, religion, music, verbiage, etc.—with present-day culture to inform a blended future, similar to how traditional cultures inform our present culture without us knowing.

The research required to craft the work was extensive. In just the Lorandael chapters alone, I've invested hours of research into the history of Japan, various forms of martial arts, and the Shinto religion. Likewise, continued research into the history of Europe over the past millennia will likely be necessary to complete the work, which is why my aesthetic aims for this piece centered heavily on communication. Whenever humanity evolves and cultures clash or interact, language and communication evolve.

As humanity continues to evolve as a species, our communication methods will evolve as well. With human augmentation on the horizon, it is my contention that within the next century communication will take place cyberkinetically. Most people will no longer need or even be able to speak to one another verbally. Connection to some sort of global database will facilitate said communication, making access to information as simple as thinking a question to Siri. Likewise, our body parts will more than likely become synthetic and easily replicable and replaceable. Essentially, we will be walking iPhones. After reading and discussing Derridian theories on arche-writing among friends and colleagues, I also contend that these changes in communication will demand changes in language, resulting in the elimination of word-based language entirely. Binary code transmission, numerical language, will become the singular language between humans, and eventually images will surpass written or spoken language as the ultimate form of communication between sentient beings. Right now, one can find binary code ingrained in the physical fabric of the universe. So in the future, we'll probably transmit images or series of images instantaneously to another party or computer system via binary code and know exactly what said image means just like a computer. Thus, throughout the work, dialogue is presented in a variety of ways depending on who and what is speaking, and

the celestial beings, gods if you will, speak to humans via image projection, which humans understand instantaneously.

I came to Stonecoast knowing absolutely nothing about writing fiction. When I applied, I considered myself at worst a subpar poet, and at best, a mediocre nonfiction writer. I bring a spirit of excellence to everything I do, driven into my psyche by years of athletic competition. I want to be the best I possibly can be at whatever craft I undertake. My drive is to better and best myself every day. To this day, I am still unsure how I managed to weasel into such a well-regarded program filled with such gifted students, staff, and faculty. Now, as I complete my time at Stonecoast and reflect on my journey, my adventures in fiction, the only words I can think to attribute to the experience are transformative and life-changing. *Proper Zero* is the early culmination of that journey, and I hope these excerpts cast a soft shadow on my expectations for the finished product.

Proper Zero

File I

```
<TimeCapsule.memlog/Users/ahri_doloran/in_the_end>  
"In the End"  
November 3, 2433 - 10:29:36  
President Ahri Doloran-Spero  
Asteria Hospital  
Asteria, United Earth Federation
```

Cigarette smoke hangs in thick white curtains around the rails of my hospital bed. A television screen plays some stupid television show I used to like as a kid, but the smoke is more interesting. Grey wisps rise and curl, stretch and twist with vigor from cigarette's end. A Newport. Vintage. I can taste the authenticity. Gritty tobacco that stains the breath. None of that processed bullshit. The kind my dad would have smoked.

I take another long pull from the cigarette. Let the smoke roll over my tongue and puff it out in small rings like I used to in my twenties, when I was young. Each ring holds its shape for a few seconds, then fades into a single paper thin sheet lingering overhead.

Ain't that life.

I chuckle, but the laugh soon curls into a phlegm-filled cough and a rasped wheeze. Blood and mucus well in my throat, killing the sweet taste of my father's tobacco. My chest constricts. I wait for it to loosen before I can swallow the blood, the phlegm, and the wheeze back down where they belong.

Wrings you out and stretches you thin.

I shake my head, staving off another coughing fit with a swig of water from the Styrofoam cup stationed on the food tray beside my bed. But hey, at least the nurses didn't forget the sippy straw this time.

There's a knock at the door. A key card clicks and beeps, and the door slides open. A young man in a white lab coat ghosts inside. He grabs a clipboard with what I assume are my charts from the plastic slot drilled into the wall just inside the door. His eyes skim over the nurse's notes page by page. He nods his head twice, grimaces once, but it's the look in his eyes that tell me bad news is on the way. I take another long draw from the cigarette and wait.

When he reaches for his ear, I know he's ready to talk. He links our CPU's through the peer-to-peer connection on Penumbra Data Network, so that I can hear his thoughts. He sniffs the air for a moment, finally noticing the cigarette smoke, and disperses the haze shrouding his face from my view with a few quick waves of the hand.

Doctor: Madam President. My name is Doctor Talbot. I'll be looking after you from now on.

He bows at the waist and coughs a bit. It's expected. His lungs have probably never experienced real cigarette smoke before.

Ahri: Call me Ahri. Sit down.

I motion for him to sit down. He takes a seat in the chair next to me, and I can see him clearly now. Dark hair combed over neatly. Brown eyes. Mid-twenties at most. I access his files from the network database. His profile filters through the smoke beside his head. Dr. Mitchzy Talbot. Age 27. Graduated top of his class from Lumwork School of Medicine (ranked #1 in all of Umbra). No wife. No kids. Senior Palliative Care Physician. Expertise: End of Life Care.

I chuckle again, as he stares at the cigarette burning in my mouth, clearly itching to say something, but thinking better of it. This time no coughing fit, but he's probably never heard a human laugh before. Probably thinks it's an after-effect of the smoking.

Doctor: So, Ahri, can you tell me a little bit about what's been going on?

Ahri: You'd probably know better than I do, doc. I'm sick. Coughing up blood, shortness of breath, tightness in the chest, all that good stuff.

I take another pull from the cigarette. He laughs, but in a guarded way, careful not to inhale too much.

Doctor: And the pain?

Ahri: Getting worse.

Doctor: Okay. So, you've been coughing up blood. Trouble breathing a bit, and some tightness in the chest. How are you feeling right now?

Ahri: The morphine drip is helpful.

I nod towards the needle wedged beneath the skin of my forearm and the plastic tubing snaking up my arm to a plastic, liquid filled bag hanging from the drip pole beside my bed.

Ahri: But honestly, no better than I felt four hours ago when the nurse asked.

Doctor: I'm sorry for the wait. I was making some phone calls to verify what I thought I saw on your scans.

Ahri: Well, let's cut to the chase then, doc. What's the deal?

Doctor: Well, I have bad news and then hopefully some good news.

He glances down at my charts again.

Doctor: The bad news is I looked over all your MRI'S and scans. Ahri, you have lung cancer. Stage 4, which means the cancer has metastasized. It is spreading to your throat. It's in your lymph nodes, and if we don't operate immediately, your organs will shut down.

I roll my eyes. Again, he doesn't notice as his eyes slip back down to the chart.

Doctor: The good news is we can replace the organs with synthetic ones. It's an out-of-standard practice, but still effective. You'll have to have them maintained every few months and replaced every three to five years, and you probably won't be able to be as politically active as you were, but at the very least you should be able to go back to Headquarters and spend time with your family.

Ahri: But side effects include...

Doctor: Well, synthesizing a human is still an imperfect science. With all the data we lost after the war and the laws being what they are, we can only take the science of augmentation so far.

Ahri: And for good reason...

Doctor: Absolutely, Madam. We have all heard the stories of the past. I only meant to say that our methods now do not compare to the full augmentation methods lost to us, so there is a minuscule chance that a synthesized organ could break, or rip, or malfunction, and there's always the risk associated with surgery, but the odds of negative responses in either case are less than three percent.

Ahri: So, what you're saying is if I choose to go through with this, I'll be bedridden and have to have my organs changed out like a used car every three to five years. Like a fuckin' hunk of junk. And if something goes wrong, you know an organ

“fails” or something like that, would there be pain? The same kind of pain I’m in now at least?

The Doctor pauses for a moment but holds my gaze.

Doctor: Yes, but if you don’t have the surgery now, today... I don’t think you’ll survive the week. Maybe not even the night.

Ahri: Damn.

The cigarette feels heavier as I pull it to my lips. I wince as flakes of red-hot ash singe the back of my hand. The cigarette has grown too short, too much ash collected, and my hand is shaking.

Doctor Talbot takes the cigarette from my fingers and places it in the ashtray next to my bed. He doesn’t bother to put it out. Or probably doesn’t know how to. My eyes follow it down.

I pull another cigarette from the pack I have hidden in my nightgown and light it.

Doctor: There are safer methods nowadays, you know. Better methods to smoke, I mean.

Ahri: Nowadays...

He reaches to pull the stick from my mouth again, but I slap his hand.

Ahri: Hindsight is twenty-twenty, doc. And safer doesn’t always mean better. Besides, these are vintage. Newports. Quit wasting them.

He shakes his head and leans back in his chair. He’s a good doctor. Patient. Caring. In any other situation, I’d probably like him to be my doctor.

I chuckle, this time unable and unwilling to hold back a fit of coughs and blood.

Ahri: Can you give me a minute, doc? I need to make a phone call.

Doctor: Of course. Just ring a nurse when you're ready.

Doctor Talbot disconnects our link, and I lean back in my bed as the door closes behind him. Sink into the soft pillows at my back. I take the cigarette in my lips, and inhale deeply. Let the smoke suck the twitch from my fingers. Eviscerate the pain in my chest. Fend off the tears that silently roll across my cheek, listening to the seconds on the clock beat against the cold steel walls of the hospital room. I exhale tears.

I smoke it all. Watch the fire eat its way across the thin paper skin of the cigarette caressing my lips. Lapping up tobacco. Then place what's left of the butt three inches deep in a graveyard of ash and smoke on my nightstand. Imagining the papery skin of my own corpse dissolving, the bacteria and bugs eating away at my flesh, my body eating away at itself until their nothing left but ash and dust six feet below.

"Lovely."

Wind claws and scrape the tatters of my vocal chords, rubble across my tongue, and crawl from behind my lips to form the word. How long has it been since I last spoke? Even to myself. It feels so strange. To speak. Was it always so painful? Was being human always so painful?

I sigh.

Ahri: Mom. Dad. If there's any juice left in this thing now would be a good time to let it rip. I know I shouldn't be afraid, but...I am. If I could just hear your voices one more time. Maybe...it will be easier.

I slip my hand into my shirt, and let my fingers run along the jagged face of the crystal stone that hangs from a silver chain around my neck, a shard of the Hallowfax, the

stone of creation. It was my mother's gift to me before her death, the one thing she left me before she passed. It was all I would ever need.

I never knew them while they were alive. But I have known them even through death. They taught me many things in death. My mother made sure I knew them through the memories she left me infused in a stone—their star— before her passing. I have known them. If they were here right now and things were the way they used to be, back when monks and automated men wrought chaos on the world, they could heal me. Smolder the pain into nothing almost with the snap of a finger. For a second, I wonder if my life would be worth the chaos. But I know it's not. Not after what they showed me in the memories stored in that tiny rock. The reason they aren't here. No single life worth so great a cost, especially not my own.

Ahri: Please.

I wait for a moment, running the stone between my fingers. Hoping it might spark and blaze brilliantly the way it did so many years ago when I was just a young girl. Back when it showed me—everything. Nothing happens. I let the stone fall from between my fingers. Resolved to my fate. I grab the cigarette pack from inside my jacket pocket.

Ahri: You're probably right, once should be more than enough. I have to be strong. Stand on my own two feet. Like you taught me.

I take a deep breath.

Ahri: Time to get on with it I guess.

Ahri: Call, Kol.

The dial tone seems to rattle whatever tears I have left from their hiding places like bats drawn from a cave.

Kol: Ahri... I wasn't expecting your call till later. How are you? Is everything okay?

I smile. His voice is warm. Calm. Comforting. Concerned. The same way they have always been the last forty years.

I can see his smile in that voice. The white hair. Pruned skin. His face seems to age in reverse now, and I see him—both of us—the way we used to be. And those eyes. Kind but hawk-like in their attention. He bears the wit of nine cats, always listens and considers before he speaks, but when he does he projects with the authority of a king. Maybe that was why I decided to make him one.

I was fairer then. Myself seventeen. Young. Beautiful. Reckless. Never a step slower on the uptake than I am now, but still naïve to the ways of the world. Where did the time go?

Kol: Ahri? Are you there?

I take another deep shuttered breath. Holding back tears.

Ahri: Kol. I'm dying.

I hear his breath catch.

Kol: But...the doctor...The last time I thought he sai—

Ahri: The cancer is worse. It's worse, and it's spread. He wants to operate, Kol.
Replace all my...

Kol: Okay. Okay. That's fine. I did some reading on those procedures a while back. They're not standard practice anymore, but it shouldn't be too hard to get a team together to get it done.

Well-read as always. I can't help but laugh silently at the comment.

Kol: Have they scheduled a procedure time? I mean the Princess of Umbra will certainly be top priority—

Ahri: I'm not having the surgery, Kol. I won't—I can't. I can't do it.

I find myself shaking my head, again snuffing back tears. The breathes catch in my throat, triggering another blood saturated series of coughs.

Kol: But—But why not? Ahri, that doesn't make any sense.

Ahri: The synthetic material will have to be maintained, and they'll have to replace the synthetic materials with new ones every three to five years. They could rip. They could tear. Every three to five years, Kol... Slipping in and out of skin.... And I'd be bedridden for the most part, unable to fulfill my duties—I won't crawl on my belly for anyone.

Kol: Lydia and I will serve in your stead as we have been, and it wouldn't be bedridden. We can retire you to the island where your mother and her people grew up. You love it there.

Ahri: And live essentially in exile unable to do anything. Go anywhere. Be a person... and there would be pain... if any of the parts were to tear or break, there would be pain, and I'd bleed out almost immediately. That's not a way to die.

Kol: Ahri, listen to me! You're being absolutely unreasonable! The medicine is safer than it has been in over a century—

Ahri: No, you listen to me, Kol! If I'm going to die, let me go with dignity, on my own terms. Begging for life, like a fucking snake! That's no way to live. These bodies weren't meant to last forever, and I ran mine a little too hard, but I refuse to spend the

next forty years of this life bedridden, lame, being nothing more than burden to those that I love, clinging to a corpse.

I think of my father and mother.

Ahri: I don't want to be remembered that way. Let the people remember me in strength—that I faced death and lit a smoke and laughed.

Kol: H-how long?

Tears jockey for position in his throat.

Ahri: I don't know. Maybe a week. Maybe tonight.

Even as a thought passed between us, holding every ounce of strength and dignity I have left. It comes as a whispered gasp.

Kol: I'll talk to the doctor...then I'll call Lydia, and we'll be there by nightfall.

Ahri: Kol...

Kol: Yes.

Ahri: I never told you but my mother left me something. A stone. A special stone. It showed me things... dangerous things... about my parents and the world before our time. I made a memory log of its contents, for you and Lydia and her children. I'm giving you the access code to the file. It will be stored in my memory drive on the global database. Watch it. Then give it to her. Tell her before she takes the throne, she needs to watch it as well, and her children should watch it before they take the throne, so they will understand how far we have come, and how far we still have left to go.

Kol: I will.

Ahri: Thank you. And Kol...I love you.

Kol: I love you too, Ahri. Hold tight. I'll be there soon.

The signal disconnects, and once again the room falls silent. I lean back in my pillow.

Ahri: I'm going to die.

Actually saying it, knowing what those words mean, weigh heavier on my shoulders than knowing it's true. I'm leaving my children, my family, the kingdom behind. I fear for them all. The lives of human beings are no longer dictated by gods. My parents made sure of that, but we are the gods' offspring—an uncertain fate. Darkness still lurks in our hearts. But I'm not going far. I'll see them all again. And now, I'll finally get to meet my parents.

Ahri: Mom, Dad, I'm not sure I'm the child you might have wanted me to be, but I did my best.

I gaze out the window, suddenly feeling tired. Dark banks of clouds billow over the city outside my window, ready to cash in. Skycars pass through the grey sky beyond the morphine drip at my side. And somewhere between sleep and wakefulness, rays of distant sun wind between skyscrapers and the horizon.

The compression lock to my door releases with a series of mechanized clicks. The pressure released hisses before sliding open to the left. A nurse ducks inside quietly.

Hanah Bal. 23. The same girl from yesterday.

She turns on the light on the far side of the room, careful not to wake me, but when she turns she realizes it's already too late. She smiles and bows, before linking our minds via the network.

Nurse: Good afternoon, my princess. How are we doing tonight? The doctor told me you slept through lunch and dinner. Are you feeling all right?

Her voice is dim and muffled as if she's talking from a great distance away.

Ahri: I don't feel so well.

Nurse: You woke up just in time. Your family has just arrived. I came to tidy up a bit and give you your nightly check-up before they come.

Ahri: Can you get them for me, please? And you might get those lights changed, the room's still dark. I can barely see you.

At least that's what I intend to say, but an error message appears beside Hanah's head. Telling me the message has not been received. I try again. Instead, words spill from my mouth into a slur of gurgled moan.

The nurse moves closer to the bedside. Her eyes canvass me. Squinting. She's checking my vitals. Her eyes narrow as they scan back and forth over my face and the whole of my body. She presses a hand to her temple, adding another channel to her communication function.

Nurse: I need a doctor in here, stat.

Ahri: A doctor? *Why? What's wrong?*

Instead, another grumble, as the thoughts crawl through my mind.

The nurse hunches over pressing two fingers snugly against my wrist and then in the wedge between my neck and under my chin. Checking my pulse. She places her hand over my mouth.

Nurse: Airway is blocked. I need assistance to room 1. Patient going into cardiac arrest.

Ahri: Cardiac arrest? I'm dying... I'm dying... Shit! I'M DYING!

The room grows narrow and dark. I open my mouth, but my throat constricts, closing my airway. I can't breathe.

Ahri: No! Not Yet!

The dark closes in, turning the pillows and sheets of my bed into binds, so I cannot run. I am trapped. Here. In my own skin. Tumbling through the dark. Listening to the slowing thump of my heart. Echo.

Ahri: Please. I—I don't want to die alone.

A warmth wraps around my shoulders, steadying me.

We'll go together.

I know this voice.

Ahri: Mom?

Hello, my love.

Ahri: What? How are you here? Where are you? I can't see anything.

I told you, Ahri. I've never left.

You're never alone.

Doctor: Ahri? Ahri? Can you hear me? Nurse, hand me the paddles.

The voice is familiar, but I can't seem to remember who it belongs to. A sudden jolt shocks my chest. I can't see them, but my limbs wriggle like fish shot in a barrel. I am electric. I've never felt so awake. So alert. So alive. Light floods the darkness, and in the foreground of its brilliance stands Doctor Talbot, Hanah and a whole host of scrub-clothed angels.

Ahri: Is—Is dad there with you?

I'm here, my love.

Nurse: Who is she talking to?

Ahri: Mom, Dad, I'm dying—

You are.

Doctor: You're not dying, Ahri.

My muscles relax, and my head falls to the side. Outside the window, under the light of a crescent moon, billowed clouds cash in. Rain pounds against the window, clawing in droves at the glass panes, begging for the long night to be let in.

Ahri: *I'm scared.*

Don't be.

Doctor: Ahri, stay with me! Nurse, get that OPA going! Open up that airway!

Ahri: What's going to happen to me *now*?

Rebirth...

Just let go, love.

Ahri: O-okay.

The room narrows again.

Ahri: I can't. I can't see *anything*!

It's okay, love.

Nurse: Doctor, she's flat-lining!

Ahri: Oh no! Lydia! *Where's Lydia?*

Doctor: Ahri, can you hear me? Stay with us!

It's okay. Stay calm.

Ahri: *I want to see my daughter! I need to say goodbye!*

You're going to be okay.

Darkness swallows me, and I can hear my heart again. Beating. The last drips
from a leaking faucet. I cling to it.

Lydia: It's okay, mom. We're all here. It's okay. We love you.

I love you too...

Ocean Waves?

I'm on the beach.

Hearth?

This is where you grew up, mom.

It is.

It really is beautiful...

But

Why am I here?

Is this real?

It is real.

You're part of the essence now.

You're free to go wherever you wish.

Anywhere?

Well? Anywhere in the universe.

How do I get to where you are?

Think of us, and you'll know where to go.

I'm coming.

Soon there will be a door.

Open it.

Okay.

You're almost there.

I found it.

The stars...? Wait...

Mom, Dad?...

Hello, love.

I'm here.

You're home.

And you must be Nomu.

Shura.

Nevar.

And Master Saex...

You're all here.

Well, not everyone. Some are off adventuring and exploring.

Finding loved ones.

But you will meet them all.

Eventually.

This is amazing—

Mom, Dad...

W-Will you show me it all again, the story of your star?

The Hollowfax. It showed me everything

and I could hear your voice and thoughts,

but there are still things I do not fully understand.

Of course, my love.

We'll walk you through it all. Step by step.

After all, we have all the time in the world.

File II

Capsule.memlog/Users/Ahri_doloran-spero/the beginning>
"The Beginning"
January 17, 2369 - 00:32:43
Ahri Doloran-Spero
Asterian Palace
Asteria, United Earth Confederation

Last night, my mother's star spoke to me. Or maybe. Her ghost spoke to me through it.

I'm still not sure.

I turn the tiny crystal shard dangling from the silver necklace around my neck over between my fingers as I lie in bed.

Ahri: Come on, mom.

I shake it angrily a few times, trying to prod the stone. Prod the ghost. Back to life again.

Ahri: Give me something.

The stone tumbles between my fingers, lifeless and unresponsive.

A frustrated sigh escapes my lips, as I turn on my side to face the window.

Maybe it was just a visual bug? I did skip the brain augmentation updates last week.

A dashboard screens over my normal vision as I open the function in my mind.

I run another visual diagnostic check. No error comes back.

I run an overall functionality check. My body reads functional.

Hell, I'm probably as healthy as any human can be.

I wasn't hallucinating, and I know it wasn't a dream, that must mean what I heard last night. What I saw. Must have been...real. Right?

Ahri: Urghhh.

I grumble. Kick the sheets and comforter from over me and sit up. I grab the sketchbook and graphite pencils from the mahogany nightstand beside my bed. I finger to an empty page in the book, turn to the window, and let my heart sketch what my eyes see. My drawings have never lied to me.

Outside the window, a mosaic of city. Those high-rise apartments washing over shores of tangled concrete. The light pollution that crests their helms. Those steel titans screaming at silence. Struggling against the night. Fending off dreams and wishes in favor of everything you can't find anywhere else but right here, right now. Brake lights streak, as sky cars snake along infrared skyways through seas of high-rise apartments. In their backdrop, a few stars are barely visible.

I shove the pencil behind my ear and observe what I've drawn. I've never liked living under all the rules and regulations, the royal lock and key, of Asteria Palace and Aelene, Chancellor of New Japan, but I've always loved getting lost in the lights and chaos of the city. I always found it beautiful. At least, I thought. Now, I'm not so sure. My heart is clearly telling me otherwise.

In my drawing, the walls of my normally spacious room are closed and narrow. The lines are hard and thick. The shading darker than it should be. And the city beyond. Cluttered. This is an angry drawing.

I've always been moving so fast. Focused on getting away. I wonder... I wonder how much I've managed to miss. About myself.

I stare back down to the crystal around my neck. And for some reason, I feel ashamed. Ashamed that I've never really taken notice of the stars. Or anything that lies beyond my city until now.

I turn to a fresh page and try again to let my pencil remember. Capture. Page by page. Moment by moment. Exactly what happened last night. To remember the voice of my mother's ghost calling to me. To feel that same warmth and energy that spread through my body. To force the stone to bristle with that same brilliant heat. That life.

I want. I need it. To return me to the vision of that silent, green meadow overlooking a crystal blue ocean at sunset. Remember how the breath caught in my throat. How the fear coursed through my veins, as my mother materialized in front of me among the thistles, her body radiating dazzling white light brighter than the hottest star. Maybe, more than anything. I want to remember the strange calm that washed over me. A stillness I've never experienced before.

Come to me, Ahri.

Her clairvoyant voice swirls through the winds over the fields.

I will give you the answers you seek.

Ahri: Mom?

She nods.

Ahri: How are you here?

She ghosts across the field and takes the crystal in her hand. There is a tenderness in her eyes as she looks at it. A longing marred by deep pain.

We call it a star.

You see, a star is a promise.

*When you give it to someone,
an unspoken bond is formed between you.*

*So, no matter where we go,
no matter how far apart,
as long as we each have part of our star,
we are connected.*

We will always be together.

She turns her gaze back to me and smiles again.

Come to me.

And I will show you

Everything.

In an instant, she is gone, the vision disappearing with her like a light switched off, and again I was lying in my bed surrounded by night. The milky surface of the crystal, lifeless, the way it is now.

I lie back down on the bed and flip through the sketches. Every element of my memories is present. The lines and shading of the meadows are tender and light. Welcoming like summer. Until I come to a sketch of my mother, and I stop. There is no life here. Her proportions are slightly askew. The lines and shading awkward. The color amiss. Dead like the leaves of fall. It's as if I've never really seen her at all.

Maybe, because, I haven't. Maybe, because I didn't. Because I never will.

Ahri: No, it wasn't just a bug. It was her.

I toss the sketchbook carelessly onto the floor and stare up at the empty, marble ceiling.

Ahri: It wasn't a dream. I'm sure I wasn't asleep. No time had passed when I came to.

I run both hands through my hair, trying to rip the doubt from the root. Convince myself *again* that I'm not bugged or crazy.

I open my memory log files and find a memory of the lone time I've visited my parents' graves nearly thirteen years ago. I'm only five years old in the memory, far too young to understand graveyards, graves, or death. But there I stood on a long paved road at my guardian Aelene's side, staring at marble grave markers sprouting from within the earth. Titus Spero and Lorandael Doloran are the names engraved on either side. Resting above the names is a picture of a tall dark-skinned boy with short nappy hair and a shorter blond-haired girl, both no older than my eighteen years, sitting on the thick, moss-covered branch of a forest oak together.

I listen to Aelene explain that my parents were war heroes before they passed, but they left me in her care because they loved me so dearly. From the pocket of her pantsuit she produces a necklace. The necklace I'm now wearing. She kneels down in front of me and places the necklace around my neck, telling me that my mother loved me very much and wanted to make sure that I got this. That she hoped it would bring me peace when I most need it.

Ahri: It was her.

I roll over on my side so that I can see the sketchbook on the floor and wonder why my heart has bled *this* onto the page. Have I really grown that indifferent to the idea of having a mother who loves me? Or at least, is the thought really as convoluted and warped as what I see here?

Ahri: No.

I sit up again and snatch the sketchbook off the floor and flip back to my sketch of the city. Feel the heat of my anger blistering off the page. I tear the page out and carry it like a used handkerchief to the trash can, crumple it, and chuck it. Finally resolute on my plan of action. I pull up the time in my mind. 1:23AM.

Ahri: Alright mom, if you really are out there. I'm coming.

*

I dress quickly, throwing on blue jeans and an old BTS band t-shirt. My good riding attire. I slip on the black leather boots lying at my bedside and grab the hooded, blue jean jacket from where it hangs on the end bed post. I slip it over my shoulders and button it up three quarters of the way.

I kick the scattered piles of dirty clothes, books, half-finished poems, and drawings strewn over the floor out of the way as I make my way to the dresser in the room. I grab the aviator sunglasses and tuck one of the arms into the neck of my shirt, then take a hair band and wrangle my dark curls into a scruffy ponytail. I glance at the dresser mirror and shrug. Blow my reflection a kiss and smile. A bottle of sunscreen rests on its side in the litter of make up along the dresser top. I reach down to grab it, but don't.

Ahri: Free the freckles!

I laugh as I return to the pile of clothes and fish my wallet out from the back pocket of a pair of dirty jeans. I shove the wallet into the inside pocket of my jacket on my way back to the dresser. From the dresser's sock drawer, I dig up my electronic cigarette and six large bottles of watermelon-strawberry e-liquid. I stuff the cigarette into the chest pocket of my jacket and the bottles into the side pouches of a knapsack lying

close by. I raid the rest of the clothes drawers, stuffing underwear, jean shorts, jeans, and t-shirts into the sack's main compartment. I sling the sack over both shoulders and strap it on tight then whirl around carelessly and start for the window.

The window is already cracked slightly, something I did earlier in the day so as not to alert security. I force it all the way open with ease. Cool city air and the smell of pizza and piss funnel into the room. I inhale deep and emphatically.

Ahri: Alright. Game time.

I step out the window, turning my gaze hesitantly skyward so as not to look down at the concrete street forty stories below. Above me, the words Asteria Palace blaze in big, blinding ocean-blue letters branded across the building's head for all to see. I roll my eyes and flip them off, as I ease my way out onto the windowsill, bracing my arms against the ledge. Careful not to slip. I peek over my shoulder at my target, the railing of the fire escape stairs, about a fifteen-foot jump to my right.

Ahri: Okay. You can make that. You can definitely make that.

A cool wind rushes my face as I bend down preparing to make the leap.

Ahri: Urgh. C'mon. Really?

I wait for the gust to pass and the air to fall still. Take a slow, deep breath. Then, I jump. Gravity snatches at my heels and drags me down, my heart racing in my chest. I stretch my frame out as far as possible and reach for bottommost inside handrail. My fingers wrap around their circular face, and I squeeze for everything I'm worth. The staircase whines and gives a shaky jerk under my weight, jarring my right hand loose. I swing back and forth, pain wracking the stretched muscles and tendons in my fingers of my left hand, as I struggle to hold on.

I rush my right hand back onto the railing and wait for the swing to slow.

Ahri: See? That wasn't so bad, was it?

I chuckle and take another deep breath to slow the pounding of my heart against the walls of my chest. Then I reach up and grab the bottom of the baluster and start to pull myself up.

*

Forty flights of stairs below, I sneak along the base of the palace to a grey door that will lead me to the garage. I slip inside and open an Asteria search browser in my mind and scroll through the recent history as I jog down past rows of parking level beneath—“Embryo Unchained performing at the Hammertown Concert Hall dates and tickets,” “100 Places to Go before You Die,” “Old World Tattoo Ideas,” and “Death Valley images”—I open the link to Death Valley. The same meadow I saw in my mother's vision spreads transparent over my sight. I copy the location and place it in a Maps application so that I won't need to waste any time once I find my bike.

In the row close to the exit gates, my stomach jumps when I spot the front end of my SkyStreaker Street Rod parked in the far corner of the parking deck close to the main elevator.

Ahri: Hey there, beautiful.

I slip the knapsack off my back, rummage through the main compartment for my joulecard, and race over to the hoverbike. It's tucked away in a cardholder near the bottom of the sack. I slide the plexiglass card into the bike's keycard slide, and the bike powers to life, the electromagnetic propulsion system lifting its sleek, black body into a silent, subtle swaying hover. The rider function activates as I link my mind to the bike,

and a cool blue glosses the world's color. The miles-per-hour and RPM gauges display in the left portion of my vision, and a map with the directions I input earlier displays to the right as the function engages.

Ahri: 750cc should do it.

I cap the energy distribution for the joulecard at the necessary output then mount the bike. The frame is slim and light. For some reason, it always reminds me of a bolt of lightning. It rides like one. That's for sure.

Ahri: Start.

The engine roars to life.

Ahri: Music to my heart.

Kol: Yeah, I bet.

The invasive communication link makes me jump, but I know the voice.

Ahri: Shit.

My eyes roll and rest on the tall brown-haired boy dressed in black jeans and a hoodie, leaning against the closed doors of the elevator.

Ahri: What do you want, Kol?

Kol: Going somewhere?

As he approaches I think about throttling forward, but wrecking my bike trying to escape might be worse than getting caught. He stations himself strategically between the bike and the exit gates.

Ahri: For a ride, what does it look like?

His eyes canvass the bike before honing in on the knapsack on my back.

Kol: Not planning on coming back before morning, I take it.

I shrug.

Ahri: Won't know till I get going, so would you *please* move?

Kol shakes his head.

Kol: No can do. Not on this one. Aelene chewed my ass last week for letting you sneak out, and...my cheeks are still pretty raw.

Ahri: Aelene can eat a bag of dicks.

I say it, but the words don't carry as much venom as they usually might.

Kol chuckles.

Kol: Well, there is actually a service that will let you send someone a bag of candy dicks. I can look into that for you tomorrow.

He walks around to the back of the bike, making sure to keep his hands secured to some part that won't allow me to hit the throttle without yanking his arm off.

Kol: She didn't want you to have this thing in the first place for just this reason, you know?

Ahri: Yeah, well, a lot of people around here don't want me to have a lot of things... How'd you even know I was out here?

Kol: You didn't really think Aelene was just going to let the princess of Umbra roam freely on this thing, did you? Especially after the last time you snuck out and came back with that.

He nods down at the Old World symbols tattooed on my exposed left forearm. He glares down at the symbols to get a closer view.

Kol: Non-Binary Language. Old World Chinese?

His eyebrows raise slightly with surprise as his translation function engages, translating the language back.

Kol: Hearing something one hundred times is not better than seeing it once.

He reads, then chuckles a bit.

Kol: That's such a *you* thing to get, but hey, for the record, I think it looks good on you. However, because you decided to get that, guess whose job it now is to monitor where this bike is AT ALL TIMES?

He points two fingers with emphatic sarcasm at himself.

Kol: You guessed it. This guy's.

Ahri: That's not creepy at all.

He grimaces at the remark but lets it go.

Kol: Not like I have a choice. You really think I like getting alerts every time you decide to leave somewhere unauthorized?

Ahri: And you think it's not weird that I have to be authorized to go anywhere?

Kol: As I said, I think there are people that are highly concerned with your safety as a member of the royal family, but do I personally think it's cool? No.

Ahri: It's a bullshit post, Kol. It doesn't really mean anything. The government and the people have nothing to do with me.

Kol: You're an important symbol of freedom, Ahri Spero-Doloran.

He does his best impersonation of Aelene's nagging voice.

Ahri: Well, they treat me like a freakin' inmate. Which is why I'm leaving.

I grab him by his wrist and try to pull it free from the rear seat fixture, but his grip is too strong.

Kol: AND... why I'm not going to try to stop you. Technically, it's not my job to keep you from doing stupid shit, Ahri... Just to report it and...

His eyes narrow, and bury themselves into mine. Searching. Or maybe hoping to pry any more information out of me.

Kol: Make sure you're safe when you do...

I realize that in his own roundabout way he's asking to come with me.

A fire stirs in my belly. A large part of me wants to tell him to fuck off and quit butting in. This is personal in a way he can't possibly understand.

Ahri: Sure, life as a princess, honorary or not, sucks, and Asteria Palace is a hellhole, where people treat me more like I'm an expensive china doll than a human being, but that's not the only reason I'm leaving. There are other reasons I have to do this. And I have to do it alone.

The words pass between us before I remember we were linked and I've accidentally been directly addressing him. I find my hand tucked beneath the neck of my shirt, grasping at the crystal dangling from the necklace around my neck. My anger softens. Heat treated into uncertainty for a moment as I remember. I'm chasing ghosts.

I turn back to Kol, ready to fend off a furious or offended rebuttal, but he doesn't say anything. In his eyes, I find a kind consideration that reminds me that of all the people in this shithole, Kol is one piece of shit that really does care. He cares about me. Not what I am. Not what I represent. Just me.

I sigh again. Uncertainty cooling into steely resolve.

Still, I have to go. I have to do this, and I have to do it by myself.

Ahri: Look Kol, if I could, I'd let you come, but this one I've got to do alone. I can't explain why, exactly. But would you please just trust me on this one?

He stares at me for a moment, then shakes his head.

Kol: Fine. I don't want to control you, and I really don't want to be one of the ones making you feel like you're being controlled, but it *is* literally my job to keep safe—a job I take quite seriously by the way. If I'm gonna wear the heat for you, and for my own personal sanity, you at least have to check in with me. Let me know you're okay. Nothing more, nothing less. I'll encrypt your message channel, so they can't hack me and find you.

I glare at him. He lets go of the bike with a shrug and shoves his hands into the pockets of his jeans.

Kol: Hey, you're the one lighting the forest on fire on this one. Not me. So that's a pretty reasonable request.

He shrugs.

Kol: I'm the only one of us who knows where they put the tracker. You check in. I'll take it off. Or you can just go. Risk it for the biscuit, knowing Aelene will have every Royal Policeman available turning over heaven and hell to find you.

He looks out of the through the garage window at the stars lighting the night sky.

Kol: You're a smart girl, without the tracker, I'd say you could make it a couple of weeks. Maybe even a month or two before they find you. On foot, I'd give you a week, but on this bike with that direct location...

He nods down at the bike, as if it's the tracker itself.

Kol: You'll be back here by noon tomorrow getting tongue-lashed by Aelene. And you can kiss your bike and whatever freedoms you had left goodbye.

I catch myself stuck between a grimace and a smirk. As he said, we've been fighting, cat and dog, like this for sixteen years. I know he'd never actually turn me in, and he'd track me down if anything were to happen. Besides, having him around will probably prove useful anyway as I go.

Ahri: Anyone ever told you, you'd make a great dog?

He smiles. A smug shrug steals onto his face. His head cocks to the side in that same way it has since we were children.

Kol: Once or twice.

Ahri: Fine. I'll check it.

Kol: Alright.

He walks around the side of the bike, slips his hands deep beneath one of the rear shocks and yanks, pulling out a small bit of wire connected to a tiny box-looking object. Its face pulsing red.

Kol: Remember, you don't check in I'm assuming you're in trouble, and I'm coming to get you. And I know you much better than the rest of the Royal Police, so I won't have too much trouble finding you if necessary. Now, they're going to try and hack your normal augs to get a location on you. You know how to secure that, right?

Ahri: I've been evading Aelene for most of my childhood, Kol. I think I know how to keep her from getting to me.

Kol: You say that, but like I said, these guys are good. They pick up your trail and you'll be back here fast as—

Ahri: Yeah, yeah, and next you're going to tell me to make sure I take backroads out of the city to avoid cameras, make sure I only use cash, all that. Look, I got it.

He stands up and pockets the tracker.

Kol: Actually, I was just going to say your boot is untied.

Another smug expression steals onto his face. I look down and the strings of my left boot dangle loosely at its side. I reach down and tie them quickly.

Kol: So where you headed?

Ahri: Not quite sure. North is all I've got for now.

I pull the cigarette from the pocket of my jean jacket and take a long pull. Kol's face shrivels with disgust.

Kol: Alright... North then. And where'd you get those old things? They're terrible for you.

I blow the smoke in his face and rev the bike's engine.

Kol: Helmet at least?

I roll my eyes and turn on my radio function.

Heroic Bear of Despair. Great band.

I crank the tunes as high as my functions will allow and hit the throttle. The bike pulls forward slowly as the repetitive chug of a rhythm guitar blasts in our shared headspace.

Kol: Holy shit!

He grabs at his head and cuts the link.

I hit the throttle. Concrete and gravel shoot in all directions as the bike kicks into high gear and propels me forward, streaking silently out of the garage into the night.

```
<Time  
Capsule.mlog/Users/lorandael_doloran/the_disappointmen  
t>  
"The Disappointment"  
January 1, 2341 - 12:32:15  
Apr. Lorandael Doloran  
Hearth Tower  
Hearth, New Japan
```

“Shomenuchi!” Father shouts from his place along the far wall of the training ground. He shelters in the sleeves of his white training robes as he always does when he is watching me closely.

“Aye!” I raise my bokken over my head with both hands, making sure that my feet start at about shoulder width with my weight slightly forward. I slide my front foot across the polished marble floor and swing the wooden blade down sharply, advancing my back foot, but the strike is slow and weak. We’ve been training striking the head since sunup. Now it is near noon, and my arms and legs have grown heavy and scream out in pain, but Father is watching.

“Shomenuchi!” His brown eyes observe my every move with hawk-like vigilance, noting any falter or misstep, any sign of weakness. I keep my eyes trained on Vryael, my Guardian, who stands at Father’s right. His eyes are steady, kind, approving. They are my rock.

“Aye!” I perform the strike again, breath spilling from my gut as if I have been punched. A droplet of sweat trickles down my brow. I want to wipe it away, but to stop now would be unacceptable to Father.

If Vryael were training me, he would let me rest.

Sweat curls around the corner of my eyelash and into my eye. I blink once, twice, trying to soothe the burn of the stinging salt, but the method only shakes loose more sweat from my brow, like bees to defend the hive, and in seconds I'm near blind. I can't see Vyrael.

“Shomenuchi!”

“Aye!” My hands are shaking now. My fingers ache down to the bone. I raise the bokken over my head, but the hilt slips from my grasp. I've lost focus.

My arms fall to my side, fatigue breaching the floodgates of my psyche, draining all the adrenalin that up until this moment has kept my limbs loose and free. Blood drips from the tips of my stiffened, throbbing fingers, which have yet to unfurl from their curled position. It feels as if I'm slowly, painfully turning to stone.

“Pick up your sword,” Father says. His face, hidden behind long, silky locks of black hair, is stoic and unmoved.

I try to lift my arms back up, but they refuse to budge.

“I—I can't,” I say.

“You can!” he says firmly. “Your body is weak, but the body does not control the mind! Now, pick up your sword!”

C'mon...Move...Move!

The hinges of my limbs creep to attention, prodding the entirety of my existence in a slow circle to find the bokken lying along the marble at my back.

Pick it up.

I kneel down and reach for the bokken. But my legs give way. The weight of my torso is too much. I topple over like a statue, and the marble floor seems to rise up to

meet me. My arms flail uncontrolled, yet upward, just well enough to shield my head from receiving the full impact of the impending collision.

No! No! No! Get up!

I lie there, squirming, trying to force myself to get up, but I have no strength left. Pain and exhaustion consume me.

“Pathetic,” Father says. His eyes light with something kindred more to hatred than anger. The chirp and crackle of lightning grows in his closed fists as he starts towards me.

I’m sorry.

I close my eyes, willing the cool marble to absorb me fully, to shield me from whatever punishment Father is prepared to inflict.

“Master Seigfried!” Vyrael steps forward into Father’s path. “Please! She’s only ten!”

“And she will be twenty before she masters even the first resonance!” Father exclaims. The crackling electric current continues to charge in his fists. “The pace of her progression is sickening!”

He steps to Vyrael’s side in order to pass him, but Vyrael again mirrors his movement, screening his path towards to me. “Sir, she’s your daughter, and the sole heir to your house. If you push her too hard now—”

“That is not the heir to my house,” Father cuts him off. His eyes burrow into mine, burying the purest sentiment of his hate into my core. “Khaene never showed such weakness, and I will not allow—”

“She is not Khaene,” Vyrael cuts back with equal heat. “There will never be another, Khaene, and if you don’t realize that, if you continue training her with such brutal tactics, you will spoil her talent just as you spoiled him!”

No, Vyrael.

My breath catches in my throat.

I’d never heard Vyrael shout at anyone before.

I didn’t believe him capable of it.

His words to everyone were always so calm, kind, and encouraging.

But in that moment,

I learned how to show love.

As I lie helpless on the floor of the training court,

listening to the heated passion fueling his words in my defense against my Father,

his superior,

I learned how to stand up for someone else.

Father’s face turns scarlet as he stares in near disbelief at Vyrael. The sound of the back of Father’s hand striking Vyrael’s cheek echoes off the stone walls encasing the ground. I watch Vyrael fall, his body convulsing as electric currents surge through him.

“If you ever speak to me in such a tone again, I swear by the Light I will cut out your tongue,” Father says. He turns his attention back towards me. “If you don’t like my training methods then her fate rests with you, but if she has not mastered the Rojin Kohin by the start of the new year, the punishment for you both will be dire.” His breaths fall heavy from his lips as he speaks. “Clean the training square. No blood, no sweat, no dirt.”

The frock of his robes sweep to his back as he walks.

I'm sorry, Vyrael. This is my fault. I'll do better next time.

As Father exits the training ground, Vyrael slowly rolls over onto his side, wiping away a light trickle of blood from his cheek. His finger and legs still twitch.

I fight back tears as pain settles into my bones.

I swear to you, Vyrael. I will grow strong.

"It's alright, little one." Vyrael kneels down beside me and rolls me onto my back. I wince as he takes one of my bloodied hands into his own to examine it. His normally kind blue eyes are stern and still angry as he runs a finger softly along the torn, blistered surface of my palms. I cannot feel his touch.

"I'm sorry," I mumble, staring at the red mark along the side of his cheek. "I'm sorry... I'm sorry..." The words flow from my mouth alongside a flood of tears I can no longer withhold.

The anger in Vyrael's eyes softens. "No, Lorandael. You have done nothing wrong. You have nothing to apologize for." He wipes away my tears with the back of his hand.

"You are stronger than your Father gives you credit for." He places two fingers just before the bridge of his nose, forming a traditional release sign, merging his spirit with the essence. His energy flows through the room, making my skin prickle and the hair on my arms stand on end.

"Why does he hate me?" I ask.

"Your father does not hate you." There's a pain in Vyrael's voice as he speaks. "He wasn't always the way he is now. If you had seen him on the day of your birth..." A smile cracks his lips. "He loves you very much. He just... His perspective of what that

means has simply been skewed by his own failures.” He presses his hands together. When he pulls them apart, water pools in a growing sphere between them. When the sphere expands to the length of my body, he lowers it down over me. The water is cold, almost ice cold, but soothing to my aching muscles.

Khaene.

I'd never felt hate in the way I did in that moment.

Khaene.

*I tunneled on the name,
though I did not even know who or what it belonged to at the time,
and without even realizing it,
I embedded every memory of sadness and pain
I had ever suffered at my father's hands into its meaning.
I would never find happiness
until I rid myself of that name.*

Khaene.

“It’s a healing cocoon.” Vyrael reaches inside the neck of his robe and produces a small vile filled with a purple liquid. “Healing herbs,” he says, pouring the contents of the vile into the cocoon. “You’ll feel better in no time at all.”

But I won’t feel better. Not until I know. Not until I understand why. Why that name seems to measure the extent of my worth in Father’s eyes.

*In that moment,
I changed,
or maybe,*

I broke.

*If I had possessed the strength,
every muscle in my body would have been clinched tight,
but I lacked the strength.*

I couldn't even wipe the tears from my own eyes.

*I was weak
and I hated myself for it.*

I watch the purple liquid swirl in the water encasing my body. Almost immediately the throb in my muscles slows.

Still, it wasn't enough. I needed to know.

“Vyrael, who is Khaene?”

<TimeCapsule.mlog/Users/khaene_doloran/the_shadow_of_a_ghost>

"The Shadow of a Ghost"

December 31, 2241 - 23:10:15

Apr. Khaene Doloran

Aokigahara Forest

Hearth, New Japan

The children... they're playing again aren't they, Emp? I ask the black cat perched on my shoulder.

The cat faces me. Head lulls to the side. His yellow eyes hold my gaze, and he blinks.

He projects a vision into my mind—the children running through the streets of Epsilon. The roofs and balconies of every home within the city are adorned with bright lanterns, tassels, and tapestries, which show more colors than the eye can imagine. The scent of glazed crescent rolls sprinkled with cinnamon—the most popular treat amongst the children—hangs in the air. Conversation is carried on loudly by every pair of cheery red lips, kissed with hints of wine in celebration of the keeping of balance of life. It is truly a magical sight to behold, and then, I see myself watching from the shadow of trees of the forest.

Why do they hate me, Emp? I think.

Another vision—a woman curled into the corner of a marble stone home. Fear claws at her insides. I can feel it. Hear the racing of her heart pounding against the walls of her ears. Smell the pheromones building like a cloud overhead, as a shadow, human in form but not defined, stretches out towards her. A man whose face is clouded by darkness rushes into the room and stands over her, wielding a sword in the direction of the shadow.

Humans fear what they don't understand?

I gaze down at the dark skin coating my hands. They are mine. Extending from two slender arms. Part of the torso held upright by two thin legs. I feel my face. I see it sometimes, in the still pools and lakes of the forest, sometimes in the distortion of the slow flowing river waters, but when the water is still it looks very much like the children within the city walls.

But I am... just like them?

He blinks again— I am the man standing in front of the woman, holding the sword.

Do I hate them?... No. I don't think so.

He blinks again— I am curled in the corner, cowering in fear of the shadow.

Do I understand them?

I lean back in the tree and listen to the trumpets and horns play in the distance as I strip the feathers from a duck I caught earlier in the afternoon.

When we watch the children in the white robes playing with the wood sticks in the temple courtyard, sometimes I think I do. I understand their movements, or at least I understand their purpose, what they're meant to do, attack and defend, just like we do against the wolves and bears. Sometimes even, how they could be better.

Then, other times, I watch the children playing in the grass fields to the east of the city, and I don't understand what they're doing at all. I am nothing like them.

I pull away the last of the duck's plumage and sink my teeth into the meat of its breast hungrily.

I don't think I've ever asked you, Emp, but do you know where I come from?

He nods his head towards the city.

And you've just...always been with me?

He shakes his head, no.

He purrs as he stretches himself on my shoulder then jumps down onto the branch to stretch itself to sit again.

Another vision—himself ghosting through the woods of the forest. In the distance, I can sense a strong presence, a powerful essence, an essence that resonates with my own, that can wield my power. It draws me like a bee to nectar. I want to merge with it. I breeze into a small clearing and there holding itself upright against a rotten log is a naked baby. A baby strangely silent, but a baby I am certain is the source of the essence that drew me here.

You found me here? But why would someone leave me here?

The cat turns his gaze back towards the city, and I see—the baby's eyes. They are not soft, warm, new to the world, like even the wolf cubs of the forest. They are cold and stern like the men in armor who guard the city gates. He shows me the fearful woman again.

They were afraid of me?

The cat curls into a tight ball at my side.

He shows me—one of the children dressed in the white monk's robe with the wooden sticks I've seen playing in the temple courtyard. I watch the boy grow. He stretches upward, his arms and legs growing longer. His robes grow with him. His stick becomes a sword like the guards I've seen along the wall tops. A spirit, something like a wisp of wind, finds him. He looks at it and begins to speak with it as it zooms around his head. He nods, and it enters his chest. He looks at his hand, kneels down, and presses his

palm to the floor. Ice crawls across the stone floor, and suddenly a polar bear appears at his back. He stands again and continues to grow. His eyes turn cold. His white monk's robe becomes white leather armor just like the guards atop the city walls. His sword becomes a javelin, and when he stretches out his hands, his eyes glow like heated blue flames. His skin turns an icy blue, and the ice that stretches from his hand twists and contorts into a dragon.

They are like me? Or I am like them?

He shakes his head again.

I see—the baby standing against the log again through his eyes. I float around its head, searching for a way in, but expecting none. The baby is... a baby, unable to comprehend the danger of its circumstances. But when the baby sees me, it fixates on me. Its eyes follow me back and forth as I circle over its body. It reaches out with both hands, inviting me in.

I merge with its spirit. The flow of essence and energy it possesses is stronger than anything I've ever experienced from a human before. And it's still growing. Its power has only begun to kindle. But more interesting, the baby can understand my influence on its spirit. That I am trying to keep it alive. It understands the urges I give it—what I wish from it—to move. To hide. Our resonance is perfect.

We waddle through the brush on unsteady legs till sundown. We are hungry, but we have no teeth. No claws. It was almost as if you knew that merging with me was your only way to survive. We needed a find an animal to suckle, but how to do so with a baby's strength? The baby's muscles are far stronger than they should be. We walk until we find a wild goat. We suckle from it. Stay close to it. Survive.

We grow from baby into boy. Fast as the wolves. Strong as the bear. Prey becomes predator. I can teach him things. How I've seen humans hunt and gather. How the animal uses the wind to guide its course. How to feel the earth and the essence that flows through it and to use it to our advantage. We are strong now.

So that is why they hate me? Because I am strong. Stronger than they think I should be.

No.

Silence passes between us for a long while.

No child should have been able to survive in the forest alone for so long.

But he did.

Because of this the elders feared him

They said that he was not of this world.

That he was a demon spirit of the forest.

He was not born.

He could not die.

He simply was.

I understand their fear. And maybe, I've been afraid of them as well.

The cat purrs. He tilts his head to the side, questioning the restless energy in my spirit.

We're going to the festival.

*

There is a climbable path of handholds along the western wall of Hearth, where the putty holding the wall's stone together has eroded. No one seems to know about it, so there is rarely a guard stationed here. I scale the wall like a cat.

A full moon shines overhead as I drop down into a back alley, but as usual I go unnoticed. I run along the wall behind rows of stone cottages that line the outskirts of the city. From the alley, I see it all, the festival, the people, everything. I wander into the crowd, through the throngs of gathered people in amazement. Music plays and dancers in white gowns dance along the rooftops and balconies. Vendors jostle to offer me treats, and men and women toss me coins and ruffle my hair as I shuffle past, probably thinking I'm a beggar boy because of my tattered clothes and unkempt hair.

Do they not recognize who I am? I ask Emp, as another woman hands me a silver coin before directing me to a treat stand along the road not far off.

He shows me the tankards and cups filled with rosy red wines. The laughter and the hiccups.

Too drunk to fear the demon from their tales? I laugh.

He shows me—the shadow outstretched before the woman.

Or they never knew what you truly looked like at all...

That night

At the celebration of the New Moon

Was the first time anyone inside the city walls had

Ever

Experienced any real interaction with him.

I smile a bit at the thought of being one of them.

I think I want to try the sweet rolls.

I shoulder my way through the heart of the crowd to a small wooden stall selling the delicious bread treats. When I shoulder past the last group of bystanders, standing at the cart is a girl. Her brown hair falls in gleaming waves down the small of her back. She is short, just as I am, and robed in fine white silk. She is one of the temple children.

In the same moment that my eyes rest on her she turns to me. Those brown waves are nothing more than a curtain, veiling a face like early spring, the season I love most. Her skin is pale, kissed by the winter's lack of sunlight, and her cheeks red as the fresh summer rose. But it is her eyes that fix me. Above her thin lips and cute snub nose are two dazzling brown eyes, the same color as the bark of the forest trees after a heavy rain. The light of the fire toasting the tasty bread treats flickers over their glossy coat, offering a fierce edge that seems to cut straight into my soul. Strong, yet kind. The kind of eyes I have always dreamed of my mother having. I almost feel at home in them.

“Hello, I’m Kaeri. Would you like a sweet roll?” the girl asks, offering me a roll before I even realize she has moved closer to me.

I stand paralyzed by fear. My mouth agape, unable to answer.

No one had ever offered him anything in kindness.

“Well, this is usually the part where you say, ‘Sure, I’d love one,’ and then you tell me your name.” She giggles.

Emp shows me—myself taking a slow deep breath.

I draw in a slow breath to make my reply, but before I can utter the words, a hooded figure appears from the within the crowd. He passes between us like the shadow of a ghost, and in the same instant Kaeri is gone.

My senses jump into overdrive. I look to my left and my right, but neither the ghost nor Kaeri are in sight. I turn to my nose in panic, drawing on Emp's essence to pick up her scent. I don't know much about the nature of people, but they are not simply supposed to disappear. I know that much.

Suddenly, I catch a whiff of her scent in the winds to the east. I follow the smell with my eyes till I see a rustle in the crowd that does not fit. My sight narrows, and I see Kaeri, mouth covered, being dragged through the crowd. I grab a sharp cutting knife from the sweet roll stand, and hurl it. The knife cuts through the air and the crowd in the direction of the cloaked figure and strikes it square between the shoulder blades. It collapses. Lifeless. Kaeri spins from its grasp as screams ring out through the night. The music falls silent, giving way to whispers and chatter as a crowd gathers around the body. Four adults, all robed in white garments like Kaeri's, muscle their way over to her and the body. My heart is beating so fast in my chest, I can barely breathe. It feels like someone has lit a fire in my chest, and I'm going to burn alive from the inside out. I am filled with the urge to leave, as if someone, Emp probably, were physically trying to drag me from the square. But I cannot move. Once again, I find myself paralyzed, this time staring at the blood pooling beneath the cloaked body.

I-I didn't mean to. It just happened, Emp. I swear I...

Kaeri's eyes find mine through the crowd. She smiles softly at me, and my heart slows.

She's safe.

A conversation ensues between the men and Kaeri, and after some time she points in my direction. One by one, their eyes all turn to me, but their expressions suggest astonishment instead of the fierce anger I expect.

One of the men, older and taller with long black hair and a thin jawline, stands and makes his way towards me. The crowd parts like butter before the edge of a knife. He commands the attention of the entire crowd. He is important, and he knows it.

“Did you do this?” he asks me, pointing at the body.

I cannot lie, but I cannot bring myself to admit it aloud, so I nod.

“Why?” His stern eyes glare into mine in a way unlike any creature has ever looked at me before. He’s truly listening.

“I thought she was in trouble,” I say. I can no longer hold his gaze and my eyes sink to the tops of my bare feet. “I didn’t mean to kill him. I never wanted to kill anyone. I don’t know what came over me.”

Suddenly, I find myself wrapped in a strong embrace.

“It’s alright. You are very special, young man,” he says, “and I’m going to take care of you now. You’re going to be just fine.”

That night was the first time he met Kaeri.

He was alone.

He had nothing.

He had no one.

But that man who embraced him,

Siegfried Doloran

Eight Dan and Head of the House Doloran of Epsilon.

He adopted Khaene into our family shortly after.

Khaene was alone.

But maybe,

That would have been better

Than what was to come.

<Time Capsule.mlog/Users/titus_spero/nomu>

"Nomu"

January 27, 2341 - 22:34:59

Pte. Titus Spero

Warehouse

Tanaris, United European Confederation

Nomu: Here—My father calls it a star. It's some kind of special rock that's been in my family for generations. He told me when I found someone I could truly trust, I should take a hammer and break it in half and give half to that person. You see, a star is a promise. When you give it to someone, an unspoken bond is formed between you. So, no matter where we go, no matter how far apart we are, as long as we each have our half of our star, we are connected. We will always be together.

I was nine when you said those words to me. Was that really only a year ago?

Commanding Officer: Shoot him.

I stare at Nomu as our commanding officer picks up my hand and wraps my fingers around the grip of his pistol. His star hanging from the leather strap around my neck hides its face into my bare chest.

My arm hangs lifeless at my side, my mind unable to process the scene unfolding before me, scrambling to put together the pieces that have led to this moment.

Nomu. How'd we end up here?

Commanding Officer: Pull the trigger!

We grew up together in the same town. We are close, close as brothers, and you've always watched over me like an older brother.

Their families were very close.

Kin in every relation but blood,

*But when the Vala pressed their offensive on Penumbra,
both their families died during the invasion.*

Their whole town consumed by fire,

Turned to ash

By carpet bombings and tank shelling in a matter of hours.

The memory was horrific to watch.

We were the only survivors. Orphans. We would never be able to go home. Still,
you watched over me.

Titus was badly wounded during the invasion,

But Nomu carried him,

For miles

And days

Until Khaene and his army found them.

They took them in.

Augmented their minds and bodies.

Trained them.

Made them better.

Stronger.

Told them both you could take back their home,

Together.

The officer lifts my arm and presses the barrel of the gun to Nomu's head.

The dark-skinned boy kneeling in front of me looks me squarely in the eyes. In
them, I see no fear, only kindness and love.

Commanding Officer: Shoot him now!

Titus: Why?

I choke back tears.

Titus: He—He's done nothing wrong.

No, he hadn't.

The officer draws his own pistol and presses the muzzle into the back of my head.

Commanding Officer: We caught him stealing from the pantries after hours.

The officer shakes his head.

Commanding Officer: Twenty-one weeks of training have clearly done nothing to strengthen this boy's resolve. One who would steal from his own brothers, who would ask more than his fair share is a coward and a weakling. Cowards and weaklings are not fit to serve among our ranks. We are a brotherhood. All for one. And in this world, we are only as strong as our weakest link. Kill or be killed...

My heart drops into the soles of my shoes. I can no longer hold Nomu's gaze.

Commanding Officer: Now choose!

It's my fault. It's my fault you're here. Guilt runs wild through my insides.

His body was giving out.

As a training method, they limited the recruit's rations,

but he was too young to endure the intensity and stress without proper nutrition.

He was falling behind

more and more each day,

so much so

that the few rations they were granted were being denied to him.

But Nomu.

Nomu carried him.

He helped Titus through the training sessions,

and then he fed him with his own rations

to make sure he could train.

You lied to me, Nomu. Why? You said you were full. You said what you were giving me were your leftovers. I plead for my eyes to speak the words my mind cannot transmit to him. I won't let you die. Not like this. Not for me.

Titus: Commander, it's not his—

Nomu: It's okay, Titus.

He smiles at me with the same smile he's shown me every time he's slipped me his meal, every time he's helped me through training, every time I've needed him, that same smile.

Nomu: It was my choice. I would gladly do it again.

My hands shake. Through the river of tears flooding from my eyes, I can no longer see his face clearly. I thought I was getting stronger, but really, I'm still just a coward and a weakling. You've just been watching over me, carrying me even now.

Commanding Officer: Make your choice, private!

The hammer of his pistol cocks back with a loud click. I squirm as if he has broken some bone in my body.

Commanding Officer: 3...

Fear grips me.

Commanding Officer: 2...

I can't think clearly anymore.

Commanding Officer: 1...

The final count jolts through my body like electricity. My finger clinches, and the trigger pulls. The pistol jerks back in my hand, and my insides run. But my feet don't move. Blood and brain matter splatter across my face and into my mouth. A hot metallic taste warms my tongue. I drop to my knees, and the gun falls from my hand, striking the cement floor with a soft clatter.

I can't draw my eyes away from his body.

Nomu.

My best friend, my brother.

Titus: I'm sorry.

Commanding Officer: May you rot in the seventh circle of hell.

The officer spits on Nomu's corpse.

Commanding Officer: Coward.

He turns to me.

Commanding Officer: Well done, boy.

The officer laughs cheerfully, clapping me on the back.

Commanding Officer: Sifting the wheat from the chaff is essential to our cause.

The force of the clap knocks me forward onto all fours. I catch myself in the pool of Nomu's blood. It is warm to the touch, still fresh, meant for internal circulation and sustaining life. The wafting scent of liquid iron strengthens the metallic taste in my mouth, twisting my stomach. Hot bile spews from my mouth before I can stop myself.

Commanding Officer: Stand up! Be proud of what you have accomplished here.

The commander laughs again, grabbing me by the waist and pulling me to my feet.

Commanding Officer: The Asterian Army is a brotherhood.

He turns to the other children standing in rows at our back.

Commanding Officer: A brotherhood that is only as strong as our weakest link, and the sooner you all internalize this fact, the stronger our cause will grow.

He smiles wryly.

Commanding Officer: We will convene at the training ground at 0500 tomorrow morning to begin anew. Remember what and who you are fighting for. Dismissed.

The children slowly begin to funnel out of the warehouse and back to the barracks, followed swiftly by the commanding officer.

What am I fighting for now? Who am I fighting for? I'm not sure how long I stand there in the dim light, watching over Nomu's body, but the sun has risen over the hills in the east before I am prompted to move again.

File III

<Time
Capsule.mlog/Users/lorandael_doloran/the_kyu_trial>
"The Kyu Trial"
June 13, 2344 - 06:00:38
Apr. Lorandael Doloran
Hearth Temple
Hearth, New Japan

Along the open balcony of to my room, I prepare to practice the one hundred eight strikes of my *Niten Ichi Ryu*,

The blades of my katana and wakizashi ring like a glass harp at play as I draw them from their sheaths.

My feet swish softly along the marble floor as I take up my stance—feet just beyond shoulder width, squatted into a low sit.

Cold. Tired.

The wakizashi I hold in a reverse styled grip in my lead hand. In my trail hand, I aim the point of my katana toward the dummy in front of me.

More cold than tired.

Winter's chill cuts through the thin lining of my clothing, freezing the hinges of my joints and extremities till they fall numb.

Tell yourself it isn't cold.

It isn't cold.

Yesterday's training session ended late, and my muscles are sore.

You're not tired.

I'm not tired.

Begin.

Under the light of the full moon, I begin. With swift pivots and twirls, I jab, slash, sweep, and parry. My blades visible only as silver blurs cutting through the early morning air. Though sore, my muscles feel strong, conditioned for long hours of use. Even so, following yesterday's training, fatigue sets in faster than usual.

I concentrate harder, slowing each breath, blotting out both pain and exhaustion, and power through the last of the one hundred and eight movements without a single falter.

See, you're stronger now.

I check my posture.

My base is wide and strong and my arms loose and flexed, ready to strike or counter with speed and precision.

Near perfect.

Baru projects a vision in my Mind's Haven—her humanoid form. Tall and slender. Radiant silver skin. Soft grey eyes. Drifting like a kite through mind's metaphysical constructs She smiles as she claps and nods her approval, letting her joy over my performance fill my spirit. The silver wisps of wind that crown her head whip freely about in the way that it does when she is truly pleased.

Is it enough though?

I sheath my katana, place them back on the sword stand at the end of the balcony and walk back into my room. A cloth towel hangs from a towel rack along the wall, and I use it to dry myself of sweat. Baru's smile fades and the silver wisps settle. Her head

cocks slightly, questioning what's wrong. I shrug, gazing out over the slumbering city of Hearth, and the moonlit reflection cast over the ocean waters in the distance.

Yesterday, I watched some of the younger apprentices train in the temple courtyard while I was on break with Vyrael. They were practicing kamae and kata with Father. They're just the basic techniques, but their kihon was mediocre at best. Their movement was slow, and their strikes and counterstrikes were poor. When I was that age, I could beat each and every one of them without using my hands while blindfolded. And some of the older apprentices who already have celestial pairs even went as far as to show him their own Rojin Kohin, all of which would be ineffective against a real opponent! But you know what Father did, Baru?

Hatred and anger well inside me.

He smiled and told them how proud he was of their progress.

Baru's sorrow-filled calm reaches out in my spirit to comfort me.

It's been five years since we found our resonance, and I've trained so hard. I'm the strongest apprentice in the temple, the fastest apprentice in a century to master the First Resonance and earn rights to the Kyu Trial, and all he's ever told me was how much of a disappointment I am.

Baru projects another vision—a man, bearded, bulky, and broad-chested, standing at the base of a snowcapped peak of Fuji, beneath wind-gusted flurries of snow. I feel the overwhelming strength in his arms and legs. His thick hands that could crush builders with ease.

Then she shows me—a teenage boy with long black hair and a smile that carries sunshine, dressed in the traditional white robes of the temple monks. He sits, meditating,

in wild grass of the sun-drenched meadows east of Hearth, and I can see the world through his cunning eyes. Now, she shows me—a woman, tall and lean, with hair black as night, standing at the edge of the cliffs overlooking the beach and the Great Ocean west of the Hearth. All of her former pairs.

Then she projects an image of myself—curly blond hair, blue eyes, stern-faced. Standing above them all. Both katana and wazikashi drawn and held at my sides, telling me I have surpassed them all. I have grown strong. My spirit is filled with her fierce pride.

Those people don't matter. Not to Father. To him, there's only one that I must surpass.

Khaene.

He is all that matters.

A fly buzzes around my head. I snatch it as it passes in front of my nose and crush it in my fist. Once I pass the Kyu Trial, I'm going to find Khaene, and then I'll prove my worth to him.

"Training at such an early hour even on this day of all days?" Vyrael's voice calls from the archway to my room.

"Every morning, no exceptions." I sigh, turning from the balcony to find Vyrael leaning against the frame of the underpass.

"What's troubling you?" Vyrael asks. He strides into the bedroom, lighting torches around the chamber as he goes.

"Nothing." I cross the room and wash my face quickly in the washbowl stationed atop the white oak dresser along the far wall.

“Don’t lie, Lorandael. You’re not very good at it,” Vyrael continues around the room, adjusting the linens on my bed, straightening books on desks, and scrolls into neat piles on shelves.

My brow furrows in disgust. “Father still thinks I’m not ready the for Kyu Trial. He made point of telling me so yesterday after you left the training ground. It frustrates me.”

“*A History of Old Japan.*” Vyrael grabs one of the scrolls stacked crookedly on the nightstand beside my bed. “And *The Teachings of the Way,*” he grumbles, picking up another loose scroll off the floor. He walks both scrolls across the room and places them on shelf along the opposite wall. “Certainly not the proper place for sacred texts, but at least you’ve been reading them like you promised me.”

“I know them well enough.” I follow him across the room to another small wooden mannequin outfitted with my training armor—white leather bracers molded to fit, a matching leather cuirass fit to my chest and shoulders, padded leggings, a pair of white leather boots, and a hooded wool cloak. Sitting down on the hard wood bench in front the dummy, I slip out of my robe and dress myself.

Vyrael turns away. “The oak and the redwood take hundreds of years to reach their full size. They must endure the harshest winters, the wettest falls, and even the hottest of springs in years when rain is scarce. But when they have finished growing, they are tall and strong, and their roots bore deep into the earth. Who said that?”

“What does it matter? I am not a tree, Vyrael.”

“You may not be a tree, but if you wish to grow strong like the tree, then you must be patient as the tree is patient. And you must also remember that your Father is no longer your master. I am.”

“Why did you come?” I ask, buckling my belt.

“The Dan Council are ready for you.” A fatherly pride pours from him. “They request your presence at sun up, which is...” He cranes his neck to look out the window. “Soon.”

“Well, I’m ready,” I reply, flexing and stretching the cuirass to loosen the leather a bit.

Another vision— Baru placing two soft hands on my bare shoulders, filling my spirit with confidence. She dips her head with a reassuring smile. Today is my day.

*I still often wonder
if I had known then what I know now
about the nature of the world
and the monsters within...
If I'd have been so eager to depart.*

We take the spiral staircase at the end of my hall on the seventh floor, up to the ninth floor and the Hall of the Nine. The smoke of burning cannabis leaves cleanses sacred air, as we pass the gohei, guarding the open pass at the end of the hall.

Sitting atop ten tall-backed, marble thrones, arranged in a semi-circle around the outskirts of the dimly-lit, circular room are the Dan, whispering amongst themselves. Their celestial pairs lie in their materialized spirit forms between the thick marble pillars and sculptures along the marble floor at their sides.

I survey their faces as I take the center of the room, making certain I can attribute a name to each face and their celestial pair in case they address me directly. It's been some years since I've seen many of them, so most of their appearances have changed, and at least two were newly appointed in the last year or so.

Ju Dan Saex and Bao the monkey at the center, Father and Abari the cobra to Saex's right and Schichi Dan Gimblin and Keogo the wyvern beside the empty Ku Dan throne on his left. umm. Roku Dan Zigbaer and Faedris the eagle to Father's right and Go Dan Kryin and Caefir the bear to Gimblin's left, Yon Dan Skae and Kukou the lynx on Zigbaer's right and San Dan Xenex and Tier the ibex to Kryin's left, Ni Dan Ien and Zusi the wasp to Skae's right and Sho Dan Isa and Weis the dhole to Xenex's left. In that order, right?

A projection—Baru nods.

Perfect.

“Ikkyū Kyu, Vyrael of the House Doloran, what is your business here?” Ju Dan Saex asks from the tallest of the thrones at the center of the semi-circle.

It doesn't look like he's aged even a single day. I know we age slower than normal humans, but a man of his advanced... stature?

A vision—Baru chuckling. Followed by another vision—the baboon sitting on the ground next to him holding a clock. The second hands ticking much slower than usual.

Good point, when you are a master of time itself. Age probably means very little.

“I bring forth my apprentice Lorandael of the House Doloran to attempt the Kyu Trial,” Vyrael responds as we take the center of the open floor.

Saex strokes the white beard, which hangs from his chin and curls at his feet like a snake. His skin is wrinkled with age, but his body is as cut and fit as a man in his early twenties. “*The Way* teaches that life ebbs and flows in tiny threads of energy,” he says to me, “connecting the consciousness of the world and everything that inhabits it. We call this flow the Essence, a force that binds us together and creates balance and peace. This is the source of our power. Your master has assured us your mastery of the Rojin Kohin and the Rojin Randori, and he has granted you the right to attempt the trial in order to receive the rank of Kyu. I will ask you a few simple questions, and then the other Dan and I will decide whether to honor your master’s judgement and grant you the right to attempt the trial as well. Do you accept our challenge?”

I bow at the waist. “I accept.”

“Very well,” he replies. “Vyrael if you would please clear the circle...”

Vyrael bows and backs away. When he has settled in front of the doors to the room, Saex continues. “Kneel, apprentice.”

I take a knee and bow my head before him.

“What is your name?” he asks.

“Lorandael. Lorandael of the House Doloran.”

“And who is your celestial pair, Lorandael of the House Doloran?”

“Baru, celestial of wind,” I say. As I answer, Baru materializes in her physical spirit, a blue-feathered falcon. She circles the air just above my head.

“Why have you come here today, Lorandael? What is it you seek?”

“To be tested, to prove my mastery of the Second Resonance and achieve the rank of Kyu.” My reply sounds a bit firmer than I intend.

Saex chuckles. “Ah, that may be why you are here, but I don’t believe that is what you seek, young one. Each and every one of us seated here has knelt in this very place. We all came to be tested, but what we each sought was certainly as different as the lives we have now led because of the desires and pursuits of our youth. So, why do you wish to become a Kyu? What is it your heart truly desires?”

I hesitate for a moment, trying to choose my words as carefully as possible. “I want to prove my worth to—Xana and the Temple,” I say. My eyes find my father for a split second. He glowers at me in his usual fashion, so I train them back down on the marble floor.

“What would seem a noble pursuit,” Saex replies. “Do you understand the purpose of the Order of Light?”

“To protect the balance of the Essence within this world,” I say instinctually.

“Yes, and one does not always need power in order to fulfill this duty. The lust for power and validation of one’s strength is where Darlke and his darkness takes root within the mind and spreads like sickness to the spirit and finally the body. The hunt for it will consume you. Never lust for power. Never forget your purpose.”

“Yes, sir,” I say, disappointment slipping into my tone.

My eyes drift up to meet his. He is smiling.

“Dans of the Order of Light, I now ask, do you grant Lorandael of the House Doloran, apprentice to Vyrael of the House Doloran, the right to attempt the trial to receive the rank of Kyu?”

“I, Isa, Sho Dan and Head of the House Caspaeyn, and Waes, celestial of the Soul, grant the apprentice right to attempt the trial,” The thick golden hoops hanging

from her ears knock against her cheeks as she speaks. The white furred dhole seated on its haunches at her side nods graciously to me.

“I, Ien, Ni Dan and Head of the House Xaeyan, and Zusi, celestial of the Flow of Essence, do hereby grant the apprentice right to attempt the trial,” Ien says. The giant wasp buzzing back and forth in motion blur at his side jerks its head up and down sporadically in approval.

“I, Xenix, San Dan and Head of the House Laex, and Tier, celestial of Metallurgy, will grant this apprentice right to attempt the trial,” Xenix, the skinny master with a very long neck and hooked nose says with an approving nod. The iron-horned ibex standing beside him nods its head slowly.

“I, Skae, Yon Dan and Head of the House Zaeyn, and Kukou, celestial of Future Sight, will grant the apprentice right to attempt the trial,” Skae says, an ear-to-ear grin spread across her lips. The lynx lying lazily at her side stares through its milk white eyes out past me, seeming not to notice.

“I, Kyrin, Go Dan and Head of the House Zaldan, and Caefir, celestial of Expansion, grant the apprentice right to attempt the trial.” Kyrin flicks dirt from beneath her nails, clearly uninterested or bored by the proceedings. She is the youngest of the Dans by far, a woman in her early twenties by the looks of her. The shaggy, angry looking grizzly bear sticks a paw into the air.

“I, Zigbaer, Roku Dan and Head of the House Xaen, and Faedris, celestial of Sight, also grant the apprentice right to attempt the trial,” Zigbaer says. His saggy face forces a perpetual scowl though his voice sounds pleasant. The gold-feathered eagle perched atop his seat cocks its head inquisitively in my direction.

“We’ve heard a great deal about you, Lorandael,” Gimblin roars. “All the Dan are pining to see what Luthr’s progeny is capable of, and so I, Gimblin, Schichi Dan and Head of the House Braeg, and Keogo, celestial of Evolution, do wholeheartedly grant you right to attempt the trial.” His frizzled, shaggy black hair and bushy sideburns make him look more animal than human. The sleeping wyvern lying curled around the back of his throne opens its eye for a moment. A stream of black smoke plumes from its nostrils. It closes its eyes and returns to sleep.

“I, Luthr, Hachi Dan and Head of the House Doloran, and Abari, celestial of Corrosion, do not grant this apprentice the right to attempt the trials on the basis that the apprentice’s resolve to preserve the balance is weak.”

Why am I not surprised?

I bite back my retort, straining to let it manifest only as thought.

It still hurt all the same.

The cobra coiled in his lap hisses and whispers pass between the other Dans. I turn my gaze towards him and scowl just long enough to make certain that he sees me. He returns my glare with one of equal ferocity.

“Well, regardless of Dan Luthr’s concerns, it appears he has been outvoted, and the trial will proceed. But for the record, I, Saex, Ju Dan and Head of Lor and Grand Head of all of the Dan Council of the Order of Light, as well as Bao, celestial of Time, do grant you right to attempt the trial.” The Rhesus monkey seated on the arm of his chair nods as well. “Now, rise.”

I stand up and lift my head. I’m supposed to look at Saex, but my gaze constantly shifts between him and my father.

“Your task is simple, show us the Second Resonance and your Rojin Randori,” he says.

“Yes sir,” I reply.

Baru’s calm spirit soothes the anxious fluttering of my heart.

I form the release sign, extending two fingers just before the bridge of my nose. Concentrating on the threads of energy I recognize as Baru’s snaking through the air above us. Willing them into my body. Slowly, they divert from their natural flow and funnel into the center of her chest. Power swells inside me as my spirit merges fully with the essence of the wind flowing through the earth.

Swirl and Blow, Baru.

Essence rushes through me like water breaking from a dam. It latches on to every bone, muscle, and nerve in my body, pumping strength into them. A glowing, silver wind gusts and swirls around my hands. I flex my fingers, imagining my katana and wakizashi. The wind answers, morphing into two blades composed of pulsing silver wind, lighter yet sharper than any steel.

I take up my fighting stance and prepare to demonstrate my Rojin Randori.

An image— Baru levitating in a slow pace back and forth through the white space of my Mind’s Haven. An instructor watching me closely. She nods her head for me to begin.

I pivot in a tight circle to gather momentum and throw a sweeping strike with my katana held in my trail hand at the statue between Ien and Xenix. A concentrated gust of silver wind erupts from my blade, cutting the statue in half like paper, its top half sliding and collapsing the floor below. I shuffle and jab thrust with my wakizashi, each

dispersing a powerful gust of wind that shakes even the lanterns hanging from the ceiling above.

Baru's spirit urges me to remain calm. Presses for control. In my mind, a vision—I am taking slow deep breaths. But I continue to focus on my father, pivoting and slashing, retreating and parrying, each blow carrying a destructive force a bit greater than the last. As I work, I can hear the lamps and lanterns clattering to the ground, the pillar crashing and crumbling around me, the astonished yelps of even the Dans as my wind tears at their hair and cloaks with the force of a hurricane.

A vision—Baru's face, stern, commanding me to slow and control myself, but I can't.

I'll show him.

Anger and hatred had already begun to consume me.

I continue in the practiced sequence of my Rojin Randori. I cut down invisible enemies at my side, back, and front with all the power I can muster. My muscles feel strong, but overuse of our celestial resonance is beginning to take its toll. My spirit has reached its limit. An angry warning fills me. Then a vision—my body and spirit disintegrating, ripped apart by the overuse of our resonance. I concentrate harder, continuing the strike sequence, forcing the strings of energy to remain tethered to my limbs.

Suddenly, my body freezes, no longer able to move. The energy gathered at my center drains back to its normal circulation in the wind within the earth. The two blades vaporize from my grasp.

What happened? What is this?

“That is more than enough, Lorandael.”

I look up, and Ju Dan Saex is standing with his bō raised into the air.

I observe the room. Lanterns and lamp stands roll along the marble floor and the statues, and the pillars seem to have aged a hundred years, beaten and battered by strong storm winds. Even the gohei has been stripped of its paper appendages.

“I’m sorry, I…”

“Lost control,” Saex says, while the other Dan reorganize their clothes and return to their seats. “You have left us in a predicament, young one. The room and its inhabitants may be no longer be fit to complete the ceremony. Vyrael, take your apprentice. We will reconvene in the morning when the room has been repaired and our minds and bodies settled.”

“Yes sir.” Vyrael strides forward and bows.

I catch my father’s eye. He’s sitting unmoved atop his throne. A smug smile forms on his lips beneath the chill of his stony gaze.

I wanted to cry,

but I had forgotten how,

My hands curl into fists, and it takes every ounce of strength I possess not to rush his seat and punch him square in the nose. I feel Vyrael’s hand pull on my shoulder to escort me from the room. I shrug it off angrily. But when I look up at him, he smiles at me, the same smile he showed me so many years ago. This time I know he’s lying. In his eyes I see it. I see disappointment.

```
<TimeCapsule.mlog/Users/titus_spero/overwatch>  
"Overwatch"  
June 13,2344 at 15:23:33  
Yth. Lt. Titus Spero  
West Autobahn  
Wals-Siezenheim, United Europe Confederation
```

I press my cheek against the butt of the rifle so that my head rests in a comfortable position behind its scope. I close my eyes, prompting my mind to open its LRBS shooting sensor function.

LRBS Sensor Function: Shooter, lock and load.

I pull the rifle's bolt handle up and back, opening the chamber, and slip a cartridge inside. The chamber closes with a mechanical click as I slide the bolt handle back again.

LRBS Sensor Function: By eye, go to Traffic Stop.

I follow its instructions, drawing the scope over grass hilltops to my third marked sector, a designated segment of ground between the barricaded traffic stop separating the outer limits of the Slums of the city of Asteria and the first speed limit post along the winding stretch of highway that leads in and out of the city. I find the traffic stop.

Titus: Contact.

The sensor's readings float above each object within view like the readings on a computer screen monitor. A light wind blows less than a mile per hour across the fields, carrying the scent of lilac and spring wild grass, the same scent my mother used to carry. I adjust the scope, increasing the magnification, so that I can see across the highway.

LRBS Sensor Function: Go to semi-truck. First stall. Three o'clock approximately thirty mils.

Through the scope, I watch as the other two members of my team, Nevar and Shura, usher a hovering semi-truck into the first stall, blocked by a lift gate. Jimmy's Moving Company is scribbled in big bright red in cursive lettering across the side.

Titus: LRBS Sensor Function: Go to glass.

I train the crosshairs of the scope on the driver. He rolls down the window, but he looks nervous. As Shura approaches his driver's side window, his brown eyes shift back and forth beneath a short frock of brown hair. A bead of sweat falls from his brow. Shura is a beautiful girl, even with her black hair pulled back into a pony tail and the white jacket robe covering her bulky exo armor, but I doubt her beauty is what's making him uncomfortable.

Titus: Target is wearing grey mover's uniform. Sitting in driver's seat of grey hover truck at far side of highway.

I describe the target and his surroundings for the sensor to confirm.

Titus: Target confirmed. Check parallax and mil.

I check the ballistic sensor along the stock railing of the rifle for readings to make sure my reticle and target are on the same plane.

Titus: On target. Switch to channel zero.

White noise floods the mic wedged into my ear, as I access my peer-to-peer function and link my PCU to my squad member's.

Titus: Overwatch to Boots on Ground, do you copy?

Nevar: Loud and Clear, Overwatch.

Titus: Listen, I don't get a good feeling about this guy. Have you checked his departure clearance yet?

Nevar: I think Shura is on that now.

Titus: And what're you doing?

I continue to keep my crosshairs trained on the man, as he speaks to Shura. He's smiling and laughing now, but his skin is sallow, the smile is hollow, and the laugh looks forced.

Nevar: Jackshit, as always. Shura insists she doesn't need backup, so I'm about to take a smoke break.

Out of the corner of the scope, I can see Nevar reach into the pockets of the white robe covering his exo armor and pull out a pack of cigarettes.

Titus: Those things will kill you, you know?

Nevar: That's funny, coming from you.

He laughs, packing the case, then pulling one out and sticking it in his lips.

Nevar: I'll take my chances, and I'm assuming yesterday will be the last day you ask to bum a smoke as well, then?

Shura: Clearance for departure hasn't been approved. But he says he got an email yesterday saying he was cleared to go. Must be a mistake in the paperwork.

Titus: Does his ID tag show up on scanners?

Shura: Yeah, it does, but he did seem like he had to think hard when I asked him where he was from and where he was going.

Titus: Nevar, are you getting anything on your sensors? I'm too far away to get a good read on anything. Check his pulse, any sudden change in perspiration, anything like that?

Nevar: I'm picking up nothing. Guy's cool as a cucumber. He's probably telling the truth. We all know, the Department of Mobilization is always fucking the paperwork up. Remember, when they relocated us from the Slums to the Trading Outpost? Took them a full week to hunt down all the paperwork after we turned it in. Morons.

Shura: Shut up, Nevar.

Nevar: And being an asshole at traffic stops isn't going to get you any closer to an invitation to the King's Guard. Damn kiss-ass?

He shakes his head and leans against the front of the barricade, facing away from her.

Shura: And you being a dimwitted asshole isn't getting us any closer either. Can you give me anything else on him, Titus? You're AU's are a bit fresher than mine.

Nevar: So what? My augment updates are out of date just because I didn't get anything?

Titus: Give me a second.

I strain my eyes further, activating my x-ray function. A virtual mapping of his skeletal structure and nervous system appear along his internal frame. Readings on vitals and heart rate appear at his side.

Titus: Ask him why he's going there.

I watch as Shura approaches the driver's window once again. The man smiles at her as she asks her questions, but as he answers, his heart rate spikes a bit, only for an instance.

Titus: He's lying. Check the back of the truck.

I focus my crosshairs back on the man and check my readings once again to make sure I'm still on target. Shura continues to speak to the man. His heart rate spikes again. I can tell she has told him they are going to search the truck.

Nevar and Shura move to the back, and I begin my breathing routine to steady my aim. Slow counted breaths pass between my lips in measured rhythm.

The man's heart rate continues to rise. Through my scope, I can see he's sweating now. His eyes dart back and forth between his hands on the steering wheel and the side view mirror. He's mumbling to himself as Nevar unlocks the latch on the back of the truck and Shura slides the door up and open.

Nevar: What the... Titus, you aren't going to believe this.

I see Shura draw the pistol from the holster along her waist. However, the man sees it, too, through the side view mirror. His body leans over and his head dips beneath the dashboard where I can no longer see.

Titus: Boots on Ground! Target has a weapon! Take cover!

When the man resurfaces, he is indeed holding a pistol in hand. He turns and leans out the window, firing a shot in Shura's direction. She ducks back around the edge of the car just in time, as the bullet whizzes by her ear and buries itself into one of the concrete walls of the barricade.

Shura: Hostile contact!

She leans back around the corner to return fire.

Titus: We still reading 1.16?

I switch functions to ask the LRBS sensor, beginning my breathing routine to steady my aim as I prepare to fire.

LRBS Sensor Function: 1.16 confirmed. Check level. Hold over 3.9.

I run through the readings on my range, angle of fire, can't, temperature, humidity, air density, angular rate of moving targets one last time for a ballistic solution. It shows the rifle is level and the hold over reads 3.9. I'm on target.

Titus: Ready.

LRBS Sensor Function: Left .4

It gives me a final wind measurement after the first breath.

I take another slow deep breath and train the crosshairs just off the back of the target's head, accounting for the wind and even the rotation of the earth. The world falls silent. I exhale once. Twice. On the third exhale I pull the trigger slow and smooth.

The rifle fires with a deafening crack, kicking sharply into my shoulder. My whole body absorbs the weight of the force created behind the bronze bullet.

For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.

That was what Titus taught me.

*That's what you felt behind the butt of your rifle after every shot
was death leaping forth from the barrel.*

Three seconds of silence follow. Hit. A plume of pink mist. The man's head shatters like glass, and the body slumps down into the seat, painting the truck's interior in untidy strokes of red. His heart rate drops until he flat lines.

LRBS Sensor Function: Kill confirmed. New Personal Record Recorded—1500 meters... Report generated. Asterian armed guard inbound.

I switch my function back to peer-to-peer.

Titus: You both alright down there?

I can no longer see either of them.

Shura: Fine.

Shura sighs. I can hear her slip her gun back into its holster.

Nevar: All good here. Nice shot.

Titus: Good.

The tension in my body releases somewhat. I open an archive and find a file labeled *The Dead*, where I keep a running list of the ID tags of all the people I've killed.

47, Alistar Montre, ID number 4355.

I save the name to the file.

They told him it would get easier.

Pulling the trigger.

That he'd get used to it.

Kill or be killed.

He told me in some ways,

they were right.

It was easier in close quarters.

Less time to think.

Only time to react.

Hand guns jerk violently in the hand.

Short and sweet.

Blood splatters the walls of a room.

But there's no time to look.

On to the next target.

*No time to think.
But from miles away behind the scope.
It never got easier.
There was too much time.
Time to take it all in.
To see their faces.
To wonder if they had families.
Kids like himself.
Kids like me.
Or maybe not like us at all.
Just kids.*

I study the face. I will access his personal file and memory logs later if I can, see if he has family—a mother or father, brother or sister, kids, anyone—I can send a note to.

Titus: I'm sorry, Alistar. It's hard, but I have to, because if I don't someone else will, and I can't leave that burden to someone else.

I save the words to a Notepad function, knowing it will take the shape of a letter to his family soon. I don't hope they will understand.

*Titus had pulled the trigger many times since he was a boy.
Men.
Women.
Kids like himself.
Kids not like himself,
but he didn't get sick over it anymore.*

*At first, his hands shook
the same way they had that first time.*

And then, the nightmares began.

Titus: And I couldn't let you hurt my friends. I have to protect them.

*Because he'd found something to fight for—
right, wrong, or indifferent.*

Titus: But I will see you again. You will not be forgotten.

*Every night,
I used to watch Titus toss and turn in his sleep,
and I would wonder what it was he dreamed about,
but now I know.*

*He saw them all in his dreams,
his targets,
and their families—
brothers. sisters. kids.
And every night, he watched them all*

*Shatter
like glass behind the weight of his bullet.*

I roll over onto my side and take a few more deep breaths to steady my shaking hand as I pull away from the trigger. I brush the dirt and soil off the white long jacket and trousers of my uniform and break down my weapon, my hands shaking the whole while.

A silence that only accompanies death hangs in the air.

I feel Shura's link reaching out to mine. I accept the link without hesitation.

Shura: You need to see this, Titus. Switch to my optics channel.

Titus: Alright.

I press a finger to my eye, and my vision switches over like a television station.

Shura: You pickin' me up?

Titus: Yeah.

I'm looking into the back of the moving truck, and seated on the ground in the innermost reaches of the van are two children dressed in hospital gowns. Both appear catatonic, staring blankly back at us.

Nevar: Shit.

I watch as he carefully climbs into the back of the moving van.

Titus: You recognize them, Nevar?

He makes his way to the back of the truck.

Nevar: Yeah.

He sighs, kneeling down in front of them.

Nevar: Damn rebels. What the fuck did they do to y'all?

Shura: Who are they?

Nevar: The girl's name is Reghan. The boy's, Rhyan. They're twins. Recruits from the Naxos Province. Just graduated not too long ago. I heard they'd gone missing.

There is angry sadness in his voice.

Titus: Are they responsive?

Nevar: Don't know. Doesn't look like it.

He waves a hand in front of them.

Nevar: Nah, the lights are on, but doesn't look like anyone's home. Completely catatonic.

Titus: Shura, can you bring me closer?

I look the van over carefully as Shura steps in. There doesn't appear to be anything inside other than the two children, not even a speck of dirt.

Titus: The back of the van is hypoallergenic? Why?

Shura stops in front of the children, who still sit huddled in tight balls at the back of the van. Their hair is short so that they're almost bald. Their finger nails are cut to the same length. Their eye color is exactly same color. Everything about them is exactly the same. That's wrong, even for twins. But there is something to go on.

Titus: How do you know them?

Nevar: I trained them myself. Or at least, I helped them train. They weren't the best soldiers physically, but they were smart like you. Figured they'd make their way into the intelligence branch.

He shakes his head.

Titus: Maybe they did.

Nevar: What do you mean?

Titus: I can't say until I know for sure. Just hang tight. I'm coming down. Shura, snap photos of everything while I— wait. I'm getting another link request.

I accept the link.

Titus: Commander Rommel.

Rommel: Excellent work, Titus.

His voice is gruff.

Rommel: One shot. One Kill. Efficient as always. That'll teach those damned N.A. rebels not to fuck with the UEC, eh? Hold tight. We're coming to get you. General Gynzo would like a word.

Titus: Yes, sir.

As I rise from the cold earth, I can see three white choppercraft emerge from over the hilltops. Two of them dip down and veer off to the right towards the highway. It's the UEC National Guard come to collect their stolen goods. The third dips its nose in my direction. It's coming to collect me.

Titus: I'm sorry.

Some part of me wishes the wind could hear me. Hopes that maybe, it could carry my words over the miles of grassland to make a home in those children's ears.

```
Capsule.memlog/Users/khaene_doloran/rebirth>  
"Rebirth"  
January, (date) 9152- (time)  
President Khaene Doloran  
UEC Project Department  
Asteria, United Europe Confederation
```

Six hours into the procedure, silver, stainless steel tentacles twist and turn with precision. With our minds linked, I watch the doctors direct the arms' actions as if they were their own to build...her.

Khaene: What is our progress, doctor? Is she complete?

I lean over the shoulder of the doctor sitting at the computer station center of the surgical observation room and link to his vision. Diagnostics scroll across the screen, diagramming the progress of frame lying on the operating table below, projected in the right-hand corner of his sight function. The machine's tiny digits, too small for even the naked eye to perceive, weave the fine tapestry of her frame together. Fastening synthetic tendons smaller than the human eye alone could see to synthetic muscle. Synthetic muscle to unbreakable bone. Giving shape, form, and soon. Life. To a creature destined for perfection.

Doctor: We are six hours and thirty-three minutes into the operation, sir. Preliminary scans showed no damage to the original frame after Dr. Aljaha's theft. Physical augmentation process of the new frame is 99.8% complete. Output readings show 100% physical functionality. All we have left is to integrate the nervous system protocol with the muscular system protocol in her hard drive reader, so she'll be in complete control of her physical capacities, install her memory program, and upload her

consciousness file from her previous frame to the new frame. Then she's all yours for testing.

The doctor does not turn around in his seat to answer.

Doctor: I will say, with the data collected from the last batch of recruits, I'd guess after this round of testing and data collection with these frames, maybe one more model upgrade, and you'll have the best cyborg augmentation protocol we're capable of producing.

He takes a long sip from the coffee mug beside him.

Doctor: Those Valeran bastards won't know what hit them once these bad boys hit the battlefield.

Emp projects a vision into my mind—this small frame confronting an old man dressed in white monk's robes in open combat. The white beard that runs down his chin and curls at his feet whips around like a snake as he twists and turns, wielding a wooden staff skillfully in combat against the frame. At his back stands Luthr, Ien, Isa, Gimblin... all the Nine Dan of the Council, and an army of blank-faced men and woman, boys and girls garbed in the same white robes. Kyo and Trainees of The Order of Light.

My fingers dig into the leather back of the doctor's chair, wishing it were skin, as anger boils inside me. Yes, Emp. These frames will be strong enough to hold tie with the Order. I assure you.

A haze of uncertainty fills my spirit—Emp expressing his doubt at my promises. I see Emp's corpse-like figure draped in tattered black robes, standing in the white space of my mind's haven. Is it not taught in the Teachings of the Way that this world is only

an imperfect replication of Nothing? That we humans are nothing more than an imperfect replication of Xana?

He nods.

I stare down at the tiny child's frame lying on the table.

Doctor: Commencing consciousness download.

Six hours ago, that frame was nothing more than a pile of scrap metal, circuitry, and synthetic tissue. Now, look at it. Two of the machines tentacles stretch down and attach themselves to the frame's head at either temple. An elation the likes I have not felt since the last time I saw Kaeri courses through me. A smile creeps onto my lips.

Humanity is imperfect. Our bodies and minds fragile. They break. They tear. They age. And because of that we die. Even the monks of the Order. Our resonance with celestial draws us as close to The Essence as humanly possible. But the power of a celestial is beyond what the human body can maintain at a constant. It stretches and rips our bodies, minds, and souls apart. In this semi-augmented form, we are still barred from perfection by the limitations of flesh and blood. And therein lies our undoing.

I watch the percentage on the download bar climb closer to one hundred, as memory files and physical function pass, rapidly across the screen.

For one hundred years, I have worked to synthesize human anatomy and replicate it, just as we were replicated from the likeness of Xana. And with these augmented bodies, man will ascend. Surpass Xana, the Hollowfax, all of them. These bodies have no such limits. These bodies, down to every last nerve and fiber ending, are synthetic. Composed and synthesized to be nearly indestructible.

Where synthetic bodies are deficient, they can be rebuilt and improved. Everything they see, everything they touch, every scent, every thought, every memory, every move they make is recorded visually and likewise transcribed verbally for analysis. But now they are connected like the trees and plants of the forest in a network very like the natural essence that ties us to the earth. Their very existence is now stored in a database for later information processing. From the extrapolation of that data they can be improved. With these synthetic frames, we draw as close to machines as is possible while still maintaining our humanity. We're simply more efficient—stronger, faster, smarter. We can become perfect. And transfused with the shards of the Hollowfax we've found, our soldiers will do everything the monks of the Order can do and more.

I see Emp smirk in his clever way.

We will never die.

Emp projects visions into my mind—another black-hooded figure standing on a hilltop, the whole of the earth and all its inhabitants herded beneath him cloaked in shadow. All bow before him. He stretches out his cloaked arms towards the heavens. The sky darkens, and a feeling of emptiness invades every inch of my body. I wriggle my fingers and toes. Wrench my neck back and forth to free myself of the sensation.

Yes, I'm sure Darlke will be most pleased. *Fac bonitatem solum.*

I push the image from my mind as the download reaches one hundred percent. The mechanical tentacles detach themselves from the frame, and the doctor's diagnostic panels now reads, "Aware."

Doctor: Rhyan, can you hear me?

His voice projects loudly through microphones along wall in the room below.

The frame opens its eyes groggily.

Rhyan: Wha—Where am I?

She turns her head towards the straps restraining her legs and arms. Terror leaps into her eyes.

Rhyan: Where am I? What's going on? What is all of this?

Doctor: Calm down, Rhyan.

His voice is reassuring. Pleasant even.

Doctor: Your augmentations have been expanded and upgraded. That's all. How are you feeling?"

Rhyan: Help me!

Tears roll down the frame's cheeks.

Rhyan: Someone please! Help me!

The doctors shake their heads.

Khaene: What's wrong, doctor?

Doctor: Nothing sir, Nothing at all. It's a normal response. This upgrade is extensive, a complete overhaul and rewiring of the circuit board. Her senses are probably heightened five to ten times what she's used to, and she probably doesn't know how to control them.

He sighs.

Doctor Two: She's about as close to a newborn as one can get, experiencing the world in a whole new light. It might be a bit more than she can handle right now. We'll put her out for now and try again later. If we can't get her to cooperate, we'll wipe her memory bank and start her fresh for testing. I'll keep you posted.

Khaene: Thank you, Doctors. Message me when she's ready.

The tentacles extend once again from the ceiling and connect themselves to the screaming head of the frame. In seconds, she is fast asleep. Less than two percent of what lies beneath is true flesh and bone developed in the womb, but yes, she does look incredibly...real. She is perfect.

I feel Emp, staring at the frame through my eyes. He projects a vision—a baby being birthed. A mother holding and cuddling her after a successful birth.

Soon, Kaeri. Soon.

*

The elevator jerks to a halt on the main floor and opens.

Guards: Your Majesty.

The guards standing at either side of the elevator door turn and bow as I exit the elevator. I nod to them as I pass.

Khaene: Horas.

I link to one of the conscripts stationed at the information desk to right of the door. The boy looks at me, clearly shocked that I know him by name.

Horas: Yes, Mr. President.

Khaene: Send word to General Gynzo. Tell him I will meet with him at Headquarters shortly.

Horas: Right away, sir.

He bows. His eyes glaze over, as he links his mind to the communication servers to find a recipient in the Headquarters. Clearly, his augmentations are of the first generation. I open his file and scan through its content. Horas Elderick. 17. Brown hair.

Brown Eyes. State of birth Bysill in North Umbra. Enlisted at age seven, after parents killed in rebel raids on his village. Ten years of service.

A few seconds pass, and the consciousness returns to his eyes.

Horas: General Gynzo awaits your arrival, sir.

Khaene: Thank you, Horas.

Power is the only god the animals will answer to. And soon, I will give you all the power to take back everything you have lost.

I turn and continue through the lobby into another long, windowed hall. Sunlight pours through the windows. Below a sea of skyscraping city, brightly lit packages of cement and steel.

The hall reeks of coffee grinds and cheap herbal tea. Medical scribes, research assistants, and conscripts in their black long gowns, as well as military recruits in their long black robes, take their breaks around coffee tables and on the lounge couches that line the hall. Some talk about whatever state-sponsored show they saw at the theatre the previous night. Where they'll travel to next. What their plans are once the war is over. Others press their heads against the window and watch. Skycars and military hovercraft inch along the busy infrared roads interlacing through the tops of buildings like Old World rollercoasters. Listen. To the honk of horns and the wail of sirens. The screech of skycars and skytrains breaking as they pull into station. Yet, still unable to drown out the constant drone of voices filtering in and out of day clubs that will soon turn to nightclubs. All twitching limbs of another city suffering from insomnia.

I look into their faces as they all stand to bow as I pass. They don't know it, but I know them all by name. Maybe not on sight. But I have access to all of their files. And as

my eyes rest on their faces and my identification function projects each of their names, I now know them as if they were my own. I see everything. Down to those birthplaces in the smallest of rural cities I may have liberated. United. But never visited.

An alarm goes off in my head, telling me sunset is soon. I stop for a moment and realize the whole hall seems to have fallen silent. Out of the corner of my eye, I see them, all the children. Their eyes wide, staring in my direction. Waiting for instructions that will not come.

I show them a cheap smile and take a seat next to a boy sitting on the closest couch. Mychal M. Thirteen. State of birth: Delphine in East Umbra. He stares out the window, a sketchbook resting on his lap, pen scratching back and forth across the page, unaware of my presence.

I offer him a link. His eyes light up. He realizes who is offering the link. The sketchbook flies from his lap, landing face first on the carpet flooring, as he jumps to his feet, slams his heels together, and pounds a fist over his chest in salute. He accepts the link.

Mychal: Sir, I'm sorry. I was—

I laugh at his drastic change in demeanor and hold up a hand to stop him. I pick up the sketchbook and hand it back to him.

Khaene: It's alright. Mychal, isn't it? Please. Sit down.

He looks at me, then down at the seat. I extend a hand, offering it back to him. He lowers himself slowly back onto the cushion, but still positions himself with his back rigid and straight.

I extend the link to the rest of the children in the room. They all accept.

Khaene: Please all of you. Sit. Watch the sunset with me.

All: Yes sir.

They are all part of the fold now. My kingdom. My family. I turn my sights to the west and implore them to simply watch. For just this brief moment, not to think of me as any more than what I am. A man. So we can enjoy our sunset together. A father and his children.

Khaene: Do you smoke?

I pull a pack of menthols from the pocket of my suit jacket.

Mychal: No sir.

He shakes his head viciously as if he's afraid I've asked him a trick question.

Khaene: Probably wise. Do you care if I do?

His eyes shoot to mine.

Mychal: N-No sir.

Khaene: Thanks.

I pull a pack of matches from the same pocket, strike it, and light the cigarette, inhale short and swift to keep the conversation flowing.

Khaene: Do you all often come here to watch the sunset?

I look around the room. Hesitant looks pass between them.

Khaene: No?

I turn to Mychal.

Khaene: How about you?

He shakes his head. The sketchbook is now wedged between the pit of his arm and the arm of the couch.

Mychal: Not often. There's never really any time.

Khaene: Yes, it does seem there's always something that must be done these days.

At least, there's time today though, right? Time to sketch, even.

A weak smile creeps onto his lips. I glance down at his book.

Khaene: Might I see?

Mychal: Yes sir.

He nods, offering me the book hesitantly. I open it and flip through the books contents. The sketch work is well done. The boy is talented. Towards the front—landscapes of an oceanside town: fishing docks, children playing in a field, sunsets over the water, all dressed in beautiful light and colorful accents and shadings. But the more pages I turn, the less landscapes I find. Towards the back—soldiers' portraits and the sunset from this exact same spot. Always done in harsh, gritty greyscale. Except for one. A full body portrait of a naked girl. This one drawn with the same color and life as the portraits earlier in the book. Clearly, whoever this girl is, she means a great deal to him.

Khaene: This is marvelous work, Mychal. Might I show the others?

He nods again hesitantly.

I pull myself up on the couch like a child too short to see over its back.

Khaene: All of you, gather around. I have something to show you.

I wave them over with a smile. Genuine this time.

Slowly, they all pack in around the couch. When they are all settled, I flip open the book to the most recent drawing of the sunset. Whispered awe bounces back and forth between them, as they ogle over the drawing. In my peripherals, I see Mychal blushing, a quiet smile slipping onto his lips.

Khaene: Sometimes I like to paint. Art is good for people like us. The unfortunate ones. The ones life has cursed, robbed, and abandoned. One day I'll show you all a perfect sunset. The kind I like to paint. There's a little cove in the cliffs along the beachfront in the Hearth where I come from. When you're there, for whatever reason, you can never quite tell where the sea ends and the sky begins. At sunset, the sun dips down out of the sky and seems to sink into the water below. It's truly a spectacular sight to behold.

I glance down at Mychal.

Khaene: Once you've seen it, you will know true beauty. You will know what it truly means to be at peace.

Mychal: I remember those sunsets.

His voice seems to withdraw from us into himself.

Mychal: We used to have sunsets like that. Well, not here. But back in my home town.

He throws a weary glance in my direction, waiting for me to reprimand him for speaking out of turn. I grin.

Khaene: Is that so?

Mychal: Yeah, I mean nothing as grand as what you just described, but we lived right off the beach and all, and yeah I remember...the sunsets were nice. Real quiet.

He gives a small smile. There's a glimmer in his eye as he speaks. An innocence that fades faster than it came. His gaze drops to the floor. Remembering.

Another boy, Timothy, pipes in from the back of the gathering.

Timothy: We never had anything like that where I'm from up north. When the sun sets it's over the mountains. The sky turns a bright orange just like it is here, and I swear you'd think the mountains were giant men. We'd always sit outside with the village elders, and they'd tell us stories about the giants that used to walk the earth, and this great flood the gods sent to wipe them all out. But instead, they climbed on each other's backs, waited for the sun, and then turned to stone instead of drowning. Or something like that.

A few of the children giggle or roll their eyes. Then another older girl, Amethys, speaks next.

Amethys: In the west, sunset is a time for prayer. All the families gather in their homes and pray. Thanking the gods for the day that has passed, and praying for good fortune in the days to come.

The sun continues to descend behind the walled expanse of the city, giving way to night, without fuss or notice from the city below. The city dresses itself in bioluminescent shades of green and yellow-orange and white that dribble down the face of every building within sight, spilling over the roads and people below.

Khaene: Well, one day, if you work hard and become strong, you will all see your homes. Your villages. And your sunsets once again. I promise you.

I reach out and ruffle the black hair atop Mychal's head.

Khaene: We will all see our homes again.

I stand and straighten my suit jacket.

Khaene: Goodnight, my children.

I give an embellished bow to them before continuing down the hall. And the group disperses to return to their work. These children. They'll never know a beautiful

sunset in this city. In this crab-barrel world. Until the war is won, all these poor souls will ever know are hard days, concrete sunsets, and restless nights. But I will give it to them.

Through my vengeance, I will give them peace.

As I walk, a vision— Mychal lying on his back, watching the sunset. His bloody, bullet-riddled body, strewn amongst the corpse stained battlefield. That same innocent glimmer glossing eyes void of life.

Yes, many will die fighting for that perfect sunset.

I turn and look at them all once again as I reach the elevator. Every one of them has their own story. We all come from somewhere different. A different place. A different people, but what ties us all together. Me to them. Them to me. Is that our stories were all stolen from us. But we will have them back with these new bodies. Bodies without limits. We will crush our enemies.

The elevator door opens, and I link the building's elevator function as I enter.

Khaene: Sky deck.

The elevator jerks a bit, then shoots upward.

Still, there can be no victory without sacrifice. If one of them should fall, they fall knowing at the very least, their countrymen, their children, and their children's children, will know that sunset in his place. And all those generations that follow will carry peace and prosperity with them.

The elevator door opens. Again I am greeted by two guards in black suits. They escort me to the hoverchopper waiting on the flight deck a few yards away. I take my seat in the hoverchopper. Strap myself in and prepare for takeoff.

*

It rains.

It rains because it rains, Khaene.

I hear her voice in my head, as I listen to the rain drum against the windows of the conference room.

Even: Our campaign into the south has seen relative successful so far...

Over the clank and clatter of Od and Gynzo's plates, stainless steel dishes, and salad forks, I realize Even is still talking to the table behind me. Still giving his report.

I try to focus. Not just hear Even's words, but actually listen.

Even: We've established air dominance in the early weeks of the campaign, but the insurgents are more resourceful and less primitive in their nature than we thought. We may have underestimated them...

At some point in the past ten minutes, from the pocket of my jacket, I produce a small, milky crystal shard, which I turn over in my fingers.

Rain is a bad omen.

It rains because it rains, Khaene.

Even: While airstrikes have been relatively successful, hit-and-run ambush tactics are resulting in heavy casualties.

Every word draws my attention back in time. Back to that night along grass hills of Coatza. Back to her. Back to Kaeri.

It rains because it rains, Khaene.

With every day that passes, I draw nearer to seeing you again, Kaeri.

I stare at the reflection of myself plastered in the wall, distorted and blurred by the rain.

Why am I afraid?

My mind continues to drift. Browsing virtual time and space. Searching aimlessly.

Reflection: an image that is seen in a mirror or on a shiny object.

-Something that shows the effect, existence, or character of something else.

-Something that causes people to disapprove of a person or thing.

Something that causes people to disapprove of a person or thing.

I see my hollow, transparent reflection in the window. The hard lines, the greying hairs, the see-through emptiness.

I'm not the boy I used to be.

Even: Our intel suggests the Northern Alliance have built an elaborate tunnel system throughout the countryside, and at this point, they still have the support of the local people. We can only continue air bombardments for so much longer before civilian casualties begin to climb at a more rapid pace.

My mind settles on an article in *Science for Simpletons*.

Any translucent surface both reflects and refracts light.

Reflection for these surfaces is less than the refraction. In fact, *only about 5% of the light is reflected.*

During the day, light from inside a room is being refracted out and reflected back inward. Outside light follows similar conduct, being mostly refracted into the room, and reflected back outside. To see a reflection, one must look

more a carefully, because most of the light filtering in is outside light.

However, during the night, there is little coming from outside. So the majority of the light you see is due to reflection. Thus, one can more easily see their reflected image.

Reflection or refraction?

I tap my fingers against the arm of my chair. It does the same. I tilt the short glass of bourbon to my lips and take a drink. It does the same. I blink it. It blinks. We move in unison, but it is not me.

The real question, however, is: if the reflected image possesses the same intensity, why does one see it more easily at night than during the day? The answer: The inner workings of the eye.

You see, the eye doesn't retain a set sensitivity to light. Whenever light concentrations are high or intense, the iris contracts, restricting the entry of light into the eye, resulting in the eye being able to perceive bright light but making dim light invisible. However, when dark, the iris expands, making dim light visible and bright like painfully blinding. Likewise, the retina also acts as a regulatory force, which is why it takes half a minute or more for the eye to adjust to a dark room. Our irises, however, can dilate within a few seconds.

So, during the day, refracted light from the outside forces the irises to contract; therefore, reflected light is near invisible. However, during the night, the pupil is dilated, so you can clearly see a reflection.

Even: Sir...

But will her eyes see? Am I what you always feared? Will she understand why I had to—

Even: Sir!

My eyes stick on Even's reflection in the window. Even through the rain's distortion, there's no question he is upset.

I spin in my chair to face the table, as Even opens a file in our visual functions. An array of three-dimensional model maps of the NA landscape circle in place over the center of the conference room table. Aerial video footage of various strategic airstrikes plays from a projected square screen just above. White-heat signatures cluster together in short lines, crossing heavy tree-laden hilltops. Communications plays in our ears—pilot gives target coordinates, target coordinates confirmed, pilot asks for clearance, clearance given. Short and sweet process.

A set of crosshairs, steady and unwavering, pan across and center on the targets perfectly.

Controller: Rocket's launched, inbound hot.

The nonchalant calm in his voice strikes me as casual conversational more than authoritative.

The crosshairs rattle followed by a hollow repetitive *peck-peck-peck-peck-peck-peck* as rockets launch from the hovercraft.

The heat signatures don't stop. They don't run. If they even look up, I can't tell. And the grey screen burst into plumes of white flame.

One in six strike the center of the crosshair. It's not enough to bring the heat signatures down. They fire again. Miss. A third time. Miss. A fourth round. Finally, the heat signatures meld into a single white ghost that dissipates into grey.

Crewman: Yeah, right there.

Controller: That's it... Got him.

The crew celebrate together.

Gynzo: Shit shots, but they got the bastards.

At the far end of the table, Gynzo rips a slab from an oversized turkey leg with his long fingernails and shoves it into his mouth.

Gynzo: Fucking rats were resilient.

He chortles, spewing chewed meat down the braids of his red beard and the front of his long leather jacket. He kicks his boot-covered feet up onto the table.

Od: Our goal is to unify these countries with as little bloodshed as possible. I would not recommend the—

Gynzo: Fuck that! Keep torching the bastards. You toast enough of them they'll give up sooner rather than later.

Od takes the napkin from his lap and dabs the edges of his lips.

Od: A successful strategy as proven by our predecessors overseas in their campaign of Old Vietnam. Have you read any of the histories?

Gynzo sweeps his feet off the table and throws the napkin down violently.

Gynzo: No, I haven't, but I have torched plenty of villages in my time.

He smiles wryly.

Gynzo: Believe me, the locals get the message pretty quick.

Two more videos play from the file hovering above the table. Two more bombings—another in the countryside, another obliterating a small village.

Even chews on his jaw.

Even: They're fighting for a religious ideology and to maintain their freedom. In their eyes, we're an invading force on lands that they have called home for a thousand years. They won't be deterred so easily.

He turns back to me.

Even: Sir, we need maps of their tunnel systems.

He ushers the single strand of blond hair back into the heap of overly greased comb over.

Even: We still have superior fire power, but if we can't rout the enemy from their tunnels into the open, I fear the conflict will last well into the summer unless one of us chooses to intervene.

Gynzo raises his hands.

Gynzo: Sir, I'll end the conflict in a week guaranteed. I...

Od: Any intervention from one of us would without question draw attention from the Order. We cannot risk it.

Gynzo throws his hands in the air wildly.

Gynzo: They know we're here, dammit, and yet, they've done nothing to stop us thus far. They're spineless cowards.

Od: Risk. Reward, Gynzo.

Gynzo strokes the length of his beard, deep in sarcastic thought.

Gynzo: Ah well, what is it those old farts used to say, Od? I believe it was, You gotta risk it to get the biscuit.

In my mind, Emp projects an image—two children fighting and bickering over breadcrumbs.

I finish the cranberry vodka sweating in my short glass in front of me in one sip. I take the handle of *Fris* from the ice bucket at my end of the table and pour myself another drink. Down it in one gulp as well.

Even: I will resolve this conflict as soon as possible! I just need time! And maps.

He turns to me.

Even: I just need the maps, sir.

Khaene: Then get them.

I pour myself another drink but let it rest on the napkin on the table in front of me.

Khaene: There's always at least one native in need of money or medicine. We can provide both.

Even: Yes sir.

Gynzo: Aggressive interrogation is always an option.

Gynzo motions me to pass the *Fris* his way. I slide it across the table and he catches it. Brings it to his lips and takes a long swig,

Gynzo: I believe I read somewhere that waterboarding is quite the effective means by which to extract information.

He smacks his lips and glares in Od's direction.

Od takes the dirty utensils from his plate and places them in correct order beside his plate, according to the demands of proper etiquette.

Od: You are truly a repulsive creature.

Gynzo snickers, pointing the tip of the bottle in Od's direction.

Gynzo: Repulsive. Maybe. But remember this boy. In war, the things that repulse you. The things that leave you with nightmares. Are always the most effective. No doubt.

Khaene: Od.

I cut in before Od can rebut.

Khaene: Report on the north.

I turn my attention to his black-haired twin brother, sitting across from him.

Od straightens the black tie around his neck and readjusts himself in his seat. He is the opposite of his brother. Always cool, calm, and collected. Never nervous. He sits with perfect posture.

Od: Intel has confirmed the enemy is stockpiling weapons and recruiting heavily in the mountains in preparation for the fall and spring. That woman you spoke of, Nilsa. It appears she is their leader.

At the mention of the name, my gut twists, yearning for another drink.

Khaene: And a surprise winter offensive is out of the question?

Od: Winter offensives in the Russian region have historically ended unsuccessfully. The conditions are less than hospitable for long-term engagements. I'd recommend that we blockade and starve them out, but the campaign in the south has been prolonged. And by now, whatever provisions they've stockpiled should be enough to last well into summer, when they can grow in the fields behind their walls.

I massage the bridge of my nose with one hand.

Khaene: I spent ten years teaching that woman. Of course, that comes back to bite me in the ass as well.

Od: Well, you'll be pleased to know we've located her.

Khaene: Where?

Another screen projects over the table's center. Ground-level footage of a woman dressed in heavy furs with a long rifle slung over her arm plays on the screen.

Od: She was spotted in Holemguard only a day ago, recruiting in the local bars. I've arranged a Snake Team operation to take her out.

Emp projects an image—another crystal shard. The same shape and size of the shard I still hold between my fingers.

Khaene: Hold off Snake Team. I want to handle this personally.

Od straightens his back against his seat and straightens his tie again. His subtle way of confused protests.

I strike up a quick lie.

Khaene: I served with Nilsa for over a decade when I first arrived here. I know her better than anyone. If I can convince her to support our cause, she'll prove a powerful ally. As she already has the faith of the people consolidating power, it wouldn't be as difficult if we could leave her in charge of the region with a pledge of support.

Gynzo snickers and then bursts into an obnoxious round of sarcasm filled laughter.

Gynzo: This whole meeting is really starting to piss me off.

Khaene: What?

All eyes turn to the empty vodka bottle clasped like a club in his hands.

Gynzo: We've been wallowing in this godforsaken country for almost a century.

A goddamn century.

He glares around the table at all of us.

Gynzo: Now, we're this close to getting our revenge, and you cowards want to waste more time over some fucking rebels hiding in the mountains?

He slams the bottle on the table as he shouts. It shatters in his grasp, and he crushes the shattered pieces in his palms until blood streams down his wrists.

Gynzo: Did you all forget our pledge? DID YOU FORGET WHAT THEY DID TO US?!

He bangs his fist against the table top, flames spitting between his fingers, leaving the table top beneath his fist scorched and marred by fire.

Gynzo: And you.

He points a bloody finger in my direction. The air in the room suddenly swelters.

Gynzo: Don't think I don't know what went on between you and that girl back then!

My eyes bore into his, and he stares back at me like a rabid dog.

Gynzo: Your little plaything left you, and now you want her back. You'd betray the cause for some two-bit brothel whore.

Khaene: Careful, Gynzo. Watch your tongue.

His lips curl into a cruel, twisted grin.

Gynzo: See, there it is. Can't even deny it, can you? You actually *care* about her, don't you?

He laughs.

Gynzo: More than you care about us? More than you care about *them*? More than you care about Kaeri, maybe?

The chair clatters to the floor as I jump to my feet.

Khaene: One more word of disrespect, and you'll never speak again.

Gynzo shoots up from his chair, fast as flame inhaling dry wood to meet my challenge.

Gynzo: I like that look in your eye, Khaene. It's been a while since I've seen it.

He sniffs the air.

Gynzo: Bloodlust.

He rips the sleeves from his coat at the shoulder with a strong tug at each arm, exposing his arms completely. He flexes his hand, and flames consume the entirety of his hand. They spread upward, following the pattern of the tattoos encasing the length of his arms until finally the hair atop his head burst into flames.

Gynzo: Ohh...that feels good. It's been a while since I've been able to go wild.

The mania in his eyes lights with bloodlust.

I reach out my right hand.

Waste Away, Emp.

Power flows through me, clinging to my soul, as I merge with Emp's essence. The air turns sour as a black mist and swirls around my fingers. I clutch the mist, which quickly morphs and solidifies into a katana whose black blade stretches the length of my entire body.

Gynzo: Yeah! You wanna fuckin' go! Let's go!

He sniggers and bites at me. The sweltering heat makes it hard to breathe.

Gynzo: Come On, Khaene! Let's see what you got, old man!

I draw on Emp's sense and my vision sharpens. Our spirits work in unison. I feel him watching. My second set of eyes, ready to feed me information and influence my movements when necessary. I take the hilt of my katana in both hands and take up my stance, *Migi Gedan No Kamae*, preparing to strike, channeling my rage into essence.

We'll take him in one blow.

Od: Calm down, both of you.

I recognize the cold in his voice. The signal that he is about to open his eyes. Instinct draws my eyes away from him, but his eyelids snatch open, and he catches my gaze for just a moment.

The room sinks into an empty void. Utter, cold, darkness.

"Dammit, Od! Release me!"

I open my mouth to speak, but silence pours from my mouth. I can see nothing. Hear nothing. I sniff the air searching for a scent from the world outside my mind, but even my nose has betrayed me. Whatever illusion he has trapped me in, he also made sure to strip me of all my senses.

"I will release you when you are calm," his calm voice echoes through the void.

Fine. I inhale and exhale slowly. Until I am calm once again.

Slowly, my vision returns. Gynzo is snickering like a hyena across the table. He plops back down into his chair. From the inside pocket of his coat, he whips out a half-smoked cigarette, which he pops swiftly into his mouth. He snaps a finger, producing a tiny ember over the tip of his thumb, and lights up.

Gynzo: WOOO! Now, that was exhilarating. Sorry, lads. Just needed to blow off some steam. Crego and I are just... itchy. This city is cramped and stuffy. It's driving me crazy.

He places the pack on the table and slides it across the table towards me as he spins around childishly in his chair.

Gynzo: I need to get out and stretch my legs a bit, if you get what I mean.

I can feel Emp's annoyance wash over my spirit. I release our resonance, and my blade dissolves first into mist then to nothing, as I catch the pack with one hand, take a smoke and place it between my lips.

After taking a long drag of his smoke, Gynzo kicks his feet up on the table again and flicks a small embering flame across the table in my direction. The flame catches the end of mine, lighting it, before it fizzles at my back.

Khaene: You'll get all the exercise you could possibly want soon enough.

He shrugs.

Gynzo: Acceptable.

Od closes his eyes and folds his arms over his chest. I straighten the shoulders of my suit jacket.

Khaene: I'll go to Holemguard and talk to Nilsa. Try to convince her to rejoin our efforts to unify the land. If not—

I stare down at Gynzo.

Khaene: I will end her and put down the resistance myself.

Gynzo pulls the cigarette from his lips and puts it towards me.

Gynzo: Now that is the Khaene I know.

File IV

<Time Capsule.mlog/Users/lorandael_doloran/debriefing>
"Debriefing"
June 13, 2344 - 06:00:38
Apr. Lorandael Doloran
Hayama-Isshiki Beach
Hearth, New Japan

Swirl and Blow, Baru.

I channel her Essence, from its cycle in the cool breeze that drifts over Hayama-Isshiki Beach. I draw it to my insides. Let it flow freely through my spirit. Then tether to my limbs. With arms outstretched at my sides, I breathe my weapons into life. The wind answers my call, taking the shape of my will, katana and wakizashi.

I take up my stance in the beach sand, and prepare to practice.

I imagine my father standing before me. His yari drawn. My enemy. I watch his eyes as I circle around him, looking for an opening in his *Sojutsu*. Any tell in his movements that might hint that he is prepared to strike. Our eyes meet, and I can tell his goal is similar. He probes my eyes for any whisper or hint from my *Niten Ichi Ryu*, but he will find none. I am certain.

"I, Luthr, Hachi Dan and Head of the House Doloran, and Abari, celestial of Corrosion, do not grant this apprentice right to attempt the trials on the basis that the apprentice's resolve to preserve the balance is weak." His words rattle through every corridor of my mind. "You're not ready," he whispers at every turn.

Oh yeah?

Rage crawls from my throat in the form of a terrifying shout. I clamp down on the hilts of my blades and lunge forward fast as the wind to strike. I dance through the strike

series along the beachfront. Gusts of wind lash out at my invisible enemy like whips, each strike slicing through sand, water, and beach waves. The father in my mind parries each strike with ease, the way I know he would if he were here now in flesh and blood, but this only makes me strike harder, work faster, until once again I feel Baru's pull on my spirit to relent.

I do not push forward. This time I release our resonance, letting her Essence return back to its regular cycle in the wind. Sweat pours from my brow, as I struggle to catch my breath. Still, in my mind's eye he remains, standing in front of me, the tip of his yari hovered inches before the bridge of my nose. That same gratified smirk on his lips.

"You're weak," he says. "You always will be."

My eyes sink to the beach sand.

"I know."

I'm worthless.

An image projects in my mind—Baru shaking her head. Concern etched into every crevice of her perfect face.

Leave me alone, Baru.

I feel her spirit attempt to draw me inward into my Mind's Haven. She wants to talk face-to-face, but I reject her.

A single star in the night sky to the north, brighter than all the others, and I follow it out into the frigid water, stopping only when the waves' break punches me in the gut.

I don't fight back.

As the undertow swells into a new curl, I spread my arms, close my eyes, and fall back with the firm push of the break. I let the flux bully me underwater until I can hold my breath no longer and I claw for the surface. Salt fizzes in my ears as I catch my breath float in the surf, drifting aimlessly with the ebb and flow of the tide until my back anchors in the calm shallows somewhere before the drag of the tide.

Is this what it's like to be salt of the sea?

I loose all my wildest ponderings and wayward thoughts. Let them flow into words in no particular order with no particular reason, as long as they drown out Baru's attempts to resonate with me. This is one struggle she can't possibly understand, and just for a few minutes, I want to be alone.

*There was so much
I still didn't understand
The least of which was
How well Baru
Really did understand my struggle*

Further out, beyond the ripple of the shallows, a planet-sized moon peaks over the horizon, casting its light over the star-speckled calms, so that it is impossible to tell where the water ends and the sky begins.

It's funny how similar we are, isn't it, salt? Cousins, practically. Birthed of a supernova to live as stardust for a short time. So can I ask you, salt? Do you ever look up and see the stars as I see them? Do you ever look up and imagine your mother? Your father's star?

I find the constellation Orion. The great hunter. And in it, my wise Betelgeuse, the largest and oldest amongst the bunch.

I do. I think about her a lot. What kind of star was she? What did she look like? How bright did she burn? What other life did she give? In the soft cradling rock of the waves, I imagine what my mother's arm must have felt like. Father never talks about her, but I hear stories from Vyrael about how similar we are. About how much we look alike. How strong she was. How proud she would be.

I think of Father. The way he looks at me. Those eyes filled with disgust.

By now, my body has adjusted so that the water feels quite warm against my skin. I sink my consciousness into the sand and let the push and pull of the waves massage the ache in my muscles the way I imagine a mother might. Whoever she was. She must have been great. Because to him, I'll always be stardust.

"There's something liberating about asking questions that will amount to nothing, isn't there?" A voice calls from the shore over the hushed whispers of the surf. "Almost like one could close their eyes and decompose into nothing."

"Dan Saex?" I breach the surface and I spin around, flinging and dripping water, bowing at the waist as the old man approaches. "Bao," I address the Rhesus monkey lying lazily on his broad shoulders.

"You really are a serious one." He laughs, stopping at the edge of the dry sand. "Stand up, child. Stand up."

"I'm sorry, sir," I say. "I just wasn't...expecting anyone."

He gazes out over the ocean.

“I’m not surprised,” he says. “I’ve often found the solace of Hayama-Isshiki Beach an excellent place to seek the wisdom of the stars.”

“I’m sorry, sir. I’ll leave at once.” I bow again.

“No. No.” He waves off my statement. “Please stay. I actually came here looking for you.”

My expression must give away my surprise.

“I’d like to see something,” he says. “Indulge me?”

He stretches out his hand, offering me a place at his side in the sand.

“Of course, sir.” I join him on the beach. “What can I do?”

“Spar a round with me.”

“Uhh, yes-I mean yes, sir. It would be an honor.”

“Excellent.”

He thrusts his bō into the sand so that it stands on its his own. He shrugs the sleeves of his robes off leaving his upper torso exposed.

“Are you familiar with Bōjutsu?” he asks.

“Yes sir, I am. I’m proficient in most weapon combat styles.”

“Good.” He rolls his neck, stretches his shoulders, back, knees, and finally fingers, all of which give a loud cartilage freeing cracks. “I won’t have to take it too easy on you then.”

I’m grinding my teeth without noticing it. Is he making fun of me?

“Look at you,” he says, drawing his bō from the sand. “Your eyes watch me so carefully, observing my every movement for weakness.”

What?

He squats down repeatedly to stretch his legs. “You don’t even realize you do it anymore, do you? You’ve trained so hard that it’s second nature now. You do it without even thinking. It’s muscle memory.”

When he finishes stretching, he stands and yanks the bō from the sand.

“In all my many years as Head of the Order of Light, I’ve only seen one trial like yours,” He twirls the bō skillfully back and forth at his side before bracing it in his hands against his side. “A combination of raw untamed strength and a precision far beyond your years, but that was no Rojin Kohim or Randori demonstration. At best it was some sort of Taninzugake demonstration, one hundred and eight intercepting counterstrikes to create a perfect three-hundred and sixty degree defense while also being able to attack at the same time. Very impressive.” He shakes a finger at me. “But that look in your eye. Ah. I’ve seen it far too many times. In your mind, you were fighting someone, weren’t you?”

Words escape me.

“I thought so. What you showed us was a Rojin Tataki, but you haven’t master the Third Resonance yet, which is why you lost control. I get the sense that you lose control quite often.”

How he read me so well, simply by a few short minutes of uncontrolled kendo. Is this the perception of the Dan?

“I’d like to observe you when you’re sparring with a flesh-and-blood opponent,” he continues. “Not just the wind.”

For the first time that I can remember, I am hesitant in the face of combat. Instinctively, I reach out to Baru—that angered, displeased portion of my spirit.

Forgive me, Baru. I was petulant, but I need your help.

Petulant

might not have been a strong enough word.

Remind you of someone else?

In the same breath, she relents. I know she feels the earnest nature of my apology and also my fear.

Saex takes up his fighting stance.

In my mind, I see Baru—Stone-faced. Confident. Urging me forward.

You're right.

I nod, inhaling slow and deep to calm the spiking throb in my heart.

We can do this. Trust my instincts. Trust my training.

I draw her Essence into me.

Swirl and Blow, Baru.

Our spirits merge completely. Become one, master of the wind. I summon my katana and wakizashi and take up my stance.

“Come, Lorandael. Show me what you can do,” Dan Saex says, as my weapons manifest themselves in my grasp.

“You won't use your Rojin at all?” I ask, staring at the bō.

“Force me.”

“I'll warn you.” I take up my stance. “My sparring is much better than my show performances.”

“Let's see it then.”

I channel Baru's essence into my feet

Let's go.

I dash forward, covering the short distance between us in the blink of an eye. I flank his left and strike with a hard sweep of my katana at his waist. I've surprised him with my speed. I can tell by his slow reaction, but he is equally fast and his sense keen. He pivots and parries with perfect precision, catching the strike at the center of his bō, displacing the wind in strong gusts around us. I give him no time, following up the strike with an array of sweeps with my katana and jabs and slices with my wakizashi, testing his defense for all it's worth. I want to stay close. Keep his arms from extending.

I continue to gain ground, forcing him to give ground, but sticking to him. Never letting him create space. I sweep again at his right with my katana, a strike that must have surprised him. He parries late, catching the edge of my blade with his bō inches before it meets his waist. He pushes out to force my blade away, but he is strong, too strong, and he's left an opening. I relax my arm and allow the force of his push to thrust me into a strong tornado kick. He does not duck as I expect, and the face of my foot plants squarely into his jaw, knocking him off his feet and into the sand.

Baru jumps excitedly in my spirit, as Dan Saex picks himself up out of the sand.

“Good, Lorandael!” he exclaims. “Absolutely spectacular performance!”

He stands, brushes himself off, and spits out the blood pooled in his mouth.

“But what will you do now, I wonder?”

He holds the bō in outstretched arms at a horizontal angle, and the wind suddenly falls quiet. His bō slowly dissolves into nothing.

I feel Baru moves my spirit to alertness. He's merged with Bao.

This is his Rojin Randori.

“My turn,” he says, and the world falls silent.

Everything around us seems to stop in place. The cresting waves hold their break. The wind refuses to blow. My breath echoes in my ears as if I've suddenly been placed in a large empty room. Even Saex stands frozen in place.

I can't sense his presence at all. What's going on?

Baru's spirit urges me to dodge, but I'm too slow. I feel a firm pressure in my back. I give with the force and fall into a barrel roll. I turn to my back, and I see him frozen in the position of a perfectly executed back kick.

Where is he?

A quick projection—he's striking at my left. I brace myself with a cross guard just in time to catch another firm side kick, that sends me skidding backward ten yards or so. Instead of continuing forward, Saex remains frozen.

Baru, we need a plan.

Another projection—a clock, the hands moving and the world outside slowly down from its normal pace.

Right. He's slowing time. It's like I'm only seeing him in still frames.

Drawing closer to Baru, I wrack my brain hard for a plan.

Can't trust my eyes. I'm trusting your senses, Baru.

I lean on her heightened celestial senses, and use her as an extra set of eyes.

There. I feel him move and guard overhead just in time to deflect an axe kick with my forearm and jump away.

We have to predict his movement. Axe kick, I leapt backwards, what would I do next?

Then I know, I lean back and tuck into a back flip. I reach out my arms for what I guess will soon present itself. In an instant, his body throwing another side kick materializes beneath me. I grab onto his shoulders, pull myself down, and latch onto his back, wrapping my legs around his waist as tightly as I can, dragging us both back into the sand. I tuck an arm beneath his chin and clamp my hand across the collar of my robe to create a tight chokehold on his neck. With my free hand, I produce a wind-forged wakizashi, which I press to his neck.

“It’s over, sir,” I grunt through the strain of maintaining such a tight clutch on his body.

His body dissolves like a ghost from my clasps. I scramble to my feet, searching for any sign of him, but strangely I feel the wind against my skin and hear the waves crash again.

From my back, I hear a soft round of slow applause. I spin around, clasping the wakizashi in a reverse grip, ready to defend myself again.

“Weapons down, Lorandael. Our spar is over.” Dan Saex chuckles with a smile.

“How did you escape?” I ask, doing my best to mask my indignation.

“Come.” Saex walks past, and I follow.

“I control time, which means in a sense I can also control space. You did well to surmise that I was slowing down time as you perceived it, that you needed to work two moves ahead of my one, but you never considered that I could speed time up as well, did you?”

I bite my lip angrily.

“Considering all possible outcomes of a combat interaction without full knowledge of the opponent’s capabilities prior to the engagement is near impossible,” he says. “I’ve personally only met one individual who could see all of those outcomes at once and make the correct decision, but...” He glances down at me, and an excited glimmer steals into his eyes. “With the other intangibles you displayed, I’m now certain that with time and training you will be his equal.”

“You mean Khaene,” I reply sullenly, unable to hold his gaze.

His eyebrow raises.

“It seems Vyrael has shared more with you than I thought.”

“I’ve known the name for a while, but no one will tell me anything more.”

“And for good reason.”

There’s a scorn in his tone that draws my eyes back to him.

“Will you tell me about him, sir?” I ask. “Why my fa—I mean why everyone fears him so?”

The spark in his eyes dwindles, leaving only a cold emptiness.

“I’m afraid I cannot, child.” He stops abruptly. “I know you have heard a great deal of myth surrounding Khaene, most of which is probably false, but seeing as he is the former Ku Dan there is a great deal of sensitive information surrounding that name, which I am not permitted to give to any monk less than the status of Dan.”

Saex walks towards the water.

“I can, however, promise you that when you are ready. You will know everything,” he says, wading out knee deep into the surf.

“T-Thank you, sir.” I bow.

I relax a bit. Let the tension flow from my muscles. I hadn't realized how tired they are. It's not everything, but it is something. Something to work towards.

We stand in silence for a long while, Saex letting the water soak through the hem of his robes. He closes his eyes and inhales slow and deep.

"I've always loved this place," he says after a long while. "The earth here still remembers time before man entered the world. It truly is beautiful."

"It is," I say.

"Your father used to come here often as a child when things didn't go his way." He laughs. "And his pupil before you."

I try to imagine my father standing here as a young boy. Angry. Hurting. In the same way I do. I cannot imagine Khaene. I've never seen even a picture of him, but I imagine him looking. Acting. A great deal like my father.

"What's wrong with me?"

"Wrong with you?" Saex glances back at me

"All I want. I mean I just—I just want to prove to my father that—" The words catch in my throat. "I don't know why he doesn't love me."

I feel my fist clench at my side, and again, I want to cry, but can't remember how.

"I try so hard. So hard, but no matter what I do, it's never enough," I say. "I'm never enough. And I'm just so angry... So angry all the time, and I hate them both for it."

Saex smiles at me. "The river does not blame the mountain for which direction it flows, child."

My eyes narrow and I glare at him. "What?"

“You’re quite talented, Lorandael,” He says. “To learn Ninten Ichi Ryu from your master and develop your own functioning strike patterns. To have an eye such as yours at such a young age.” He chuckles shaking his head in disbelief. “And then to be able to blend it near flawlessly with your celestial resonance into a functional Rojin Randori is truly remarkable. Some might even call it genius. I didn’t think I’d see such talent twice in a lifetime. Your Rojin Tataki will surely be a sight to behold.”

Heat burns in my cheeks as he speaks. I cannot meet his gaze, so I turn away.

Am I blushing?

He sighs. “That is if you ever reach it,” he continues. “Even a genius is not without flaw. And what’s worse when you are overly gifted, *you* are truly your own limit, and those flaws that act as limits are much more difficult to identify and even harder to fix than they might be for the average practitioner.” His eyes narrow, and his voice lowers, as if he is no longer speaking to me but past me. “Your struggle will always be an internal one. A battle fought right here.” He points a finger at my head. “And here.” He turns the finger towards my heart.

“Your father loves you, Lorandael. He’s been through many trials in his time, more than most, and he may not remember what it means to love or how, but he does, and he pushes because he fears for you because of your gifts and because sometimes what lurks beyond the horizon can truly be terrifying.”

Saex lifts his gazes up to the stars, draping the side of his face in cool moonlight.

“There is a whole world beyond this island.” He looks back down at me. “But you will never know peace until you learn to love and live for yourself.”

“But sir, is that not selfish, sir?” I say, truly confused. “I thought our responsibility as monks of the Order was to protect the balance of the world. To live and die for others. How can I do that if I’m *living* for myself?”

“And that, child, is a question of the balance you must discover for yourself. There is still a great deal you must learn about the Essence and what it means to be a monk of the Order, but perhaps more importantly, there is still a great deal you must learn about yourself, which is why I’ve decided to send you to train elsewhere.”

A frigid ocean wind covers both our skin in chill bumps. Saex wades through the water and returns back to the shore.

My face freezes with the wind, but my insides are boiling and my heart jumps wildly in my chest.

“But Dan Saex, I thought—and you said...”

He holds up a hand to silence me.

“You are young, a quality that right now can override your skill. That being said, it is clear that you are far too advanced to continue training at the Temple, so you will train with Kyu Caelix and assist him and his team on their mission in East Europa. Something in my spirit tells me you will be of use to him.” Bao materializes on his shoulder and winks at me.

“Dan Saex, I...” I catch myself mid-sentence, struggling to compose myself.

“Thank you, sir. I will not disappoint you.”

He shakes his head as he starts past me back towards the path through the cliffs that lead from the beach back to the city. “I would worry less about disappointing me, and worry more about living up to your own expectations.”

My own expectations?

“Caelix will report back to me when he believes you are ready to retake the Kyu Trial. Now if you will excuse me. It’s time for an old man to rest his bones.”

“I understand, sir.” I bow. “I will work harder to earn the Council’s trust.”

“Till next we meet, Lorandael Doloran.” He waves as he plods across the beach front back towards the rocks.

I collapse back into the sand and find Betelgeuse in near disbelief.

Did you hear that, Baru? W-We’re finally leaving this place. We’re going on a mission.

Baru’s warmth massages my spirit. In my mind, a projection—I am flying. Streaking just over the break of glass ocean waves stretching beyond the horizon. In the distance, a pinprick of land swells and grows under a brilliant sun, and I zoom over fields of wild grass and forests.

Bibliography

- Alexander, Elizabeth. Memoir Chronicles The Joy And Loss Of 'The Light Of The World' Rachel Martin. 19 April 2015.
- . *The Light of The World*. New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2015.
- Asher, Jay. *Thirteen Reasons Why*. Penguin Books, 2007.
- Atticus. *Love Her Wild*. Headline, 2017.
- Barry, Kevin. *Dark Lies the Island*. Graywolf Press, 2013.
- Beah, Ishmael. *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007.
- Bunting, J. 23 Essential Quotes from Ernest Hemingway About Writing. Retrieved April 2017, from The Write Practice: <<http://thewritepractice.com/hemingway-quotes/>>
- Campbell, James. A life in writing: Per Petterson. 2 January 2009. April 2017. <<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2009/jan/03/per-petterson-interview>>.
- Caputo, Philip. *Rumor of War*. Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1977.
- Card, Orson Scott. *Ender's Game*. Tom Doherty Associates, 2013.
- . *How to Write Science Fiction & Fantasy*. Writer's Digest Books, 2001.
- Carver, Raymond. "On Writing ." *The Story and its Writer: An Introduction to Short Fiction*. 6th Edition (2003).

Coelho, Paulo. *The Alchemist*. HarperCollins Publishers. 1988.

Collins, Suzanne. *The Hunger Games*. Scholastic Inc., 2008.

Craft and Art. 2014. April 2017. <<http://www.sfw.org/2014/02/craft-art/>>.

Dickman, Matthew. *Mayakovski's Revolver*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2012.

Didion, Joan. *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*. Macmillan, 1990.

Dorgan, Theo. *Greek*. Dedalus Press, 2010.

Faulkner, William. *The Sound and the Fury*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1984.

Gaiman, Neil. *American Gods*. William Morrow, an Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 2001.

Goss, Theodora. *The Strange Case of the Alchemist's Daughter*. Simon and Schuster, 2017.

Gregory, Larry McCaffery & Sinda. "An Interview With Raymond Carver." *Mississippi Review* (1985).

Grossman, David. *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*. Little, Brown, 2009.

Grossman, Lev. *The Magicians*. Viking Press, 2009.

Heller, Peter. "How I Wrote It: Peter Heller, author of "The Dog Stars"." Amazon Books . 2013.

---. *The Dog Stars*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012.

Mrjoian. Aram. "The Language Of Landscape: An Interview with Peter

Heller.” *Bookriot*. 07 May 2014,

<<https://bookriot.com/2014/05/07/language-landscape-interview-peter-heller/>>

Hemingway, Ernest. *A Farewell to Arms*. Scribner, 1995.

Hollander, J. *The Anxiety of Influence*. April 2017, from New York Times:

<<http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/11/01/specials/bloom-influence.html>>

Jones, Josh. The (Urban) Legend of Ernest Hemingway’s Six-Word Story:

“For sale, Baby shoes, Never worn.”. 24 March 2015. April 2017.

<<http://www.openculture.com/2015/03/the-urban-legend-of-ernest-hemingways-six-word-story.html>>.

King, Stephen. *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*. Simon and Schuster,

2002.

Kolln, Robert Funk & Martha. *Understanding English Grammar*. 9th. Pearson

Education, 2012.

Lanza, Robert, and Bob Berman. *Biocentrism: How Life and Consciousness*

Are the Keys to Understanding the True Nature of the Universe. BenBella Books, 2010.

Larson, Erik. *The Devil in the White City: A Saga of Magic and Murder at the*

Fair That Changed America. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2004.

Lee, Bruce. *Tao of Jeet Kune Do*. Ohara Publications, 1975.

"Looking To The 'Stars' For A Reason To Live." Fresh Air.

Interview with Dave Davies. 13 August 2012.

Ludlum, Robert. *The Bourne Identity*. Richard Marek, 1980.

Martin, George R. R. *A Game of Thrones*. Bantam Books, 1996.

Moore, Alan. *Watchmen*. DC Comics, 2008.

Nelson, Maggie. *Jane: A Murder*. Soft Skull Press, an Imprint of Counterpoint, 2005.

O'Hagan, Sean. "Fright club." *The Guardian*. May 2005.

Oliver, Mary. *A Thousand Mornings*. Penguin Books, 2012.

Palahniuk, Chuck. *Fight Club*. Norton, W. W. & Company, Inc., 1996.

Petterson, Per. *Out Stealing Horses*. Greywolf Press, 2003.

Petterson, Per. Per Petterson: A Family Approach To Fiction Lynn Neary. 23 September 2010.

Pullman, Philip. *The Golden Compass*. Alfred A Knopf, 2001.

Rowling, J. K. *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. Arthur A. Levine Books, an Imprint of Scholastic Inc., 1998.

Scott, Jeffrey. *How to Write for Animation*. Overlook Press, 2002.

Shinkai, Makoto. *Your Name*. Yen Press, 2017.

Silvey, Craig. *Jasper Jones*. Read How You Want/Accessible, 2009.

Snyder, Blake. *Save the Cat!: The Last Book on Screenwriting You'll Ever Need*. Michael Wiese Productions, 2005.

Springer, M. Seven Tips From William Faulkner on How to Write Fiction. Retrieved April 2017, from Open Culture:

Stein, J. (1956). William Faulkner, The Art of Fiction No. 12. Retrieved April

2017, from The Paris Review:

<https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4954/william-faulkner-the-art-of-fiction-no-12-william-faulkner>

Stocke, Joy E. Per Petterson: Language Within Silence. April 2017.

<<http://www.wildriverreview.com/interviews/per-petterson-language-within-silence/>>.

Takami, Koushun. *Battle Royale*. Translated by Yuji Oniki, Tokyopop, 2009.

Thorne, Jack, et al. *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*. WF Howes Ltd, 2016.

Tzu, Sun. *The Art of War*. Courier Corporation, 2002.

VanderMeer, Jeff. *Wonderbook: The Illustrated Guide to Creating Imaginative Fiction*. Harry N Abrams Inc, 2013.

Vonnegut, Kurt. *Slaughter-House Five*. New York, Monarch Press, 1974.

Wallace, David Foster. *Consider the Lobster: And Other Essays*. Little, Brown, 2005.

Wallace, David Foster. *Oblivion*. Little, Brown, 2004.

Walls, Jeannette. *The Glass Castle: A Memoir*. Scribner, an Imprint of Simon & Schuster, Inc., 2008.

Wells, H. G. *The War of the Worlds*. B. Tauchnitz, 1898.