

ILLUMI
NATION

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Blurb

When sixteen-year-old Alex signs up for a science camp, she isn't expecting to be trapped on a space station full of ghosts. (The space station? Yes. The ghosts, not so much.)

Sixteen-year-old Finn is ready for every ghost you could throw at him but is less prepared for his entire life to be shattered. (If only he had friends to help pick up the pieces.)

It turns out that summer breaks don't always go the way you'd want. Sometimes, you get a standard fun-filled holiday, plus a cool new experience to put on your university applications. Other times, you're forced to face down injustice, infinity and a space station full of monsters while figuring out who you want to be and how you want to change the world.

If you're lucky, you might even discover an entirely new universe – a universe where everything is illuminated.

Author's Note

Please send any feedback to justin@justin.zone! (Or just send me a message on social media, or talk to me in person.) I would love to hear about what you liked and didn't like, or what worked and didn't work. This is still very much a draft – even though I've done my best to polish it up, where I can – so it needs your help to improve!

Broadly, this is aimed at a young adult audience, and it's inspired by the kind of thing I liked reading when I was fifteen. I also wanted to use this as a chance to experiment with a few different writing styles and techniques I hadn't tried before. Some of those were fun to play around with, while others were... challenging, let's say.

Most of all: thank you for reading. I write stories for myself, but I also write stories to share them with other people. It took a little longer than expected, but I'm glad I can finally share this one with you.

Before

I look down at my hand, where I've written the word: "*Nope*."

Well, too late now.

I've never been to Saturn.

First time for everything.

Of course, it's not until I'm sitting in my sleeping pod that I realise I don't want to be here. The drugs are already taking effect, the sights and sounds of the shuttle around me reduced to a broken-camera blur. On my hand, 'nope' turns into 'ndlgijis.' I want to run. More than anything, I just want that *feeling*, that split-second, endless point in your stride when both feet leave the ground and it turns out people could fly all along. I want the sun on my face, the ache of breath in my throat...

Am I running away?

Nah. I'm running towards something.

Maybe I'm just running.

Probably won't be doing much running on Saturn, though.

I sigh, which turns into a yawn. Drowsily, I look to the pod on my right.

I'm sitting in my sleeping pod, minding my own business like almost always, when the girl beside me asks me a question.

"So why are YOU here?"

I look at her. She asks again. My heart skips a beat.

"Um... I don't know?" I reply.

"You don't know?" She squints in disbelief. "And I thought / was in trouble." She yawns, and it's like I'm going to be swallowed. "Well, good luck," she says.

"You... too?" I'm not convinced any luck is required, going into a month-long cryonap. I suppose if things go terribly wrong, the ship will explode and that's that, but it seems unlikely.

The girl lies back in her pod. Seconds later, she's asleep.

I lie down too, resisting the urge to flee.

It's quite strong.

I resist it.

The lid of the pod scythes towards me. Air hisses as it seals.

It's going to be fine.

Either that, or we're all going to die, and it'll be all my fault.

PART 1

RUN

ALEX I

There's a boy staring at me.

He's pretending not to, but he totally is.

"Looking for something?" I ask. It comes out more aggressively than I'd intended.

"No," he says. "Sorry." He turns away, lips pressed together in a grim half-smile, like the smile that materialises when you're giving condolences at a funeral and can't figure out what you should be doing with your face.

I look away too, staring at my feet. I realise I'm not being friendly. I hate myself for not being friendly. But partly because I have an incredible headache, and partly because I'm terrified of being stranded out here in space, I don't particularly care about being social right now. The shuttle vibrates. I feel it in my seat, the engines' whine growing in intensity.

"Woah," says another girl. "Is space turbulence a thing? Does anyone know?"

I close my eyes. I want to take all her nervous energy and crush it.

Breathe in. Breathe out. In. Out. Lilted, seasick waves of small talk lap against my migraine. I tell my MeshMate I DO need more aspirin, thank you very much, and it grudgingly complies while flashing blood-red warnings on the insides of my eyelids. There's a cooling sensation as the medicine is dispensed from a capsule inside my ribcage.

The headache relents a little; then a little more. Eventually, I start feeling human again.

I open my eyes. I grit my teeth. *Okay*, I tell myself. *Time to make some frickin' FRIENDS.*

There are five of us, in this dinky old passenger shuttle. We have names. I'm bad with names. Thankfully, my MeshMate provides helpful labels.

Sitting to my left is a girl named Wake – the one worried about 'space turbulence'. If you took a cocker spaniel, a really fluffy meringue, an animatronic Disney exhibit, the entire concept of charades, plus the way a summer's day feels when it's fifty percent too hot, and put that in a blender and turned the resulting mixture into a human, that's basically Wake (in my limited experience,

which consists of ten minutes of barely paying attention while suppressing the urge to spew my guts out).

Left of Wake is a guy named Tao. He seems alright, if a bit bro-y. He strikes me the kind of person who's great at sports, smart enough to do fine at school, decently attractive with well-off parents, but not all that interesting to hang out with. He goes to the gym a lot. He has a contagious laugh. I bet if I chucked a cricket ball at his head right now, he'd catch it effortlessly.

Directly across from me is another dude, Sinas. Sinas is... hmm. If Wake's a cocker spaniel, Sinas is a panther. He's a lean steak, or chess, or a minimalist Japanese garden. He's not summer but winter, the kind that's both harsh and comforting, filled with skeletal trees and clouded breath and the crunch of ice skates on frozen canals. He exudes such an uncaring aura I can't help but admire him for it.

Next to Sinas is boy-who-stares. His label, according to my MeshMate, is Finn. Despite my earlier dickishness, Finn seems fine, and there are four things I've already noticed. One: he's a proper nerd. Two: he's extremely quiet. Three: he's extremely attentive. Four: he needs to fix his hair, immediately. A few strands of his fringe are cutting across his eyes, and I'm tempted to walk over there and yank them out myself.

I realise I'm staring and hurriedly turn away. Finn notices. He doesn't say anything.

Finally, there's me. I'm Alex, a.k.a. Judgy McJudgeface and I am, as you've noticed, both a teenage girl and a bit of a bogan. I'm annoying, stubborn, quite hypocritical, and still unsure why I got chosen for this exclusive excursion out to Saturn, since I wouldn't call myself a 'student leader' at the best of times. I also just described somebody as a winter's day which – let me tell you – is serious bullshit.

I smooth out the fabric of my pale pink jumper, folding my arms tight. "Does everyone know what projects they'll be working on?" I ask. "Once we get to the station."

The others look at me.

"A dark matter experiment," Wake says. "I'm developing software to process the data from it, it's SO awesome. Is your headache OK?"

"It's better," I lie, still picturing winter.

"Do you get migraines often?"

"No. I don't." That part's true.

"What about you?" Wake asks Tao. "What are you in here for?"

"You make it sound like we're being shipped off to a prison colony, hey." He laughs. Everyone else chuckles too, in nervy icebreaker mode, even though he's hovering around 2/10 on the joke scale.

"My mates totally agree," Wake says. "Normal people don't sacrifice their school holidays for a science camp."

"Normal people also don't get free trips to Saturn," Tao says. "Anyway, my project's related to synthesising energy-efficient ship fuel – fancy chemistry, basically. I'll be stuck mixing compounds all day. Pretty hectic."

"That does sound awesome, though! Or at least it's useful."

"Sure! I hope so. What else are you guys working on?"

Sinas sits up slightly. "Studying mating patterns of the Saturnian squid."

Tao blinks. "For fun, or...?"

"Partly to see how it affects genetic mutations, partly because my original project fell through, and this was something they could scrape together."

"Oh. That sucks."

"Eh. Squids are alright." He opens his mouth to add something, then thinks better of it. Instead, he queues up some songs on his MeshMate, signified by a speaker icon that blinks into existence above his ear. After a second, I send a request to listen in. After a second, he rejects it.

I resist giving him the evil eye and turn my attention to Finn.

"It's classified," he's saying quietly. "I don't think I'm allowed to talk about it."

Wake raises an eyebrow, her curiosity as majestic as the birth of a mountain range. "Classified?"

"It's a government thing," Finn adds. "I'm really not supposed to talk about it."

Wake leans closer. "Is it military?" she whispers.

"No! I mean— what's your project?" he asks me, more out of desperation than genuine interest.

The headache subsides briefly, a gap in the clouds. "It's not as cool as your stuff." I search for a way to dress up what I'm doing, to make it sound more impressive, but in the end, I settle for truth. "I'm a writer, mostly. I'll be writing about everything that goes on at the station for a newsfeed back home. They've been doing heaps of amazing work here for years, with barely any recognition. So that's what I'll be helping with." I smile, my heart racing for no good reason.

"That's awesome!" Wake says.

"Yeah, that's clearsky," Tao says. "I couldn't string two sentences together to save my mum's life. Are you ArtGen or analog?"

"Analog. All by hand."

"Woah, that's— what's the phrase? That's kind of a lost art."

"Awesome," Wake agrees. "So cool."

I'm pretty sure everything Wake sees, hears and does is 'awesome', but I'll take what I can get. And look, even if Tao's grammatically challenged, his jersey stretches tight across his chest in a way that's quite good (I bet he knows it, too).

Suddenly, the shuttle rumbles.

Nah, it more than rumbles – it *thunders*. The entire floor drops and I'm in freefall for a sickening second. Restraints clutch my shoulders, hard. So do Wake's fingers. My high-pitched "eek!" is punched out of existence by a 'BANG!' that's physically painful.

The lights go out.

"Woah," says Tao.

"Shit!" Wake hisses. Her hand's still on my shoulder. It hurts.

"Is everyone okay?" I hear myself ask.

"Sure," Sinas replies.

Finn nods, barely perceptible in the darkness. My MeshMate tries to boost the brightness, the shuttle's interior re-visualised in noisy monochrome. There isn't much – eight chairs (five occupied), some emergency supply cabinets, a single holoprojector that doesn't work – ten cubic metres of space and none of it looks new. Governments can't afford to be spendy these days, not compared to the corporations. I recognise the stink of burning insulation from countless afternoons spent fixing bots on the farm.

"What the *yak* just happened?" Wake asks.

"Power failure?" Tao suggests.

"Is the shuttle OK? Are we in trouble? Should I be screaming my lungs out before we all start eating each other?"

"Still gravity," Finn murmurs. "That means there's thrust."

"Probably just space turbulence," Sinas says.

Wake rolls her eyes.

I respect their capacity for stress-humour (strumour?) because something about being stuck in an airless void really *gets* to me: the idea we're probably the only human beings for millions of kilometres in every direction, and all that's between us and a painful death is roughly thirty centimetres of aging e-shields and plastic bulkheads, or alternately, all that's between us and a less painful, more *protracted* death is a working pair of antimatter am-drives. I've visited Luna more times than I can count, Mars twice, even Venus for a family holiday. I've saved the solar system from invading aliens in a dozen virtual realities, but this is different. My thoughts are drumsticks, my spine a cymbal in a jazz band intro. I mean, we woke up from cryosleep literally ten minutes ago and the situation's ALREADY turning ash? Plus, Wake's little joke about cannibalism has roots in truth for stranded ships, and of the people here, I'd probably be first to go. My legs are kind of meaty, and if you amputated one and prepared it properly, it'd sustain the others for a week. I imagine their looks as they size me up, and Tao's regretful-but-firm tone as he apologises. '*We have to,*' he'd say. '*I'm sorry.*'

The lights are still out.

Or maybe we should eat Tao first?

"I'm going to check the cockpit," I say, wriggling out of my restraints.

"Bet you it's an AI in there," Sinas murmurs.

I ignore him.

"Be careful," Tao adds.

I ignore him too and stride towards the front. There's a pressure door, firmly closed, but it opens without protest. I walk through, past the cluster of stasis pods that kept us nice and offline on the journey out. When closed, they're mirrored and featureless, like the eggs of those Saturnian squids Sinas is

studying. Now, with their lids arcing up over my head, they're more like flowers. Apart from that, there's a bathroom, a ladder to the cargo hold, and the cockpit accessway. These long-range shuttles aren't designed for passengers to be conscious in for more than a few hours.

The cockpit isn't even locked. Only the central console is bright, announcing *'EraDrive Guidance Protocol active: tampering will result in lockdown. For manual emergency control, connect to local mesh'*. There's a chair, surrounded by dataglass, and an empty Coffee² pod is taped to the armrest, but it looks like it hasn't been washed in years.

"Hey, pilot. Wanna turn the lights back on?"

The integrated AI doesn't reply.

A wide, curved window wraps around my head. What many people don't realise (until they see it themselves) is when you're in space, there aren't always stars. It's not like those hot-as-balls nights spent trekking outside your arcology, with the Milky Way a grand spray of hope across the dark. Because you only see stars at night, right? You only see stars when the Sun isn't there, and when you're in space, unless you're hiding behind a planet or moon, the Sun's ALWAYS there. Even here, 750 million kilometres from Earth, our local star stands tall against the rest of the universe.

Thus, as I stare outwards, it's black.

There are bright spots, here and there: nearby satellites, or asteroids, or inner planets. My MeshMate indicates one of them is Earth. It's no more than a pinprick, slightly blurred by the thickness of the window.

I raise my thumb and block it out.

No more society. No more humans. Only me.

The shuttle grumbles, clearing its throat.

"Lights?" I ask again.

There must be a physical switch somewhere, so I start scanning the control panels. This shuttle's reminding me of one of those ancient, fourth-hand cars that threatens to fall to bits after every mildly tricky corner. We've got a few on the farm back home which I reckon are fifty percent car, forty percent rust, and ten percent spiders. My parents don't like this aspect of space travel either – my dad says it gives him the shivers, the way new perspective makes your entire life small. It's one of the many things that we agree on. (See also: the ethics of gene splicing, the best Tim Tam flavour, and how long it'll be before all of humanity's dead.)

A sheet of colour slides across the window.

We're drifting under Saturn's rings.

"Nice view, huh?" Tao says, three inches behind me.

I jump. "Aaah!"

"Sorry! We were just wondering what you were doing."

"Looking for a light switch," I say defensively.

"Find one?"

"Yeah, nah."

I turn and his face is *right* there – speckled green eyes, artfully-tousled black hair, a small smile that's threatening to turn into a big one. I lean on a viewscreen as the whole crew crowds into the cockpit behind me, Sinas stealing the pilot's seat as if it's the most natural thing in the world, the top of Wake's head barely visible in the scrum. Saturn's rings are streaks of pure colour: brown, tan, grey, off-white, sequenced into bar-code ripples by a billion years of gravity and the occasional interfering moon. Each hair-thin band of dirty ice is solid from a distance but breathtakingly intangible up close. The planet's a painterly smear of desaturated yellow, with green hints by the poles and a mammoth spilled-milk vortex scarring its southern hemisphere. Saturn has a certain 'loom' about it – it's hundreds of times bigger than Earth, after all – yet its rings are only a single kilometre thick. Their shadows are razors, harsh and perfect. We're travelling at a casual 60,000 km/h but scale makes the world stand still.

I won't lie. The view is gosh-darn amazing.

The shuttle's nose tilts and my stomach tries a backflip (three out of ten from the Olympic judges). More of the planet sidles into view and the cockpit is suddenly overflowing with reflected sunlight, our faces and hands and clothes cast in gold as if we're already swimming through Saturnian cloudtops. Tao's still got that faint smile on his face, and Wake's smile is wider, her face pressed against the window. Sinas' fingers tap a jaunty rhythm on his seat. Finn's eyes, though neutral, are focused like lasers (the type you'd get in trouble for owning).

I don't know these people, not yet, but perhaps I'll remember this moment. I'll remember the control panel digging into my back, and the faded pink jumper I'm wearing, and my jeans, and my sneakers, and the way my hair is pulled into a careless ponytail.

I'll remember the distant pulse of my headache, like a monster screaming behind a locked door, desperately trying to warn me.

You're here, I tell myself. You're really doing this.

Oh, no. Wait. Shit!

"I forgot my toothbrush!" I blurt out.

"Huh?" Wake glances at me.

"I'm an actual mango. I left my toothbrush on Luna." Technically weeks ago, though yesterday from my perspective. I can visualise it sitting beside the hotel sink, taunting me from the grave.

"They'll have spares on the station," Tao says. "I'd offer to lend you mine, but..."

"It was a limited edition," I reply.

Now Sinas turns to look at me. "A what?"

"It was a limited-edition *Moon's Haunted* toothbrush. It was signed by one of the actors."

"Oooh, which one?" Wake asks.

"The girl who plays Commander Vespera."

"Oh, she's great! Where'd you meet her? Do you think she died at the end of last season?"

"Spoilers!" Tao hisses.

"You *forgot* a toothbrush signed by Commander Vespera?" Finn says incredulously.

"Also, a toothbrush?" Sinas frowns. "Was a signed poster too boring?"

"I— I didn't have anything else with me, alright? It was a bloody awesome toothbrush! You'd understand if you saw it!" I can already feel its memory fading from existence, like the electromagnetic ripples of a forgotten MeshChannel.

Em-ripples of a forgotten channel... that's pretty good. I extract a notebook and pen from my back pocket and scribble down the phrase, right above '*dad keeps calling my teacher 'the schoolmonger' and it sounds like a slur*'. This whole manoeuvre is tricky in such tight quarters, and I accidentally elbow Wake in the boob. She gives me a weird look, but it's more for the fact that I'm carrying around a few sheets of dead tree.

"It still smells like something's on fire back there," Sinas adds, pointing towards the passenger area. "Not sure if you guys know this, but spaceships aren't meant to be on fire. It's bad."

"Well OK," Tao says.

"I'm serious."

"Nah, yeah, we'll be fine."

"You sure about that?"

"The shuttle hasn't fallen apart yet." Tao shrugs. "Getting five students killed via a dodgy shuttle would be polluted publicity, no matter which tech-king or mega-corp is funding this joint. We'll dock in literally ten minutes. It's fine."

Sinas considers disagreeing but instead leans back in his seat.

"So," Wake says brightly. "Which arcology is everyone from?"

Thank Christ for extroverts. "Westralia-7," I say.

"Synth-agriculture?"

"Yeah."

"That must be nice. I'm from Sydney – the Alphabet dome."

My MeshMate retrieves a cached image of a vast, S-shaped bio-structure lashed by hundred-metre waves. "Is it true you get unrestricted Mesh there?"

"Yeah! Everyone talks yak about it, but Alphabet treat us better than heaps of other corps." She touches the back of her neck, brushing aside her long, dark hair. "Finn?"

He looks surprised about being asked to contribute. "Westralia-1."

"Do you and Alex live close to each other?"

"Sort of. Not really."

"I'm inland and he's on the coast," I explain. "Basically, I make the food, and he eats it."

It turns out Sinas is originally from the Netherlands, which is a neat trick considering the current sea levels, but recently moved to Eastralia-3 for his parents' work. He says they're high up in a data management company. Tao lives in the Tesla power farm smack-bang in the middle of Australia. (There's a joke that everyone who survives out there is either crazy, a robot, or crazy about

robots, and Tao doesn't seem to be the first two, so... look, I get the attraction of fulfilling emotional/physical needs with a flawless machine consciousness, but some people take it TOO far.) Wake's asking questions and chatting away and doing 90% of the talking, and it's comforting, even if I'm more invested in staring at the fucking enormous planet outside. In a way, I'm envious. People like Wake make communities work, always sending out dozens of friendly little tendrils, glue-gunning Person A to B to C and D whether they like it or not, rearranging Venn diagrams of interests and personalities. She constructs relationships, which makes me think of those colourful fish that help build coral reefs.

As the others talk more about *Moon's Haunted* plot twists (I've read the books, so I stay out of it), Finn turns to me.

"Interesting start," he murmurs. He's blinking a lot, in a nervous sort of way.

"Start to what?"

"The story you're writing. You said you were here to write."

"Oh." I'm surprised he remembers. "Hopefully a malfunctioning shuttle's the worst of it. I'll make the written version more dramatic. Add a couple of explosions."

"Ha." He thinks for a second, positively chockers with concentration, giving me the chance to stare without reprisal. If my parents said we were distant cousins, I wouldn't die of shock – he's got the same soft cheekbones, darker skin that tans easily, hair that's murky brown and mostly straight with an irritating hint of streakiness. He's also slightly taller than me and a heck of a lot thinner. (Too thin, I tell myself. He'd be a useless AFL player.)

"What kind of stuff do you write?" he asks.

"A spread. News articles, stories, essays... I reviewed v-sims and games for a very ash MeshHub for a while but the admin skipped out before paying me." I blush. "Do you know what fanfiction is?"

"Sure," he says cautiously.

"Well, a lot of that recently. Too much. And I write popular science articles, because otherwise I wouldn't be here. Most of it is dazzlingly terrible. Maybe ten percent reaches a vaguely acceptable standard." I send Finn links to the better stuff, not that he's likely to read it. (Or maybe he's exactly the type to read it. If so, he's already a lost cause.)

"Thanks," he says.

"No worries."

There's that grim half-smile again – the funeral smile. He turns back to the planet.

Above us, we spot a silver glint: our home for the next two months. Unofficially, it's called Starfish Station because, in a stunning twist, it looks like a starfish. Five huge arms stretch from a bulbous, central, messy collection of rooms and airlocks and transit tubes, squished like Play-Doh in a toddler's fist. (Most stations are similarly unimaginative in terms of architecture, beauty being a lower priority than 'does it leak air?' or 'can it be set on fire?') Its surface is gunmetal grey and eerily organic, ribbed and pockmarked and slightly hairy, an

exoskeleton concealing the living creature inside. Comms towers, solar panels, and thermal radiators create criss-crossing edifices that gradually thin as each arm tapers to its point. The central mass is a few hundred metres thick, each arm more than a kilometre long. The gaps between them are spanned by concentric docking rings, dotted with supply tanks that look like blackberries. The station spins lazily about its central axis, shimmering in the sunlight.

It's a nice sight, in its own way, but it's also... lonely? A few large transports have docked at the thickest arm, and I spot blinking lights in a few habitation areas, but that's it. Not much activity for such a sizeable assembly. Its eccentric orbit has taken it close to Saturn's south pole, our destination.

An alert appears on my MeshMate: *<Please strap in and prepare for deceleration>*.

I look down at my hand.

'Shit,' it says accusingly.

The station grows, and we shuffle back to our seats. Memory foam encases limbs and torsos. Saturn's spectacular immensity, my useless regrets, the worrying distance between what my life was a month ago and what it's about to be – they collapse into a singularity of abstracted feeling that no longer matters. I tell myself it doesn't matter. *I'm here. I don't care why I'm here, or how I'm here, or what decisions brought me here. I don't care about regret, or being scared, or what my parents said or didn't say, because I want to be here. I want to. I want to run.* Messy sentences, layer upon layer of scribbled thoughts, and I take the whole book and chuck it out the window. It tumbles in the shuttle's wake.

"No comms, huh?" Sinas says. Usually, you'd expect welcome chatter or a pre-recorded announcement from whatever's managing traffic near Starfish. The Mesh, though, is silent.

"Is anybody getting signal?" Finn asks. "I've been pinging the Mesh since we woke up, but... nothing."

"Same," Tao agrees.

"It's 2092," Wake says, "and the internet's *still* cursed?"

"Life's hard," Sinas murmurs.

"Life IS hard! They'd better have good a decent connection on the station. My school will murder me if I don't send an 'I'm not dead' update."

There's a clunk as the antimatter drives lock into a new orientation, then a whirr more felt than heard as our final braking burn begins. The shuttle did most of the hard work while we slept, so all that's left are some final adjustments as we vector towards the docking rings, to match the station's lazy spin.

I busy myself re-reading the orientation document. *'Congratulations on your acceptance into this year's ASIRO Offworld High School Vacation Research Program! We look forward to sharing this fantastic experience with you, and ensuring it will be as useful for you as it is for us. We remain extremely proud of the work we do at Starfish Station and many other locations across the solar system... blah blah blah code of conduct... blah blah blah what to bring...*

blah blah blah your project and our expectations...' The only exciting part is the message from my assigned supervisor, who's—

"I think this is gonna be fun," Tao says brightly.

Wake: "And useful!"

Sinas: "And interesting?"

Finn: "And hard."

There's a moment's silence. Perhaps awkward, perhaps not.

"I just hope it's worth it," I say. "I enjoy having school holidays, y'know? But when they said I'd been selected, I suppose I couldn't say no."

"I totally get that," Wake says. "There was barely a day between my exams and when I had to start packing. I'm hoping this is partly a break, too. We'll have to do work, but I bet we'll have loads of spare time."

Sinas smiles wryly. "Can't wait to spend it walking up and down some corridors. Maybe staring out some windows, too."

"Let's minimise the depression till *after* we've unpacked," Tao says. "Here's to the next twelve weeks?" He holds up his palm for a high five. Sinas' lankiness means he barely needs to move, whereas I'm huffing and puffing like a fusion cooling tower, fighting against the seat's overly protective embrace.

A few minutes later, the shuttle settles into its docking tentacles.

<You have arrived>, my MeshMate says.

Thanks, friend, I reply.

<Happy to help, friend!> it pipes back.

There's the sensation of material cooling and contracting as the shuttle's am-drives power down. Umbilicals snake from the station into its belly. I feel more *clanks* under my feet, the subsonic hum of pumps. Our chairs release us, their memory foam retreating.

We stand, stretching wobbly limbs.

"Our luggage is in the cargo hold, right?" Wake asks.

Tao nods. "I checked when we woke up. Well, MY bags were there, but..."

"But?"

"Now that I think about it, I didn't see anyone else's."

Wake stares at him. "You're joking."

"Yep."

She punches his arm.

"Ow!" He sighs, rubbing his bicep. "Everyone's stuff was there – apart from Alex's toothbrush, I guess."

"Moment of silence? For lost toothbrushes?" Sinas says solemnly. He bows his head. So does Finn, then so does everyone, and we stand in a lopsided circle for a solid ten seconds, remembering what it was like, before the dark times.

Until Wake giggles.

"We need to get off this shuttle," I say.

"We definitely do," she replies.

There's an airlock at the arse-end of the ship and I take one last look at our dilapidated metal coffin, thankful it's held off exploding until now. "It was a frickin' good toothbrush, guys."

"In our hearts it shall remain," Sinas says. He sorta winks at me without physically winking, and I'd be lying if I said I didn't feel a little magnetism. Sinas is magnetic, precisely because he isn't trying to be (or if he is, he's far too good at it). His slouch accentuates his subtly athletic frame, and his features – pale skin, sharp face, neat brown hair – are somehow unassuming. He's winter, but a comfortable one; not overbearingly warm, like Wake, but warm just often enough.

Ugh, stop. Get a hold of yourself.

We traipse through the airlock and emerge into the docking bay, ready for our grand arrival.

Except our grand arrival is a ghost.

ALEX II

I'm not sure what I was expecting. A red carpet? A marching band? If so, the carpet's covered in tarantulas and the trombones can't play to save their worthless lives.

The arrivals area is a long, curving concourse that bridges adjacent arms of Starfish. Around us lie rows of seats, vending machines, and cargo racks, with a dusty manual check-in desk that hasn't seen use in years. A few scattered ferns try to brighten the place up, their long fronds swaying in recycled air, but even a small star wouldn't help; most stations are grown from the same cream-coloured polymer that feels specifically designed to dampen any enthusiasm. A holoprojector throws a list of arrivals into the air and I notice we're not on it. The last scheduled departure was an ice-hauler which left for Enceladus three days ago.

One by one, we pass through a biometric scanner, which clears us with a lonesome *ding!* The station's spin gravity feels analogous to one gee, with 'Welcome to Starfish Station!' painted in faded red on the floor. I scuff the edge of the 'W' with my sneakers, then realise I'm part of the problem.

Suddenly, an automated voice announces, far too loudly: "*Welcome to Starfish Station! Presented by Australian Department of Science and Sprite™.*"

I jump. The fading echo of *SPRITE*, *sprite*, *sprite* is the only sign of life.

"Did we miss it?" Tao asks, nearly swallowed by the emptiness.

"I checked the date," Sinas replies. "We're on time."

Wake shrugs. "Someone's supposed to meet us here, right?"

<*Pendant Cadenza*> my MeshMate reminds me. <*Research coordinator.*>

"They could be busy," I reply. "If I was a scientist with loads of stuff to do, maybe I wouldn't want a gaggle of teenagers interrupting my research."

"But we're nice teenagers," Wake says. "The helpful ones."

"So you've got heaps of dark matter analysis experience, have you?"

"...Fair."

The air is frigid, and I grit my teeth to stop them chattering. Maybe the government's trying to cut back on heating bills. Back home, it was pushing 40°C, a.k.a. good Christmas weather.

Your parents didn't want you to come, my mind whispers. Remember?

Yeah, sure. Thanks, brain.

Mum's face, weather-lined, tear-streaked. Dad's usual rambling replaced by uneasy stoniness. That day should've been cloudy, or stormy, but instead the sun glimmered like treasure, dogs barking, kookaburras cawing, the crops casting tally-mark shadows in the dirt. What I can't remember is *why* I was arguing with them; likely some stupid desire to spite them for an offence that never mattered. *'I don't want you travelling such a long way,'* my mum says. *'Not with so much wrongness in the world.'*

So why are you here? my brain asks. Great question.

Because I want to be.

That's the truth.

I pick at the hem of my jumper where the fabric's starting to fray. In contrast, Tao's only wearing shorts and a West Coast Eagles singlet, and I'm surprised he hasn't contracted hypothermia. Probably one of those guys who insists they're never cold when they CLEARLY are.

"Should we wait here, then?" Sinas asks. "In case somebody's on their way."

I nod, but Finn's already hunched over in a seat, watching something on his MeshMate. I'm about to join him when Wake pipes up.

"...Or we *could* go and explore?" she suggests.

"What do you mean, explore?" Tao asks.

"Walk around! Find people."

"OR we could sit here and not get in trouble," I reply.

"Exploring sounds good," Tao replies, and I'm getting himbo vibes already.

"We should get help," Wake says. "They can tell us where to go, and whether we have to get... inducted. You guys haven't been able to log in either, right?"

My MeshMate has tried handshaking with three different networks but is being unceremoniously rejected. This is a government facility, so I'm betting new arrivals need specific clearance. Still, the lack of connection is starting to put me on edge.

"I'd rather wait," Sinas says. "I don't want to get in trouble on our first day."

"We won't get in trouble," Wake says. "We're 'using our initiative.'"

"I propose we use our initiative to sit here."

Wake rolls her eyes with a Dickensian 'harrumph'.

Tao grins. "I'm with Wake – what's the harm in looking? It'd be nice to stretch our legs after cryo."

"If we don't have Mesh access, I bet we can't go far..." Finn murmurs.

"If the doors are locked, they're locked," Wake says. "But if they aren't, I say we find somebody." She twirls and nods like a bobblehead. I agree being trapped in this extremely cold, extremely boring room isn't great for morale; for me, it's an opportunity to sit on our backsides and wait for qualified help, but Wake's already reaching for drastic action. I'm not too keen on that impulsiveness.

"A few years ago, I went on a school trip to a nanofabricating plant," I say. "An employee was supposed to meet us at the entrance, but it looked like the entire

place had been shut down. Our teacher went to check on things and left us alone for twenty, maybe thirty minutes? Which was a bad idea, if you're trying to herd thirteen-year-olds. Anyway, some of my friends got bored, decided to go 'exploring', and ended up accidentally breaking into a high-security area. Guess what happened?"

"They DIED?" Wake says, wide-eyed.

"What? No! They got caught and were thrown into a penitence sim to be 're-educated'. I heard it was awful. Lots of snakes. Also, it turns out that same had invited a group of students to their house for a sleepover, and it wasn't BAD bad – nothing happened – but nevertheless a huge breach of conduct. They got fired. Then they disappeared to the Bahamas."

"Wow."

"Yep."

Tao scratches his chin. "So, what you're saying is... since they banned using penitence sims on kids last year... we should totally go exploring?"

"I'm not saying that. I'm definitely not saying that."

"Fine, but I'd feel WAY better if we saw one single person. There's literally nobody here. It's glitched. Plus, I feel naked without Mesh access."

Grudgingly, I agree. The docking bay is a few hundred metres end-to-end and minus our voices, there's only the contented hum of life support. Minus us, it's a drab, doll-house diorama with only wilting ferns to keep the party going. Finn crouches by a small, disc-shaped on the polymer floor – an AutoDrone stuck on its back. It jerks as its thrusters try and pop in back into the air.

"Please assist," it whispers. "Return me to my charging station." Its electric whine is a little pathetic, probably by design.

Finn sees me watching and stands up quickly, as if I've caught him *in flagrante*. When he thinks I've stopped looking, he gently lays the drone on a bench.

Fuck it. This IS weird, or glitched, or whatever you want to call it.

"Let's go," Wake says. "Let's go let's go let's go."

Sinas gives me a 'what's-the-worst-that-could-happen' shrug.

"Sure," I say tiredly. "Let's find a human to talk to."

Thankfully, my headache's almost faded. As Wake skips past I fall into step, the others close behind, heading to the nearest exit. The floor follows the outer arc of the docking ring, which gives the concourse an upward curve like the world's biggest banana. I can't help feeling a sliver of vertigo before my brain figures out what's up with the horizon. I trip over my own feet as beside me, Wake does the same. I grab her arm before she faceplants into a fern.

"Never been on a ring station before?" I ask.

"Nope." A grateful, seasick glance. "Actually... I've never been offworld."

"Huh." I stare at her. "This is your first time off Earth?"

"Yup."

"And you came to *Saturn*?"

"That's me." She chuckles helplessly.

"Huh. You really did want this."

"Don't you?" Suddenly, it's as if I've blasphemed her entire existence. "This is what the word 'clearsky' was meant for – a chance to do something awesome, or worthwhile. For me those chances are rare, so why would I ever refuse?"

"You... wouldn't?"

"Exactly! So it's yakkin' awesome we're here, isn't it?"

Wake isn't an open book. She's open ocean, waves climbing, cresting, and crashing into the world. Her rounded face is alive with sincerity, eyes glinting ever-forward; even her hair is in on it, a black, sparkling waterfall that splashes down her back. She's a half-head shorter than I am but packs so much bounce into her diminutive frame I'm already being washed away. Wake's the only one of us dressed remotely formally, wearing a neat, business-casual blouse and skirt, and I realise she was trying to make the best first impression she could (if only there were people here to impress). I decide we should probably be friends, even if she uses the word 'yakking' unironically, which is in itself a war crime.

There's a clatter as the AutoDrone tumbles onto its back, interrupting Sinas and Tao's discussion of the recent Formula TM Grand Prix; I learn Sinas is a Team FEISAR supporter, which *disgusts* me, right as we reach the door.

Beside it is an actual, physical map – shockingly printed on actual, physical paper. (It's easy to forget most information used to exist outside the Mesh. If you believe the conspiracy theories, it's because the Techno-Kings or TKs want it that way, to better control their consumers.) Tao folds his arms, biceps swelling majestically, but the goosebumps covering them lessen the effect.

"You cold?" I ask.

"Nah, not really."

"You look cold."

He spreads his hands.

The map tells us we're exiting Docking Bay B, heading towards an office block labelled 'Administration'. We are, in fact, looking to be administered to, so Wake and Tao lead the way. The station's exterior was noticeably organic, but you wouldn't know it from the corridor we're in, which is pale and featureless as corridors tend to be. Every few metres there's a door and a cramped, tinted window. A few are open. Most aren't. The offices contain moulded desks, angled viewscreens, oddly shaped 'ergonomic' seats, spreadsheets and blueprints holoprojected mid-air. The power-saving glowstrips in the ceiling are too stingy for their own good, replacing any shadows with plain old gloom.

Much like the docking bay, however, the offices are vacant. The corridor winds clockwise in an endless corkscrew, and I suspect we're spiralling along one of Starfish's arms, towards its central hub. We pass more offices, then conference rooms, then VR workspaces with padded walls.

"Hello?" Wake calls out.

"Everyone must be at a meeting, hey" Tao says. "Or lunch."

"Maybe," Sinas says.

Suddenly, I have a brainwave. "What if they're doing a safety exercise? Like a decompression drill."

"That's... a lucent explanation," Finn says. "It's possible."

His surprise is vaguely offensive, but I roll with it. "Right? There's an alarm, everyone has to drop whatever they're doing and pretend to hide in an airlock for ten minutes, then they come back and everything's fine. We're fine."

"Maybe," Sinas says again.

"It's a good shout," Tao says. "Gimme a second."

He stops at the next office door and ducks inside.

For a second, nobody moves. Then: "What the hell?" I hiss.

"I'm just gonna poke around," he hisses back.

"You're gonna get us all in trouble! *Trou-ble!*"

"It'll be fine."

"No it won't!"

"There might be clues telling us where everybody is."

"Really? You're choosing NOW to do a Sherlock Holmes impression?"

"'Sherlock' who?" Sinas murmurs.

I glance at him. "Oh my *god*." By this point, our whispering is carrying across half the solar system.

"Just help me look!" Tao says. "Thirty seconds, then we can go."

"Fine!" Wake says, accentuated by an angry little foot-stomp, but it's concealing a rock-hard excitement boner. She skips across the threshold to join Tao amongst the cubicles. Sinas slinks in moments later, hands in pockets. Before I know it, I'm following, even as I frown in disapproval (weird how that works). Only Finn stays in the hallway, hiding inside the folds of his black hoodie, presumably keeping watch.

Inside, the office is drearily normal: three desks, three cubicles, three Mesh access points. On one desk, a half-eaten baguette of unidentifiable synth-meat and hydroponic lettuce. On another, a holo of two smiling toddlers, sitting on a beach with seaweed in their hair. Despite Tao's desire for a hardcore forensic investigation, my inkling is this is just a random guy's office, regardless of any iffy items we might find in their Amazon purchase history.

But you're curious, aren't you? my brain whispers.

OK. Alright. There IS a cauldron of wrongness bubbling in my gut, refusing to cool even as I stamp on the coals. It's as if Starfish's population was magicked into oblivion literal minutes before we arrived. The air still retains a people-powered musk. This office's denizens haven't saved their surely-very-important work. Ships haven't docked for three whole days. (Is that a long time? I don't really know. How many people actually live here? I also don't know.) No ships, no humans, no datastreams flickering across the Mesh...

Or everyone's participating in a particularly intense decompression drill.

Covering the nearest wall is the week's activities schedule, days divided into blocks of primary colours. Plenty of stuff should be happening right now: a tag-up meeting for the 'Illumination' experiment, an all-hands-on-deck cleanup

of the robotics lab, a presentation regarding abnormal energy spikes occurring in Saturnian storms. I even spot a reference to yours truly: '*Meet and greet VRP students*' at 0400 station time, right beside '*URGENT: containment upgrade for hub in progress. Area off-limits until further notice!!*'

I feel a hand on my shoulder.

I whirl around, and Tao's eyes widen at my half-raised fist.

"You good?" he asks.

I exhale. "Dude, you gotta stop sneaking up on me. I cannot be blamed for what my reflexes make me do."

"I'm not sure the law works like that."

"But me punching you *does* work like that." I try on a smile, and it sticks. "Sorry, blame my friends back home. A few of 'em insist viral pranks are the most sophisticated form of humour."

"Oh. That type." He rolls his eyes with a grimace. "But I wanted to ask if you ARE good, actually."

"Ummm. Sure?"

"You seem..." He shakes his head; his height means he's half looking down at me. "You know what? Forget I said anything."

"Uh, okay—"

"I mean, I don't know you, and I'm not assuming anything, but I wanted to check if you're fine. That's all." He can't figure out what he should do with his hands, so he leaves them dangling by his sides. "I noticed you were crying. When we woke up. On the shuttle."

Oh. That. "Just dry eyes."

"Sure. But I know for some people, they pretend to be up when they're down, and I don't want to be nosy, but my mum was bipolar and she'd get really depressed sometimes, and—"

"I'm fine. Seriously."

"Okay! Okay. Well..." He shrugs. "Sorry?"

"Eh. Don't be."

We look at each other, or more truthfully, at the air beside each other, while Wake curses at a datapad she's trying to unlock (each threat of human-on-machine violence only increasing in severity). Tao, though a prime example of hitting the genetic jackpot, strikes me as a little dopey – his expression is unexpectedly sincere, like a golden retriever eternally eager to fetch.

"Is something bothering you, though?" he asks, with admirable persistence.

I'm annoyed by how nice he's being.

Then again, I'm annoyed by lots of people, me included. *Well, if we're being so forward...* "I guess I'm having second thoughts."

"About this trip?"

"Uh-huh."

He half-smiles. "It is scary, isn't it? Being out here."

"That's one way of looking at it."

"If this ends up being boring, or there's a minor disaster, we're kinda stuck. Couldn't get much further from home if we tried. That's sure scary to me."

"Yeah, nah, I..." I bite down on the inside my cheek. "Look, I'm fine. Life's weird sometimes. Let's leave it there."

"Alright. If you do ever want to talk, though, I'm down."

"Appreciate it. And hey, same – I'm good for random chats, a sneaky Milo, debates about our place in the universe, whatever."

"Then I'll keep a spot free for it. 'Cause just as an FYI, you're not the only one with problems around here." He backs off to go and calm down Wake.

I swear in my head, not at Tao but at... life. I'm supposed to be having fun here, learning things, making friends; not having D&Ms about my shitty feelings. I walk back out and Finn's still in the hallway, arms crossed, those ever-present streaks of hair cutting across his eyes. I want to believe he's pondering an important topic, although I'm not sure why. Perhaps he's absorbing the hum of the station – the clicks and whispers of recycled air, the subtle chemical smell of its polymer bones, the nauseating undercurrent of unseen spin. Maybe he's looking at the nameplate by the door, '*Haru Hanamura*', wondering who they might be.

I take up some wall-space next to him. "What's up?"

He shrugs. "Just thinking."

I'm tempted to pry, but right now I can't be bothered.

Eventually, the others tire of snooping.

"Find anything?" I ask.

"Nah," Tao replies. "It's all locked behind biometrics."

Wake brushes down her skirt. "I was hoping for some juicy research notes... about antimatter weapons tests, or human hybridisation mods, or AI sentience trials or *something*. Why else would they build a research station out here?"

"To study the mating habits of the Saturnian squid?" Sinas suggests.

"Starfish was meant as a deep space gateway," Tao says. "A platform to support outer solar system exploration, and to test and develop space survival technology. Before you ask, yes, I read the orientation package."

"A likely story," Wake retorts. "I bet they're all witches. I bet that everyone on this station belongs to a coven of secret witches, and they performed a ritual to summon a dark god, and they messed up and got sucked into Hell. That's why nobody's around. They've been transformed into demonic pawns."

"I'd watch that movie," Sinas murmurs.

Tao seems to have found, a.k.a. discreetly obtained, a.k.a. stolen a tennis ball. He starts bouncing it on the floor as we walk. Oh, right, we're walking again; not turning back like sensible people, instead delving further into this decrepit, deserted station like the trespassing high-school drongos we are. *Thwack, thwack, thwack* goes the ball.

"If I was doing illegal experiments," Finn says, "I'd use an asteroid. Hollow out the centre, hide underground. There's a hundred million asteroids out there,

so if you can mask the thermal signature, the probability of being discovered is way smaller than needles in a haystack."

I smile slightly. "A Finn-fun-fact."

"...Sure." He gives me a look.

The hallway dumps us into a circular chamber colloquially known as a sanity room: a place with more open space than is strictly economical, perhaps with a few plants or flowers, some fake birdsong – or even better, fake birds – and other reminders of what it was like to live on solid ground with a sky over your head. This room features a central pillar encircled by verdant creepers, growing from a tiny patch of dirt. Scarlet petals litter the floor, curling brown with age. Benches and tables line the perimeter, plus a couple of drink dispensers. A chemical fog above our heads decently approximates an atmospheric haze.

The Mesh can provide far more elaborate virtual experiences, but it's never quite the same as truespace, however unspectacular your reality might be. If only there were *people*, though! Without them, the room's fakery is much more alienating.

Wake produces a matte black sphere maybe eight centimetres wide (where *was* she hiding it?) and presses her thumb onto its surface. It rises and hovers in front of her face, and she waves and gives it a friendly wink. "Hi hi hi to all my premium subscribers! We just arrived but the trip was sooo scary – lots of space turbulence – and I totally thought our shuttle might explode, but we're safe now and I just HAD to give you all an update. How are you guys?"

We stare at her blankly.

"Is she—" Tao begins.

I groan. "Oh no."

Wake cups her ear theatrically. "Sorry, but I can't hear you because of this light delay! Eighty minutes?! That's so long! I'll have to send you a ton of these pre-recorded messages to make up for it!" She bows her forwards, raises both arms, and— she dabs. I'd call it charmingly retro if I wasn't such a curmudgeon.

"I have to say," she continues, "it's been *yakking* strange so far. We've been wandering around and there's like, zero humans? Which is starting to 100% freak me out. It's like everybody was turned into ghosts." Her eyes widen. "Wait, what if our shuttle *did* blow up? What if *we're* the ghosts!?"

"Do people watch this?" I mutter. "Do people *like* this?"

"Oh, trust me," Tao replies. "They do."

Finn shuffles out of sight with alarming speed as Wake swings the drone around, giving her followers a view of the room. Sinas retreats as well, humming a soft tune – one of those identikit pop songs that completely vanishes after saturating the public consciousness for two weeks. I'm not really a fan of this one, but Sinas' voice does make me like it better. His v-neck sweater and fitted grey jeans do cut a decent pop-idol figure. (Ugh, stop. Bad thought.)

Wake takes the drone out of the air and points it, selfie-style. "I should totally introduce you to my new friends! First, this is Tao... say hi, everyone! Tao's pretty glacier. He's into AFL, as you can tell by the jersey." He grins, slipping an

arm around her shoulders like a childhood mate as she points to the blue and yellow '92' emblazoned on his chest. "I personally don't watch about AFL, but as far as I can tell, it's sweaty people in short shorts grappling each other, which sounds fantastic to me."

"That is a *great* description of why I love the sport," Tao replies. "Thanks Wake, I guess you're pretty glacier too."

"You heard it here first!"

They both smile at the drone for a second. Then Tao asks, "So, how many followers do you have?"

She leans closer and whispers a number.

Tao's eyes widen. "Whoa! Can I, like, refilm that whole section?"

"Nope!" Wake darts away, searching for Finn, but he hides behind the central pillar with 'I have no idea what's going on right now' plastered all over him. It's basically a Looney Tunes cartoon but he manages to outlast Wake's attention span.

So, she turns her attention to me. "Let's go meet Alex! Heeeeey, Alex!" I wave, attempting to look suitably uncaring as she waltzes closer. "Alex here told me a *secret*," Wake says. "She told me she's a writer. And she writes *fanfiction*."

Oh, shit. "Umm," I say.

Wait, I told Finn I wrote fanfiction. Either he told Wake, or Wake's a dirty eavesdropper. One seems more likely than the other. (Of course, I – a paragon of justice – would never listen in on other people's conversations.)

"What fandoms are you in?" Wake asks. "Any ships you like?"

"Umm." Writing stupid wish-fulfilment stories shouldn't be embarrassing, but some of them are old, or bad, or slightly M-rated, and even if they're *good*, I don't want my face associated with certain sentences I wrote while high on chocolate and social media at 2AM.

"Tell us about one of your stories. Do you have a favourite?"

I swallow. "There's a *Moon's Haunted* story I'm quite proud of? It's about Commander Vespera, and, um." I swallow again. "Lieutenant Violet."

"Ooooh, nice. Is it sexy yuri fanfic? If we can't already tell from your blush."

"I want to say it's romantic, with character development, and... stuff. Slow burn. But, uh, don't read it if you're under thirteen."

"Great, I'll link it in the video description for the degens out there – you know who you are. I know who *I* am, too." She pouts in a manner I'd describe as 'scandalous'. "Thanks Alex, it was so great to meet you!"

No fucking WAY you're getting that link.

Sinas is our lone survivor. He's in his own world, still humming, unaware of Wake's metamorphosis into a great white shark with a camera. She sneaks the drone above his shoulder and the three-inch sphere hovers silently, capturing a few cadences of Sinas' oddly tuneful voice.

Then he notices it. He stops. Turns around.

He looks, to put it mildly, slightly pissed. Less pop-idol, more serial-killer.

Wake grins. *"It's the sound that kick-starts my each and every day... My music, my birdsong, my fireworks display... C'mon, sing it with me!"*

"No," he says flatly.

"The views will be SO orbital."

"No."

"Please?"

"NO."

"Ten seconds – just ten seconds – and I bet thousands of girls will be crushing hard on you. Or boys, whatever. We can even have fun reading their creepy comments—"

"Is that supposed to be a positive?"

"Okay, okay. Sorry." Wake grabs the drone and switches it off, unable to conceal a flash of sulkiness. Sinas ignores her and walks away, apparently genuinely irritated, which would be a more dramatic gesture if the room wasn't doughnut-shaped. Wake sprints her little legs in the other direction and catches him right as he reappears. She's at least a foot shorter, so she has to look up to meet his gaze. Then she starts singing the same shitty song, right to his face.

He stares at her, utterly confused.

Wake isn't a great singer but makes up for it with enthusiasm. She knows EXACTLY what she's doing too, and as she reaches the chorus, her voice wavers.

Sinas narrows his eyes. And softly – so softly I perhaps imagine it – he joins in for the last line. *"That's what we'll do, 'cause we're humanity forever..."*

I'm dying. I'm dying of cringe.

A hint of a smile passes across Sinas' lips. "That won't always work."

"It did this time, though." Wake sticks out her tongue. "Can you believe how many Miku songs have been coming out recently? So many good ones! And she's SO glacier! Forget Commander Vespera, I'd like a toothbrush signed by Miku. By the way, Alex, are you still devvo about your toothbrush?"

"Extremely." I'll be dealing with the psychic damage of the past thirty minutes for the next thirty years. "Have you considered this might not be the best time to snap into content-creator mode?"

"Tell that to the algorithm."

Tao chooses that moment to literally skip into frame. "Oi, while you guys were having a moment, I found a path to the station hub. I figure that's the most populated area. Wanna go?"

Once again, I'm overruled. (I wonder if this is what having siblings is like.) As we walk, Tao bounces his tennis ball, and I settle for staring at my battered sneakers. *It's fine. You're fine. You're not doing anything normal people wouldn't do. You're just wandering around, looking for help.*

This new hallway ends in an industrial airlock, marked by out-of-date contamination warnings.

"The plague," Finn says.

"M-hm," Sinas agrees. "Once a station gets infected..."

"That was years ago," Wake says. "Ancient history."

"Doesn't hurt to be careful," I reply.

"Yeah," Tao says. "My sister died from it." The ball stops.

"Oh," Wake says. "Sorry."

"It's OK. It's not a big deal."

"But—"

"Like you said, it was years ago."

Seems like a big effing deal to me, but Tao's tone hasn't changed one iota. He starts bouncing the ball again, *thwack, thwack, thwack*, from the floor to his hand to the floor.

With climate change, and the corporate rebellions, and people injecting mutant DNA into their hearts and heads and let's face it, their genitals, the last few decades have been rough on planet Earth. Even so, the grey plague might've been the worst. Plagues were supposed to be *historical*.

Turns out they weren't.

Behind the door sprawls a quite plain cafeteria. Benches and tables form a central aisle, with food and drink dispensers lining either side. According to their advertising displays, each one either turns you into Superman or will blow your brains out (with tastiness, hopefully). Artificial windows display views of Saturn outside, although one's showing a video game paused mid-fight, Goku handing Darth Vader a most glorious ass-kicking. I'm not sure which view I prefer.

Suddenly, Tao says, "Hey, hi!"

And a boyish voice replies: "You lot aren't supposed to be here. Are you?"

ALEX III

A group of scientists has just entered the cafeteria. (I assume they're scientists because they're wearing lab coats.) The leader in front is oddly young. He must only be a few years out of school, with swept-back shoulders and an intense gaze and the kind of skin that suggests he spends more time in the sun than on space stations. He has a heavy backpack slung over one shoulder and looks understandably surprised to see us.

"We're here for the high school Visiting Research program," Tao says. "We were supposed to meet someone at the dock, but nobody showed up."

The leader exchanges a glance with a woman to his left. She shrugs. She's also carrying a backpack, and I notice her lab coat is ripped in several places.

"Who were you meant to meet?" the man asks.

"Pendant... Cadenza, I think. If you know where he is, that would—"

"If you come with us, we can take you to him."

"Great!" Tao holds out a hand. "I'm Tao."

The man – boy? – pauses, then gives it a sharp shake. "Khorin."

Another glance from the woman in the torn coat, but she stays quiet. Frankly, I'm just glad to see other human beings. I might pretend to be unfriendly on occasion, but enjoying your own social bubble is best when other bubbles exist to sample from.

"We're so glad to see you guys!" Wake says. "Where is everybody?"

"Occupied," Khorin says.

"Doing what?"

"Safety meeting." His voice is husky, still boyish. He sets off down another hallway, in the opposite direction, beckoning for us to follow. Half of the science crew lead the way, while the other half fall in behind us.

"Do you know where we'll be staying?" Wake asks. "We still need to grab our bags from the shuttle."

"Alastair will handle that," Khorin says.

"And how about Mesh access? Do we need special permissions?"

"I think so."

"You *think* so?"

"Been working here a while. Can't remember."

We turn another corner and I'm two seconds from being completely lost. If I was meshed, it wouldn't be a problem; then, I'd also know whether the air was safe to breathe (probably, but best to check), or whether the upcoming door is automatic or manual (always fun to walk face-first into a door you thought would open for you), or the names of the people escorting us (because 'young man' and 'torn coat' will only get you so far). I ask my MeshMate to label everyone anyway. Nice to meet you, Scientists #1 through #8.

"How long have you worked here?" Wake asks.

"...Five years?"

"Wow, that long?"

"I'm older than I look." Khorin shifts his pack to his other shoulder. From within, there's a metallic clunk.

"I would've guessed you were 20! In a positive way. What do you work on?"

"You ask a lot of questions," Khorin says.

"Guilty! Haha."

"We're almost there. Alastair will take care of you."

"You're lying," Sinas says quietly.

Khorin turns. "What?"

"He's lying," Sinas says again – to us, this time.

Tao frowns. "What do you mean, he's—"

"I can tell."

Khorin stares at him. The scientists stare at him. We stare at him. / stare at him. And suddenly, Sinas isn't slouching anymore. He's alert. Behind us, I hear a couple of the scientists whispering to each other – Scientists #4 and #7, a.k.a. torn-coat and a wispy woman who's a doppelganger of my maths teacher.

"Huh," I say.

Finn narrows his eyes. "Let's head back to the dock."

Wake seems utterly confused. "Sinas, why?"

A few of the scientists approach us, slowly. In my periphery, those behind are spreading out to block the hallway. That's not good. Right? Why would—

Sinas bolts. He spins on the spot and *runs*, twisting past the outstretched arms of torn-coat and sprinting down the passageway. Then Khorin is suddenly very big and very close and he grabs Tao, who tries to back away, but he's got Tao's arms and twists them and Tao cries out, and Finn stumbles back looking goddamn terrified and Wake's hands go up in self-preservation as she yells at everyone and no one. "Sinas? Hey, what the YAK is going on? Who are you guys?"

My mouth drops open – that's my contribution – until I see Khorin's eyes, which are empty. They're not filled with denial, or surprise, or rage, or confusion. They're *empty*. I'm dunked by an ice-bucket of adrenaline and I'm suddenly shivering, so many irrelevant questions sprouting through me like who these people are and why they're on the station and how Sinas knows and why Tao's screaming. I want to run but in either direction our path is blocked: in this thin grey hallway, its ceiling low enough to touch, the four of us are pinched

between eight other figures. The wispy woman locks eyes with me. She moves a hand to her waist, takes a stubby black object from her belt.

<Alert! Gun!> my MeshMate says.

Holy fuckballs! adds my brain, helpfully.

Then, a spark of inspiration knocks me flat. I hate myself for it. I love myself for it. "Wake!" I shout. "Season two, episode nine!"

She stops yelling for a second. "What?"

"Season two, episode-fuckin'-nine! Lieutenant Violet! Now!"

Wispy woman aims the gun – definitely a gun, I can see straight down the barrel, and oh god, she'd better not shoot me – she won't, right? Then Wake's drone beeps and text blasts across my vision: <CLOSE YOUR EYES>. As I do the drone emits a painful whine that instantly crescendos and—

Snick!

Light turns my eyelids red, heat on my cheeks, shouts, muffled swearing, a bone-splitting shriek from Scientist #7.

My eyes open.

Our attackers are bent double, hands over faces. The wispy woman is full-on sobbing. Tao kicks, scratches, wriggles free from Khorin. The drone's flashlight glows red-hot.

"Run!" Wake screeches.

She's first, then Finn, then Tao, then me. We flee down the corridor in Sinas' general direction. I don't want to believe what happened just happened, even though my MeshMate could play it back, sounds, scents and all. I run. Everyone runs. What else can we do? But the station's spin is catching me, the same spin that gives us gravity taking hold of my soul, and no matter how fast I am I can never outrun it. Everything's spinning, the station around Saturn, Saturn around the Sun, the Sun around our galaxy, and I'm caught and it's freaking *dizzying* and I really, really want to throw up.

I'm too busy sucking down air to throw up.

This can't be happening. It's a misunderstanding.

I want to explain. I want to be explained to.

I look over my shoulder and see distant figures chasing us around the station's curve. I think it's my maths teacher.

There's a blaze of light. Heat splashes against my back. For a second my skin grows warm, then it BURNS, my jumper blackening and splitting. I've been stabbed. My mind stops spinning and starts screaming instead. There are two, three, five awful seconds before painkilling healbots rush to the wound. I can't touch it. I'm on the floor, the world reduced to the flesh between my shoulders, sizzling, dripping—

It goes numb.

Wake and Finn are pulling me, dragging me forwards.

"Alex! Alex, are you OK?" Wake says.

I croak a reply – 'yes, 'no', doesn't matter.

"Holy shit, they shot her!" Tao shouts.

We might be past the point of explanations. Sinas and Tao are ten metres ahead, and behind—I won't look behind. I think I just got blasted with a thermal rifle – me, a sixteen-year-old farm girl! Might as well club a seal while you're at it. My MeshMate must've dosed me to hell because otherwise I'd be catatonic.

We dash round a corner and we're back in the cafeteria, dodging between tables, skidding, stumbling, the voices behind us are angry and close. Here we go, into the next corridor, the lights dim and flickering. Any second I'm expecting another lion's roar on my skin.

Instead, we burst into the sanity room.

There are six exits. The birds are singing.

"Which way?" Sinas asks.

Wake dives into the corridor leading back to the docking bay. We corkscrew downward, a full-pelt descent into Hades. It's dizzying enough *without* all the painkillers.

"Maybe they won't... know which way... we went," Tao pants.

"They'll realise we came from the dock," Finn says worriedly.

Suddenly, Wake stops in front of the office we searched. "In here! They'll miss us if we hide!"

There are at least ten things wrong with this idea, but right now, that makes it one of the better ones. We pile into the office, rushing to the end where it bends back in an 'L'-shape. Wake plugs her drone into the door panel, spending ten precious seconds fiddling with a dataport before – *whoosh!* – the door slides shut. She sprints to us and slides round the corner, nearly colliding with Tao.

"It'll stay locked," Wake whispers. "I overrode the security layer."

"It'd better, because there aren't any other exits," Sinas says, eyes white in the gloom.

"You overrode the security?" I ask. "How?"

"Not that hard, if you've done it before. Wait, you just got shot. You're OK, right?!" Wake's eyes tell me that I'd better be OK, otherwise *she* won't be OK and we can't have that.

"I'm fine. I mean, I'm bloody NOT, but it doesn't hurt too much. For now."

"They only wanted to stun us," Sinas says. "Not murk us. That's promising."

"Oh, how lovely, they only wanted to STUN me. Do you realise how insane, how *mantis* that sounds—"

"Shhh!" Tao hisses. "They're coming."

We duck behind a desk, submerged in fear. The office holoprojector throws spreadsheet cells across the ceiling. Finn's closest to me and I can smell his sweat, but otherwise he seems calm. Wake looks frickin' *wild*, vibrating with suppressed energy. Sinas is an origami version of himself, knees folded into his chest.

Eventually, Tao crawls forward and sticks his head around the corner.

I knew I shouldn't have come.

Should've listened to my instincts. I don't know where things are here, or how they work, and that's without being more alone and isolated than most

other humans in history. Sure, if I was home, I'd probably be wasting my life, sitting under the gum tree that leans across our house, sipping a cold Milo, but that useless image is so incredibly distant it's basically incomprehensible. It's noise. Static. Doesn't matter. We're stuck here, with people who want to—

Murk you? my brain suggests.

Perhaps not. But increasingly, I'm thinking about what this means for the station's vanished staff, and if something truly polluted has happened. I can't get enough air down my throat; my vision swims and I lean against the wall and try not to let the others see my face.

I shouldn't have come.

But you can't go home, my brain says, and I shiver and shiver until I'm about to fly apart.

Eventually, Tao comes crawling back. "I don't think they came this way," he whispers. "We should escape on the shuttle."

Wake shakes her head. "The shuttle is the most obvious target."

"Where else is there? If we stick around, they'll find us – in hours, days, however long it takes them. We've got no food, no water, no... anything! And I really need a piss!"

"You had to bring that up," Sinas groans. "Now I need to."

"If we can take the shuttle, we'll be safe. We can call for help."

"Are there are other stations nearby?" I ask.

"There are three permanent bases around Saturn," Finn says.

"OK, then I vote shuttle."

Wake glares at me. "You wanna get shot again?"

"No, but—"

"If they're waiting for us, that's how we ALL get shot."

"They might not be waiting," I say.

"But what if they are? Have you ever been shot at before?"

"Not until now, no!"

"I just don't want to take chances," she mutters. "Or leave before we need to..."

"Neither do I," Tao replies, "but if we're fast, we can make it to the dock before they think to look. It's two minutes away. We're wasting time!"

"Dude, they freaking *shot* at us," Wake says.

"I *know*! I was *there*!"

"What are our options?" I ask. "Other than sitting around panicking."

"I'm not panicking," Wake retorts.

"Kinda feels like we should be," Tao snaps. His voice cracks.

My notebook sits heavy in my pocket, and I wish I had a pithy thought to encapsulate my disbelief. Instead, I try controlling my breathing, focusing on the words in the air instead of the words inside my head. *Breath in. Breathe out. In. Out.* We can't stay here, that much is obvious, but we also can't get caught. There must be another path – one we're not thinking of.

"Sinas, any ideas?" Wake asks.

He shakes his head, staring at the floor.

"Great. Thanks. Super helpful."

"Give him a break, Wake," Tao says.

"I just— sorry. This whole situation is making me crazy."

"That's because it IS crazy. It's mantis. It's fucking berserk."

There's a twinge in my shoulder as the painkillers start to fade, and I resist the urge to touch whatever's back there (a little cooked flesh, no big deal). What if I'd just hopped on a different shuttle – perhaps a Martian ferry instead? Mars is nice. Why couldn't they run this camp on Mars?

"What if," I say, "we find a different shuttle? There are lots of docking bays. We can find a different one."

"Where, though?" Wake asks. "We don't have a map."

"I don't know," I say.

"And how are we going to steal a shuttle?"

"I don't know."

"And—"

Sinas looks up. "I'll handle the shuttle."

"Wait. Really?"

"Yeah."

Wake finally pauses to think, instead of dismissing all my suggestions. "There are at least three docking bays, right? I remember seeing them from the shuttle. They're connected in a big ring, or circle. Semicircle. If we go back—"

I nod. "I reckon we can sneak to the other docks."

"Okay," Tao says. "I'm happy with that. We happy with that?"

More nods, even though no one's remotely happy.

Wake unlocks the door, and we move.

The first turn takes us to a wider tunnel, big enough to drive a truck through, with a maze of lane markings for autonomous cargo carriers. We have to jog for a couple hundred metres to the exit, our footsteps unpleasantly echo-y, our only cover the curve of the station's ring. There's an airlock here, and through it is a hexagonal chamber that sits between the neighbouring docks like a buffer. (If the docks are sections of a humongous bracelet, this is the charm dangling between them.) The floor is an open cargo elevator, and the ceiling is a window looking towards Starfish's hub. To our right and left, more airlocks, to Docking Bays B and C. One of them is probably where we want to be.

Interestingly, a dozen fist-sized pale blue spheres stitch a line between the airlocks. They're half-translucent and pasted solidly to the floor. I'm tempted to poke one before my Australian survival instincts kick in. *Don't touch, because it's probably poisonous and won't attack unless provoked.*

"We go through," Wake whispers. "We find a ship. Then what?"

"Then Sinas flies us out of here," I say.

"Theoretically," he replies. "Depends what type of ship it is."

My eyes narrow. "You DO know how to fly, though? Or am I tragically underestimating our chances?"

"I can do small ships – I have a racing licence." He purses his lips. "Big ships, not so much."

"It'll be a small ship," Tao says. He slaps Sinas' back.

Finn suggests he's reasonably sure we landed in 'B', so we form up on either side of the 'C' airlock. I gulp a quick breath. Tao flicks a switch and the doors slide apart, first a crack, then wider. They're so bulky the process takes multiple seconds, metal plates rasping, motors whinging. It's so loud they're probably hearing it in Antarctica.

Which is bad. Oh gosh, it's very bad. Docking Bay C looks a lot like Docking Bay B, except there ARE people here: at least forty are kneeling on the floor, hands behind their heads, men, women, young, old, some in work clothes, others in high-vis PPE, a few families recently awoken from sleep. Some are crying. Some are angry. Most are scared. All are trapped. Surrounding the crowd are a dozen individuals wielding snub-nosed rifles. They wear dark grey vacsuits with full-face reflective visors, except for one severe-looking woman with folded arms and a grudge. She's surveying the kneeling civilians, murmuring orders to the guards. For now, their rifles are pointed at the ground, the hostages intimidated into silence.

The civilians turn towards us.

The guards turn towards us.

"Uh-oh," Wake says.

We've barely run a metre in the opposite direction when the first plasma bolt slices over my shoulder.

I hear screams. I run faster. The airlock's still grinding open, plasma fire zipping above our heads. A stray bolt scars the floor, crackling with energy. Tao collides with the access panel by Airlock B, and it also starts to open, oh-so-slowly. I glance behind me to see a couple of guards with guns raised, behind them the huddled hostages, behind *them* the broken promise of escape. Wake squeezes through the gap between the doors, then Sinas, then Finn, then me, Tao last, reflexively shielding his head as though that'll stop a laser and together, we sprint onto the familiar, fern-filled concourse of Docking Bay B.

The shuttle. We can get to our shuttle.

We dash past the check-in desk, through the rows of seats. I look back again. Tao's a half-second behind. My lungs hurt.

We're not going to make it.

We will.

We won't—

A blue streak punches through Tao's left shoulder. There's a spray of red that turns my heart to ice, then a violent hiss as the wound instantly cauterises.

Tao twists. Falls.

I... keep going.

I run, stumbling after the others. My legs don't want to stop.

You should help him.

I don't.

"Cease fire!" a voice barks.

It's the unmasked woman. She's standing in Airlock B, fifty metres back, and my MeshMate stumbles across a datastream that tells me her name: Maritime. As if announcing her arrival, the ground bucks like an earthquake, and suddenly I'm on hands and knees trying to survive a bone-jarring, teeth-rattling rumble. I can see Tao from where I am. He's on his back, unmoving. A streak of blood runs down his arm, slashing through 'Wel ome to Starf sh Statio !' on the ground.

That wasn't a stun shot.

The vibrations damp, then fade.

I think I'm crying.

Maritime steps forward. "Help him," she barks.

Two guards break away. I'm not sure how they CAN help, but they kneel beside Tao and lift him up.

Maritime is statuesque, in the manner of a vengeful goddess. Her face is harsh, cast from bronze, with strong brows and high cheekbones and a thundercloud's jaw. She's tall – taller than Sinas – and stands with scientific precision, hands clasped behind her back, head angled towards us. The vacsuit she wears is streaked with use, wild scratches marking its dark grey plates.

More of the odd blue spheres are scattered around the dock, a breadcrumb trail leading across the floor, up the wall, across the ceiling, then back down the opposite wall again. They trace a rectangle between us and our attackers.

"Come with me," Maritime says, "and everything will be alright."

"I don't think so," Wake replies, with admirable fury.

"This isn't up for debate, Miss Srichaphan."

Her responding glare hits like a jackhammer. "You just shot our friend!"

I raise my hand slightly. "And me."

"And Alex!"

"I apologise," Maritime says. "That was... pre-emptive. We're escorting all personnel off the station. Now." Her neck cords are suspension bridge cables.

"You want to take us *off* the station?" Sinas asks.

"Yes, for your safety. I'm doing you a favour. It's important no one is within the— where'd you get that?" Maritime's gaze shifts back to Wake, like a sniper's sightline across no man's land. Wake is holding something small and black – not her drone, but a datapad. In the distance, Tao groans, slurred with pain.

"What?" Wake asks. She holds up the pad. "This?"

"Yes. That."

"It was lying here, on one of the chairs."

Maritime whirls around. "Did one of you leave a remote behind? Are you *THAT* incompetent?"

One of the guards steps back. "I don't think it's ours—"

"Wake, put it down," Maritime says. "It's very important you put it down."

"I might hold onto it," Wake says.

Maritime's eyes flick from Wake, to the datapad, to the trail of blue spheres that cuts the dock in half and suddenly I have an awful premonition.

"Wake," I whisper, out of the corner of my mouth. "I reckon we should do what she says."

"This pad is our best chance of getting away," she replies.

I step towards her. It's already too late.

There's a blinking red button on the front of the datapad. Wake presses it.

Maritime crumbles: "Don't!"

Twin beams of piercing blue light erupt from each sphere. They spin and slice through the station's polymer, leaving enormous red-hot gashes in their wake – gashes that align between adjacent spheres, perforating the dock, cutting it in two. It's like the room was chopped in half with the world's biggest, sharpest bandsaw.

The beams dissipate. For a moment, there's only the sizzle of melted material.

From the other side of the cut, Maritime stares at us in shock.

Then the spheres explode, *pop-pop-pop-pop-pop*, one after the other, the whole set in an eyeblink.

I'm thrown backwards.

As I fly, I hear a high-pitched whistle. It's a song, then a shriek, then a roar.

I hit the ground. Something cracks beneath me – bone, probably. Wind snatches at my hair, my clothes, the roar now a hurricane of escaping air. I look up. For a moment, I can't make sense of it: the dock's other half looks curiously smaller, distant, a diorama framed by a thirty-degree tilt. Then I realise.

The frame is empty space. The two halves of the chamber are drifting apart and there's literal *open fucking space* between them. Air is rushing out, so fast it makes my ears pop, dragging me towards the void with the strongest arms I've ever felt but hook my elbow around a bench and hang on. Boxes and bedraggled ferns tumble over my head. One bounces off the edge of the cut, exploding into dirt. The lights are still on but they're red, dark red, and I can hear an alarm but it's muffled and there mustn't be any air left for sound to carry through. The gap keeps widening, and I can see other parts of the station beyond: a habitation ring glinting in the sun, plus another arm of the Starfish, a similar jagged breach in its side. The colours are too desaturated, the details too sharp. On the far side of the gap, Maritime and her guards are safe in their vacsuits, slithering towards Airlock B. My eyes hurt. My skin hurts. Everything hurts.

Then, I see Tao.

He's out in the void, tumbling, a splotch of blue and yellow against endless nothing.

He's too far away.

His eyes are closed.

I'm pretty sure... I'm pretty sure I see him die.

I feel myself losing my grip on everything, including consciousness.

Then the station twists and leaps and punches me in the face.

FINN I

You know those times when you go to a summer camp, except the camp is on Saturn, and when you arrive the camp gets attacked by terrorists, and then the part of the campsite you're standing on explodes?

Pretty sure this is one of those times. (Technically we aren't *on* Saturn, since Saturn's a gas giant, and technically it's not summer, because seasons don't really exist anymore, and technically, the people who shot at us might not be terrorists, but I'll persist with the analogy.) In the back of my mind, I do keep wondering if this is a strangely detailed dream. Perhaps I'm still safely asleep on the shuttle. Perhaps I'm home, on Earth, and my unconscious self has invented this entire misguided venture. A nightmare sounds more logical than reality, because why else would I choose to revisit the worst few weeks of my otherwise short, uneventful life?

I'm probably not dreaming, though. Things hurt too much.

I swim towards consciousness through a dead sea of pain. My MeshMate is telling me stuff, lots of stuff, lines upon lines of amber text, useful information which – in the moment – is incredibly useless.

Stop, Ferdinand. I'm awake.

My MeshMate chirps.

There's a particular feeling when your eyes are so tired they can't properly focus, and it's as if that has been applied my every fibre: my sluggish thoughts, my aching body, the disquieting lack of floor under my feet. Déjà vu hits like a ton of wet rice.

My name is Finn.

I'm sixteen years old.

My tegu lizard, Ferdinand, died last month.

My mother's maiden name is... uh-oh. Can't remember.

On the count of three, I'm going to open my eyes.

One. Two. Three.

I turn my head, the pain spikes, and I'm... floating, in the half of the docking bay that still exists, staring at I-don't-know-what. I try to flip over, but I can't, and my brain starts to shriek 'you're falling, you're upside-down, YOU'RE FALLING!'

over and over and I flounder uselessly, suspended mid-air, gasping against the urge to throw up. It takes a while to convince myself I'm okay.

Gravity's gone. Good to know.

Not dead yet. Good to know.

First task: get to a solid surface. I curl up, reach down, tug off one of my shoes, then hurl it at the floor above me.

Slowly, I start drifting in the opposite direction.

Very, very slowly.

Even though I'm mostly bones, those bones are much more massive than one dusty running shoe. I take off my other shoe and throw it, too. It bounces off the floor and bounces and spirals into the darkness. (Thanks, physics.)

Minutes later, I'm within arm's reach of a handhold on the ceiling. I seize it, swing myself to a stop, and take a few deep breaths. *It's only zero-g. You can handle zero-g. You aren't going to fall.*

Second task: survey the area.

The docking bay is mostly dark, the lighting a feeble emergency red, close to death. Something's on fire at the far end of the concourse, throwing long, flickering shadows. Without gravity, flames don't rise; they balloon in undulating spheres of orange and smoke. The last thing I remember is the dock being sliced in half... so why am I alive?

Where I expect to see a giant hole in the station, there's instead a clean, white PolyGrowth wall. It adheres to the ragged borders of the explosion's handiwork, sealing us off from the vacuum outside. Frisbee-sized repair bots tend to the regrowth, dispensing extra material where needed. They work fast – since I *am* alive, it must've been only a minute between the explosion and the fix.

How long have I been unconscious?

<Half an hour>, Ferdinand chirps.

Enough time to repressurise the room and reheat it to habitable levels. It's understandable I feel like crap, though – raw space exposure will do that to you. I give Ferdinand a quick scratch under his chin and he scuttles up my leg, perching on my shoulder.

<Healbot supplies at twenty percent. Please restock at a medical dispenser immediately.>

"Yeah, yeah." My voice cracks.

I need water.

Problem: everything that wasn't bolted down has been sucked out of the dock. Everything except the bodies.

I spot one. Then two. Then three. They're curled up, unmoving.

"Hey," I call out.

I don't like the bodies, not when it's dark. I turn to face the ceiling, polymer inches from my face, my legs dangling in the cold, thin air.

Third task: don't panic. That one might be difficult.

One of my eyes is scabbed over. I touch the area around it. My fingers come away red with blood, half-clotted (a parting gift from a flying fern, on its one-way trip to oblivion).

Okay. Bodies.

The closest is near the floor, currently above me. I ask Ferdinand to identify it. The lizard sniffs.

<Alex Hawthorne, 92% probability.>

Alex. It's Alex.

Truthfully, I'm a little scared of her.

I should check if she's okay.

I leap towards her, on legs made of custard, and custard or no custard I soar across the docking bay, stomach churning, and it's tempting to close my eyes but instead I stare at the place I'm going to hit, and keep on staring until—

"Oof." I slam into a bench and claw at it to avoid pinballing away. (Delicate movements, Finn. Delicate movements.) Awkwardly, I manoeuvre into the gap beneath. Alex is there, face-down, one elbow hooked around a chair leg.

"Hello?" I ask. She doesn't respond.

The only sound is the repair bots' whirr. While the station holds its breath, my own quiet breathing is almost oppressive.

Alex's skin is bruised and raw from the rapid decompression, but I'm fairly certain she's alive. That's the best I can hope for, at this point. Her hair floats in a ghostly fan around her harsh, tanned face. I reach out reflexively to tap her shoulder, to rouse her, but... I don't.

She'll wake up.

My MeshMate tells me the other bodies are probably Sinas and Wake. It's hard to be sure, in the dark.

No Tao.

Tao was the first person to ask if I was OK, when we woke up on the shuttle. We were both still dizzy from stasis sickness, but he told me a joke. I remember laughing. Tao was... nice.

'He was nice.' What an inadequate way to describe somebody.

He's probably dead. Floating, out there.

I should stop thinking about this.

I scoot over to the resealed wall to watch the repair bots work. I wipe the blood from my face, and my hair, and it perhaps wasn't a good idea to use my t-shirt since it's now a scarlet-stained rag. Collecting my shoes takes more effort since they ricocheted in completely opposite directions. Eventually, the bots move to extinguish the remaining fires. The flames are gone within seconds, and the concourse darkens. My brain keeps insisting there are more bodies in the shadows – perhaps one's wearing a yellow-blue AFL jersey – but it's always a trick of the light, or lack of it.

It's like I'm the first one awake at a sixth-grade sleepover, anxiously counting down the seconds until the world restarts.

I was expecting lots of things to happen on this trip. Some nice, others not-so-nice, but not... this. Who were those people who attacked us? I can think of plenty of options – pirates, soldiers, terrorists, corporate spies, fundamentalist cults, downtrodden workers gunning for a raise – but why were they forcibly evacuating people off Starfish?

I don't know. I'm thinking, and I'm thinking, but I don't know.

I suppose I'm scared.

Fourth task: keep not-panicking.

I should be doing things, making plans. Finding supplies, getting a vacsuit, finding a medbay, signalling for help.

It all seems vaguely pointless. So, I wait.

I wait until one of the floating bodies stirs.

"Sinass?" I call out.

"Eeeuuughhh," is the reply.

I launch myself towards him, realise I can't stop without grabbing his legs, and sail straight past to the opposite wall. "Are you okay?" (Stupid question.)

"I'm... alive," he says, looking around.

He takes in the scene. I wait.

"How am I alive?"

"Um. The repair bots saved us, I think. They sealed the breach fast. We're lucky."

"Huh." He coughs a couple of times. "I could use a little help."

I launch towards him again, more slowly. As I pass, he seizes my outstretched forearm. We barely manage to navigate the resulting brain-bending tumble but eventually find ourselves clinging to the benches next to Alex. Sinass hisses, biting back pain.

"What's wrong?"

"Shoulder," he grunts.

"It's probably dislocated," Alex mumbles.

I choke back a yell. "Aah!"

"I'm awake." She extracts herself from her makeshift bunker, rubbing her eyes. "Fuuuuuuccckk. We aren't dead?"

"E-seal." Sinass nods at the membrane.

"Would ya look at that. Man, I feel like I've been churned through a trash compactor. Where's Wake? And Tao?"

"Wake's sleeping," I say. Suddenly, a lump in my throat, like glue. "Tao... I haven't seen him."

She glances at me groggily, then closes her eyes. "Shit, shit, shit, *shit*."

"What is it?" Sinass asks softly.

"I think I saw...." She trails off. "Let me take a look at your shoulder. The one that hurts."

With his good arm, Sinass pulls the neckline of his t-shirt aside, exposing the joint. Oh boy. There's a spherical nodule where his arm and shoulder meet, pushing against the skin from underneath, and the logical conclusion is that it's

the end of his arm bone – which is supposed to be socketed into his shoulder – which makes me want to vomit far more than the lack of gravity. A black bruise is spreading across his skin.

"Yep, that looks VERY dislocated," Alex says, upon a close examination. I don't know how she stands it.

Sinas grits his teeth. Like me, he's trying not to stare. "Oh. Good."

"Want me to push it back in?"

"Umm. I'm fine—"

"I'll push it back in. Finn, hold him down."

I blink. "What?"

"Hold him down!"

There's no disobeying that tone, so I swing myself over and grab Sinas' other shoulder, pushing him firmly against the bench. Our eyes meet and suddenly I'm blushing like a tomato. It's my body's way of telling me it wants to be far, far away.

Sinas smiles grimly, focusing on infinity. "This is fun," he says.

"Uh, sure," I say stupidly. "Ever been to Disneyland?"

"Nope."

"That's more fun."

"On three," Alex says. She grips his arm and angles it flat, ninety degrees to his body. Then, slowly, she starts pulling. I struggle to keep Sinas in place. "One, tw—"

Clunk!

"OWWW!"

"Better?" Alex asks.

I try erasing the sound of clicking bones from my brain. Sinas moves his arm up and down experimentally, then swings it around a few times.

"Hurts less," he murmurs. "Uh. Thank you?"

"You're welcome. Make sure to give it a few weeks before you try lifting any weights." She grins in a rather self-satisfied way. "You end up learning heaps of random crap, living on a farm with only magpies to talk to – how to jump-start a hovertruck, how to shoot a shotgun, how to avoid being devoured by snakes, how to prepare my dad's *extremely precise* Vegemite toast recipe..."

"How's your back, by the way?" Sinas asks. "I never saw what shot you."

"Cause you were too busy saving you own arse?"

"I... that's not—"

"You totally bolted, dude. Left us hanging."

"Okay, but you understand why." His eyes are sorrier than an orphaned beagle's. "I panicked. There wasn't time to think."

Alex's eyes are a suspicious German Shepherd's (one that helps detectives solve crimes). "Well," she says, with the judgemental capacity of a courtroom, "my back, for your information, is roughly medium rare. It'd go down incredibly with some barbecue sauce, and it stings like a bull-ant nest but my MeshMate's out of painkillers. I'm going to wake Wake."

"She's sleeping," I say.

"So?" Alex stands, somehow hooks her sleeve on the bench, and suddenly she's backpedalling head-over-heels to nowhere. "Ah crap I HATE zero-g! I hate it! I— oooooohhhhhh. No. No no no no no—"

Sixty seconds and half a cup of spew later, we've gathered around Wake's supine form. She's cradled by one of the biometric scan gates, spreadeagled against a panel. '*Unidentified object in the scanning area*' is splashed on the nearest wall, a forest of sabre-tooth letters.

Alex raises her hand.

She slaps Wake, hard.

Her eyes snap open. "Grandma?!" She blinks, bewildered, then locks onto Alex. Her stare becomes a glare. "*You*."

"Wake up, sleepyhead! Clock's ticking."

"Huh?" Wake coughs up a few droplets of blood. "Oh, god."

"Yeah, 'Oh god' is right. All that shit you're remembering, and wondering 'hey, was that a dream?' It happened."

"Everything?"

"M-hm."

"Even the part with us wearing luchador masks and wrestling?" Wake gazes at each of us in turn, lips moving silently. When she speaks, her voice is the quietest I've ever heard it. "Where's Tao?"

"He didn't make it," Alex replies.

My heart stops. It stops, and a dizzying shiver runs through me.

This does feel like a dream.

"I saw him after the explosion. He was thrown off structure, into the vacuum." Alex gestures vaguely. "He was pretty far out there."

Sinas stares at his feet. "Too far?"

"Yeah." She shrugs. "Or maybe not. Maybe somebody saved him."

"I don't believe it," Wake says. "I don't."

I'm not sure which part – the dying, or the being saved.

I focus on everything that isn't moving.

The people who're left.

Our clothes are ripped and torn and blackened. Physics has emptied a jar of scratches, bruises, and burns all over us. We're dripping with exhaustion and traces of whatever used to live in Alex's stomach, plus the residue that remains when you don't have enough energy to be sad. Logically, I shouldn't care overly much. People die. I don't know most of them, and I didn't really know Tao.

Other people did, though. Maybe I could've been one of them.

I should stop thinking about this.

"We'll find him," Sinas says, and for a moment I almost believe him.

Wake's only zero-g experience comes from arcades and simulations, but she adapts quickly, avoiding the usual introductory vomit period thanks to her sheer

pissed-off-ness. Alex has appointed herself as Wake's guardian-slash-teacher and they float together ahead of Sinas and I, skimming the wall towards the airlock where our shuttle was docked.

Key word: was. Vibrations from the explosions must've ripped it off its moorings. Resupply hoses dump fuel into nowhere, waving in the aftershock.

At least the airlock is still pressurised, so we hunker down inside. Sinas floats freely, arms folded, while Wake presses as much of herself as possible against the floor, with the air of someone who's just bombed an exam.

"A plan...?" she says. Half-question, half-prayer.

Alex pulls out her notebook. "Let's make a list of things to do. Or NOT do."

I run my fingers through my hair, sweeping it aside (a good amount of blood has now gone into styling it). Lists are good. Lists give you tangible goals while the rest of the galaxy is going supernova. Alex's vintage paper obsession is odd but as her pen begins scratching and scratching, a strange calm settles over me.

We should be freaking out. I don't, as a rule, but if there's ever a time, it's now. Maybe our adrenaline tanks are empty. Or perhaps it's the feeling, however justified, that the worst has already happened and if we're alive – if we can survive the next few hours – we'll soon be on the next shuttle home, and I can walk through the door of my mum's apartment as raindrops snake down the windows and pretend I *never* thought this was a good idea.

The most noticeable sign of worry is a slight shake in Alex's fingers.

The pen spins away from her. She retrieves it, biting her lip.

"Priorities," Wake says. "We need priorities. From most to least important."

"Don't die," Alex suggests.

"Isn't that, like, implied?"

"I think it's clear we should keep it in mind."

"Alright. Tao's not here, I get your point. If you look on the bright side—"

"Oh, the *bright* side?"

"—OK, the side that's a bit less bad, WE are here! We are. Although the shuttle isn't, which means our stuff isn't, and we'll eventually need food, and water, and medical supplies, and I could really use a change of clothes and a new pair of shoes, which is dumb, but I'm NOT gonna be the girl who gets caught by a serial killer because she can't properly run in high heels!"

"You can float in high heels, though."

Wake gives Alex a Look.

"Sorry," Alex says. "Ignore me. Keep going."

"I'm TRYING to help. For food, we could go to that dining hall we passed, but we'll need money. Does Earth money still work out here? We'll also need to find another ship or call for help and look at getting Mesh access, and I wonder if there's a way to check life support status for other parts of the station, or how the whole system is doing, because there might be more people with guns we have to watch out for. Do you think there are other people here? More staff must've survived too, although we don't know how much damage there to the rest of the station, which is why we should check—"

"Wake!" Alex raises her hand. "Slow down."

"Yep. Yep, okay." She takes a breath. "What's first, then? Finding rations?"

"We aren't gonna starve in the next couple of hours, and water shouldn't be THAT hard to find. I reckon our priority is medical supplies and vacsuits, in case of another breach. The repair bots have kept us alive so far, but that could change."

Sinas nods. "The last station I was on had emergency lockers stashed at the major transit junctions. Let's keep an eye out."

"Couldn't we also, like, go outside with vacsuits?" Wake asks. "Instead of worrying about running into hijackers? Or bad guys? We could climb outside, jet over to the nearest working ship—"

"No," Alex says.

"We wouldn't even have to—"

"Wake, no. We'll end up like Tao."

"But it would be so much easier!"

"If you're that keen on following him, why bother with a suit? Just go jump out an airlock."

"That isn't what I meant," Wake says quietly. "You know that's not what I meant."

"Then STOP thinking about it."

She smiles sweetly. "Only trying to help."

"I know, I know, I'm sorry. Ugh." Alex laughs awkwardly. Wake's smile doesn't waver. "The first thing you're NOT supposed to do is go off-structure, but I guess not everyone takes that class at school, huh?"

It's true our biggest priority is staying safe, and emergency supplies will go a long way towards that. We should also assume nobody knows the situation, which means contacting a nearby outpost via comms. Of Saturn's moons, there's a few thousand people on Titan, a few hundred on Enceladus, and likely a dozen or so ships within a hundred million clicks. After that, we can attempt to find transport. I trust Sinas when he says he can pilot us out of here, and stations *are* meant to maintain a full complement of escape pods, but when I think back to our view of Starfish as we approached, our shuttle was one of only three visible arrivals. What was it Maritime said? '*We're taking everybody off the station.*' The pods, then might be gone already – if she was telling the truth.

Information's another big problem. For now, the dock seems safe, but once we're moving, we'll have no idea whether the next compartment is full of open space, or boiling plasma, or a posse of thugs pretending to be scientists. We'll need a way to access the station's monitoring systems—

"Hey, Finn," Alex says. "Anything to add?"

I freeze. "Not really."

"Looks like you're thinking pretty hard over there."

"I mean... I agree with what you guys are saying."

"Sure." She gives me a wary look.

It's not as if I don't want to contribute, but I find it difficult, especially with people I don't know. I'm the type of person who works on ideas independently, double-checking they make sense from every angle. I want to be confident I'm right, and that I'm not being stupid. By the time I've done that, though, the conversation's left me behind. It's a puzzle my brain never knows how to solve.

I mean, I can talk to people – I'm not an idiot – but you get my point.

"We NEED to get ourselves Meshed," Wake's saying. "Local streams must be running, even if the main net's dead. I bet I can bypass the security layer from a physical port."

"You really think you can slip into a government network?" Sinas asks. "It's probably more difficult than you realise."

Wake narrows her eyes. "And how would you know?"

"I've seen the security my parents go through for their job. It's not exactly Starbucks Wi-Fi."

"Dude, I can quantumslip a dumb little cipher."

"Jesus Christ," Alex replies. "You guys are trouble. By the way, is anybody carrying *anything* useful on them right now? 'Cause now's the time to reveal if you've been hiding a wormhole in your undies."

"Good point!" Wake says. "Got my drone still."

Sinas produces a pocketknife, covered in fingerprints. "This has a few handy attachments."

Wordlessly, Alex holds up her notebook.

From my hoodie's pouch I take two dark grey rectangles. They're floppy like rubber but have a lovely, polished texture, about the size of a shoe.

"Oh man, you got *Shoosters*?" Wake says.

Shoe plus booster: it's what it sounds like. They were THE hot new toy last year, equivalent to strapping force impellers to your feet, mimicking a hoverboard without the board. Cool idea in principle, but I gave up on them after nearly launching myself off a 30th-floor balcony. My mum bought them for me as a birthday present, and while I appreciate the thought, I'm exactly the type of person who'd never use them (and thus, it's exactly the kind of present I'm given). I brought them because other people are usually keen to try them out, and I need all the help I can get making friends.

"Shoosters, drone, pocketknife, notebook," Alex murmurs. "We're done for. Well, this place is pretty sizeable, so unless you'd rather wander blindly for three days, we need to figure out where we're headed."

"There's a map, isn't there?" Wake says. "We saw it before."

"That part of the station's no longer attached," Sinas replies.

"Tragic," Alex says. "Any other ideas?"

I raise my hand.

"Christ, what are we even doing?" she mutters. "Why the hell did we— I mean, we're basically dead people walking, Tao IS dead—"

"He might not be," Wake says.

"He's gone, Wake. I saw. And we're stuck in elliptical fucking orbit around fucking Saturn—"

I raise my hand higher.

Her eyes pin me down. Via my MeshMate, I create a local channel ('wormhole_in_your_undies' springs to mind as a name). Then I share the snapshot I took, ninety-three minutes earlier: the map, mostly readable, apart from the bottom-left corner obscured by Tao's head.

"Huh," Sinas says. "Good foresight, dude."

Wake grabs the map and enlarges it, rendered mid-air by our MeshMates. It's 2D, so not super helpful, but a heck of a lot better than nothing. We can see the main accessways and where they lead, and how to get to the six primary sectors of the station.

"Finn?" Alex says. "You're alright."

High praise.

The first of Starfish's arms is where power generation, air filtration, thermal management, and any other necessary recycling happen. The second handles long-term accommodation and hydroponic agriculture. Third: an entertainment arm where tourists and visitors get shuttered. Fourth: comms, admin, and the main control centre. Finally, the fifth and thickest arm contains manufacturing and general storage. The station's hub, which is the biggest area of all, is chock-full of science labs. Of course, things aren't totally segregated – there are plenty of resources scattered all over, like medbays, and life support substations, and printers. The dock we're in used to connect the admin and manufacturing arms, and the internal spiderweb of transit tubes seems our best bet for getting around.

My stomach rumbles.

The map's seafood. The transit tubes are spaghetti. At home, I'd simply cook myself food, like the old-style donuts I learned how to make last week (REALLY good, but sadly very distant). One of my friends at school does love to call me salad boy, which I promise is less bully-coded than it sounds and mostly means 'easily ignored, boring on the outside, probably good for you'. Well, if I'm salad – Alex is pasta, Wake's a spicy garlic bread knot, and Sinas is a deceitful biscuit which pretends to be choc chip but is actually full of raisins.

This is because Sinas is hiding something. *I'm* hiding something, and I'm quite sure he is, too. Underneath his steady, casual tone, there's...

I stop looking at the map, and stare at Sinas instead.

Problem is, he's already staring at *me*.

He winks. My heart skips.

"—so that's our route," Alex says. "Too easy. But do we do distress call or escape pods first?"

"Or," Wake says, "we split up and do both at the same time?"

"Ash idea," Sinas says. "Let's not."

"It'll be faster, and if you think about it, we don't know how much time we've got before other things start exploding. Plus, it's safer if we're in two groups."

"Eh," Sinas says.

"Actually, I agree," Alex says slowly. "Split up, and we'll cover more ground. One group isn't inherently better for survival under these circumstances, since we've got no idea what we're dealing with either way." Her brow furrows.

"Eh," Sinas says.

"Totes fine if you don't want to," Wake says.

"It's okay." Sinas shrugs. "Let's split up."

The others look at me.

'Eh' about sums it up. "Sure," I reply.

"Then it's a plan!" Wake replies. "An incredibly awesome foolproof plan that'll a-hundred-percent *work*."

Ferdinand kneads his claws into my shoulder, enjoying her enthusiasm.

"So, we'll meet back here?" Sinas asks.

Wake marks a security station on the map. "Let's try here instead. It might give us a more lucent view of the station."

Alex nods. "Fine. But if there's a problem, and we can't make it, we come back here and wait. Agreed?"

I look at them. They look at me.

Alex, teeth gritted, holding her notebook tight. Sinas, hands clasped calmly behind his back. Wake, brimming with bewildering (or reassuring?) enthusiasm. Me, with neutral smile I must've stolen from a ghost.

It's strange. Here, in this tiny airlock, I can almost pretend we're four normal students, about to spend a few semi-educational weeks doing experiments, chatting about stupid memes, and accepting each other's friend requests before parting ways forever. Over the years, I've become rather good at pretending. Right now, though, pretending will get us killed.

I also wonder how I'd feel if I was the only one left. I wonder how much more scared I would be.

I wonder how I'd feel if there were four faces staring back at me, instead of three.

Alex shares a snapshot of her notebook scribbles. Suddenly, it doesn't seem like adequate preparation.

"I guess we should go," she says.

"Guess we should." Sinas nods.

"Any last words?"

Sinas shrugs. "Try not to get shot this time?"

I'm surprised when Wake throws her arms around my chest. She smells of sweat, and static, and melted plastic – we all do – and it takes me a moment to lift my arms and awkwardly hug her back. It feels strange. The last time I hugged somebody I must've been eight years old, but... it's nice. One by one, she gives us each a quick, firm embrace.

"Be safe," she says. "I don't want to lose any more friends."

Her smile's far too bright for her words.

FINN II

A virtual coin-flip pairs me with Sinas. Our job, since I was only half-paying attention: find a communications relay with which to make a distress call.

"Ready?" Sinas asks.

"Yeah."

After wriggling through a hatch, we find ourselves back amidst the offices. If the map is to be believed, this arm contains most of the higher-level control systems and datacentres which would support day-to-day management of the station, including – we hope – a high-powered transmitter. We're expecting to run into one several hundred metres hubwards.

Sinas doesn't say much. Neither do I. We float side by side, concentrating on navigating without bumping into too many walls (with limited success, on my part). We pull ourselves from handhold to handhold, making short, cautious leaps when necessary, watching and listening at every junction or hatch.

The mechanical stress of the explosions has jammed doors, buckled ceilings, bent walls so far that they've snapped, revealing deep gashes in the station structure. Glowstrips flicker incessantly between sickly blue and ominous black as viewscreens blast generic alerts of 'catastrophic damage'. Open lockers have spewed clouds of clothes and Coffee² canisters to be swatted out of our path. Even the polymer itself is starting to blotch, like cheap plastic that's spent too many years in the sun. Ferdinand scuttles on ahead, his tail swaying in the smoke-tinged air.

Eventually, the corridor splits. There's a drink fountain where we can greedily gulp down water, which is tricky without gravity. The liquid sticks together in rippling globes, which fly everywhere except my mouth, but hey – better than nothing. Soon, we're cutting through a surprisingly large lecture hall, with arena seats rising around a central holoprojector. The lighting's dim green. The air smells of ozone. We soar above the seats, towards the exit at the far side.

I glance at Sinas. I'm not a person who minds the quiet, and it seems he doesn't either. Still, I wonder what he's thinking.

"It'd be ace to watch a Formula-TM race on that screen," Sinas says.

Huh. "I don't really follow that stuff," I murmur.

"I'm biased, obviously, but I've wasted WAY too much of my life on racing. I'd show you some clips, if we had a Mesh connection."

"Right." I should add more; have I mentioned I'm bad at conversations?

"You follow any sports?" Sinas asks.

"Volleyball, I guess. Only because I played it for a while."

"Oh, I used to play volleyball when I was younger too. Not anymore though. Have you watched that volleyball anime? It's called Haikyuu, I think?"

"I have. It's really good."

We glide towards the exit.

"Nobody's stopping us," I say.

"From what?"

"From watching Formula TM on that screen."

"Ha." His mouth curls upwards. "Or Haikyuu, for that matter. I guess we can always come back here, once we're done."

As we continue, the corridors become slimmer, more cramped, spiralling and slewing and splitting from one another like the capillaries of a living thing. That's what this station is, in a way: a structure more 'grown' than 'built'. A tug drags a slab of space-grade polymer into orbit, dumps heaps of energy into it, and its constituent cells start to reproduce and arrange themselves according to a preprogrammed blueprint. With enough worker drones to fine-tune the construction, it takes mere months to grow a full-sized structure that's airtight, insulated, self-repairing, reactive, and by certain metrics, alive. That flexibility has made biology-derived structures quite fashionable, in contrast to earlier stations, which were just prefab modules slotted together like GDP-priced Lego.

Starfish might not be alive for long, though. Each compartment enforces a muted silence on us, like a concert hall's pre-performance hush. The Mesh is undoubtedly overflowing with alerts, and it's strange, being unable to access that river of data. It's as if one of my senses was quietly stolen, and I'm only now noticing how much a part of me it was.

A salient example is provided by the huge arc of electricity crackling floor-to-ceiling, blocking our way, which the Mesh would've surely warned us about.

"Okay," Sinas says. "That's interesting."

My own description leans more towards 'terrifying'. Lightning spiderwebs into my retinas, and the air itself feels distinctly tingly. The electricity jumps once or twice a second with an ear-splitting ZAP.

"Ferdinand? Voltage estimate?"

<Unknown. Likely fatal. Large potential differences are required to arc across air gaps.>

Sinas raises an eyebrow.

"Ferdinand's my MeshMate," I explain. "I, uh, gave it a name."

The problem is there's a giant backup battery bank right next to this corridor (I'm not a wizard; there are signs announcing this). Something quite important to those batteries must've been dislodged by the commotion.

My eyes dart to a switchboard on the wall.

"You think we can turn it off?" Sinas asks.

"Worth a try." Of course, the switchboard is protected behind a cover, but Sinas digs around and pulls out his pocketknife. It's oddly hefty – less pocket, more knife – with a cylindrical housing nearly 20cm long. He fiddles with a button on the side.

Shummmm! A metre-long red laser sprouts from one end. My jaw drops.

"Don't tell anyone I have this," he says, grinning. He touches the beam to the switchboard latch, and the material heats up quickly, dissolving into red-hot droplets. "Fun day, huh?"

"Yep." I'm hypnotised by melting plastic, and the lively flicker of the beam.

"I'll be honest – I think we probably should talk about what's happening, and what we're doing, and what that Maritime person was up to, and why they felt the need to fucking *shoot* Tao – but also, I sort of don't want to. Not right now."

Understandable. And really, what is there to talk about? There's a problem, we're tackling it. (Also, I'd love to own one of those pocketknives.)

"So," Sinas continues, "to avoid the issue, what would you be doing today? If it wasn't for all this." He waves his free hand behind him.

"Back on Earth?"

"Yeah."

"Um." Is playing video games a boring answer? "I was close to finishing the newest Half-Life game, before we left. Or I'd go on a walk." Oh god, that's pretty boring too. "I like going on walks, when my mum isn't home."

Sinas blows on the latch, dislodging some material. "Walking where?"

"I've explored nearly everywhere in my arcology, so I catch the hyperbullet to other cities, or use MeshSims. I used to go outside when the weather was okay, but that's not allowed much." I shrug. "Maybe I like exploring."

"Exploring, huh? What else do you like?"

Briefly, I debate whether to share my deepest, darkest secret: "Seals."

"As in the flappy, honky things?"

"Those flappy, honky things are objectively the best animal."

I think Sinas smiles, but it's hard to tell, with his back to me.

"Then I'd probably cook dinner," I say. "And after dinner, there's tutoring, if anybody's scheduled." It's a wonder Sinas hasn't fainted from excitement.

"*Cooking* cooking? Chopping stuff up, and— heating it?"

I nod, then realise he can't see me. "Yes."

"It's pretty neat you know how to do that. My parents are a hundred percent synth-foodies, and while everything that comes out of those dispensers is good, it's such an identical level of 'good' it drives me crazy. Their pizza gives the exact same vibes as their burgers, or their burritos, or cake. You ever feel that way?"

Nope. "Sure."

With a tug, Sinas yanks the switchboard open and peers inside. He flicks a couple of switches, and a shivery, vibrating whine comes from everywhere and I hope it's the sound of batteries shutting off because the electrical arc disappears. With luck, we didn't break anything important (or at least, break

anything more). I grab an alloy multitool that's floating by my head and chuck it down the hallway, past where the arc was.

Nothing happens. It's probably safe.

"We're glacier," Sinas says.

I hold my breath as we float past. Through a grate, I can see the batteries: shadowy rectangles in tall, thin aisles, barely wide enough for an AutoDrone to service. There's a flicker of coloured light, deep within, but I blink, and it's gone.

The hallway ends in a four-way junction. After consulting the map, we head upward, into a cylindrical accessway. Here the lack of gravity helps, and we can use the rungs on the walls to propel ourselves with surprising speed. We probably saved a decent amount of time by deciding not to backtrack. Sinas floats ahead of me, a long, languid shape.

When he asked what I'd usually be doing back home... see, Sinas isn't somebody I'd usually hang out with. He's popular, dripping with a casual self-confidence which means he's never had to think about being the popular kid. Without wanting to short-change my own social status, he's a natural, and I'm— not. Every day, every minute, I'm having to concentrate on simply being *me* and not collapsing into a singularity of silence and self-contradiction. It doesn't mean he's better than me, or vice versa, but he's not an archetype who regularly crops up in my friend circles. (MY friend circle hasn't changed since third grade.)

Plus, if seals are objectively awesome, Sinas is – no mincing words – objectively attractive. His face is *nice* in the way certain faces are, with sharp eyebrows, a gaze both serious and warm, and a dusting of freckles. His smile, permanently ten percent present, gives off cyberpunk Mona Lisa, his face slightly pointy, like one of Alex's pens. He's also tall, and graceful, and fast...

"You good?" he asks, glancing down at me.

"Yeah," I say, struggling to keep up.

Everything's relative. I'm not tall, but I'm not short either. I'd never call myself graceful, but I can usually avoid tripping over doorsteps. My face might never be plastered across a billboard, but I do like the way my skin turns brown after a long day in the sun, and how my smile (the rarest of exotic birds) is slightly too wide, and how my eyes are just dark, without the warmth. I like that I'm thin enough to fit into absurdly small cupboards for the express purpose of jump-scaring my friends. I don't like the way my voice sounds, but who does?

We rise out of the tunnel until we hit the ceiling of the chamber beyond. It's almost cavernous, and unexpectedly loud, a machinery-induced chatter barely on the safe side of 'deafening'. Elephant-sized pumps lie beneath mineral-stained housings, next to boxy CO2 scrubbers and electrolyzers. Pipes sprout from the walls – red for oxygen, green for biofuel, blue for water – and meet in orderly jumbles, status lights blinking. A catwalk winds between towering water tanks, their bulk hidden behind scaffolding.

It's a resource reclamation plant for recycling dirty air and water. As a kid, I loved these kinds of places; something about the complexity, the intersecting

pathways, so many machines working together for a single, vital purpose. As I look to the floor, five metres below, there's a tingly ache in my feet.

"Is this where we're supposed to be?" Sinas asks.

"Think so." I consult the map. "It's labelled as a utility substation. There should be another exit."

We use railings of the catwalk to pull ourselves along. Below, one of the pipes is leaking; in fact, nearly half the electrolyzers are dark, which is worrying since electrolysis generates oxygen. Out of the corner of my eye, I see another multicoloured glow, but when I look, I find only more shadows.

"Here's a random question," Sinas says. "What's the most exciting thing you've ever done? Besides our current, ah... predicament."

Usually, I confine excessive excitement to strictly virtual realities. "I've been in a situation like this before, on a station where something similar happened. Not a bomb, but there was a fire, and the evacuation was... chaotic. A few people got mugged. Lots of damage. I was unconscious for most of it, though."

"Woah. You've had a lot of luck with space stations. When was this?"

"Three years ago. Ish."

"During the plague."

"Yeah." I'm careful not to say more. I'd rather not remember.

Sinas twists, gliding backwards above the catwalk, and wipes the sweat from his face. I pull off my hoodie – nearly removing my shirt with it – and tie it around my waist. It's hot, with the pumps nearby.

"What were you on that station for?" Sinas asks. I'm surprised he's talking this much, although I suppose I don't mind.

"Vacation research," I say. "Similar to now."

"Huh. You seem like a person who might do this a lot." He grins slightly.

I'm pretty sure he's calling me a nerd. "My mum's a physicist," I say. "Maybe that's why. And you don't."

"What?"

"You don't seem like... a person who'd do this a lot." I wince.

"What's that supposed to mean?" His smile widens.

"Forget it."

"What kind of person DO I look like?"

It's the most I've panicked all day. "A nice one?"

"Ha. Okay." He rolls back over, opening the door ahead of us, to another vertical accessway. "You said you live in the Westralia dome? With your mum?"

"Yeah. Just me and her. She travels a lot for her research, so I get dragged around a bit."

Sinas sighs. "I know that feeling. Good for you, though, doing work you enjoy. Science is cool."

I blame my mum for that side of me. She's always loved that part of her life, and it's probably one of the few things she still loves. "In the future, I guess I want to design spacecraft. I dunno why – maybe because I do like exploring. Or watched too much Star Wars."

"Born too late to explore the world, born too early to explore the universe, but born *just in time* to build really cool spaceships?"

"Something like that."

"Sounds great," Sinas says. "Let me know if you need a pilot." He coughs, and I notice his voice has changed. Before, he sounded oddly nonchalant, all anime-boy superhero, whereas now he sounds more like the rest of us: scared teenager, trying not to be. I also realise he's been asking all the questions, but my small talk skills are equivalent to those of a thousand-year-old corpse.

We come to a hatch, locked by four levers. Think of a question, Finn. Think of a question. Think of a damn question.

I cough. "So, now you know why I got stuck on this trip. What about you? Any special reason you applied?"

Sinas shrugs. "I guess I wanted to get away from Earth for a while. Do something different."

"Oh. Why?"

"Eh, you know." He undoes the third lock. "Sometimes—"

WHUMP!

The hatch whips open. We're sucked through by an impossible rush of air. My vision blurs. My ears pop. I'm a leaf in a hurricane and everything's moving and I can't stop and I open my mouth to—

I slam into a wall and bounce off.

Everything goes dark.

When I come to, I'm staring at the world through a beer bottle. I scrunch my eyes, trying to clear my vision. It feels like a railroad spike was driven through my skull.

I also can't breathe.

I can't breathe.

I can't breathe.

I'm in a room – a cylinder, lined with server racks – which must've been breached. No air. No time to think as panic claws at my throat. I spot Sinas floating above me. He isn't moving. I launch myself up the racks, stop next to him. I grab his shoulders and shake, hard. The only sound's my heartbeat, drumming, drumming, drumming. I shake harder—

His eyes open.

His eyes widen. He grabs my arm, kicks off the wall, yanks me to safety as a comically large crate smacks against the servers next to us. I scream internally. The whole no-air thing is becoming a real problem, and I see Sinas gasping, but there are doors, exits, and we spin towards one together. Shattered electronics are suspended all around us, sparkling prettily in the grim red light.

We reach the door. My lungs are on fire. Sinas slams his fist against the controls and shouts. He's probably telling me to brace, so I brace. The door slices apart and – *whump!* – another gale, sucked into the vacuum. Sound

returns. The world shrieks. The air tears at us, our eyes, our clothes. I gulp at it greedily. Debris tumbles in deadly vortices, and I stay low, I hold on, pulling, myself towards the opening. My grip's giving way. My arms aren't strong enough.

Somehow, I roll into the corridor beyond. So does Sinas, two seconds later. I reach up smack the access panel.

The door shuts. Blessed calm.

I lie there, too weak and disoriented to move.

A lesson: if a door is closed, it might be closed for a reason. There was probably a pressure warning on the hatch we completely ignored.

"Let's not do that again," Sinas says hoarsely.

"Yeah." I cough. "Sounds great to me."

"I wonder how Wake and Alex are doing."

Slowly, I tilt myself upright. Blood spirals off my forehead. Can't tell if it's from an old wound or new. Stings, though.

Sinas gets up, leaning on my shoulder. He doesn't look at me but shakes his head, bent double. I can feel his heartbeat through his ribs. I'm not sure what to do, so... I wait. He gives my shoulder a quick squeeze, then moves away.

I realise I've been holding my breath.

It's funny. This entire time, I've been trying to keep him at arm's length. The thing is, I'm not sure I want to.

Pragmatically, we need to work together. If we want to survive.

I've REALLY tried to avoid thinking about this.

Despite our unexpected detour, the comms relay is close, only fifty metres more. The air cyclers are working overtime to replace the chunk of atmosphere we dumped, and I wonder idly what Sinas was going to say, before we nearly died like idiots. I've nearly worked up the courage to ask him – not that it should take much courage – when we drift past a medbay.

The door's jammed. We lever it open and squeeze inside. It's a small room, its centrepiece a memory-foam examination bed, currently curled up like a aquatic creature's shell. An autosurgeon hangs from the ceiling, its dozens of tentacle manipulators stowed.

"You first," Sinas says.

I don't bother protesting. I sit, and the chair cocoons me.

Ferdinand does the talking; he knows what's wrong with me better than I do. I tell myself to relax as biomechanical arms descend towards my face, servos buzzing, implements gleaming. I close my eyes, concentrating on breathing. A sharp itch atop my skull rapidly fades into numbness, followed by tappings and scratchings from the robot's arms. My nose wrinkles at the stink of disinfectant. Its suckers hold me in place. To Sinas it probably looks like a nightmare, but to me it's no worse than a massage. Motors and tools dance in perfect unison, cleaning my wounds, paving over my cracks with new cells.

Soft whirrs. Incessant clicks. Another, more insistent sting as something's injected into my shoulder – a generous top-up of healing nanites.

The chair retreats, and I prop myself up.

"Good as new?" Sinas asks.

I touch my head, and there's no flash of pain, which must be a good sign (at least for the quality of my painkillers). "Your turn."

Sinas goes to the chair. Before he sits, he takes off his shirt and chucks it at me. I barely make the catch.

"I figure the doc'll need to check my shoulder," he says. "I trust Alex knows what she's doing, but..."

I look away as he lies down; I don't want to stare.

"You haven't met her before, right?" Sinas asks.

"Nope," I reply.

"Thought you might be cousins. You do look like her."

Now I'm considering it, I suppose there are similarities. Then again, people say I have my mother's eyes, but I don't see it. With all the genetic fiddling that happens to most babies, family resemblances don't mean much.

Sinas hisses, as the surgical robot sticks five separate needles into his shoulder, providing pinpoint access to internal damage. Dappled green light from its scanner plays across his pale, toned chest. He's for sure athletic, more swimmer than weightlifter. I, on the other hand, look like neither of those things. I reckon he's had gene modifications, which means his parents are the special kind of rich, and near his heart there's a fireworks-shaped scar, which looks like a top-of-the-line regrowth rather than a cheap cybernetic patch.

He's so... *halo*. I used to never quite understand what that slang meant, but looking at Sinas is an education. His stomach rises, falls, rises, falls, tensed.

His shirt's scrunched in my fist.

A noticeboard on the wall proves less distracting, cheerfully announcing lunchtime barbecues, after-work dance lessons, and lecture postings with stunning images of nebulae. "*First results from the Illumination test campaign: further theories towards galactic structure.*"

"What's that?" Sinas asks.

"A lecture. In about three hours."

"We could still make it... if there's anyone left to lecture." Anaesthetic slurs his words. "A weird school lecture is partly the reason I'm here."

"Oh. Really?"

"Some army guy who'd won a bravery medal was doing lots of school visits, telling us to be courageous, take the lead, all that stuff. His name was Butch, or... Blade, or something, like he'd walked out of an action movie." He affects a surprisingly plausible American accent. "You gotta take the first step, kids! When life throws its punches, you gotta dodge and punch back! That's how I survived, and that's how you'll thrive!" He grimaces. "Thought it was a load of crap at the time, but I guess it made an impression."

"So, this trip is you throwing a punch at life?"

"That, or my parents."

"Oh." I frown. "Like, your parents made you come, or— you wanna punch them?"

"Ha. Open to interpretation."

"The last guy who gave a talk at our school was from Romania," I add. "He had pincers, like a lobster. More of a 'don't do drugs' type of chat." I go for an accent which is vaguely European in my head, but it comes out as strangled Dracula. "You must be veeeery careful. You cannot mess around with this, my friends. People make these modifications but do not think of the side effects!" I blush. Why the *heck* would I try a voice when that literally NEVER goes well—

"Side effects, huh?"

"Oh yes. Side effects, very very bad. Like brain is— I'll stop."

"No, tell me more. Using lots of complicated words."

"Nope! Nope. He was nice, though, and the pincers didn't seem that bad. It's like how the intelloctopi keep insisting we should all get tentacles and hang out with them underwater. Wait, have you met one? They really are intelligent... it's wild to think they just evolved down there, at the bottom of the ocean..." I need to stop talking.

Sinas gives me an amused glance. The autosurgeon emits an optimistic fugue as it finishes, then folds itself away, returning to its lair. Strangled Dracula, on the other hand, will be sent into permanent exile. I might send assassins to hunt him down, just in case.

Sinas cracks his knuckles. "Nice meeting you... what was his name?"

"Grigor, I think."

"Nice meeting you, Grigor."

I regret a lot of what I do.

My gaze flicks to the noticeboard, to avoid staring at more Sinas. Dying from embarrassment has, for a moment, distracted me from dying from suffocation. Or hypothermia. Or blood loss. I sigh, running my fingers through my hair.

His hand's on my shoulder. "Could I have my shirt back?"

"Sorry! Yes."

He slips it on. It automatically smooths out its creases, another rich-kid sign. "We'd better— hide!"

He presses himself against the wall by the door. It takes me a slack-jawed second to react and match him.

An otherworldly blue glow is shining through the still-slightly-open medbay door. It's bright enough to throw a sharp line of light across the floor, past our feet. The source must be close. It had to have heard us talking. The line inches left to right, as whatever's casting it approaches along the corridor outside. Sinas mouths some words at me, but I can't tell what he's saying. A few seconds later, a message appears in my inbox.

<Who is it? Can u see?>

<Don't know> I reply. <Maybe drone? Maybe AI + Wk?>

He shakes his head. Yeah, wishful thinking.

There is *nowhere* to hide in this room. Probably should've locked the door. In case our Mesh signals are being spied on, I tell Ferdinand to go dark.

Slowly, the light changes. The blue becomes deeper, more indigo, until it's a pure, saturated purple.

It stops moving. It's SO bright.

It must be right outside.

I can't *hear* anything, though: no footsteps, or voices, only my own jackhammer heartbeat. I'm incredibly tempted to peek around the door, but I'd be silhouetted worse than a kangaroo in headlights. Sinas' arms are wrapped around himself, battening down the hatches.

The light starts moving again. Its colour keeps changing, now a pale red. The line on the floor angles towards me, but grows dimmer and dimmer, until a minute later, it winks out altogether.

Whatever it was, it's gone.

Probably.

Sinas saw it. Which means I can't brush this off as my imagination playing tricks anymore, taking spiteful advantage of past traumas.

"What was that?" he whispers.

"I don't know," I say. "Although, I think..." I catch myself before I say too much. "I don't know," I say again. "But we should be careful."

The trouble is, I want to say too much. With Sinas, I can't help it. He has this ability to draw thoughts out of my head and into truespace, moreso than almost anyone, apart from maybe my best friends back home.

Still, if we want to be safe, I shouldn't say anything.

So I don't.

FINN III

Luckily, our path takes us in the opposite direction of the spectral light. One edgy minute later, we arrive at a door labelled '*Communications Relay B*'.

Communications Relay B is full of bodies.

They float, motionless, at a dozen different angles. Some are standing. Some are sitting. Some have their knees bent, arms outstretched, bracing for an impact that never comes. Some have been pushed together, side by side, never to be parted. In the dimness I can't properly see faces, so I can pretend they're statues in a museum, or trees in a forest. It's the only way my brain can process it. Most appear to be station staff – maintenance workers, satellite operators, engineers – except for one armoured squad, snub-nosed rifles in their hands. There's no blood, no injuries. I'd say they look relatively serene.

"Are they dead?" Sinas whispers.

If they aren't dead, they aren't alive, either.

The closest body – a young woman – floats on her side, facing us, her hair a black shroud across her eyes. I lean closer, expecting her to wake at any moment, to grab me, to scream.

She's still warm. She isn't breathing.

None of them are breathing.

With the gingeriness of a newborn joey, Sinas places a couple of fingers on her neck.

I wait.

He shakes his head.

There are twenty figures, maybe thirty, packed into this circular room. My imagination insists it should smell like an ancient Egyptian burial chamber, hot and humid, suffused with decay, but it doesn't. Apart from the bodies, nothing's out of place. We COULD locate a different, less corpse-filled comms relay, but I'd rather stop adding to the 'times I've almost died' tally and get this over with. Calling for help will only take a minute; after that, we're free to park ourselves in a closet and wait for the cavalry in peace.

Right?

We float to the consoles in the middle of the room. Shadowed faces gape as we pass; I'm sure their vacant eyes are tracking us behind our backs. Six large viewscreens hang in a semicircle, above angled touch panels and interface ports.

I place my palm on the central panel. It lights up, and a message appears: *<satellite driver error: amb256.sys.ros>*.

"Huh," I say.

"Problem?"

"Yeah. Might be one I can fix, though."

"You do that. I'll have a look around. Fast fixes preferred, please." Sinas shivers.

Theoretically, I know what a driver error is. A file got deleted, or a cosmic ray scrambled a memory bank and now the app doesn't have what it needs to interface with the satellite transmitters. The first question is where *should* the driver be? Perhaps it's there but isn't being recognised. In the corner of the screen, it tells me how to boot into repair mode, and I hold down a finger-torturing combo of switches and restart the operating system. It's confusing, navigating the relay's filesystem. My fingers tap-tap-tap the console, lit by the mossy glow of the screens. It turns out the driver isn't in the assigned directory, but there is a software patch, sitting right there. I run it to see what happens.

<Installation error: permission denied.>

Fair. I give myself administrator access and try again.

<Installation error: file already exists.>

I run a more thorough search. It turns out 'amb256.sys.ros' exists but the file has been quarantined. I try deleting it so I can install a fresh version.

<Permission denied: read-only.>

I sigh.

"How's it going?" Sinas asks.

"It's... going," I reply.

"Well, keep at it."

"Planning to."

"Because if you'd forgotten, our lives depend on getting this transmitter working." He appears around the side of the screen, smiling beatifically.

I roll my eyes.

"I REALLY appreciate getting to spend so much time in this room. Don't you?" he asks.

I stare at him. "Yes."

He tilts his head, sauntering out of view.

Okay, back to work. The file's read-only, but I can change that. I modify permissions on the entire directory and re-run the installer. Its progress bar ticks along steadily, a waterfall of names running down my screen.

Once it's done, I restart the console. And...

<Satellite synchronisation error: carrier interference on band A13.>

Clicking on the button a dozen more times won't help. I do it anyway.

Nope. I stare at the error message, my eyes glazing over. Then I breathe, very slowly. I feel myself float, perfectly still. I can sense every extremity of my body, my tongue, my fingers, my tiptoes.

Don't get frustrated. You won't be defeated by a software bug.

Ferdinand flicks his tongue, perched on my knee.

Carrier interference implies something, or someone, is blocking the relay's usual transmission band. There must be a way to check what's coming in and out at each frequency. I find a utility that does exactly that.

Blocked, it says. *Blocked. Blocked. Blocked.* Every regular frequency is out of commission, and the station can't get a fix. I can't help but wonder if this is deliberate jamming, because I don't know what else would gridlock the entire transmittable range. Perhaps electromagnetic interference from Saturn...

"You doing okay?" Sinas calls out.

"Yeah, just thinking."

"As long as you haven't been zombified yet. I'd go insane so fast, if it was only me here."

"Really? You seem like someone who can... do stuff. Handle themselves. More than me, anyway."

He snorts. "Thanks. Well, I'm good at some things. Playing the piano. Flying too fast. Disappointing my parents. Correction, I'm good at pretending NOT to disappoint them, but they'll figure me out one of these days— oh hey, I found an emergency supply locker! Wow, there's LOADS of gear in here."

I don't think it's possible to piggyback on an existing signal, at least without decrypting its quantum cipher, which means the interference can't be bypassed altogether. However, it should be possible to overpower it, by blasting a strong-enough signal. Maybe I can boost the power of our relay? I divert as much as I can of the station's remaining power reserves; any more would need a security override.

Sinas is rummaging through the supply locker, humming to himself. I'm pretty sure this song was featured in the 'awkward slow dance' section of last year's school disco. Just like that, I'm back to worrying about clammy hands.

"If you could sing in tune, that'd be nice."

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me." I smile faintly.

"I did, but I didn't realise you were such a bully."

"Well, now you do."

Forlorn snuffles echo around the chamber. "You're... you're so heartless," he says, a slight catch in his voice. Then, he's back to normal programming. "The good news is, I found us some pressure suits, and a big squishy ball which I think is an emergency airlock. The were supposed to be ration packs, but they must've been taken already. I'm hungry. Are you hungry?"

"A little."

"This sucks. This whole thing *sucks*. I hate space."

"Well, space is a vacuum."

A pause.

"Eeeuugggh," Sinas groans. "Go back to WA already."

I've always wondered how actors cry on demand. I've heard you're supposed to recall a sad memory, like a pet dying, but even when my pet genuinely died, my eyes stayed bone dry. (Sorry, Ferdinand. You deserved more.) I restart the beefed-up comms relay and try handshaking a satellite.

"Before, when you were talking about why you came here, you said you wanted to do something different," I say.

"I did?"

"Like, fifteen minutes ago."

"Right. I *did*." I imagine Sinas floating, staring into space as he thinks. "Y'know how a new experience can be exciting, at first, but if you keep doing it, it becomes... normal? And more abstractly, people say change in general is exciting, but if your life keeps changing, all the time, is that 'exciting' or is all that change just the status quo? Actually, I have no idea what I'm saying."

"I get it," I say. "Sort of."

He sighs a long, deep sigh. "I mean, my life's totally fine. But I'm switching schools every six months following my parents around, and eventually, adapting to new places gets tiring."

"Can't you go to an online Mesh school? Boarding school?"

"My parents aren't keen on either. Anyway, I thought this would be a chance to start fresh: meet new people, mind my own business, do work, no expectations. Forget the rest."

I frown to myself. "You were tired of new places, so... you came to a new place?"

"Well, it sure sounds stupid when you put it like that," he says neutrally.

I think back to Sinas' retort to our disguised captors: '*You're lying.*'

<Commlink established> the console announces. <Signal quality: poor.>

"Hey, I think I fixed it."

"Holy shit, really? Good job, dude."

I shrug. "Easy enough. Only needed to bounce the signal off Saturn."

"Sacrificed a couple of goats too, I bet." Sinas floats toward me, gazing at the screens. (It doesn't even ask for a password, an unintended side effect I'll take full credit for.) The mere sight of its simple, clean interface, waiting for an input, makes me oddly happy. Here's our connection to the rest of the universe, which is theoretically full of people who can deal with this munted situation way better than we can. It's like I'm slowly waking from one of those nightmares in which I definitely didn't study for the exam.

My heart leaps. It's a perfect triple-somersault.

"Do you wanna make the call?" Sinas asks.

"Uh – you do it."

3D-scanned versions of us bloom on the screen. We look tired, messed up, and quite out of place (so: accurate). Sinas drums his fingers on his leg, an unsteady tango of urgency and relief.

When he speaks, his voice is serious. It's *convincing*. "This is a priority SOS from Starfish Station. There has been an attack. Explosions were set off across the structure. Many systems are damaged and we need IMMEDIATE assistance. We aren't sure how many survivors there are, or if there are working escape pods, or how much longer we can survive. Again, this is a priority SOS from Starfish Station. To anyone in range, there were explosions all over the station. There's catastrophic damage and we need immediate rescue..." He repeats the message, over and over.

I'm unsure how quickly a reply could arrive, until there's an incoming communications request. I panic as I figure out how to accept it. A fuzzy orange hologram sparks to life, shapes coalescing and dissolving in a lake of static.

A garbled voice speaks: "*Star—...—tion. Do—...—read?*"

Sinas leans closer. "Yes, this is Starfish Station! We're survivors of an attack! We need help! Who are you?"

For a long, long moment, there's no answer.

Ten seconds. Twenty. Thirty. Sinas shakes his head. Then—

"—*derstood. How—...—vivors? What is—...—ation?*"

It's light delay, lots of it. The ship we're convening with must be a long way out. The hologram coheres into the curve of a cheek, a woman's face, before shattering into luminescent sand.

"Could you repeat that?" Sinas asks. "The signal's ash, we're not receiving. There are at least four survivors, but hopefully more. How far away are you?"

Thirty seconds later: "*—hours. I repeat, ten hours. Was—...—nation activated?*"

I notice the floor's a different colour. It's a pretty shade of lilac.

Intense purple light is spilling through the doorway, silhouetting the bodies, tessellating shadows across the room.

"Hey, look!" I hiss.

"What? I'm talking to them."

"Look!"

Sinas tears himself away from the screen. His eyes widen. He seizes my wrist and launches us across the chamber, sending unconscious bodies flying. He slams into the wall next to the emergency locker, then I do, which hurts, and he swings himself through the opening and drags me in behind him before I can catch my breath. The locker's small, filled with detritus, barely enough room for the both of us but Sinas grabs the door and pulls it shut.

We wait, shoulder to shoulder. My wrist aches. There's a grating in the locker, splitting the world into slits, and the purple glow becomes more and more intense, until... it appears.

I'm not sure what 'it' is. Light blooms, emanating from the doorway, lurid shafts that illuminate frozen arms and legs. It drips through the slits in the locker onto our terrified faces. It's as if you took the concept of light and turned it into a substance you could touch, and carve; one that alternately flows like honey or billows like steam from a Coffee² cup in an easterly breeze.

The light moves slowly into the communications room. It doesn't have a body, or a shape, as such. It's just light.

"—fish Station, please respond. Are—...—able to confirm an—...—hostile parties?"

The light shivers.

"Starfish Station? Respond?"

I should've have ended the call. Should I be afraid? I don't know, but this feels *wrong*. A bead of sweat trickles behind my ear. The light floats towards the comms console. It's slow, deliberate, silent.

Until it isn't. "Fish... fish... fisssshhhh... shon... shon... shon..." Its voice is wind gusting around lampposts on a black, rainy night, broadcast through a dead car stereo. Now, fear drags fingers across my neck. There are boxes at my back, no room to move, Sinas' elbow digging into my side. I can feel him shivering. He's staring straight ahead. The light starts absorbing our hologram, swallowing it whole.

"—can hear us, we are six—...—all we can to help. Are you inju—...—respond! Please—"

The equipment shorts out. The screens go dark.

The light does, too.

Suddenly, the room's empty.

No light. No monster. Just... us.

I shudder, and inhale, and blink—

I see—

Against my eyelids—

Lines, colours. A scribble in the void.

My eyes snap open. The room is still empty, a forest of bodies.

With my eyes closed, though, with my senses drowned in staticky, red-tinged darkness, I see a shape, round, a few metres in diameter. It looks drawn, a child's violent scribble of a thousand-pointed star, the same texture as blunted graphite. It flickers, vibrates, morphing from shape to shape, flipping through a lifetime's sketches in an instant. Complex protuberances blink in and out of view. It's a star, being tortured. A tiny star, in need of an exorcism, exactly where the light used to be.

<Close your eyes> I tell Sinas.

It hovers in the night inside my head. No matter how much I try to focus on it, I can't. My thoughts can't swim. More and more, I see shapes in its silhouette: a line, infinite, criss-crossing back on itself, a pattern endlessly repeated and remade, like a fractal. That's what it reminds me of, why it fills me with vertigo, why my brain struggles to find a reference point. It makes me want to vomit.

It makes me want to be somewhere else.

"Frac... tal..." it emits, in rasping, aching speech.

This is a dream. This must be a dream.

I open my eyes. I'm still inside the locker but in my head the light is dark, bloody red. It drifts towards us with a strange sense of aimlessness, swirling,

twitching, reaching out with glowing tendrils to touch the bodies it passes. That's what I'd see, if I could see it outside my head.

"Maaaa... arrrr... rrrkkooooo..."

Sinas twitches.

He's seeing this, right?

It's five metres away. It stretches for another body, a sleeping girl. I can barely see her in the gloom, but I watch her, eyes wide, and then I scrunch them shut and watch *it*. Instead of focusing 'on' it I look through, past it, past the far wall where Saturn would be, suspended among the stars.

I focus on the planet.

The scribble blurs, but I can see what's inside.

Filaments.

Pillars.

A place.

A *universe*.

My heart pounds.

It's looking at me.

It's looking at me. It knows we're here.

It doesn't want to hurt us. It doesn't want to murk us. Oh, no. It wants to do much, much worse—

"MAARKO!" it shrieks, in snakeskin and ocean depths and closed-off sewers, and Sinas spasms and I'm dreaming because I think the bodies spasm too. The light's suddenly back.

It's boiling red.

Hypnotic purple.

Icy blue, cold as the Antarctic.

It glides to the door, quickly, and passes through into the hallway beyond.

It's dark once more. Sweat covers every inch of me.

I don't want to move. (But my legs ache with cramps.)

I don't want to breathe. (But I'd like to keep breathing.)

Question: *What? The? Hell?*

It felt alive, but unlike any life I'm familiar with. This is a research station. They do experiments. What if it's related? My mum's worked on some glitched-out, shot-in-the-dark skunkworks research I'm definitely not supposed to know about, but all that combined wouldn't get five percent towards 'giant freaky light monster'.

Monster. Is that the right word?

Yeah. Monster.

Maybe it's not an experiment. Maybe they found it, inside Saturn. It could be alien. It **FELT** alien.

"No," Sinas whispers. "No, no, no."

What if it's related to the people trying to disable the station? Did **THEY** know about the monster? Would that justify rounding everyone up at gunpoint?

Sinas keeps shivering. His knee spasms against the locker door. "No, no, no..."

I should say something. My head runs through a hundred comforting statements. They're rubbish.

Do it, Finn. Open your goddamn mouth.

This is what's so frustrating about being me. It should be incredibly easy to ask 'hey, are you okay?' Simple question. Four words.

What if he isn't, though? He doesn't look okay.

I could pat his shoulder?

Nah. Feels weird.

Just SAY something, Finn! It's not hard!

I bite my cheek. It hurts, a lot. "Hey. Sinas?"

"No," he whispers.

"Sinas?"

He turns to me. "Oh," he says. "Hey."

Jerkily, he opens the locker. We pull ourselves out. I wince at the pins and needles in my legs, forcing myself to stretch through the pain. Sinas cracks his knuckles, slouching against the wall.

"You alright?" I ask. "What— what do you think that was?"

"Who cares?" He smiles oddly.

Many people, I would think. At this point, stumbling across a tomb full of Cthulhu-worshipping cultists wouldn't feel totally out of the ordinary.

"All we need is a safe place to hide," he adds. "We did our job. They're coming to rescue us. Ten hours, she said. They'll be here in ten hours." He floats to the comms console, studiously ignoring anything out of the ordinary. Unfortunately, the console is fried. It won't even turn on anymore. "Can we reboot the station Mesh from here? Wake mentioned something about that."

"I don't know."

"Then we should go meet her. Maybe she managed to."

I can't muster the will to say anything else. As usual.

We gather supplies from the locker. First, we slip into vacsuits, zipping them up over our clothes. They're made of a flexible, body-hugging material, pure white, with origami helmets that fold open at our touch. Each suit's fitted with a two-hour oxygen supply, backpack thrusters, and gecko-derived adhesives on boots and gloves. Red stripes run across my chest and thighs. The suits aren't meant for long-term survival, but it's far, far better than nothing. We extra grab suits for Alex and Wake just in case, plus a tool bag that Sinas slings over his shoulder. I test the searchlights on my chest, which are shockingly bright. Best keep them off to avoid attracting attention.

We leave much more stealthily than we arrived, continuing hubwards, to a deck where this arm meets the manufacturing arm (like the webbing between two fingers). That's where the security station is – our designated rendezvous.

Sinas stays quiet, and so do I, watching for any strangely coloured lights. He seems okay, for now. I hope he's okay.

We squeeze through a hatch, into Starfish's mission control centre. Instead of gloomy, cramped hallways lined with conduits and switchboards, these are gloomy, slightly less cramped hallways lined with dataglass and consoles. Here, there are more signs of life. A cleaner's hovercart jams open a door, behind which lies a shadowed cafe, thrown into disarray. Frozen Coke arcs across it. Strands of spaghetti form pungent stormclouds. A soccer ball floats between suction-cupped goal posts, amid discordant music from inside.

We continue until we reach an elevator. A smudged, bloody palm print conceals the call button.

"Huh," Sinas says.

I call it anyway. The floor vibrates, and the capsule opens. Inside, more blood: three paint-like streaks on the floor, another on the ceiling. I try to avoid thinking about it, or stepping in it. I select a destination and the capsule accelerates, the floor jumping to meet us. My legs buckle.

I'll be glad when this is over.

Say it aloud – he can't hear what's inside your head.

"I'll... I'll be glad when this is over."

"Agreed," Sinas says.

I close my eyes, listening to the elevator's hum.

"We're still alive, huh?" Sinas adds.

Which means something. Even if we're unsure about literally everything else, we're alive. For now.

Most of us, anyway.

"What're your family like?" I ask.

"Huh?"

"Your parents, back home. What are they like? Do they miss you?" I'm not sure why that question bubbled up; I guess it's because Sinas sounded iffy about them earlier. He still hasn't told me much about himself. *Be interested, Finn. Make conversation.*

"They're... you know. Parents. Sometimes you hate 'em, sometimes you don't. They'll worry about me, for sure. Do you ever wish your parents cared a little less?"

"Uh, not really. Mostly the opposite."

"Maybe it's a nice problem to have. They can be overbearing, that's all. Wanting the best, et cetera."

The elevator stops accelerating, which means we're back to floating.

"Any brothers or sisters?"

"I had a brother," Sinas says. "Used to."

"Oh. I'm really sorry."

"Yeah, it sucks. Hey, do you listen to much music? Follow any bands? I've been learning some new piano stuff recently, and I could use your opinion."

Trust me to hit on two bad topics in a row. I spread my hands helplessly. "I'm not really a music person. People always tell me that's glitched."

"Damn, we might have to bring out Grigor again. I bet he's got some crazy playlists." Sinas sticks a hand inside his vacsuit, withdrawing a small foil-wrapped square. "I was saving this for later, but we might as well have it now."

He unwraps the square. It's... chocolate.

"Oh wow," I murmur.

"Yeah? Dude, I *live* for chocolate. Literally the one thing keeping me sane. Want some?"

"Sure, if—"

He hands me a piece. Miraculously, it's not a mirage. I pop it into my mouth. It's orbital. It's *very* orbital.

"We should probably share with the others," I say, mouth half-full.

"They'll never know."

I swirl the chocolate around, letting it melt on my tongue.

The elevator decelerates. We float up to the ceiling. I stop myself, stomach muttering in protest.

The elevator dings. Its doors open, to reveal a hallway.

When I blink, it's filled with light.

Fractals stagger through the air like lightning. My eyes, scrunched closed, are drowning in colours I've never seen: an impossible kaleidoscope of rainbows, of shimmering curtains, of vibrating strings knotted through walls, doors, each other. I can't pick out what's solid and what isn't. My skull aches.

I don't allow myself to panic. Instead, I focus past the fractals, like before, until the colours blur together. Somehow, that makes them snap into focus.

Closest to us is a shape – an outline.

It's a person, made of light. Behind them is another person, and another, and another, until the corridor consists of nothing but overlapping, glowing *people*. It's a sea, an ocean, of a hundred or a thousand souls.

They look at us.

They open their mouths.

And they scream.

ALEX IV

Wake's about to lose it and I don't know what to do.

She sniffs. Her tears stick to her eyes, making them bulge with glistening wetness like history's sketchiest Disney princess. In movie world, it would be my time to cheer her up with a crowd-pleasing, beautifully animated musical number, but in life, I've found that breaking into song isn't as effective as fiction makes it out to be. (Okay, yes, I was the only kid tone-deaf enough to be forcibly ejected from my primary school choir. No, I'm not bitter. Why do you ask?)

We float into a pitch-black room big enough for a decent game of cricket. Surrounding us is a 3D-printed structural latticework – perhaps the first stage of a station expansion. Pillars join and split like tree branches, creating a mind-bending array of cubes, triangles, hexagons, dodecahedrons, other shapes I can't name, their faces to be fleshed out with walls, floors and ceilings. Spindly robotic tentacles lie dormant, paused mid-way through depositing material. For instants, as we pass, our perspective makes the lattice line up into perfect geometry, before re-splitting into chaos.

Wake's drone is lighting the way, casting shadows that dart and chase through the gloom. It makes me think we're crabs scuttling along the ocean floor, exploring the skeleton of a long-dead whale.

In this silvery dimness, I'm forced to hold my precious notebook roughly three inches from my nose. The words '*find escape pods in manufacturing section*' are underlined four times and circled twice, which felt like enough detail to go on fifteen minutes ago, but now, in hindsight, I'm much less pleased with past Alex's amount of preparation.

Thanks a lot, past Alex. I can confidently say you've been responsible for 99% of terrible decisions in my life. That time you found a huntsman spider in your sports bag? Past Alex's fault. That time you fell off Tomato Tower and broke both your arms? Past Alex's fault. The nonsensical reason you're stuck on this space station? Oh, I wonder who shat out THAT disaster.

This giant manufacturing hall does remind me of home, though. Nowadays, growing crops out in the open is the fastest way to get them chewed up by a megastorm, so most farms require protection under gigantic climate-controlled

domes. Domes are expensive, which means minimal surface area is desirable, which means compact, twenty-storey towers of hydroponic vegetable beds. On our farm, Tomato Tower was my favourite: a stack of huge, 3D-printed quilts overflowing with plants and sprinklers and UV lights. I loved climbing it, clearing fungus, helping my fix the parts bots couldn't reach, and I didn't even mind the work because it felt like my own private forest.

I wonder if that's what *this* structure will be used for. It's not cheap to ship fresh food out to Saturn, so most stations devote space to growing their own.

These thoughts of home are nice, in some ways, but they also make me ache, deep down.

Wake's still sobbing quietly, trying to not make it obvious, but we're the only two people here and it's *bloody* obvious. I sigh inwardly, feeling very unqualified for... whatever this is. "Hey, Wake. What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Nothing's wrong. It's fine."

"So you're super happy? Tears of joy? Is that it?"

She wipes her eyes. The tears twinkle like diamonds.

"I get it," I say. "Plenty of reasons to feel like shit. Heaps of people are dead. But we're not, so let's keep it together – otherwise you'll make ME cry, and nobody wants that. It makes me look like Voldemort."

"I killed those people," she says. "I killed Tao."

"You didn't."

She smiles painfully. "That's not true."

I shake my head, stealing a liar's calm. "Firstly, we got knocked out. We didn't see the aftermath. Secondly, you aren't the one who set those charges. You aren't the one who wanted to blow up the station. That was the hijackers. The criminals. Not you."

"I pressed the button. You said you saw Tao die. You did. So – I killed him."

"You can't think like that. That's not how this works."

"Then how DOES it?" She flicks a teardrop, suspended, shattering it. "They're *dead*, all those people, they're *dead*, and it was almost us, it was so close to being us—"

"Stop! Stop, please. You couldn't have known, alright? None of us knew what—"

"What would *happen*?" Suddenly she laughs, coughing up a breath. "Of course I knew, Alex, why else would I DO it? I thought the explosion would help us escape but I didn't think about afterwards because I'm stupid and everything I do ends like this. It it's always my fault, MY FAULT and now people are gone because I didn't frickin' *think*. It was the same with my grandparents, and the bridge, and—"

"Fine! Maybe it was your fault. Maybe you are responsible." I reach out and grab her arm, hoping it feels brave, and reassuring, and that my sweat won't soak through her blouse. "Right now, that's the last thing that matters. Me, Finn, Sinas, we need you, and if we aren't 100% focused on surviving, we don't stand a chance. You can still save the rest of us. That's worth something. Right?"

She opens her mouth to retort, but instead, takes a breath – a huge breath, the size of Olympus Mons, and her eyes are red, and her nose is snotty, but she shoves everything it contains deep inside. I'm squeezing her arm because I need her to listen to my lies, and perhaps I'm also mad at her. I'm mad she's the one who gets to fall apart.

She's quiet.

She looks at her feet. She's... shaking.

You're in control, Alex.

You're in control.

You're in control.

"You've got really strong hands." Her voice cracks.

"Sorry."

"I think I have a bruise."

"I didn't mean to—"

"Just be quiet. Please." She rubs her wrist where I touched it.

From a certain point of view, is it her fault Tao's dead? Maybe, but we also escaped, thanks to her.

'Escaped.' We should've surrendered. Those hijackers wouldn't have hurt us that badly. They only wanted to force us off the station.

But they shot Tao, my brain says, and you could've helped him, too. He was nice to you, and you left him bleeding on the floor.

What if I hadn't?

What if I'd turned back, and...

Don't.

There's an airlock on the far side of the lattice. Signage implies it leads further into the station (which is promising, as opposed to open space). The air feels simultaneously humid and chilled, like the inside of a corpse's mouth.

Unfortunately, the airlock doesn't have any obvious ways to open it. Beside it, however, sits a two-metre-tall manufacturing bot. Wake slings herself towards it. She seems vaguely irritated – with herself? – with me? – which, in a pinch, is probably better than sad.

"What are you doing?" I ask, clearing my throat.

"Waking her up. She might be able to help."

"Are you sure we can trust... it?"

"It's a robot."

"Right."

"That's like asking me if I trust my toaster."

"Well," I mutter, *"my toaster has cooked two decent pieces of toast in ten years."*

"I think that's on you." She pins a strand of hair behind her ear.

The bot is plasticky, sculpted, and smooth, like the rear end of a particularly venomous spider. Its albino torso is wide at the top and narrow at the bottom, with arms that are too long and double-jointed in all the wrong places (excellent for strangling), and legs that end in four-clawed grippers. A head would be

superfluous, so it doesn't have one. A soul would be superfluous, so it doesn't have one. It's an industrial nightmare version of a human, but – all things considered – a fairly routine nightmare in which the dreamer wasn't getting paid to be creative.

Have I mentioned I have a problem with robots? Especially robots that look a bit like spiders?

I'm pretty sure a robot tried to murk me once. I'm not certain, but I'm *pretty sure*. Let's just say it wasn't 100% my choice to fall off Tomato Tower.

Wake's having a great time though, poking around in its chest. She takes an access cable and plugs it into a hexagonal MeshPort embedded above her left hip. Her cybernetics work looks like it was probably on the cheaper side (or even self-performed), with awkward stitching between flesh and silicon, but the array of ports she has is impressive.

"Eugh," I say, mostly involuntarily.

"It's the best way."

"Doesn't it feel gross?"

"It's the *best way*, Alex."

Maybe she's right, because the robot lights up. It gives the impression of stretching, joints twitching unnaturally.

<Unit #551 reporting>, it broadcasts. <Resume existing job?>

"Nope," Wake says. "I'd love it if you could open this airlock."

<Understood. Please note that a larger set of commands can be given if you are connected through a secure Mesh network. Commands outside this set will be ignored, for your safety.>

"We'll see about that," Wake says, ominously.

Ducted fans in the bot's torso whirr up to speed, and that's how it propels itself, limbs trailing behind it. It's not that I'm *scared* of robots, per se, but these more organic models give me MASSIVELY uncomfortable vibes. The vibes make me tense, which makes my back hurt, and the slimy texture of the skin between my shoulders makes me internally shriek. We should've stayed together. *We should've stayed together*. Instead, Sinas and Finn are wandering an adjacent arm half a kilometre away, and I'm stuck in the dark with a mechanical arachnid.

<Stand clear of the doors.>

Yellow lights flash. The airlock grinds open.

The passageways beyond are equally dark. It's wide enough for multiple cargo trolleys to pass without incident, and their magnetic rails form parallel tracks towards vanishing point. It's a place designed for bots, rather than humans, and our new best friend glides ahead of us, fans buzzing. There are side passages, and occasional debris, but we ignore them.

Until Wake says: "That's a freaking *vending machine*."

"What? Where?!"

There's a small room below us – essentially a closet – containing a table, two chairs, and yes, a vending machine. My mouth fires a shotgun blast of saliva, and my brain identifies the cause:

One melted Neptune Bar.
Three packets of Arnott's Shapes.
One can of Solo lemonade.

<Mesh connection unavailable>, the machine says. <No purchases can be made.>

My stomach pinches. "Oh no, you did NOT just say that."

<Mesh connection unavailable. No purchases can be made.>

"It has to connect to a key server to make sure you're not trying to fake your ID," Wake says. "And if the network's down..."

"Why would I be trying to fake my ID?"

"To steal chocolate bars."

"Why would anybody need to steal – BLOODY – CHOCOLATE!" I aim a kick at the machine and go careening into the wall. The machine is unbothered, though Unit #551 is the opposite, appearing suddenly in the doorway.

"Do not vandalise government property!" it barks. "This is an illegal act!" (Those extendable limbs it's fond of? *Very good for strangling.*)

"551? Here's a job for you," Wake says. "Do you remember where the closest escape pods are located? I want you to head there and open any doors along the way. Send a message if you run into other people. Or trouble. Just message me if something happens."

<Understood.>

Wake pats it on the shoulder. "You're the best, 551."

I wait until its buzzing, irritating fans are out of earshot. "What an *impeccable* asshole."

Wake's examining the vending machine, searching for a another MeshPort to plug herself into. "She's only doing her job, y'know."

"Okay, yes, but..." I trail off, deciding to forego any more prejudice. "Hey, are you trying to hack this vending machine?"

"Yes."

"I'm not sure whether I should be weirded out or impressed."

"This? It's nothing. Just schoolwork."

"Schoolwork at like, Saint Theresa's Master Thief Academy for Girls?"

"My high school is perfectly normal. If you go down the software development stream, they teach you all about this stuff. Mesh hacking or quantum-slipping is the same as regular networking, at the end of the day, except the person you wanna talk to doesn't *know* you wanna talk, and their house has a bunch of guard dogs and a spiky fence."

"If this is the same as 'regular networking', why isn't everyone slipping into vending machines all the time?"

"They are."

"Oh." I rub my eyes tiredly. "Well, lemme know if your network needs a critical analysis of Hamlet. That's what MY class just covered."

"Sounds fun."

"Less than you'd think. I can never take that Hamlet guy seriously."

My eyes fall upon the two small chairs wedged in the corner. *I wonder.* Experimentally, I swing one at the vending machine's window – not hard enough to connect with any force, but to check if there's enough space for this to happen without accidentally murking somebody. My dad says I like punching my way through problems, which isn't true in the most literal sense, but is perhaps a good summary of my general philosophy. I might not be into Hamlet, or Shakespeare, but Ellen Ripley? Sarah Connor? Those guys are *great*.

"You'd better hope 551 doesn't come back," Wake says. "Also, please don't."

"Then are you almost done?"

"I AM done. Watch!" A hatch opens and Wake reaches inside, retrieving five precious pearls of junk food. "Pretty sure this is grounds for us being kicked out of science camp—"

"Or worse: *expelled*."

"—so, if anybody asks, I was sleeping in my cabin. OK?"

"If science camp still exists as a concept tomorrow, I'll back you. Now hand me some effing Shapes, please. I'm starving."

The packet's a bastard that doesn't want to tear, but finally, gloriously, I rip it open and tip stale, crumbly biscuits into my mouth. Shapes are a permanent fixture of every six-year-old's lunchbox and seeing them here – in this unused corner of Saturn's orbit – genuinely makes me feel less alone. If this shitty packet of Shapes made it all the way here, maybe we can make it all the way back.

"Did you have these as a kid?" I ask.

"My style was more rice and mangoes. Why are they called Shapes?"

"Dude, they're *shapes*. These are barbecue flavour, so they're hexagons. The chicken ones are oval-shaped, the cheddar ones are rectangles, et cetera."

Wake chews thoughtfully. "You can really taste how they've been engineered for maximum flavour at minimum cost."

"Right? I never have to try cocaine now, because it could never be as good as this seasoning."

"Alex? PLEASE tell me you haven't tried snorting these."

"Not personally, but I heard it's better than you'd expect." I run my finger along the inside of the packet to scoop up the flavour dust. "So, you're from Thailand, right?"

"Yep! I grew up there, but I started going to high school in Australia. Boarding school, obviously, it's a bit far for a bus ride. I stay with friends in Thailand during the holidays, and my parents – well, they're in Canamexico now. I don't see them very often."

"Oh?"

"Long story. Trust me, you don't wanna hear it."

I shrug. "Remember what Lieutenant Violet says when she addresses the Gorthab fleet in Season 3?"

"Umm... 'Die, Gorthab dogs?'"

"Not that."

She clenches her fist. "By Grabthar's Hammer, I'LL AVENGE ALL OF THE LIVES YOU STOLE?"

"Nonono, at the start."

"Oooooohh." Wake rolls her eyes. "*The details of my life are quite inconsequential.*"

"Thaaat's the one. Such a good line."

"Ohmygod it made me literally cry—"

"That callback to Season 1?" I kiss my fingers. "Chef's kiss."

"—but *Moon's Haunted* has way better writers than my life."

"Wake? The point is that the details of her life were VERY consequential."

"OK, OK. You are TECHNICALLY right." Her smile, while present, hovers a few inches above her face. "Feel free stop me at any point, alright?"

"You can talk until the snacks are gone. After that, we'd better get moving."

"Roger roger." She looks at her feet. "My family has never been... rich? My mum's side were like, local government workers, and my dad's side owned a shop that sold second-hand stuff. Plus, they were *big* families. My grandparents had to put in so much effort to actually send their kids to decent schools." She glances at me, head tilted. "The world's unfair, like that. But they worked hard, so my parents could go to university, and by total coincidence they both trained as body-aug technicians, and that's how they met. They'd refurbish old cybernetics if the owner had died, or upgraded, or whatever. Seriously, stop me if you're bored? Anyway, my parents were incredibly grateful to *their* parents and wanted to, y'know, pass that support along to me. Because they're amazing."

"All parents want to give better opportunities to their children."

"Do they? I hope so. That's a nice thought. Wait, did I mention I have three siblings? Because I do. They're clearsky. Do you have any brothers or sisters?"

"Nope."

"That's a shame. Or maybe it's great? *Back to the story*— my parents heard about a TK promising to do cool new stuff, lower costs, expand the market for cybernetics, blah blah blah. They thought it sounded incredibly promising, and if you go read about it, it did. The initial deal for partners was unbelievable. So, they sold a lot of what they had – this was like, when I was four – and they bought a significant share of this TK's startercorp. *Culture Computing*, it was called."

"Never heard of them."

"There's a reason. CultureCom were MASSIVELY shady, running a mantis financial redirection scheme which meant investors took on debt without knowing, and during the Third American Revolution they ALSO got raided for IP theft, 'cause that's how they were developing stuff so fast. On top of that—"

"There's more?"

"*On top of that*, CultureCom owed billions of dollars to... guess who?"

One thing I absolutely detest is being expected to answer 'guess' questions.

"MetaMake!" Wake says suddenly, perhaps reading the twitch in my expression. "They owed SO MUCH to that megacorp, like, a GG-EZ-uninstall amount. Which meant my parents – somehow completely legally? – owed

billions of dollars to MetaMake, which is and was and always will be a terrible horrible no-good situation."

"But if the company was misleading its investors and doing illegal shit, wouldn't your parents be voided of that responsibility?"

"Nope! That would be *tooooo* nice. Which is my super long way of saying that for years, they've been 'voluntary members' of MetaMake's indentured servitude program. It's why they're stuck in Canamexico." Wake folds her arms. She's probably told this story a hundred times, always having to repress the same anger and shame that's collecting around her like a stormcloud (the type that planes shouldn't fly through.)

"For how long?" I ask. "Are they stuck there forever?"

"Don't ask. And d'you know the worst bit? My parents did it this because they wanted me to have 'better opportunities', but I am NOT worth what they're going through. I suck, haha. You've seen that part."

She might slap me if I quote Lieutenant Violet again so instead, my brain latches onto a different trope. "Do you think there's anything your parents could've done? Is there... fine print?"

"What do you mean?"

"I'm guessing they weren't legal experts, but it's a huge error to make."

"No. They knew what they were doing. There wasn't a way out." A mantra.

"You said you were four years old when this happened. You've only heard their side of the story. You didn't experience it directly. What if they..." Wake's lightning is building up; time to divert to another airport. "I'm just saying it's crazy that one mistake can make people slaves for the rest of their lives."

"Yes! It IS crazy! But that's what you get when shitty companies own half the planet!" She scrunches up her Shapes packet and throws it at the wall and I bet it feels deeply unsatisfying. It spirals away, trailing barbecue-flavoured dust.

"I'm not familiar with indenture laws, but are your parents... okay?"

"They're alive."

"Can you talk to them? Do they know you're out here?"

She points to her drone, floating in the corner. "I send videos, most days. I don't get replies."

"Hey, which one's better: Australia or Thailand?" *Take the bait, take the bait...*

"Honestly? Australia's amazing, and I love it, but I love being home a *tiny* bit more." She sighs stale air. "I still have so many good memories, y'know? Swimming in the river behind our house after it rains. Climbing our neighbour's mango tree with my sisters. Being soaked by raindrops as big as your freaking head, and staying out late at the night markets, and the food! The food's unbelievable. Have you been?"

"Not yet."

"Then I'll invite you. Summer holidays. I'll invite everyone, group trip." Her smile's back, doing its best to stick. "I should *definitely* stop talking 'bout myself though. I'm not worth it. How about you? Where did you grow up?"

If Wake thinks her story's lame, mine is coma-inducing. "I live on an ag-farm, in the middle of nowhere. For most people I bet that sounds pretty boring, or like too much hard work, but— I enjoy it. I like the countryside. I like small towns. The closest government zone is a place called Donnybrook, which I'll guarantee you've never heard of. My dad'll tell you I'm the reincarnation of one of those little old Italian ladies who live up in the mountains making olive oil every day for a hundred years. That kind of vibe." I wonder if deep down, Wake would prefer her life to be like mine: more typical, more routine, more outwardly fair. Deeper down, I suspect she'd hate it.

I open our last pack of Shapes – chicken flavour – and frisbee one at her face. She unhinges her gob like a python and the biscuit sails down her throat.

"Wake, you have the biggest jaw I've ever seen. Complimentary."

She pumps her fist. "Gimme another one!"

I throw it, this time lower, at her knees, and she spins upside-down like a breakdancer. It bounces off her cheek. She half-chokes on the biscuit she's already eating, and I back off to avoid getting blasted by chicken-flavoured spit. I throw another Shape and launch myself after it, opening my mouth to envelop it mid-flight. I am the world's most awkward (and only non-extinct) shark.

"We are *trash* faces," she laughs.

I'm grinning. "Yeah."

"Actually, I shouldn't say trash faces." She slips into her vlog voice, reading from an internal script. "*Self-respect and self-worth are very important our always-online society, so the first thing you gotta do is love who you are!*"

"Okay, I agree, we're perfect." I stroke my chin thoughtfully. "I'm starting to realise there are very few problems junk food can't fix. Maybe obesity?"

"A bodysculpt costs a few hundred credits these days."

"Diabetes?"

"Healbots can dispense glucose. Easy."

"Climate change?"

"I'd laugh if that wasn't really depressing." She laughs anyway, and so do I, and for a second, I'm back at school, sitting on one of the folding metal benches beside the sports oval, bullshitting with friends at recess. I'm sucking on a synthetic grape and Grace Pham's arguing about some pro-human-liberation school strike and the sun feels fierce and familiar like a jackhammer on my neck and I'd rather not make myself sad.

A timer goes off in my MeshPal. "Shit! We're supposed to be at the pods by now."

"Oh, whoops. D'you wanna chug this lemonade?"

"Chug the lemonade. Save the chocolate."

Wake opens the can and gulps half down, then hands it to me, and it must be multiple decades past expiring because it's grittier than the underside of an abandoned shooster. Then we re-enter the huge, curving tunnels, Wake's drone lighting the path ahead. We edge past a swimming pool's worth of water spilling

from a burst pipe, rippling in distorted slow-motion without gravity to pull it down. Stray drops splash against my cheeks.

"I was researching stuff before I came here," Wake says, "and I'm not that into Mesh conspiracies—"

"Great start to a sentence."

"—but if you think about it, building a giant research station near Saturn is *weird*. It's a polluted investment for a country like Australia. Why not just rent space on a Chinese station, right? Or do your research on the ground like normal people. D'you know what I heard?"

"What?"

"Places like this are used for pulling *levers*." She gives me a sidelong glance, as if that was supposed to mean something. "Imagine you're walking through the desert and you're starving, you're thirsty, you're far from civilisation, and suddenly you find a lever sticking out of a sand dune. There's nobody around. You don't know what it does. Do you pull it?"

"Um... probably?"

"Because you're curious, right? It might help you. Okay, same setup, but now the lever's guarded by a snake. A *cobra*. The cobra's clearly been *trained* to guard this lever. Does that make you want to pull it more, or less?"

"It'd make me more curious, I suppose. Dunno if I trust that snake."

Wake paints the sand dunes with a sweep of her hand. "Hypothetically, what if a person, or group of people, stumbled across a theory that's like that lever in the desert – an idea to try without understanding what its effects might be. Say you pull the lever, and it starts raining. Great, right? It helps. But what if it starts raining a LOT? What if it starts to flood? Do you keep pulling it? What if it floods so much that you could supply water to the whole world... or drown it? THAT'S what places like Starfish are for."

I frown. "You think they built this to do dangerous science experiments?"

"Other people think so." She shrugs. "And 'dangerous' is underselling it – more like 'world-changing.'"

"That's one hell of a conspiracy." I stop myself from sounding offensively skeptical. "But is a space station your best bet in that scenario? Space is a hostile environment, with limited resources, and if something DOES go wrong you lose an entire station. Billions of dollars. Thousands of lives."

"What if finding out what the lever does is worth more than one station? Plus, this way you don't lose the Earth. Or Mars."

In a way, the idea is appealingly chilling. "If they are doing supervillain shit here," I say, "it makes no sense for *us* to be invited."

"They wouldn't ONLY do supervillain stuff. Someone has to study the new squid species in Saturn's atmosphere, too."

We reach a junction that's highlighted on our map, signalling a left turn. This next corridor is much thinner. Open doorways contain only blackness. The air's still corpse-y, for lack of a better term, tickling my throat. To distract myself, I

pull out my notebook, and write '*lever, desert, snake*' at the bottom of the most recent page. '*Intriguing metaphor. Biblical? Tugging on a thread...*'

My dad's very dedicated to writing in his diary, the old-fashioned way, with pen and paper. I'd fall asleep in his lap whenever he wrote before bed, and in the morning, I'd wake with smudged ink on my face.

"Why do you do that?" Wake asks. "Writing."

"No reason, really. It's satisfying, I guess."

"Can I read your notebook?"

"Nope."

"Would you be mad if I did?"

"There's at least one shitty love poem in here, so yeah, I'd wholesale murder you." Quickly, we approach the hatch at the end of the corridor. 'Evacuation Point Blue,' it says.

"There'd better be some escape pods," Wake says.

There are no goddamn escape pods.

ALEX V

Along the wall are twenty pod berths. They're cylindrical pipes a few metres wide, capped by telescopic airlocks. Above each is a bright red light. The screens say: 'ALL PODS LAUNCHED.' I imagine this room full of people in panicked, disorderly lines. Their voices echo from the low ceiling, too loud to hear. Blurred faces. The stink of sweat. One after another, the pods launch: a *thwomp* as it leaves the tube, a dull roar as its engines fire. *Thwomp. Thwomp. Thwomp.* The floor shudders. Fewer and fewer people.

Until finally, it's just us.

Unit #551 is floating dormant by a blast door, powered down. The only other features of note are supply lockers, on either side of the door.

"That is *bitterly* disappointing," I say.

"How are we supposed to get off the station then?" Wake says. "If, if, if—"

"We hope Sinas and Finn have better luck." I stare again along the line of escape pods, not quite believing.

Wake's shoulders, normally ramrod straight, slump like melted icecream. The red lighting makes us two-dimensional, an artist's impression of despair. Potential titles for this tableau:

'Two Girls Who Thought They Were in Command of Their Destiny.'

'Two Girls Far from Home.'

'Two Girls Who Are Still Alive (But Not for Long)!'

There'll be other evac points, in other parts of station. Maybe those will have spare pods? I pull up the map. The route we just completed is five centimetres long, at this scale. To get to the far side of Starfish we're talking twenty-five or thirty centimetres, a fifteen-minute trip if the station was undamaged but, in this context, more like an hour. Another *hour* of creeping through dark corridors, alternating between 100% terror and 100% self-loathing like a junkie injecting speed into one arm and horse tranquilisers into the other.

Doable?

Also dangerous.

I wave the map away. There's no use panicking until we've heard from Sinas and Finn. (No use hoping, either.) In my head, this was it, though – the certainty that there'd be one lifeboat left. Why wouldn't there be?

My chest feels tight, shallow. In an arch, there's a single brick – the keystone – that holds the entire structure up. It turns out my sense of control *also* has a keystone. "Let's stick to the plan," I say aloud.

"Plan, plan. Right. Security station." Wake bobs her head. "Just... gimme a second to check on 551."

"Sure." I try not to sound too unkeen.

She glides to the robot and gives it an urgent poke. Its posture is that of a goon who's just been drop-kicked off a balcony – the mid-credits freeze frame in a kung fu movie.

"Why'd it switch off?" I ask.

"Dunno." She starts sniffing it, like a bloodhound.

"What are you doing?"

"My nose is really sensitive," she says, as if that's an explanation.

I pull myself to the nearest pod airlock. There's some detritus scattered around the pale grey chamber: a data drive, a hull patch kit, a few floating strands of hair that scare the living SHIT out of me because at first I think they're cobwebs (a nuclear alert for my arachnophobia survival instincts).

I'm shocked at how shaken I feel, and how much I've been holding back.

Was it a stupid choice to come here? Sure.

Am I regretting it? Sure.

Am I scared as hell? Sure.

Am I out of my depth? Incredibly.

Will any of that matter as long as we get out of here? In the long run, no. The problem is, we might *not* get out of here. It threatens to crash over me like a tsunami.

"Alex, check this out." Wake sends me a file via. "It's the last thing 551 recorded."

It's a first-person view of the hallway we came from, as the bot approaches the door to the evac chamber. It pauses, sending a command. The door slides open. It glides through. Then, suddenly, a wave of static. 551 switches to a different camera and now, from the farthest airlock, comes a faint, magical blue glow, like the highest window of a wizard's tower late at night. The bot's fans switch off, due to a power surge. As a failsafe it activates electrostatic grippers in its feet. The view shifts as it tries to stick to a flat surface.

More static. The strange glow flickers. I check its other sensors, but they're also corrupted.

The recording ends.

There are windows in the airlock, revealing the zenith side of Starfish. Sunlight bounces from ribbed radiation shielding, split by deep scars where the station's skeleton has cracked. A titan has ripped huge chunks from its body, exposing flesh with twisted, jagged force. Paint-strokes of debris lie suspended across the night, underlit by hot plasma and sparking electricity. My guess is that the hijackers hadn't finished placing explosives – otherwise there wouldn't BE a station – but its state nevertheless sends a chill down my spine.

It also looks like the automated repair systems prioritised inhabited areas. Some hull plates have been mended near the docks, and the living quarters in the adjacent arm. Several hundred metres distant, the hub looms dark: no lights, no repair drones, no shuttles. It appears mostly intact, by luck or by design. If I was a rescue shuttle, I wouldn't fancy flying through the vortex of space junk now surrounding us, but I fancy sticking around somewhat less. We still have air, and heat, and structural integrity, but how much more is anybody's guess.

Close by, I spot one of the station's main engines: a carbon black monolith of a rocket nozzle, ten metres in diameter with a fifty-metre shadow, encircled by dozens of smaller ion thrusters. The main nozzle still possesses a faint orange glow, fading as the material cools.

Fading?

The engines must've been burning then, in the not-too-distant past. We've been in zero-g since we woke; perhaps they fired while we were unconscious? That fits, since to stop the station's spin and remove gravity altogether you'd need some damn big engines. Why would anybody want to stop it spinning, though? Gravity is generally considered quite useful.

I stare outwards, shading my eyes from the distant sun.

In the distance – near the station hub – I swear I see movement.

Two pinpricks, one bright, one dark. My imagination leaps to a person in a spacesuit, shining a torch. I zoom in with my eyes, maximum magnification, and there it is again: a flicker of light.

"Hey, Wake. How good's the zoom on your drone?"

"Good enough to be technically outlawed."

"D'you reckon you could check the view? I saw... maybe a person."

I hope it's a person. Or maybe I don't? It depends if they try to murk us or not, which is a good deal more pessimistic than my usual standards.

Wake disappears into the neighbouring airlock, and I hear her fiddle with the control pad. "Yes, yes... authorise, authorise..."

<Airlock 2 opening.>

Urgent beeps, followed by a rush of air.

Wake reappears and now her drone is *outside* the window, floating serenely above the station's surface. "Can't send it too far," she says. "Otherwise, it'll leave Mesh range, and I'll lose the freaking thing." She crosses her eyes, focusing on her readouts. The drone shoots off towards the hub, and instantly I've lost sight of it amid the void of space (a good sign, if we don't want to be spotted).

"I can see... yep, there's the hub," Wake murmurs. "There's a row of big windows; an observation room or something."

"People? Good guys? Bad guys?"

"Hard to tell. I don't wanna fly it any further, the signal's weak. But I can see shapes that look like people. It's dark, though. Wait. There's... light? Purple-y light, moving, like someone carrying a torch." Wake links the feed to me and like her, I can't make out much: tinted windows, a hint of purple light spilling through

them, three or four humanoid silhouettes moving in and out of view. It doesn't help that the sun is glaring down the barrel of the camera.

"I guess we aren't alone," I say.

"Should we head there next?"

"Hmmm." I'm suddenly struck by that feeling of thinking you're home alone, acting like you're alone (a.k.a. being a huge slob), then realising you're very much NOT alone and your roommate's been watching you act like a weirdo for ten minutes, and subsequently being zapped by a thousand volts of shame.

Am I being paranoid?

Could one of those debris pieces be another, less benevolent drone, on the hunt for pesky survivors?

"I can also see a small cargo dock about thirty metres that way," Wake says, waving so vaguely it could be literally anywhere. "It's damaged, open to space, but there's at least one transport shuttle parked inside. Want to check a look?" She frowns. "Check it out? Take a look? One of those."

I forget that English must be Wake's second language, though MeshMates do make translating easier. "How intact is the shuttle?"

"I would say... it's as intact as your data privacy rights."

"Wake, that doesn't help."

"It's as intact as Reddit comments. As intact as a sleeper's biceps."

"I'm translating that as three out of ten."

I'm not a huge fan of improvising, but if this shuttle's as close as Wake says, I'll gladly take one more shot at good news. I throw an accusatory glare at the other airlocks; the red 'launched' lights are getting on my nerves. Wake pilots her drone back inside, its smooth black shell covered by a patina of ice. She blows on it gently, a duckling she's found abandoned in the snow.

If the dock is open to space, we'll need survival gear, and in that regard, we're in luck (for once). Inside the supply lockers are vacsuits – five total, bright red – along with air tanks and a fire extinguisher and a dusty first-aid kit. Wake and I wriggle into the suits, pulling them on over our clothes. They're initially quite loose, but after activation they become much more form-fitting, as the gas mixture inside compresses to provide enough pressure to survive in vacuum. (In low-pressure environments, liquids boil at lower temperatures, which is bad if that liquid happens to be the jelly inside your eyeballs.) There are temperature regulation elements inside the suit too, plus *heaps* of insulation since it's roughly -200°C outside. Add some battery packs, air tanks that we clip onto our backs, propellant for our thrusters, sticky gecko-gloves and boots, and finally, a helmet that folds over and around my face, slotting together like a jigsaw. The whole process takes a few minutes, but I want to get it right; there are always stories of people realising too late they forgot to fill their O₂.

Wake looks uncertain, and I help her zip her suit up and lock everything in place. "Done this before?"

"Nooooope," she replies. "You?"

"Once. So, I'm basically an expert."

She grins. "I feel like an anime character."

"Any second now we'll be called upon to pilot a couple of mechs." I brush off her shoulders. Her hair waves like seaweed behind her visor.

The suits are light, and flexible, and don't impede our movements. The same can't be said of the blast doors between us and the cargo dock, which are both extremely thick and extremely locked.

"Problem," I murmur.

"Problem," Wake agrees.

"Can you, uh, hack it open?"

"If I had enough time. The station Mesh really doesn't want people quantum-slipping it. What about that duct?" She points to a vent in the wall, barely large enough for a possum.

"You might make it, but I'd get my arse stuck for sure. Which'd be funny for two minutes, but not a great time overall."

"We're not done." Hands on hips, legs askew, she's the perfect image of pig-headed determination: that brash Lieutenant Violet confidence that drives a freight train through anything in its way. My mum has that confidence, too. Mum, busy with the harvest, who has no idea what her daughter's gotten herself into.

Like Wake, like my mum, I don't wanna say 'we're done'. That would be a real sleeper take. Sleepers have already given up, by sticking their decaying bodies into stasis coffins and plugging themselves into the Mesh forevermore, worshipping a machine god who almost definitely doesn't exist. I'm an idiot, but I'm not a sleeper. What would Lieutenant Violet do?

A lovely idea pops into my head, and part of me wants to lock it back in the Pandora's box that spawned it, while another part – the stubborn, annoying part – clutches tight and won't let go.

"We could EVA it," I say. "Enter from the outside."

"Go outside? You mean— hey!" Suspicion drips from Wake's brow. "Hey hey hey, an hour ago you got mad at ME for suggesting that."

"You were discussing crossing the entire station. This is thirty metres."

"Uh-huh."

"Do you want to or not?" I ask, before the sleepers catch up.

She takes a breath, resetting. "I'm trusting you. If you say we can, or can't."

"Full disclosure: I've only ever EVA'd it twice. The last time, it was for inter-school scythesoccer game, and I vomited into my helmet. The time before that, it was a safety drill on an interplanetary cruise when I was five. My opinion's roughly as valid as a panda's."

"Okay, then let's do it. Can't be that hard." She smiles.

I smile back. My face is made of cake frosting.

Bad ideas, Alex. Bad ideas for good reasons.

Together, we glide to the closest airlock. Sunlight glints through its single, circular window. I clench and unclench my gloves, feeling the material stretch and fold.

"D'you know where your thruster controls are?" I ask.

"Yep."

"Don't touch them. If you get disoriented, it'll just make things worse. Worst case scenario, link your MeshMate with the suit computer and get the autopilot going. The primary idea is never to leave the structure – we'll pull ourselves along the surface, using our gloves. Sound reasonable?"

"GLHF," Wake says.

"GLHF."

I plant my feet, give the air a couple punches.

Let's do it.

Uppercut.

You'll be fine.

Left hook.

Let's *do* it, Alex.

High kick—

Ooh, too high! Groin hurts.

Wake waves happily to her camera drone. "Heeeeey, followers! Just a quick update to say that if I die, I've really enjoyed talking to you, and interacting with you, and getting to know you guys. It's been a blast! And I hope you can really take what I said to heart. Be happy with yourselves, y'know? I know I am. Oh, and don't forget to sign up for the iHome giveaway using coupon code 'vtuber2092special'. Bye now!"

"Not gonna record a message for your parents?" I ask.

"That's just *begging* the universe to kill me. Death flags for my channel are simply good content."

She presses a yellow touchpad that indicates 'zero pressure.' Air flees the chamber, the rhythm of the station growing quieter and quieter until all that's left is my own breath, bouncing around my helmet.

The cylindrical end of the airlock irises apart, revealing flawless, abyssal blackness. Paradoxically, it's quite atmospheric.

Wake's eyes are suddenly as wide as chicken-flavoured Shapes.

I tilt my head towards the exit. "Ready?"

"YES! I'M READY!" The voice of a god inside my skull. I turn down the radio volume. Then I shake my head, then shake it again, and fuck it, I grip one of the handrails by the exit and swing myself out onto the surface of Starfish Station.

We're mountaineers, cresting a snowy ridge.

The silver-white polymer is rough, blinding. Ahead, it rises towards the hub but on either side, it falls away, a steeper and steeper curve, vertigo-inducing. If I lose my grip, I'm convinced I'll roll off the edge and plummet for days towards Saturn's murky depths. Even though the station is between us and planet, it's big enough to see its edges in my periphery: a yellow sea, calm, implacable, threatening to swallow whoever stares too long.

We're ants.

Bacteria.

Dust.

Atoms.

I glance over my shoulder. Wake's a couple of metres behind, jaw clenched. For a second, I forget which direction's down, and I snap my eyes shut and think of nothing. Effing Jack and Jill couldn't even climb a hill; I'd like to see them cope with THIS insane bullshit.

Deep breaths. Slow breaths. Staying low helps. My stomach scrapes against rippled shielding, muffled through my suit. The shuttle bay is a cancerous lump ahead, of torn support beams and melted plastic clawing at the void. Shards of metal tumble nearby with dreamy, deceptive slowness (to be evaded, since I don't want to become intimate with any pointy bits of metal). While there aren't any official handholds, there are enough gaps and wrinkles and parts sticking out that I can pull myself along without too many ridiculous contortions.

I focus on the next handhold – a small antenna.

Then, a pipe between two radiators.

Then, a hole in the plating which wobbles worryingly beneath my gloves.

"Did I ever tell you I was in a seventh-grade punk band?" I say suddenly.

"You haven't, no," Wake says. "We've known each other for approximately three hours."

"I bring this up because one of our songs was called 'Saturn's Silence!'"

I listen.

Saturn's silence.

A planetary museum.

"Accurate title," Wake says.

"Well, I say I was in a band. Technically, I hung around people's bedrooms writing angsty lyrics. I was in the, ah, periphery of a band."

"Sitting in the corner being *incredibly* judgey, I bet. Okay, let me guess – you didn't join the band for the music, so you probably had an enormous crush on the lead singer. Or maybe one of the guys who played bass."

"A mild crush. A *mild* one. And they had a tail, which I was kinda into."

"Say no more, say no more."

"Wasn't going to."

"Say no more."

Sometimes, I wonder what happened to Bessel. They ended up moving to another school, but even before that they were turning into a mild dickhead.

Can you ever say you've truly lived if you've never been part of a seventh-grade punk band? (The answer is no, you cannot.) Mum HATED that six-month phase with the passion of a thousand suns, while dad, for some reason, wanted to help us record an album. He probably wanted blackmail material.

I'm sweating inside my suit. My fingers ache. I move a hand free to stretch, then the other. I don't *need* to hang on so tightly, though if the station was spinning it'd be a different story.

Ahead, the shuttle bay doors have been punched aside, creating a hole at least twenty metres across. The edges are melted, white material and pale blue paint dripping together, like icing on a cake. I scale the tattered shielding until I can peer into the bay proper.

It's an expansive crescent: big enough for three cargo shuttles side-by-side, their tails pointing towards the centre. Two of the landing pads are for loading and unloading, stacked high with cargo pallets. The other's probably for maintenance, surrounded by a selection of rail-mounted robotic manipulators. Sunlight throws harsh, jagged shadows on the floor and the contrast between light and dark makes me squint. One shuttle – the one Wake spotted – appears arguably intact, its belly blackened by flames. Another shuttle no longer has engines, a giant bite taken from its back. Severed fuel lines dangle like roots.

The good shuttle is attached to the bay by one feeble docking arm and accessing it will require some creativity. The damaged shuttle's closer. We'll have to skirt past it.

"D'you think we can make it?" Wake asks. "I think we can." Her breathing's fast and loud through my radio.

Then, she yelps.

On the closest empty landing pad lie three human figures – no vacsuits, only uniforms. Their skin's purple, bruised, swollen.

They're dead.

Extra dead. We're close enough to know that for sure, but far enough that I can't see details.

I'm glad for that. I can pretend they're something else.

"Can't help them," I mutter. "Let's get to the shuttle."

"Okay. Okay."

It'll be easier if we can push off a flat surface, so I start awkwardly Spider-manning myself down the wall to where the space is a bit less cluttered—

I freeze. Jerk myself into cover.

"What is it?" Wake asks.

Four figures in steel-grey vacsuits emerge from underneath the damaged shuttle. They're the same suits the hijackers were wearing before they blew up the station: armoured, angular, rifles slung across shoulders, glinting in the sunlight then passing into shadow as their owners duck beneath bulkheads.

Shit. Shit shit shit.

Do they know we're here?

I glance back at the airlock we came from.

"Can you quantum-slip into their voice channel?" I ask.

"That isn't easy. Maybe if... let's try this." She sends a command to her drone, and it dives into the docking bay, sticking to the shadows. Moments later, she patches a signal into our voice feed: muffled, but audible, like voices on the other side of a brick wall. I think the drone's picking up vibrations.

"—set more charges. We need to make sure nothing can be recovered. NOTHING. If we leave equipment behind, they can continue the project. Who knows how long it'll be until we become part of it."

"How much time do we have? Before containment goes down?"

A third voice, seared into my memory: "Hours. Let's sweep the area quickly."

"Will do, chief. Gotta keep an eye out for rescue ships too, although I think Maritime's keepin' 'em back for now—"

The signal becomes inaudible

"It's that kid," Wake whispers. "That lanky wanker who tried to trick us."

Something about the third voice, the guns, the memory; it slices me in two.

My arms shiver like a sickly lamb's. I'm balsa wood, first clenched, pretending to be concrete.

I want to go home.

"What should we do?" Wake asks.

I need to go home. I don't care how. In my head, the suits shoot me, again and again, and this time, when I fall, I don't get up. My head hurts.

"Alex? I think we should go back."

"We're getting on that shuttle," I grunt.

"But those people are—"

"I don't want them stealing it, or smashing it, or pissing on it before we can fly it away ourselves."

"Right, OK, but they tried to *murk us*," Wake says, wringing her hands. "I'm not sure it's a great idea to waltz in without preparing."

"This is the *only working vehicle* we've seen. This might be our chance. Our *only* chance." The shivers are taking over me. I wish she could understand. I want her to understand. I want to run, and this is how. "I don't get it. This entire time YOU'VE been the one running ahead, taking risks, blowing everyone up but as soon as we might be able to escape, it's suddenly too dangerous? Why? Do you actually want to fuck this up MORE than you have already?"

Her eyes widen. "You *do* think it's my fault!"

"Wait— I didn't mean—"

"WTF, Alex. Not lucent at all."

I shiver, and shiver, until I can move again. "I... want to go home, alright? I just really want to go home. I'm sorry." My voice cracks wetly.

Wake glares, then looks away.

My mouth tastes of regret and the skin I've bitten off my cheek.

"Let's go," I say, stabbing awkwardness in the face.

"What?"

"Let's go! Or wait here, I don't mind."

"I am NOT sitting around to watch you get captured—"

"Then come on!" I grab her hand and we push off the wreckage, towards the top of the damaged transport shuttle.

We sail across the bay arrow-straight, the transport's wedge-shaped hull approaching slow, then fast. I look down, hoping that I won't see a visored face

peering up or a sapphire burst of gunfire – but no, we slam into the hull, scrabbling for purchase, and it's lucky that in space no one can hear you do much of anything, let alone scream. I listen for shouts of alarm I'd never hear.

I think we're safe.

We crab-walk across the hull, over an airlock, through a cloud of what my suit says is vaporised ship fuel. It clings like mist. The next shuttle's close, now, one more big leap across the middle of the dock. Wake steadies herself and—

"Wait! Wait." I grab her wrist, pointing underneath the transport.

There's a figure, directly below. Behind them is a hatch in the floor, cut out with a plasma torch. I suppose that's how they got in.

"Give it a second," I murmur.

Wake nods.

It's fine. You have time.

How *much* is an open question, but for now...

Seconds pass.

The figure turns, facing away from our destination.

We jump.

For an instant, we're silhouetted against the sun.

For an instant, we're easy targets.

The instant passes.

We land, swinging out of sight as quick as we can, lying flat behind one of the shuttle's bulbous amdrives. I wonder if my suit has inbuilt waste recycling because I really need to pee from the adrenaline, but I also really need a drink? How confusing. The shuttle's rear door lies a couple of metres below us and we wriggle over to it, out of the sunlight.

Wake swipes at the door controls, but nothing happens.

"Locked?" I whisper.

"Nope, there's no power."

"Can you hack it?"

"Alex, it's dead. You can't hack a dead guy."

I stare at the doors: moulded composite sheets with indented handles.

I grab the handles and pull.

I freaking *pull*. I feel the doors shift a little.

Wake finds a metal pole, a metre long. I grab the doors again and pull, and pull, until the muscles in my shoulders feel like they're starting to tear... but Wake jams the pole in the opening I've created. She props her legs against the shuttle, levers it open further. There's soon enough room to jam my toes in, then a foot, then a leg, and I use my whole body to force the doors as far apart as I can. Whatever's holding them closed isn't giving up easy, but this is my shuttle, MINE, and as my head pounds red I've made enough space for Wake squeeze inside. I feel her crawl through my legs.

"Yagood?" I grunt.

"I'm good!"

I wriggle forwards, trying not let the doors go too early.

It happens anyway. "AAEAAAEAEOWWWW!"

They slam shut on my goddamn calf and if it wasn't for the vacsuit I'd have three quarters of a leg. Wake rushes forwards, shrieking nearly as loud as I did and together, we get the doors open enough for me to tug myself to safety. For a second, I see nothing but red, the spray from an erupting volcano. I think I just consumed about five Shapes packets of energy. My MeshMate's warning me about sudden exertions and the importance of stretching before a workout, and you know what, friend? Buddy? Pal? I *would've* stretched if I'd had the time.

But, we're inside the shuttle.

It's dark.

"Which way's the front?" Wake asks.

"Left, I think."

In grainy MeshVision, every corridor looks the same: low, cramped, lined with storage lockers or crew bunks. Before long I'm hyper-aware of the silence, my breathing, the sweat dripping from my nose. My arms are jelly and the jelly HURTS. Is anybody in here? Maybe some people came inside, to hide...

The cockpit, when we reach it, is utilitarian, every surface angled to give the impression of forward motion. There's a pair of padded chairs, swathes of control panels and holo-displays, and four triangular windows. The main problem is that it's been shot to pieces. The consoles, the seats, the bulkheads, they're all scarred by streaky impacts, a nightmarish dot-to-dot drawing. I kneel, touching an empty ammo cartridge on the floor.

"They killed her," Wake says. "We're not flying anywhere."

"Even if the controls are dead, there could be an autopilot we can use—"

"I wanna go home too, but we gotta be realistic. This looks ash."

There's blood on the windows, a fine red spray, and I don't want to imagine the sequence of events that birthed it. Wake grabs a piece of dataglass floating by othe seats and turns it on. Its faint orange glow bathes her visor, demonic.

Through the rightmost window, I see Saturn.

Through the leftmost window, I spot a hijacker, creeping around a pallet.

I don't think we're visible, but I stay low, just in case.

Wake shows me the dataglass. "What do you think this means?"

There's a LOT of text. I skim some headings.

*Illumination Portal Development
Risk Assessment
Tachyon Containment
Preliminary Studies (NOT FOR PUBLICATION)*

"If you check who it's addressed to," she says, "there are the names of like, twenty journalists and MeshFeeds. I think somebody was trying to get this info off the station. They were trying to escape. But they got caught."

I glance at the bloody windows. Then at Wake.

"You know when I was talking about conspiracies earlier..." she adds.

I sigh. "This was supposed to be a holiday. It's the school holidays, Wake. I had *plans*."

"Hey, I wanted to get a future JOB out of this. Or maybe I still can? 'Escaped from a space disaster' is *incredible* interview material. And if you end up writing about this trip, like you said, you've got a yakking wild story to work with."

"That is the most 'silver lining' statement I've ever heard."

I envy her perspective.

I don't envy *her*. I don't need that undercurrent of ambition dragging me every which way, spending constant effort to push my bouncy, happy self to the surface so everyone can notice all the sweet waves I'm catching.

I like being a grump and treading water. It makes life easy.

But I'm starting to form a picture as to why this happened, and it begins with Wake's desert-snake metaphor:

1) Researchers on Starfish start doing glitched experiments.

2) News leaks out.

3) Mysterious faction disagrees SO MUCH that they decide blowing up the station and possibly everybody on board is acceptable collateral.

4) Due to cosmically bad luck, a group of high school students gets trapped in the middle.

And that person I'm watching, creeping around behind the cargo pallets? I reckon they're actually *hiding* from the hijackers. They haven't got a gun and their suit's coloured red and white, like ours; the biggest giveaway is that they look completely terrified.

I wave from the window.

"Alex, what are *hell* are you—"

"It's a friendly! Look!"

I wave, and wave but Red-Suit doesn't see me. They crouch, peeking gingerly around a trolley.

There aren't many ways out of this chamber. There's the hole we used, the hatch the hijackers cut through, but every other exit's locked down tight.

Then one of the hijackers darts from the shadows, weapon raised. Our new mate freezes. They raise their hands.

"Crap," Wake whispers.

After a few confused gestures, they're marched into the open, onto the landing pad with the three dead bodies. The soldier raises their rifle and slams the butt into Red-Suit's back. They buckle, arms wheeling, only their gecko-boots keeping them standing. Another hit sends them to the floor.

The three other soldiers keep their distance, one speaking into a small black transmitter. Red's shoulder's heave as they gasp for breath. Shadows are lengthening as the station hurtles along its orbit. Soon, we'll be on Saturn's night-side.

"I wish we could help," Wake says.

"I can't see how we can," I say grimly. "I guess this answers the 'where is everyone' question. They've been rounded up, taken prisoner."

"I wonder how many terrorists there are... there must be loads."

Then, rising from the floor of the landing pad, I see a dim blue glow. It's the kind of glow that Christmas lights make. It's insubstantial, flickering, hovering above the dead bodies at the landing pad's edge. None of the hijackers have noticed it yet, even as azure highlights dance along the backs of their helmets.

Red-Suit notices, though. Frantically, they try to stand.

The light descends towards the bodies. Suddenly—the world shifts. Space wobbles, as if it's been hit by a hammer. A migraine spikes through my skull.

Aquamarine shimmers start rising from the floor, an aurora in reverse.

Wake's dataglass flickers, goes blank. My suit readouts hitch. Breath fogs the inside of my visor, our faces pressed against the bloodstained windows. There are shapes in the light, a part of me insists – the part that tries to spot dragons in cirrus clouds.

"What the *fuck*," Wake whispers.

One of the hijackers turns.

I realise I haven't blinked. When I do, I nearly jump out of my skin.

In the blackness – in my head – there lies a wondrous, ghostly landscape. A neon winter pours from the bodies, and in it, I see the station, the landing pad, the shuttle's cockpit. The artist is a waterfall, a foaming torrent of sadness and denial and grief that feels like ocean spray on the wrinkles of my brain. If distance means anything it's a few metres across. It stretches and splits into sobbing tributaries, vibrating like guitar strings.

In truespace – in the sense of 'seeing is believing' – it's merely a fleeting blue haze.

Wake's seen it too. She's bloody speechless.

I tell my MeshMate to start recording. (Who knows what it'll actually see.)

The hijackers have spotted it too, now, and they're shouting at each other, backing away. One raises their rifle and— shoots.

The haze dims as a helical beam slices through it.

Then it flares. Brighter, brighter, painfully bright until it *spears* forwards and slams through the suit that shot it. There's no impact, no solidity but the figure stumbles back. Space ripples, a mirage.

The light hovers.

The suit crumples.

Other guards start firing.

I close my eyes. The waterfall's a flood. Furious sapphire whips sweep the landing pad, criss-crossed with panicked laser beams, one of which slashes across our cockpit window. I duck too late, but it doesn't break. The light lances through another guard's suit and an instant later they're limp. They tumble over a railing, floating away. The waterfall reaches into the dark, and pulls.

Piercing red sirens blaze across the dock.

<Debris alarm>, my suit barks. <Cease all EVA activity. Impact expected within two minutes.>

"Shit!" I shout.

"What? What does it mean?"

"Debris cloud, I don't know where from, but it's hitting the station and we need to be in cover!" We *would* be in cover if the dock was still intact, but now I'm just staring at open space.

Red-Suit has recovered, darting free. They use their thrusters to jet towards the open hatch under the other, broken transport. Red-Suit reaches the hatch, dives through. The guards notice. They start to follow.

"Should we move?" Wake asks.

"I'm not sure... maybe the shuttle's got enough shielding? The chance of a direct hit is pretty small—"

<Debris alarm. Impact expected in ten seconds. Direction: station north. Station is taking evasive action.>

"Whatever happened to two minutes?!"

Gravity returns as the station's main engines roar to life. Wake and I are slammed against the cockpit roof, bouncing on the glass. One of the guards is caught by surprise and starts falling into space, the floor now the ceiling. The blue haze doesn't care. It stretches across the dock so fast my eyes can barely keep up and spears them through the head. For a second, I think the spear is coming for us, too, but at the last instant it turns away.

<Impact in five seconds.>

Wake whirls, then crouches in the corner, arms over her head.

The last guard disappears inside the hatch. The light pursues. I can feel distant thumps through my feet – gunfire, amid the shuddering acceleration.

<Impact.>

Blink.

Twin holes appear in the damaged cargo transport. It twists on its supports. Puffs of wreckage burst outward, falling away.

Blink.

A hole in the landing pad outside.

Blink.

A cockpit window shatters. Plastic launches past my face.

Wake screams and there's a coin-sized hole in the floor above her head and the window next to her is completely gone and suddenly there's a giant plastic shard sticking out of my calf.

I stare.

Blood spirals into vacuum.

I don't feel any pain, but—

"OWWWWWW! Fuck shit fuck shit fuck— MeshMate! MESHMATE!"

It's like Zeus stabbed a red hot knife right into my goddamn soul, which I suppose is almost true, and the slightest involuntarily muscle twitch sends new spasms of pain through my leg which makes me twitch more and clutch my thigh so hard it bruises and I don't know how long I sit there cursing and spitting until blessed, icy coolness spreads throughout my body.

<You have a leg puncture. Do not move the injured limb. Emergency services are being contacted.>

"Thanks, mate! Which... bloody... EMERGENCY SERVICES?!"

I don't want to touch my leg, don't want to see it, so I lie back against the bulkhead staring at the floor above. It hurts. Everything hurts.

<Debris field has passed.>

Wake gapes at me. "Alex! There's a spear! Sticking out of your leg! Does it hurt? Are you okay?"

"Fucking *guess*, Wake." I shut my eyes for a second, willing myself to stay perfectly still. "Is there a first-aid kit around here?"

"Um – maybe? I haven't seen one—"

"Go check. Please."

She swings herself out of the cockpit.

The station's stopped manoeuvring. We're back in zero-g.

Time to risk a look at my lower half. My suit's tried to seal itself around the awfulness, to keep my body under pressure. Said awfulness is a shard of plastic fifteen centimetres long and a centimetre thick. About half of it is inside me.

Could be worse, I s'pose.

"Found it!" Wake presents a red box.

"Good. Great. You're gonna need to bring me back inside the station... someplace with air. Back to the escape pods, probably."

"Right. Right. That's— a long way?" She's focused on my face, determined to avoid seeing any blood.

"Sorry." I shrug, then wish I hadn't. "Ow!" My MeshMate takes this as an invitation to pump more drugs into me. My thoughts are growing fuzzy.

"Wake?"

"Yeah?"

I'm a planet, flying through space.

Light. Huge. Nothing but air.

"I think... I think I'm going to black..."

...out.

ALEX VI

I'm elsewhere – a circular room, brightly lit, for once. My leg is still a serial killer's art project, but my visor's up and I'm breathing air (so far, so good). The walls are covered in dataglass, and the room is filled with partitioned cubicles and workstations.

Wake is on a chair in the corner, deep in thought.

I cough. "Hey."

"Oh! Hi." She crawls towards me. "So, I've been reading about how to deal with stab wounds – I've got some Mesh archives about like, medical survival stuff, in case of times like this, but Alex, Alex, I don't know if I can actually take that thing out and clean it up and stop you from dying and I don't wanna accidentally—"

"Wake, don't stress. My healbots will handle 90% of it, and I'll walk you through the rest. I've done plenty of first-aid courses."

"You have?"

"Got a habit of breaking things, it turns out. Mostly hearts, obviously."

"Thank god." She sags with relief.

I notice a few objects on the floor beside her. "Did you stop by Target on the way, or something?"

"Oh, this plasma torch is how they cut through the hatch – the terrorists. And I stole one of their commlinks. I figured they weren't using it anymore."

"Is that... dangerous?"

"As in, will they know we're listening? They'll know our link's active, but they won't know it's us, or where we are. Probably."

"I'm liking the word 'probably' less and less."

"Almost *definitely*." She gives the commlink a pat. "Plus, it'll be mega-useful if we can listen in on the bad guys. I, uh... didn't want to drag you ALL the way back outside again, especially on my own, so I sorta kinda followed the terrorists through the hatch they used, to get inside. I haven't seen anybody, so no need to freak out. It's been glacier."

"Okay, well..." I glance at the doors, of which there are four, all closed. "Let's be quick. First you're gonna have to pull this spike out of my leg."

"Hold up – you promised I wouldn't have to do much! You promised!"

"Wake, just pull it out."

"I—"

"Wake!"

"Fine! Fine."

"Grip it with one hand, tight, and pull. Straight out."

"Okay." She leans over my leg, simultaneously staring and not staring. Her hand vibrates like a spring.

"Not a fan of blood?" I ask.

"NO!"

"Better hurry then. Grip, then pull." I brace.

She grabs the shard. Yanks it out.

"OW! BALLS! FUCK YOU!" The shard spirals away, trailing blood – lots of it, pooling around the hole in my suit and jeans and leg, slick, shiny, black. "Wake. Wake. Take off my pants."

"What?"

"Take of my goddamn pants! I don't want a bunch of denim stuck inside me! Unless that's fashionable! Is denim-textured skin fashionable now!? You seem like a person who'd know!" I'm trying not to yell.

"No, I—"

"Pants! Help!"

I grit my teeth as I wriggle out of my vacsuit, ignoring the bleeding as my healbots do their utmost to stem it. The pain is slightly below excruciating, hovering just above 'banging your shins into a coffee table in the dark'. My vacsuit's off, and I unbutton my jeans – my favourite pair of jeans, incidentally, which I'll probably never want to wear again after this – and help Wake slide them off. Now I can truly see the wound, in all its majesty.

Nuh-uh. Don't like this. "First-aid kit. Pass me that – that thing with the nozzle."

"This one?"

"Yep."

She holds it out, eyes wide. "Nice legs."

"You aren't even looking." I grab the tool, shining it on the crater in my calf. There's an arc-light that vaporises non-biological detritus, plus a tiny vacuum that sucks up any goo and contamination. Raw flesh – and its absence – grins at me. The next tool is a disinfecter, which foams and bubbles. It stings viciously through the anaesthetic. I think I'm in shock. The kit immediately tries to charge my insurance, but luckily, the lack of Mesh access means it can't. Wake bites her lip, half-way to vomit city.

Our stolen commlink speaks. "*Team Five, come in. Team Five, come in. This is Maritime. I need an update.*"

"Wake?" I grunt.

"Yeah?"

"*Team Five reporting.*"

"I should be good from here."

"Okay. Okay. Just – call out if you need me."

"Thank you. Team Five, any word from Khorin? He was due to meet you at the Hub – correct? The tachyon shield is almost down. Fifteen percent power, as per Vivek."

I suck out the disinfectant and spray on some SynthFlesh, which provides structure and raw materials for natural healing. It blends with my skin, covering the wound with glue-like, quick-set... flesh-stuff? I wipe it down. Almost done.

"That's a negative from Khorin. Nothing since we encountered that debris field. Last I heard, they'd found an asset and were bringing her in for processing... Huh, that's unusual. One of his team's commlinks is still actively receiving. You notice that?"

Last is a HealPatch, which I wrap around like a bandage. The first-aid kit contains a few extra healbot capsules; I swallow one, grab my jeans, and wriggle them back on.

"Yes, I'm seeing that too. If they ran into issues, we might have an outsider listening in on this line. I'm going to ask everyone to reauthenticate, code fifteen. Disconnecting."

The commlink stops. Wake shakes it a few times. "They figured it out."

"Oh?"

"Those sleeper-dicks figured it out." She chucks the commlink across the room, with more resignation than venom. "But I guess you're okay! Yay! Wanna get going? Can you... walk?"

"Dunno, but I sure can float."

"I checked the route while you were sleeping – I'm bad with maps so don't, like, trust me – but there shouldn't be any drama between us and the security station. We can take an elevator for most of it. Isn't that great?"

"Clearsky. Orbital. Amazeballs." I shake my head, slightly fuzzy. "Don't take this the wrong way, but why do I get all the bad luck? These past couple of hours, I've been shot, and stabbed. I don't see anybody ELSE with a stab wound."

"That's true. And it sucks. But we made it though, didn't we? Through all that— crap." She waves her arms. "Explosions, debris fields, terrorists, monsters... we DID it! Isn't that crazy?" She laughs, and I chuckle, barely able to stand, and for an instant, I sort of want to hug her. She gifts me an expression of surprising sincerity. "I'm just glad you're okay."

Inside my head, her face switches to those of the bodies.

Suffocating. Frozen. Grinning, even in death.

...Tao.

Every time I think of Tao, and how crappy I am for thinking I've had bad luck, the ground falls out from under me. Like the station's manoeuvring us between life and death.

I smile back. "Me too."

"So," Wake says, as we wait for the elevator. "What about that monster? Because that WAS a monster, right? That murdered those people?"

I sigh. "Do you mind if we don't talk about that *right* now? Until we meet up with Sinas and Finn? I don't think I can handle—ugh, my head feels messed up."

I pinch myself, to make extra extra sure I'm not dreaming. Wake smiles at nothing, fidgeting, pulling at her gloves.

"I just wanna figure out what's going on," she says. "Because weird stuff is happening here. Really weird. *Important* weird."

The elevator arrives. I don't like putting weight on my calf, so I brace as it accelerates towards the hub. The painkillers are really hitting me but I'm *aware* they're hitting me, which means I'm not yet fully incoherent.

"What's the first thing you're gonna do once you get home?" Wake asks.

I'm not sure my imagination can stretch that far. "Sleep, probably. Say hi to my dog. Maybe start on that book I keep saying I'll write."

"Is that one of your dreams? To write a book."

"I— I don't know. I've always liked the idea of telling stories."

"Aww, that's nice," Wake says, managing not to sound sarcastic.

"It probably sounds... frivolous."

"No! Not at all. You just gotta picture it in your head." She holds her hands out in front of her, parallel lines. "Picture it, and the steps you have to take. If you believe in it, it'll happen. Remember, we're graduating soon."

"We're graduating in a YEAR."

"So soon!" She grins. "It's nice, having a plan, or direction. I recommend it."

The elevator stops.

We continue along the hallway outside. It looks like the cleaner half of my parents' garden shed, so it's probably workshop, of some sort, but my head is far away.

I imagine holding a book I've written. I imagine a kid finding it in the library, and downloading it at home, and staying up late to finish it. I imagine her thinking about the ending sometimes, when she's older, reliving echoes of those same emotions. (The most memorable ones were often bittersweet.) I imagine standing in front of a whole room of people, talking about that book, and telling them... what?

I imagine going to university, instead. I'm sitting in a lecture hall, learning about new friends, and new faces. It feels so hollow, and indistinct.

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood, and both faded into the undergrowth.

I just want to run. I want to forget about shattered domes and human ascension protests and resource crises across the solar system. I want to forget about *this*. The thing is, I'm happy with who I am. I LIKE my life!

Without realising, I've taken out my notebook, and on the second-last page, I've scrawled:



I put the pen away, fingers aching. "Wake?"

"Yep?"

"What's your dream?"

"Oh, I hope we get back in time for my next internship, with GemCon."

"Why?"

"What do you mean, why? Because it's important. It's part of the plan." She taps her nose.

That's not really what I meant. It's clear Wake's dedicated, but I want to know what to.

I'm not in the mood to ask.

She touches my shoulder, reading my mind. "Earlier, when I said you have to visualise what you want... do you know what I see? My parents. I picture them. My parents, and my grandparents. That's it. Simple, right? But it works!"

I'm not sure that answers the question.

Or perhaps it does. When Wake sees her future, maybe she sees *more*; the idea of being better than her past. Better, at the expense of everything else.

And me?

I paint a picture. The farm. The agri-dome. The crop towers. Our house. Red dust, swept up by wind, stinging my eyes, leaving smudges on my bathroom mirror. The smell of lightning, the sound of rain rat-tat-tatting on the gravel under of my bike, the electric exhilaration of knowing I shouldn't be outside and the safety of knowing I've done it a hundred times before.

I reach for the picture.

It solidifies.

A beautiful sculpture, in a dark, choppy sea.

Here, in all its glory, is the security station we were supposed to meet at. It's locked, of course. No one's home.

"The others must be late too," Wake says.

Next to the door is a BioLock scanner. I give it a shot, mostly for laughs. It scans my face, and my body, then gives off a disappointed beep.

I look up and down the hallway. No hijackers. No monsters. It curves away from us in either direction, towards the manufacturing arm to the right or the administration arm to the left.

Then, the monitor below the scanner blinks on.

It's blank, at first.

Then a face appears on it. A woman.

"Hello," she says.

I wonder if she can see me. "...Hello?"

"Yes, yes. Hello. Please listen. My name is Haru. I'll unlock the door for you."

A soft click. The door slides upward.

Wake frowns at me, then at the monitor, then at me again.

"Please come in," Haru says.

"Um." I'm still catching up. "Thanks?"

"Please come in."

It's ridiculous that somebody who's actually being nice (?) is the creepiest thing that's happened today. Too late, I wonder if I should be more suspicious.

Curiously, I glide through the doorway.

Nothing shoots me, or stabs me. Wake follows.

In principle, it's necessary to feature 'security stations' as places to keep unruly residents (or store a few stunguns), but I doubt a place like Starfish would encounter trouble from employees or the handful of tourists allowed on station. Inside, one wall is covered in security monitors. The central one blinks to life.

The face reappears. She looks as I imagine a 20th-century school principal would look: serious, wiry, with black hair run pulled into a severe bun, run through with streaks of white. Wrinkles dance around her mouth and eyes, but they're the kind you get from frowning, rather than smiling. She's probably forty? Fifty? Hard to tell, these days. Her eyes are birdlike, a pure emerald green, and I'm drawn to them, somehow, like a child in a fairytale.

I can't help but get goosebumps, and Wake also seems a little freaked. The door closes, seemingly on its own, and the woman's gaze swivels towards me.

"Alex," Haru says. "I know you're afraid, but I must share two very important facts. First, I can get you and your friends to safety. Second, I'm your mother."

My heart pounds. "No? You're not."

"Yes, I am. I can prove it." A semi-trailer of incredulity races through me, driven by the knowledge that, really, what she said is impossible. Her voice is calm. Urgent. "I understand that at this time, you might not believe me. However, what I'm saying is true. If you're going to survive – if we're going to survive – you must listen. Yes, you were raised by Elena and Jason Hawthorne, but I am your biological mother, and I am telling you this not because I want to disrupt your life, but because I need you to trust me and understand that there is much at stake. The tragedy currently occurring on this station does not only affect us: it affects everything. Do you hear what I am saying? *Everything*."

I nod. I still don't believe her.

My fingers reach my notebook, feeling its cover through my jeans. "I'm listening," I murmur.

"Good," Haru says. "Alex, please trust me. And... I'm sorry." She sighs, the first crack in her neutrality. "I didn't want things to turn out this way. Truly, I didn't. I've tried so hard to make this happen, before, earlier, but I was never brave enough. Never quite prepared. So, I'm sorry this is how it happens." She turns away, searching for more words.

I don't believe her. I don't. It doesn't make sense. But—

Perhaps this is a bittersweet story.

That sculpture in my head? It's crumbling, falling between my fingers, dust borne away by waves. I look at this woman, who says she's my mother, and I try and figure out what that truly means. For the first time, I notice what's behind her.

She's standing in a cavern; cavern full of light.

Then, Finn and Sinas walk through the door.

Finn looks at the screen.

"Mum?" he asks. "What are you doing here?"

FINN IV

"Finn! Finn. I'm so happy you're here," my mother says, smiling.

It's the first time she's smiled at me in months. Feels strange.

Stranger just to see her. The day before I left, she was working in a university lab – in Berlin – which makes this more than strange. It's physically impossible.

"Not impossible," she says. "Difficult. I left shortly after you, on a direct route to Titan. They're investigating new string theory physics here, and my research group requested to send an observer, for a sensitive set of experiments. I was the best choice. I would've contacted you, if you weren't already in cryo. "

"Okay," I say. It isn't.

"I was just telling Alex something very important," she says. Her smile's gone.

"Oh?"

"That you're her brother."

"Oh."

I'm floating.

In a lake.

In an ocean.

I feel old panic starting to return, but familiarity doesn't mean I'm able to control it. I think I've made a mistake. Maybe human beings are doomed to make the same mistakes, over and over. I want to move, to walk away, but I can't, untethered inside my own mind. Alex stares at me as if I'm an alien. I stare as if she's not even there.

"Finn – did you hear me? You have a sister. I'm sorry I couldn't tell you sooner."

What am I supposed to say?

My mother isn't known for playing jokes. My mother isn't known for being a liar. Either she's changed, or Alex is my sister. From her shellshocked expression, Alex obviously didn't know.

I wonder what my expression says.

Strange, to have your whole life dredged up. A few words, some misplaced belief and it churns like a whirlpool, and at the bottom is a pit you've been spending entire nightmares trying to outrun while in truespace, the ground's collapsing as if you'd never moved at all. Quick breaths flow unbidden in my chest.

I'm six years old, hiding in a cupboard from a monster, and it's the same quick breaths. I'm sixteen years old, hiding on a space station, and I've always been alone.

I don't have to panic.

I don't *have* to. Not yet.

Sinas is behind me, and Wake's in front of me, and the glow of my mother's face casts ours in light and shadow.

Alex points like an objecting lawyer. "Wait a minute, wait a minute. You're my mum... and HE'S my brother? *Him*?"

"Yes. Technically, Finn is your older brother."

"You can't expect me to take this seriously. The mum thing is bad enough, but now you're taking the joke too far."

"I assure you – it's not a joke."

"Then... how?" Her face – her entire body – struggles to contain her bewilderment.

"I put you up for adoption at an early age," my mother says calmly. "I regret it, but I did. Circumstances made raising two children more difficult than I'd anticipated."

"Circumstances'? What circumstances?"

"Circumstances we can discuss in person, once we're safe."

"Nah, mate. I don't think so." She steps forwards, bewilderment morphing into anger.

"Alex, please—"

"YOU don't get to drop a nuclear bomb like that and say 'oh, we'll talk about it later'. Have you ever watched a single TV show? Whoever says 'we'll talk about it later' after revealing a big secret is always the next character to die. ALWAYS!" She can't decide whether to fold her arms or put her hands on her hips, so she does both. "Don't think this means I believe you, either – not for a second."

My mother doesn't often look off-balance, but Alex, to her credit, has managed it. She glances aside, thinking. "Two minutes of questions. Then – promise me – you'll follow my instructions."

"When was I adopted?"

"You were two years old."

"Did you know my parents, or was it random?"

"Random." She's trying to seem accommodating, but her eyes aren't selling it.

"Have you checked up on me at any point?"

"Occasionally. Not often. Once every two to three years."

"What about my dad? If you DID give birth to me, I assume someone else was involved."

"His name is Tadashi. He lives in Japan, as a doctor. We were never married."

"Does he know who I am?"

Haru nods.

"Does HE know who I am?" Alex points at me.

"No."

She turns around, fire in her eyes. "Then why the hell aren't YOU asking questions?"

I don't know what to say. "I don't know what to say."

Her jaw clenches. "This is *crazy*, right? Am I crazy?" She faces the others. "The first rando who actually wants to lock in and HELP us suddenly INSISTS she's my long-lost mother? That's more nuts than a squirrel warehouse!"

"You're not wrong," Sinas says quietly.

He throws me a look. I think he's asking if I'm okay.

Trapped in the whirlpool, churning, churning.

"Maybe this is, um, too much for right now?" Wake says. "It's a *lot*, anyways. Maybe it's better if we chat about it after, and for now we could... listen? And be supportive?" She puts a hand on Alex's shoulder, who tries her hardest not to brush it off. My mother looms, a unblinking, benevolent overlord.

"I'm not done," Alex grunts.

"Sorry, I didn't mean it that way. But—"

"Why'd you bring us here? To Starfish?"

"I didn't," Haru says.

Alex rolls her eyes. "So, me and my long-lost brother happen to apply to the same science camp, and happen to get accepted, and happen to get shipped out to Saturn where we run into the ONE person who can connect us? If you really aren't fibbing about the rest, that's one big effing *coincidence*—"

"It's true," Haru says. "I didn't mean for this to happen. This isn't the result of ulterior motives."

"Then what motive could you *possibly* have? You said you'd help us escape, but really all you've done is, y'know, try and uproot my entire life and I don't see how that helps anyone—"

"I never wanted to uproot anything. I *want* you to trust me. You must realise I have your best interests at heart; that I have a *reason* for helping you; and thus, there are reasons for us to trust one another. That trust will be necessary for us to survive. Perhaps, I simply thought it best you knew. Is that not enough?"

I don't think I trust her. But why lie?

"I'm sorry, Finn," she says, catching me off guard.

Sorry for what? Uprooting my life, I suppose.

Alex shakes her head. "This isn't good enough. It doesn't make sense!"

"No." She cuts us off with a wave of her hand, a green glow playing across her cheek. "I realise you need time, but it's a luxury we do not have. You need

to..." She looks over her shoulder. "You need to come and find me, in the station dormitories. I've barricaded myself in Section 104. From there, I can get you to safety."

"What about the terrorists?" Sinas asks, stepping out of the shadows. "Do you know why they're here? Or if they're between us and you?"

"No, and no. I didn't foresee the problem, but hazarding a guess, some of our more classified research has led to unimaginably *valuable* breakthroughs. The sort that's worth going to all this trouble to obtain. You'll simply have to be cautious. I'll do my best to divert them from my position... though, if you've made it this far, I'm sure you can manage."

"And the monsters?"

My mother frowns. "What do you mean?"

"Wait, you saw them too?" Wake asks.

"Yeah, we ran into one." Sinas glances at me.

"As in, a big glowing soccer ball? That turns people into corpses?"

"There are no monsters here," my mother says. "Other than, perhaps, the human kind."

"Whatever they are, they're definitely not human," Wake says. "More..."

"...alien," Sinas says.

"I was thinking 'ghost-y'. Ghostlike."

"Are you sure you aren't hallucinating?" My mother's face is sort of neutrally concerned. "I would advise checking your air supply, if it continues. At any rate, time is short. Meet me in Section 104. Alex? Finn? Be careful. I love you."

She says it so casually it strikes me by surprise.

Whenever she went on a trip, she'd always leave in the middle of the night, so she didn't have to say a proper goodbye. I'd comb through the camera feed afterwards and sometimes, I'd see her pause for a moment in front of my bedroom door, gazing at the gap between it and the carpet. Other times, she wouldn't spare a second thought.

The words don't sit well in her mouth. Never have. Doesn't mean they're untrue, deep down. Her gaze is fixed on me, no emotion, the same amount of emotion as if she was asking about my report card. She reaches out, and—

The screen deactivates.

"Call her back," Alex says. "Wake, call her back!"

"Would if I could – I'm still locked out of the Mesh."

I hand you a cardboard box. There's a surprise inside.

Is it a happy surprise, or a sad one?

Perhaps it's both, until the box is opened.

Alex turns to me. The heat coming off her could thaw Europa. "You really didn't know about this? Promise me, you didn't know. Promise me you're not part of some fucked-up lie."

My heart whispers, so loud I think she'll hear it. *She's your sister.*

The words nearly choke me. "No. I'm... I'm sorry."

She punches a table. It cracks.

She's your sister. Ferdinand curls up between my feet, deceptively calm.

"You doing okay?" Wake murmurs.

"I am *perfectly fine*, thank you for asking," Alex retorts.

"You look fine," Sinas says.

"I know."

"Table, not so much."

She exhales sharply. "Okay, smartass, was she telling the truth?"

Sinas presses his lips together. "Some. Probably not all. You're correct that it's one hell of a coincidence, and— something about her. It felt like she was acting. Not *lying*, but acting. Anyone else get that impression?"

"How can you tell?" Wake asks.

He shrugs.

"So, she WAS shady," Alex says. "Shadier than a funnelweb."

"But she also said can get us off the station," Wake says. "So, unless we think she's *completely* lying, we should probably do what she says. Finn? What do you think? She's your mum."

Um. What do I think?

"She's usually not that nice," I say quietly.

"This was her being NICE?"

"Or that talkative. But—"

"Definite family resemblance," Alex mutters.

"But can we trust her?" Silas asks.

My mother *does* hide things. She's hidden plenty from me in the past (mostly due to differing opinions on which information matters to which people, rather than true malevolence). Strictly speaking, though, she's never tried to kill me and I'm ninety-five percent sure she won't start now. Well, ninety percent.

"We can trust her," I say. "Unless... did you find some escape pods?"

"Nope," Wake says, grimacing.

"Finn and I did manage to send a distress call," Sinas says. "Plus, the signal got picked up, sort of."

"What? Did you get a reply or not?!" Alex asks, trying incredibly hard to not punch more tables.

"There was a connection, but there was lots of interference – we couldn't understand everything they were saying. But help's probably on the way, in about ten hours."

"Ten HOURS? If I was placing odds on us surviving for another ten hours, it'd be ten-to-one on all four of us making it. Have you guys seen my leg? There's a hole!"

"Big hole," Wake agrees. "Big big hole. Hated it. Wait, did you two run into the debris alarm earlier? Because we did, and that did not go well for us."

I can't remember any alarms.

Recognition, in Sinas' eyes. "Ah. About that. So, those monsters—"

"Fuck, the fucking *monsters*, too!" Alex says. "Sorry, swear jar."

"Swear all you fucking want," Sinas replies. "Anyway, we saw one, then—"

"Did yours murk people?" Wake asks. "Ours murked, like, three hijackers, and I guess *technically* those guys might not be dead, but was like it ripped out their souls or something, because they went totally limp—"

Sinas blinks. "You ran into more terrorists? And the monster KILLED them?"

"Yeah! It was faint ball of light except it looked different when we closed our eyes, which doesn't make any physical sense, but it was so much scarier, like it was right there in our heads but also— not." Wake shivers. "It looked... like a waterfall. A whole bunch of waterfalls stuck together"

"Ours was more of a scribble." Sinas shakes his head. "The kind of scribble a psychopath draws in their manifesto."

"What I'm wondering," Alex says, "is what they actually ARE. Because fine, they're mantis-ass monsters, but monsters are only monsters because we don't understand what created them. Think of, ummm... bears. Right. Bears are huge, and scary, and aggressive, especially if you've never seen one before, but they're not *monsters*. Are these light-things just... bears?" She trails off.

"You're asking if this is a Saturn bear," Sinas says.

"Yeah."

"I don't think it's a Saturn bear."

"Why are you so certain about these *mystery killer lights* we've found—"

"Could be aliens," Wake says.

In unison: "I don't think it's aliens."

"Why? The Starshot mission will arrive at Alpha Centauri next year. That's the best chance we've ever had for aliens to show up. Alright, if you don't like THAT theory, maybe it's a secret military super-soldier experiment gone bad. Or a Mesh virus? A super complex Mesh virus causing VR hallucinations?"

"I reckon we discovered ghosts," Alex says. "We did it. We solved the mystery."

Sinas shrugs. "Maybe I could come around on aliens."

The most likely option is it's none of those things. But if not... what's left?

"Before," Alex says, "you mentioned something weird happened?"

"Oh, yeah," Sinas says, "*extra* weird. At the comms station, we had to hide from one of the monsters. That was fine. Then, on the way back... we saw more of them." He swallows. "There were hundreds, and hundreds, filling the whole hallway, and they seemed... not human, not completely, but they had human shapes. It was insane. It felt like they could see us." He looks at me, uncertain, which is odd. Sinas' whole character is built upon always being certain.

"You're here, though," Wake says. "Did they leave? Did they ignore you?"

"That's the point I'm getting at – I can't remember. WE can't remember," he says, as if recalling a fading dream. "There's a gap, in our memories. One minute, we're in the hallway with hundreds of these ghosts, and the next minute, we're alone, sitting on the floor. It's like time skipped ahead."

"You must've been knocked unconscious," Alex says.

"I don't remember being knocked out. We don't even remember waking up."

"Your MeshMate?" Wake asks. "There should be biometrics, recordings, a Mymory buffer..."

"Nothing. As I said, it's like a time-skip, or if somebody flat-out deleted those files. Finn experienced the exact same thing."

I rub my nose, staring into the shadows. In spite of my usual complaining, and anxiety, I do quite like how my brain works – that's why I don't do drugs at high school parties, or use unsigned Mesh stims. Disrupting my own thoughts makes me feel *icky*. If a monster's apparently messing with my memories... that frustrates me. It sets me adrift. No matter how much I try to focus on that period of time, I skid across it without being able to stop. (It reminds me of my first time ice-skating, which of course I can recall mortifying detail, but the last half-hour is a total blank space.)

I can't believe I used this to manipulate people.

I wonder if this is how they felt.

"So, you got hypnotised?" Wake asks. "Possessed? In the lore, people never remember when they've been possessed by evil spirits."

I like that idea even less. "...They don't?" I say aloud.

"People in MeshSims, and movies, and Thai horror myths—"

"I'm not sure we should base our theories on local legends," Alex mutters.

"Then what do we base them on?" Wake asks. "We're stuck on a dying space station full of bad guys, and ghosts, and bad-guy ghosts, plus you had your whole yakking life torn up and I can barely *imagine* how that feels – you too, Finn – and if I was you, I'd probably sit in the corner and cry. As far as I'm concerned, I'm ready to believe in ANYTHING."

"Well, I'm not," Alex sighs. "At least, not right now. Let's wait until we meet this Haru lady. If she hasn't changed her story after I punch her a couple times, I'll reconsider."

"Probably for the best," Sinas says.

"I won't actually punch her, Finn," Alex adds. "Much." She clenches her fist. Uhh... thanks?

"Either way," Sinas says, "we should get going. Maybe we can do some Scooby-Doo snooping on the way and figure out what these monsters might be."

Wake chuckles nervously, squeezing Alex's arm.

Terrorists.

Ghosts.

My dearest mother.

I like to think I'm smart, but I'm not, because smart people don't keep making the same mistakes. If you stack enough polluted choices on top of one another, eventually, they'll take out the ecosystem. That's just physics.

A reason. There must be a reason my mother said those things – always a reason, even if it's a bad one I don't understand.

The whirlpool churns.

I shut it out.

Floating on an ocean.

You don't have to panic.

Our route takes us clockwise around the hub's perimeter, through long, wide thoroughfares that form a dividing grid for labs and workspaces. Everything here is newer, less spartan, the lights brighter, the walls less grey. The damage isn't hugely catastrophic, a bit like a cadre of kids rolled through and decided to perform selective vandalism. To our left is a conference room, chairs set around a mock-wood table. To our right, floor-to-ceiling windows have been shattered, revealing an open lab space filled with cameras and netting. Smoke pools around air vents, creating a sneeze-inducing haze.

Ahead, Alex peers from side to side, while Wake mutters to herself, trying to crack the encryption on some dataglass she found. Free-floating acrylic shards bounce off my chest, and Sinas sweeps them aside with his gloves, pearlescent opal eyes reflected faintly in his helmet. Despite everything, he keeps that same casual slouch, as if on a regular Sunday stroll.

It's robotic, the way he moves so evenly and precisely, always in the right position whenever we reach a new handhold. His shoulders, his forearms, his legs... even his hair's the kind of messy that always looks perfect, while mine's just messy. I run my fingers through it, feeling the starchiness of dried blood.

Ferdinand's perching on my shoulder, his claws sharp through my suit.

<I'm distracting myself> I explain.

His gaze possesses a certain hint of reproach.

Alex is making her way towards me. With a light tap on her suit's thrusters, she comes to a relative stop. She spins so that we're both facing forwards.

"What's she like?" she asks, switching to a private MeshChannel.

"Who?"

"Your mum, dumba— *duh*." Insult into eyeroll.

"That's... a big question," I say.

"Yeah, and I want a big answer. Think about this from my perspective – I wanna know what I've been dragged into, here."

The thing is, I'm not sure how I feel about my mother. Five years ago, or ten, I would've been. My opinion might've see-sawed daily, depending on whether she'd given me a chocolate bar or not, but I would've been *sure*. Now... it's just hard to describe a person who no longer exists.

"This is a – look, it's a weird situation," I say cautiously. "I don't want to influence you. You're better off forming your own opinion."

"I'm planning to," Alex says. "But I'd also like to hear it from you. Please?" The question shivers in her eyes.

Ugh, I don't know what I can say. Talking about it forces me to think about it, which is troubling. Perhaps it's nice my mother's away from home so much. Perhaps I can start there.

"She's away a lot, for work," I say. "My friends think she's a bit... strict? Unfriendly? But she does care, and she lets me do my own thing, which is nice."

The words sound fake, even if they mostly aren't. "Sorry," I murmur. "I understand you're curious, but—"

"Finn, just TELL me. C'mon, break it down. Is she nice?"

"Um... she's not *not* nice."

Alex groans. "Okay, let's try this the hard way. Let me guess: you don't talk to your mum a lot. She's always busy with work, and you want to think she cares about you, but she only every asks you what your exam marks are, and whether you're eating enough vegetables. You feel like you're expected to try really hard at school, but you never get much back in return. Typical quiet kid with overbearing parents. I've heard that story before."

I shake my head.

"Then prove me wrong." She moves in front, forcing me to look at her.

Sinas has gone to chat with Wake up ahead. I'm not getting out of this.

Alas, Alex does look like me. A bit more open, and more confident, and presently a bit more irritated, but she does. It's hard to deny. We pass through a huge, semi-circular gate, followed by a series of security scanners. The smoke's thicker, diffusing into faint, ashen balloons, forcing our helmets closed.

"I... Alex, I don't know what you want. I could say 'she's really great, you'll be best friends?' Or 'oh, she's terrible, and my life sucks'? Or—"

"Finn, I don't want a specific opinion, I want *an* opinion. Why's this making you so uncomfortable? Dude, you live with her."

No, I don't. Not really.

"Why do you care?" I say eventually. "After this, you'll probably never see her again. Or me. You can forget it."

"I care because it MATTERS, Finn. Right now, it matters that she's my mum and that you're my brother." She trips over the last word, staring into the distance. I think it's the first time she's acknowledged it.

"If it's true," she adds. "If it's true."

Ah, there it is.

I don't want to be selfish.

Still, it's painful.

"She was really nice, when I was younger," I say. (Why not start there?) "We used to do a lot together. I mean, it was just her, but it was also just me, so it was nice. Easy. In my opinion... she felt guilty about my dad not being around, so she went to a lot of effort. I used to go everywhere with her, and I got to see a lot of different places. We stayed in Perth, most of the time, but I went on trips to Berlin, and Cairo, and Mars..."

"Mars, huh?"

"Yeah, she worked on their fusion power stations. That's what she does – extreme environment physics. She even worked on that DimSun project, where they cracked an asteroid to block sunlight, if you remember that? I was too young to stay home alone, and she didn't want to force someone else to look after me, so she had to take me with her. Even though she was working a lot, she still found time to... hang out. Like, she'd always work on extra maths problems

with me, every night, and take me to my after-school sports, and read all the ash comic strips I drew. She'd make sushi, sometimes, even though she hated cooking. Or cleaning. Those bamboo rolling mats are *super* hard to clean. But... I like sushi." I'm looking at the floor, flowing past my boots: a river of plastic, white and calm.

"What changed?" she asks.

"She just... started leaving me at home. I didn't mind. I was starting high school, so I liked having freedom and being able to do whatever. I tried to be responsible, and not just sit around eating ice-cream all day, but she'd talk less and less and be away longer and longer. When I *did* sometimes need to ask her things, she'd never have time. Maybe she felt there were more important things, or... people change, I guess. I didn't mind." I want her to know that.

"Kind of a bad time to be on your own, though," Alex says. "With the corps starting to fight each other, and China doing their thing, and the human ascension protests. I remember being pretty scared of those guys, and I was nowhere near it."

Ahh, human ascension. If people can plug AIs into their brains to make them think differently, or faster, or objectively smarter; can change their bodies and DNA to make them look like animals, or mythical creatures, or perfect gods; then what IS human anymore? Is it being born one? Is it rejecting MeshMates and healbots and all the other augmentations swimming under our skins? (That's what the Sapient Security Committee would say, as opposed to the Human Liberation Front or HLF, which is confusing naming, but that's usually how these things go.) Perhaps 'how human is human, really?' is more valid a question than which God you believe in, or which colour your skin is, or whom you love, which indicates progress is being made. Nevertheless, as always, a lot of people are violently invested in the answer.

In my opinion there are more immediate problems to fix, such as the ongoing tragic funeral of planet Earth, or the peaceful and nonthreatening rise of general synthetic intelligence, or whether it's okay to let culty corporations and Techno-Kings (or TKs) compete in proxy wars and buy entire countries. Perhaps that's why I like the idea of building spaceships – to get as far away as possible (also known as: not an actual solution).

"From the outside," I say, "it might look as if we aren't close. But I still think my life is pretty normal. Being on my own has helped, in some ways."

"What do you mean?"

"I've sort of learned to do my own thing, in terms of... goals. And she always told me I should make a useful contribution, with my life. Not to waste it."

"High expectations," Alex says.

I shrug. Nothing's ever completely good, or completely bad. For better or worse, my mother made me.

"You said it was normal, but... weren't you scared? Being on your own?"

"No," I say.

Yes.

No.

But I always wondered if the change in my mother was somehow my fault.

"I don't think I'd like living in a city-dome," Alex says, stretching her arms above her head, indicating this conversation will continue. (Where's Section 104? Is it close?) "Buildings everywhere, heaps of pollution, no free space, no stars... what do you DO all day in a place like that?"

I check to make sure it's a serious question. "It's not entirely skyscrapers. There are parks. Swimming pools. You can hang out, go to VRcades, catch a gravtube to another city. No stars, maybe, but the lights are still pretty at night – although they started having curfews last year, after that kid got, um— yeah. If you remember."

"Oh, I remember. We didn't get curfews in the country, though." She pressed her lips together. "What about your dad? Did you ever meet him?"

"No."

"Did you ask to?"

"I... thought it was better not to."

"That's insane. That's sleeper behaviour. Weren't you curious? Even to ASK? I understand you don't like thinking about it, or talking to me about it, but maybe it's because you feel you don't know your own mum, which, I gotta say, is partly on you."

I pause. "That's a *wild* statement."

"Is it? You said she stopped talking to you, but it sounds like you barely tried."

"It's better if you get this from her," I say.

"Why?"

"It just *is*." I clamp my mouth shut.

"Kinda feels like you're trying to protect me from my own opinions," she says, "or that you think you know what's best. And maybe you're right, but for god's sake I wish you'd throw me a bone – you didn't ask about your dad because you didn't care, fine, but maybe you *should've*!" She points to her chest, then mine. "We could've figured out this mess years ago, and then we wouldn't BE here!"

"Really?"

"Maybe! And d'you know what the worst part is? I keep thinking YOU'RE the one I should be jealous of because you the 'real' side of this situation, growing up, and I got..." She looks down. "I got a lie. Which isn't true. But it's hard not to—"

"Your side's real."

"How do you know?" she asks.

"I... don't."

"Then ask me."

"About what?"

She smiles humourlessly. "You really are oblivious."

I'm just tired. Usually, I can close my eyes, take a couple of long breaths, which halts my annoyance before it becomes too much.

Right now, that's not working.

"I never had a reason to suspect anything," she continues. "I always lived in the same place, my parents never treated me any differently, and I never ever would've thought—I can't imagine them lying about this. I can't. But maybe they did." I don't think she cares if I'm listening. She dumps memories onto me as they pop into her head. Her dog. Her school. Her parents. 'Tomato tower'. "You'd like my parents," she's saying. "You'd *love* them. You'd like it on the farm, too. If this turns out to be true, you could come and live with us. It's clearly the better choice. I can't live on my own with you, and you aren't that attached, so... if we did have to stay together, that's what we'd do." She sounds unsure, even as she says it. "Might be fun."

The whirlpool starts rising, spurred on by the crappy relief in her voice. "You don't know what I'm attached to," I say.

"Then tell me, Finn. You have to TELL me. I wanna understand—"

"Alex, you think you're great at 'figuring people out', but you aren't."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Sometimes people just don't want to talk. Can't you accept that?"

"No! Because I'm the one trying to help us both through a munted situation, and I can't, and maybe you can't see but I'm freaked out and you're the only one who—"

"I don't care." I'm not looking at her.

"Finn, please—"

"You're better off not knowing."

"Why do you get to decide that? For me? For any of us?"

"Then why do you think your life is *so much better* than mine, huh?" I whirl around. "It's obvious! You think I'm—I'm a loser, and my life is—"

"I *THINK* you're my brother! Why won't you talk to me!?" For a second, she's going to throw a punch; her hand's there, then she swipes it out behind her.

"Leave me alone," I mutter.

"No! You're expecting me to just KNOW what's in your head, as if you're the one who gets to decide what happens and how I feel! You aren't the one who's been lied to! You're so— so *full of yourself*!"

I almost choke. "And you're not?!"

Wake's voice slices through the air. "HEY! STOP THAT! What the HECK, guys?"

I feel her hand on my shoulder.

Her hands are on both our shoulders. Even though she can't hear us on private, it must be pretty obvious. Alex's visor is an inch from mine, a black hole.

"What's up?" Wake asks. "What's wrong?"

Alex grits her teeth. "I'm *trying* to talk to Finn."

"But?" Sinas asks, approaching from behind.

"He's not being very *helpful*."

"Well, maybe he doesn't want to talk," Sinas says.

I hate the redness in my face. I close my eyes, breathe in. It's not working.

"If he doesn't want to talk, it can wait," Sinas says.

Alex pulls away. "Is it THAT wrong to want to figure this out before I die?"

"No, like, of course not!" Wake says. "I'd be totally the same! Maybe we can be calm, though? Until later? Since no one's going to die?" She couldn't sound less certain if she'd tried. "Please?"

"Ugggghhh," Alex groans. "Finn? You're kind of an asshole, y'know."

Something snaps. Whirlpool turns red and my vision flashes and—

"Shut up!" I hiss. "Shut up, shut up, *shut up*! I don't like you. I never have."

I hear myself spit it.

I hear myself believe it.

Immediately, I'm ashamed.

I see myself, in her eyes. Her, carved into my brain. Everything I'm afraid of. Suddenly, I'm falling sideways. It feels *weird*, as if—

I bump gently into the wall, and I stick there.

So does Alex. So does everyone.

Gravity's back, except it's... sideways?

"Let's take a breath," Sinas says slowly. "Everyone. Alright? No more arguing, or shouting. It's not good. It's never good." For once, he doesn't smile at me.

"Let's be positive!" Wake adds. "Stressful situations are usually good bonding experiences. We get soooo much bonding time! Wooo!"

"Take it down a notch," Alex grumbles. She ignores me pointedly, climbing to her feet. As weird as zero-g is, standing on the wall is nearly just as bad.

Gravity, essentially, is an acceleration. On Earth, you're accelerating towards the ground, due to its mass; when the station's spinning, we're accelerating towards its perimeter, due to centripetal force; and when the station's boosting, it's accelerating towards us, due to Newton's third law. I think this new gravity is the third option, which means Starfish must be changing orbits. Why?

Lowering the orbit *would* be a way to destroy the station. Get too low, and we'd burn up in Saturn's atmosphere.

The natural follow-up question is how long that might take. It's not difficult to estimate, with Ferdinand's help – it basically depends on where Starfish is, our current thrust vector, and how massive Saturn is. The periapsis of Starfish's orbit lies near the inner diameter of Saturn's rings (74,000 kilometres in altitude) and Saturn's upper atmosphere starts at 58,000 kilometres. That's an altitude decrease of 16,000 km. Saturn's mass implies a necessary orbit velocity decrease of 2.4 km/s to match. If our current gravity is 3 m/s (say, one third of Earth's) it would take... thirteen minutes, accelerating at our current rate.

On the other hand, that's a huge manoeuvre in an engineering sense. If a more efficient trajectory was used, such as a Hohmann transfer, we'd need a

decrease of only 500 m/s. However, that requires waiting half an orbit to hit Saturn, which leads to 10,000 seconds, or... three hours? Again, not much time.

I tell the others about my three-hours theory but keep 'thirteen minutes' to myself.

"Then he should move," Wake says. "Are guys gonna be fine? Please be fine. We gotta keep it together."

"Yeah, yeah." Alex narrows her eyes.

I nod.

"Friends," Wake says, as if babysitting a pair of toddlers. "Let's be friends."

FINN V

The hallway, instead of downward, now curves gradually to the right, following the circumference of Starfish's hub. I reach out and brush my fingers along the floor-slash-wall, feeling its living, textured polymer through my gloves. We pick our way around doorways, windows, light fixtures, and the half-gravity adds a dreamy bounce to our movements, an extra length to our strides.

It also adds one small issue: the next T-junction turns ninety degrees straight down. Normally it'd lead... left? Towards station south? It's tricky to keep the geometry straight in my head, with gravity constantly messing around.

Sinas peers over the edge. "Big drop."

"We can jump it, easy," Alex says.

"You're tall," Wake replies. "I'm short. This is the Grand Canyon for my tiny legs."

It's three metres across. I don't like heights. More precisely, I don't like falls.

Alex takes a quick run-up and lands gracefully on the far side. She almost jumps *too* far, stumbling less-gracefully into an oxygen tank. "Shit!"

"Doable," Sinas says. For him, it's even easier, and he barely has to try.

Wake backs up five metres, ten metres, then sprints towards the gap, legs pumping – leaps – arcs through the air – then cannons straight into Alex, bowling them both over.

"Shit!" Alex says again.

I gulp.

Logically, it's a small jump.

I can't help imagining the dozen ways it could go wrong. I give myself space.

I start running. One step, two, five—

Before my brain decides my feet aren't in the right place, I spring upwards and try not to look down, instead focusing on the far side hoping I haven't made some huge mistake.

This time, my legs don't fail me. This competence is a mild surprise.

"Well, I need to pee," Alex says.

This is because we're next to a bathroom. The door's at the wrong angle, also leading downward, but the room beyond is more contained than the corridor.

"I'll join you," Sinas murmurs.

"You could just go anywhere?" Wake says. "No one will mind."

Alex rolls her eyes. "I'm not an animal, Wake."

"I'm just saying it might not be easy trying to use a toilet that's on the wall. Think about it!"

I sit on the oxygen tank, and Wake sits beside me, as Alex and Sinas lower themselves into the bathroom abyss, dropping out of sight. Wake's right, and the toilets will be at *completely* the wrong angle to be useful, but they'll figure that out soon enough. Internally, I sketch the shape of the monster from the comm relay: a sharp edge here, a blur there, trying to recall its essence, the way it moved, the way it looked... wrong.

Ferdinand looks jealous, like he wants paintbrushes for claws. I think he'd just use them to draw a mouse to eat.

"Can you smell that?" Wake asks. "Smoke? Burning plastic? It's coming through my air filters."

I can't, but my nose is terrible.

"I wish these suits came in different colours. This bright red isn't really me. It makes me look like a tomato. People say *my* colour is purple. Or green." Wake drapes an arm across my shoulders. It rests against my neck, making me anxious from how unearned it feels. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah. I'm fine."

"Weird few hours, huh?"

"Haha, yeah."

She smiles cheerfully. "Not much of a hugger."

I wince.

"I'll stop annoying you, then."

"It's not annoying. I'm just, um—awkward."

"The secret is that everyone's awkward, but they either hide it or they just don't care." Her confidence is reasonably convincing. "I keep wondering what it'd be like if there were people here." She spreads her hands at the deserted, overturned walkway. "If we were doing what we were *supposed* to be doing."

"You mean the science camp?"

"Yep. Hey, you're smart, aren't you? I bet you're really smart."

I'm good at exams; I don't know if that means I'm smart. "Not really," I say.

"Well, I looked up your name and if you're the same Finn Hanamura, you've won a LOT of science competitions."

"Oh, uh... those." I smile weakly. "My mum forces me to enter those."

"I entered those willingly, and guess what? I *lost*." A Cheshire Cat grin. "To be honest, I'm kinda ash at that stuff, so don't take this as a grudge – you should be proud. I'll trap you in a room sometime so you can tell me your secrets."

"Secrets?"

"I need some of that smartness to rub off on me. It'd be— aaah! I did it!" She jumps a clean half metre into the air. "Here, look! My MeshSlipper managed to tunnel into station security. Yay!" Wake sends me a map: a proper, annotated 3D diagram of Starfish, drawn in neon-blue photogrammetry. On it sit forty or fifty blinking dots, split into clusters.

"You can access the Mesh?" I ask.

"For now, only this stream, but hopefully more soon!" She moves her hands, plucking at strings of data, excitement transferring thought into physical action. It's like when I scratch Ferdinand but accidentally perform the motion in real life.

"What are the dots?" I ask.

"Personal locaters."

"People?"

"Yep! Every MeshMate ping from the last five minutes. Neat, right?"

There are no dots nearby, and none where my mother's apparently hiding. I suspect that most people are maintaining a low profile, a.k.a. turning off their locater signals, so the pings are probably those of remaining station staff. The main concentration is a group of twenty near the docks.

I swing my feet and kick an object on the ground. It's a notebook.

"Oh, that's Alex's," Wake says, busy shovelling data.

The faux-leather binding is electric beneath my fingertips.

I shouldn't open it.

I open it. Second last page. It takes me a second to decipher the abstract scribbles, but I read about her impressions of us, human beings reduced to a selection of pithy bullet points.

She at least possesses the self-awareness to assess her own failings, too. I don't know if that makes it any better. It doesn't make me like her.

I feel myself blush.

I close the book.

Thirty seconds later, she climbs out of the bathroom, grunting with effort. "You ever tried to use a toilet bolted to the wall? 'Cause I have, and it's *tricky*."

"You could've just peed anywhere," Wake says again.

"Yeah, yeah, just wait a few hours until you're the one who needs to shit on a table."

I hold out her notebook. "You dropped this."

She narrows her eyes, but doesn't say a word as she pockets it.

Clichéd or not, rotating the world onto its side does offer a different perspective. Doors become trapdoors (or simply traps); windows become otherworldly portals beneath our feet; potted plants droop sideways across our path, disturbed and dilapidated. The smoke keeps thickening, the temperature climbing past 30°C. If the station's a living organism, it's wracked by fever, the vultures already circling. We climb through hallways and laboratories rendered

oddly unrecognisable, over the remains of everything that wasn't nailed down. Alex kicks a shelf out of her way, and the low gravity gives it an eerie flight.

Until, once more, we arrive at a cliff, where the hallway turns vertically downwards. Sinas activates his suit lights. The smoke glows in ethereal strands.

"We're going down this?" Wake asks.

"Nah, yeah, we need to be more central," Alex says. "At some point, we need to go down. I think this would normally lead..."

"Left," I murmur. "Nadir side."

"The good news is, once we're there, it's a straight shot to Section 94 or wherever the hell we're heading."

"104," Sinas says dryly. "But look, we can use the cables as handholds." Thick power lines snake from an open doorway into the gloom below, fastened to the wall with brackets. He grabs one and tugs it experimentally. If it was full Earth gravity, I'd be worried, but in this environment, even my scarecrow muscles can cope (I hope).

My toes tingle as I slide cautiously over the ledge, feet first, the cable instantly taut in my gloves.

Don't look down.

The cable twitches, vibrating, my geckoboos finding purchase which never feels like enough. I focus on the wall inches from my face, my throat thick with nervousness. The idea 'don't fall' consumes my complete concentration and because of that, paradoxically, I'm probably more likely to make a mistake.

"How are you doing?" Sinas asks.

"Fine," I grunt. "I'm fine."

"What was that argument with Alex?"

"Nothing," I say. Don't look down.

"You can talk to me. I know what it's like." His voice has the lilt of an AI therapist. "If you're feeling... adrift? Is that the right word?"

Not quite. I'm mostly angry.

'Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to suffering.' I think Yoda said that once. Or was in Dumbledore? Right now, I'm concentrating this frickin' cable.

"I'm fine," I say. "But thank you."

"Okay. I do have more chocolate, if you need an incentive. Between you and me, it might not be so bad, having a sibling." I hear him exhale, and his breath crackles in my ear. "It's... a nice thing," he says. "Trust me."

Still, I'd rather form my own opinion.

"Hey, how are you holding up?" Sinas asks.

Um. Mostly the same as three seconds ago.

Alex's voice cuts in. "*Great*" she says. "*Clearsky*."

"Still pissed?"

"Sort of. Finn was being incredibly glitched about – ugh, everything. He was glitched about everything."

"I understand. I'd be angry too. Finn... yes, he's weird sometimes, from your perspective, and mine too, but it might be because he's scared."

Am I supposed to be hearing this?

"Scared of what? *Besides, that's not an excuse to clam up like a – a clam!*"

"True. Fair. Still, try not to fight? It's not the kind of thing that helps anyone."

"Well, if you ask real nicely..."

Now he sounds more like a gossip best friend. "If you do need a shoulder to lean on, let me know. I'm told I'm pretty good at it."

"By whom?"

"Customer reviews. I've got a five-star rating."

Sinas is like an optical illusion that's different depending on your angle or focal point. Rabbit or duck? Old woman or young woman? Face or vase?

He's only being nice, I tell myself.

One by one, we emerge from the corridor into a chasm. It's a wide, high-ceilinged room, tipped on its side to form a new box canyon. Stalls and food dispensers are situated along the perimeter, with a public open square in the centre. Benches sprout from the floor (now the left-hand wall) and the very bottom of the chasm is divided by windows that show off a glittering black void. Half-way up, crossing the chasm like a horizontal pipe, is the cylindrical lift shaft that runs down the habitation arm's spine.

Open space prickles at my feet. My arms ache at the merest thought of more effort. Nevertheless, there's an exciting lilt to this; it's as if we're old-timey explorers descending into an undiscovered cave, with nothing but oil lanterns and pith helmets for protection.

"Zero-g was more fun," Wake sighs.

"This is a different kind of fun," Sinas says. "Like rock-climbing."

Our goal is to reach the lift shaft. We could *probably* monkey ourselves across the benches and tables, or set up an elaborate Tarzan scenario, none of which sounds particularly appealing. Small space stations don't assume a consistent gravitational direction for this exact reason, but on bigger scales, it's hard to design a minor city with that much in-built architectural flexibility.

"Wake, can you send your drone out for light?" Alex asks.

She whispers a couple of words in its ear, then drops it into a hover. "This is brilliant vlog material, by the way."

"Yeah, I'm glad hanging off the side of a very tall room is a positive for your social media."

The drone bobs between chairs and tables, casting chiascuro shadows across the abyss. It illuminates a layer of detritus at the bottom, including spilled drinks, overturned trays, a backpack soaked in what I hope is tomato sauce. An empty suit lies prone, atop the exposed lift shaft.

The suit moves.

Another suit pops up from behind a waist-high bench.

They materialise from the undergrowth like guerillas, as if they were already waiting, as if they knew we'd be here. Suddenly there are four, their weapons trained on us. The closest is twenty metres away, hanging from a rappel.

<Don't move,> she broadcasts. <No one needs to get hurt.>

Her visor is dark, opaque.

"Up!" Wake hisses. "Climb up! Go!"

"No way, we're sitting ducks!" Alex says. "Hanging ducks!"

"Maybe we should follow their orders," Sinas says tersely.

"Yeah, nah, I wouldn't go THAT far."

Nothing happens, for a long moment.

"Ducks can fly," Wake says. "Ducks can fly! We can drop! There's a way out at the bottom. See? No, don't look, don't make it obvious."

"Maybe we should follow their orders," Sinas says again.

If only there was time to make a spreadsheet of pros and cons.

I look down. I look up. How much is surprise worth, in these situations?

<Don't move,> the closest repeats. <You're coming with us.>

<Where?> Alex asks.

<Somewhere safe.>

<Excuse me, but you don't look 'safe'.>

<...Neither do you.>

"Three," Wake whispers to us.

"Are you *sure*?" Sinas whispers back.

"Two," Wake says.

<You, the kid at the bottom – you're first. When I say so, start moving towards us, nice and slow. No one needs to get hurt, but you WILL get hurt if—>

The cable breaks.

It's loose in my hands. I fall, away from the wall.

I reach at nothing.

There are stars above me. Sinas is falling above me.

Someone grips my forearm but then they're gone, and even at a third of a gee I'm building up speed and my brain's stuck on 'falling!!!!' instead of doing something about it. There's awful out-of-control violence in my stomach, and I bend my arms and legs and twist around and—

Impact.

I land on my side. My teeth slam together.

It hurts, but less terribly than I was expecting (I can thank my suit for that). Sinas hits the wall next to me, his legs splayed across mine; Wake's lying in a heap on a countertop, a pile of bones. I cough something up.

"Get up," says a voice. Not sure who it is. Might be in my own head. I force myself onto hands and knees, head full of stars. Alex is stumbling towards a half-open security shutter at the bottom of the well. With the world sideways, there's just enough room to squeeze past. It's the kind of door that reminds me of antimatter generators, 'containment protocols active' stencilled in flickering red.

That's when the gunfire starts.

Superheated plasma hits the security gate, making it glow. Sinas kicks it shut, the last one through. A burst of sparks draws scarlet on my retinas.

"This is why I have bloody trust issues!" Alex shouts. "It's always like, 'oh, we aren't gonna hurt you' but these morons always end up SHOOTING at us!"

There's only one way to go, so we take it: down the hall, towards a pair of ID scanners. We vault through. Sirens blare.

<Unauthorised access>

<Do not proceed beyond this point>

I'm trampling signage beneath my boots. 'Illumination Labs' in fluorescent yellow. 'Clearance Level 5,' surrounded by red stripes. There's shouting to our rear, and the sound of sizzling metal. Another sign: 'Tachyonic shielding ahead. No quantum processors past this point.'

Are MeshMates quantum processors?

Guess we'll find out. There are more doors, more security gates, obscured by thick smoke, and unmoving humanoid shapes, propped awkwardly against the walls. One's a bot but the rest are human, heads lolling inside their helmets.

Best to ignore it.

We have to go forward, always forward, through another gate jammed open be wreckage and we scale furniture to reach it, clambering up, then through, into another room that is *distinctly* on fire. It's an office – no, a bedroom? – for some reason behind as many security gates as a prison cell. Flames leap from sleeping pods to the ceiling, licking through a melted hole in the wall. My suit shrieks in protest, flashing temperature and air quality warnings all over my visor. The black smoke makes it hard to see.

"We can't get through here!" Alex shouts.

"Well, we can't exactly go back either!" Sinas replies.

There's another door, in what for us is the ceiling.

"Help me up!" Wake says.

Sinas and Alex grab one foot each, to give her an extra boost. She palms at the door controls. I look back at the security gate and through the swirling air, the flickering light, I can see figures approaching. Uh oh. I stumble back to the gate, tripping on globs of half-melted PolyGrowth. Somebody was trying to close it, but it's jammed open by a rubbish bin.

I grab the bin. It's stuck fast. Figures closer, now, three, four, five of them, sprinting towards us. A plasma bolt sparks at my feet. I duck behind the bin and start kicking it instead, kicking, throwing my whole weight at it and suddenly it shoots outward like my foot's a railgun. The shutter slams shut three inches from my nose.

"Finn! Over here!"

They've gotten the other door open. Sinas's upper half is hanging through it, arm outstretched, Wake and Alex holding onto his legs. I run towards him and jump. He pulls me up and I wriggle into the doorway, rolling onto solid ground.

New room.

Another bedroom of sorts, containing a sleeping pod, a desk, with one wall that's entirely transparent shielding. Behind the shielding is a control room filled with consoles. Flames writhe, attacking with blue-tinged fury. Stations aren't supposed to burn like this; they're made from non-flammable materials and there should be plenty of fire suppression systems. Can't see much evidence of that, though. My suit says that the air's hitting 300°C and is VERY toxic.

"Help me with this!" Alex says. She's ripped a locker from the wall, trying to jam it on top of the door we came through. We each take a corner and drop it into place.

"Is locking ourselves inside with the fire a *great* idea?" Sinas asks, panting.

"At least the fire's not trying to murk us specifically! Wait— what the fuck?"

There's a label on the sleeping pod, curled from the heat. It says: 'Sinas Krajicek'.

"That's you. Right?" Alex asks.

He stares, even paler than usual. "...Yeah."

"Why's your name on it?"

"I don't know."

"Are these our rooms? They don't look like our rooms. Why's one wall see-through?"

Wake snaps a picture. "Run now, talk later!"

There's an air vent in the left-hand wall.

Before we go, the locker catches my eye. I wrench it open. There's a fire extinguisher stowed at the bottom, pathetically small, but better than nothing. I clip it onto my belt and follow the others through the vent, tumbling out into yet another sparse bedroom. It's a mirror of the one prior; the window looks onto the same control room inferno.

One difference, however, is that there aren't any more doors. Or air vents.

The sleeping pod says: 'Tao Zhao Liu'.

"Okay, that *can't* be a coincidence," Sinas says.

"Where the *heck* do we go?" Wake asks. "This better not be a literal dead end! Can we hide? Until they give up searching?"

Sinas shakes his head. "Even with the suits, we'll be roasted in ten minutes."

"I did find this," I say, holding up the extinguisher. "It's not supposed to be for situations this bad—"

Alex snorts. "We had a bigger fire extinguisher at my cousin's tenth birthday party."

"What if we break the glass?" Wake asks. She whips out a plasma cutter. "Before anyone asks, I stole it from a dead lady. Does anyone know how to—"

It comes alive in her hand, spitting a short white flame.

"Never mind! Finn, come on."

Alex and Sinas work on blocking the vent behind us while Wake touches her cutter to the glass, creating a fierce starburst of sparks. My visor automatically darkens but I even then, I have to turn away. Wake draws a wobbly human-sized rectangle, the material rippling in protest. It's hard to see what she's actually

cutting, which is probably dangerous, but can't be helped. I'm two minutes from drowning in my sweat.

"How's it going?" Alex asks.

"Nearly... done!" She kicks at the window, and it falls into the control room, briefly smothering a few tongues of flame. I lean through and spray the extinguisher left, right, up, down. Flames wither, giving us a few square metres of breathing room. I step through the hole, still spraying; the vapour sticks to my visor and I wipe it away. In the control room proper it's even hotter, my suit complaining that it really, really can't handle this for much longer.

I look back. "Which way!?"

Alex points vaguely ahead of us. Across the computer consoles, tilted on their sides, there's a field of blackened office chairs twisted into heaps. We could climb across the desk risers, or... I start inching forwards, wondering how much the extinguisher's got left. I *feel* hot, now, the suit's coolant an uncomfortably warm bath. I step across the gap between two rows of consoles, glimpsing the raging inferno below. There's a door on the far side. Can't tell if it leads someplace safe or not.

The extinguisher runs out. I spray it ineffectually a few more times, then clip it onto my belt.

I look behind me. Wake's right there, then Alex, then Sinas.

"Which way?" I ask again.

"Just keep going!" Wake says.

"Where?"

"Forwards!"

Fire consumes the console ahead of me and I dart past, my legs burning. The air temperature's up to 500 degrees.

This isn't going to work.

"It's getting worse!" Sinas shouts.

"No kidding!" Alex retorts.

The grey suits have arrived at the window – not the section we cut through, but one room prior. They've seen us. One suit starts shooting the glass. Sinas is frozen, staring at the hijackers.

"Why the HELL are they still chasing us!" Alex asks desperately. "Can't they leave us alone? We're effing *dead* anyway!"

This isn't going to work. Think, Finn—

"Wake?" I tap her shoulder.

"What?" She whirls around.

"Cut through here." I touch the surface beside us, which used to be the floor.

"Okay. Okayokayokay." She gets to work, the plasma cutter birthing a new sun, piercing flashes coming from the window as the hijackers force their way through. Something big and grey comes falling through the smoke, hitting another desk, crashing loudly to the floor far below.

"Hurry, Wake," Alex says.

"I know."

"Hurry, Wake!"

"I know!" She makes a hole barely big enough to crawl through, right as the shielding behind us shatters. Sinas screams as the first plasma bolt arcs over our heads. I wriggle through, on my stomach. It's a maintenance crawlspace between sectors, a metre across but infinity metres tall, a sea of orange and swirling embers, but— there's an opening on the opposite side. Wake's already crossed over and she reaches out to help me, my feet slipping for a stomach-churning instant. Then comes Alex, then Sinas, leaning on each other drunkenly. Plasma bolts pepper the gap, each one a raising high-frequency hairs on our necks.

The crawlspace ends. We emerge into an enormous ceramic cylinder, fifteen metres in diameter and thirty metres long, tilted on its side. Octagonal supports for enormous pipes run its entire length, spawning from a tank at the far end. Coloured sparks leap between metallic silver rails, tracing a bull's charge of china-shop destruction from end to end. Most exits appear blocked by containment doors, the fire encroaching on all sides. Warm water swirls around our feet, dotted with ash.

<Tachyon shielding failure: sector evacuation in progress>.

A buckled catwalk spans the cylinder's width, now serving as an oversized ladder. Alex kicks it. It squeaks, but holds.

"Here goes nothing."

She starts climbing, gripping both railings for support. It's not *quite* vertical, but close; she jinks around the most mangled section and makes it to the top. Wake's next, with the delicacy and speed of a medium-sized seal (a.k.a. not much of the former, a surprising amount of the latter). As she reaches the summit, I hear a metallic *pop!*

Pop!...

Pop!...

Pop-pop-pop-pop-pop—

With an ear-wrangling *screeeeech* the catwalk tears free, tilting, twisting till it crashes to the ground beside us. Rivets scatter from our suits like rain.

"I'm okay!" Wake shouts. "*I'm okay. Mostly.*"

Maybe Ferdinand could scale the sides of the cylinder, but I can't, and any other easily accessible doors are blocked by rippling flame.

Think, Finn.

"What do you reckon is in these pipes?" I ask Sinas.

"Probably not water."

"But this looks like a cryogenic cooling system. It could be liquid helium, or nitrogen, or—"

"Yeah, yeah, you're totally right. As long as it's not petrol. Alex? Can you open any valves up there?"

"I'll check."

The closest pipe is a metre up the drum. It's bulbous, glinting silver, with one outflow valve labelled 'coolant exhaust.' Sinas and I grab a side each; at first it barely budes, but every turn is easier and easier and—

Hissss... clunk! Clear, unidentified liquid floods from above, almost driving me to my knees. Steam fills the air, shrieking violently, so thick I can barely see Sinas beside me. Another valve shears open and more coolant showers outward, some flames smothered clean, others beaten back by choking vapour.

"*Did that help? You guys alive?*" Wake asks.

Every surface is slick with new condensation, knee-deep in coolant. Even better, I see a way out, part-way up the cylinder.

"Finn and I have an exit," Sinas says. "We'll try and meet up with you."

"*I'll keep blasting MeshPings so you can track us,*" Wake replies. "*Better lock in! More creeps coming down the path.*"

Sinas puts his arm around my shoulder, for brief relief, or encouragement, or simple human connection. I stop myself from shrinking away. Things like this shouldn't make me jumpy, especially when it's something I might... want?

He smiles at me, and my heart skips.

I smile back, frozen.

"We got this," he says. "You and me."

I wish this moment could be longer. I wish I knew what he was *thinking*.

He lets go.

I swallow.

I mean, I do like girls.

I like boys too, though. Sinas is a boy.

It would be nice to think about this under less time pressure.

I clamber onto the pipe, still slippery. From here I can reach an electrical switchboard – flimsy, but it holds my weight – then a girder that forms a frame for the other equipment. I edge along it as the incline grows steeper, then lever myself onto the next coolant pipe. A nearby ladder heads in the wrong direction but it's still useful as a foothold towards the next makeshift outcropping.

'Illumination Detector B', the wall announces.

I wonder what this detector detects.

Thirty seconds later I'm standing at the exit. Sinas scales the pipes behind me, muscles working in his back.

Two hijackers appear at the bottom. Unfortunately, by extinguishing the flames, we've made it a whole lot easier to chase us.

Our exit route runs through a series of miniature laboratories, cramped and labyrinthine, merging into one another. At the far end there's a slightly bigger area with viewscreens – lots of screens – and a pair of onyx coffins surrounded by semicircular metal rings. Assorted wreckage lies on the floor, the contents of several cupboards emptied out by the inconsistent gravity.

One doorway – to the left – is blocked by more fire. But, to the right, there's an elevator.

Sinas stabs the button. Nothing happens.

"We should—we should hide," I gulp.

Sinas surveys at the coffins, but I feel that's too obvious. I grab a silvery insulation blanket from the rubbish on the floor.

"Get under this," I say. "Trust me."

He looks doubtful.

"We can make it look like it's covering something else – equipment maybe, not a person. It blends in. I've done it before." My other favourite option is hiding up high, since people often won't look up, but I can't see any good perches.

Sinas takes the blanket and arranges himself on a shelf of shattered tubing. I find another blanket and drape it half over a box, then curl up underneath with some data drives for company. My face is resting on a screen, still warm; the image switches every few seconds. First, an open chamber, a huge black circle in the middle. Then, a view of shifting colours, like a screensaver.

If we do get found like this, it looks *very* stupid. It's worked before, though. It's worked before.

I see a boot step into the room.

Then another. Two bad guys.

At first, they're still. Then, they start searching. Step, step, glass crunching underfoot. The sound of a cupboard being opened.

These people, whoever they are, don't seem *that* well-equipped or well-trained. There's a chance that – like us – they're out of their depth.

The footsteps walk around me, then behind me.

Step.

Step.

Step, out of the room, down the hallway.

They're gone.

I wait another ten seconds, then slide free. Sinas sits up, looking both relieved and slightly incredulous. My boots are falling leaves as we creep to the elevator, and there's a ping in my MeshMate from Wake, above us and to the left. Not far.

"How do we get this open?" Sinas whispers. He tries jamming his fingers into the gap between the doors. Maybe we could—

The footsteps are back.

They're not in view yet but they will be in two seconds and there's nowhere to hide except behind those two jet-black coffins.

Which we do. Crouching, with trembling thighs.

Sometimes, Finn, you're an idiot. There's one exit. Of COURSE they'd come back if they didn't find anybody. Idiot!

Will they realise something's changed?

The steps rush forwards, clearing either side of the entrance. I imagine them gripping their weapons a little tighter, their eyes settling on potential hiding spots. I look at the other doorway, barred by flames, painting the side of my suit bright yellow. Could we have escaped through there?

I glance at Sinas. He raises both fists, planting his feet.

Don't know what he's planning.

He's calm.

How the *hell* is he calm?

I unclip my fire extinguisher. I can use it as a distraction, if—

Sinas leaps.

I spray the fire extinguisher blindly, hoping there's some left, then chuck uselessly it at the first shape I see. Sinas goes low through the vapour, rising to meet the first suit's chest with his shoulder, knocking them back, and they fall. Sinas stamps down on their wrist and there's a crack and they let go of their pistol, which Sinas reaches for, but the suit jerks sideways and throws him off. The pistol skitters sideways across the myriad of viewscreens, towards the flames, and now I'm out in the open trying to help but I haven't genuinely hit anybody since third grade and I think Sinas is shouting at me to run back the way we came and I do, sort of, but there's a blur to my right and something hard and rigid grabs my hips, an arm, and I'm yanked and chucked sideways into the closest wall. I hit it face first, then slide to the ground. My skull's smashed into my visor. I can't breathe. I roll over. A suit's coming towards me. Sinas is doing his best to keep the other one pinned down, knees planted on their chest, one arm trapped at a painful angle—

My MeshMate *pings!*

A bright red suit comes diving *through* the flames blocking the other door—

—it trips—

—falls—

—next to the discarded pistol—

—grabs it and chucks it to Sinas. "Catch!"

Sinas reaches and snatches it from the air with three fingers. Another red shape bursts through the flames, wreathed in fire, cursing over the Mesh like an electric devil. Sinas points the pistol at the suit on the ground, who isn't moving, but the other grey suit still is, towards Alex and Wake, who're screaming bloody murder in twelve different ways.

"Do not move. DO NOT MOVE!" Sinas shouts. His voice quivers with such fury that I obey.

Grey Suit #2 doesn't.

Sinas pulls the trigger. A crackling blue lance misses them by centimetres. Behind them, a screen explodes.

The suit stops. Turns around. Sees a kid wielding a gun with eyes crazier than Ned Kelly.

"Drop it," Sinas snarls.

The suit looks at each of us in turn.

At their companion on the ground.

Slowly, they place their weapon on the floor.

Wake nicks it and hurries over to Sinas, looking marginally less intimidating but just as wild. Our two pursuers – I realise that's only half of them – press up against the right-wall, beside the lift, suddenly wary.

I move behind Sinas, standing by his left shoulder.

He's still. Very still. His pistol looms, menacing and black.

I can't believe this is happening. Neither can Alex, I think. A drip of orange goo falls from the ceiling, sizzling like lava when it hits the floor.

"Okay," Sinas says. "I think we're going to have a chat."

"Nope," Suit #1 replies.

"I think we are." His voice is even. Just a regular Wednesday.

Another drip. The roof's sagging, glowing dull red.

"You're that guy," Alex murmurs. "The first asshole who tried to murk us. Karen, or something."

He glares. "Khorin." Sweat stains his skin, his hair thick and wild, but he still looks absurdly young to be chasing us across a space station; realistically, he could be my older brother. (Considering today's events, I hope he *isn't*.)

Sinas swings his gun towards the other suit. "What about you?"

"Au— Aurelia," she stutters. She's a bit older, tall, thin, with eyes like a rabbit's.

"Okay, Aurelia. Stay by the lift, right there. Now, why're you trying to blow up this station?"

She swallows. "That's... not your concern."

Sinas fires at her feet. Another screen, turned to slag. "Pretty sure it IS our concern. So, I'd like you to ANSWER ME." It finishes as a growl. The air's charged with static, a promise of violence.

Suddenly, I feel a tickle against my glove.

I look down, and see... Sinas' left hand.

Pawing at mine.

I open my fingers.

He grabs mine tightly.

His hand's behind his back and I'm standing right by him, so I don't think anybody's noticed, or can see, but *I* can. His gaze hasn't wavered. The pistol hasn't wavered. Five fingers, strong as a vice. My heart thumps.

"It will destroy everything," Khorin says, nearly spitting. "This. Us. EVERYTHING. That's why."

"What will?" Sinas asks.

"Illumination."

"Is that what the monsters are?"

"Don't know. Maybe."

"You *do* know. You fucking know."

"We don't!" Aurelia interrupts. "We don't know any more than you do. Please, believe us."

"Then why are you doing this? Who hired you? If Illumination's so dangerous, why can't you explain, right now, *what it is and what the hell you're doing here?*"

Another superheated drop falls from the ceiling. I can feel Sinas' heartbeat through his fingers, *ba-dump, ba-dump, ba-dump*.

"Can't explain because then you'll be a problem," Khorin says. "You'll be MY problem. You'll be Maritime's problem. Don't want to be her problem. Better this way."

Alex rolls her eyes. "Oh, come *on*."

"Listen, we aren't fanatics, or evil, or..." Aurelia shakes her head, pleading. "If you had the chance to stop the grey plague from being created, fifteen years ago, would you have taken that chance? Knowing how many people it consumed? Would you have sacrificed your life, your freedom, your conscience to prevent that? I promise we won't hurt you."

"Then why'd you keep trying to kill us?!" Wake asks incredulously.

"Capture," Khorin grunts. "Not kill."

"The station... it's preparing to collide with Saturn," Aurelia says. "It'll burn up. But there won't be anybody on it. There won't be any deaths. We're only destroying their work. Their experiment."

"But that doesn't fit," Sinas says. "If it's a science project, their people are the project. Their knowledge is the project. You can't leave them alive, either."

"No, no, they've been taken off the station, and they'll be dealt with to make sure this can't happen again, but there won't be any more casualties if you come with us." She's speaking faster and faster.

Sinas swings the gun to Khorin again. "Even if I trust you, I definitely don't trust *him*."

There's a glint in Khorin's gaze. A proudness to his jaw.

He slides one foot forwards.

Sinas comes *this* close to pulling the trigger. "Don't."

His hand clutches mine. Perhaps... everyone needs a lifeline. A heart to hold close. I'm not even sure he realises he's doing it.

More and more of the ceiling's glowing red, which is ominous, and I also don't *enjoy* that we're trying to hold two people hostage, because it seems like the kind of thing that can turn bad in an instant. "We should probably move," I murmur.

"In a second." Wake brings up her map of Starfish, with the blue dots and bio-signatures. "You said you're taking everyone off the station, but *these* people aren't off the station. Look at this big group, near the docks – there must be thirty? Forty?"

"They'll be offloaded," Aurelia says. "They're among the last."

"Where are you sending them?"

"We make sure they're... clean."

"Make sure they're 'clean?' What's *that* mean?"

"We— I can't say—"

Suddenly, the entire group of forty dots just vanishes.

Five seconds. Ten seconds.

"What'd you do?" Wake asks.

Aurelia shakes her head. "No, no, that wasn't us!"

Khorin narrows his eyes.

"What happened?" Alex asks. "Are they dead?"

"Could be the signal's blocked, or they're being spoofed," Wake says, "but the data says they're gone."

"Who knows?" Khorin replies, smiling.

"What's so important about Illumination?" Sinas hisses. "What IS Illumination?"

"You keep saying it wrong."

"Then how am I supposed to say it?"

"Two words: 'illumi/nation'. Like 'light/dark.' Or 'life/death!'"

Whumph! The ceiling splits. A curtain of glowing liquid floods the room, glutinous, blinding, parting us from our prisoners. Instinctively I shield my eyes as it eats at the floor like acid, flowing towards our boots, the room consumed in shimmering heat. I think the entire thing's about to collapse. It's like the crater of a volcano.

Maybe that coolant *was* important.

Khorin's grin floats above the chaos.

Sinas shoots at his feet – once, twice – a strangled cry escaping from his throat.

I can barely see. I tug at Sinas' hand.

"This way!" Alex shouts. She stumbles back, retracing the steps of her dramatic entrance, through the fire blocking the other door. "Hurry the *fuck* up! Leave them!"

I pull Sinas' arm, hard, harder, until finally, he turns and follows. I glance back to make sure Khorin's still there; don't know, is the answer. He can't chase us though, not unless he can swim through literal lava. My suit screeches as we slip and slide through the worst of it, into the fire, then out into open air, Sinas holding the pistol like he suddenly doesn't know what to do with it.

We enter the hallway.

There's an air vent here with the cover already removed.

We climb inside and start crawling.

FINN VI

Air vents are more fun than being burned alive, but only barely. This one's long, cramped, and dusty, twisting and turning like a rabbit warren, barely large enough for us to slither through on our elbows. Sweat coats my face, stings my eyes, forcing out new tears that blur my vision further as I try to keep pace with Wake's wombat-esque scurrying.

"How far are we from Section 104?" Sinas asks, coughing. He hasn't stopped coughing for a good long while.

"Two hundred metres," Wake says. "Maybe even one hundred."

"Thank *Christ*."

"We were honestly nearly there before we decided to sprint head-first into hell."

We keep going. Occasionally we pass a grate, revealing a nondescript corridor or storeroom.

Ahead of me, Wake stops.

"What is it?" Alex asks.

<Shhh!>

There's another grate half a metre forwards. Cautiously, I wriggle towards it, so I can see what's outside, but I almost don't need to. Purple light shines through it, creating bars of colour and shadow.

There are ghosts, floating in the hallway.

They're not moving. Not shifting. Just... floating. There are four of them, indistinct human-sized ripples, a mixture of indigo and violet and fuchsia. Their otherworldly light has a saturated, impressionistic edge.

I stare at them, breath held.

I want to get lost in them.

I think they want to get lost in *me*.

Stay lucent, Finn.

"I wonder what their senses are," Wake whispers suddenly, placing a lot of faith in the idea that they can't eavesdrop on our MeshChannel. "Can they hear us? Smell us? See our bodyheat?"

Suddenly, my MeshMate bugs. Ferdinand goes fuzzy, for a second.

The ghosts waver, and I'm falling into a painting.

"Maybe we should just creep past reeeaaal stealthy," Alex says, "and move on, unless we want to be stuck in this bloody air vent forever—"

—look down at my gloves. I'm surprised I didn't tear a hole them.

Wait. Why am I surprised?

We're in a long, oval-shaped enclosure.

Do I recognise it? Where are we?

"Aaaahh! Woah! What just happened!" Wake exclaims.

"Ouuugh..." Alex groans. "I don't know."

"This is it!" Sinas says animatedly. "It was EXACTLY like this for Finn and me when we ran into the monsters before. Timeskip." He glances around, making sure we're okay, then catches my eye to check he isn't mantis. (He isn't.)

"Oh, so this is what that feels like?" Alex says. "The memory thing?"

We're in an atrium which provides to dozens upon dozens of dorm rooms, each with an identical arched doorway. Walking across it is like circumnavigating a coliseum, tipped on its side. The enclosure also serves a garden, of sorts, with groves of trees growing sideways from sunken, square platforms. The ceiling (to our right) is split by an enormous central dome, providing an expansive view of the stars.

There are hundreds of stars. Thousands. No, billions. We're on Saturn's night side, looking at the centre of the galaxy and the world is ethereal, barely there, its colours replaced by shades of grey and a starlit glint. Verdant leaves splay themselves against the dome, grasping for every last photon.

Sinas points at an open vent far above us. "Did we drop down from there?"

"If that's the case, we aren't getting back up there," Alex says, going to scratch her chin, then getting frustrated when she scratches her suit's chin instead. "Unless you're a circus acrobat for a living. You aren't a circus acrobat, are you?"

"I am not."

She checks her limbs for any new injuries. "My leg still hurts pretty bad, but the lights didn't do anything weird to us, did they? Weird-ER, I mean."

"I *feel* okay," Wake says. "I think I'm okay."

"Everyone still remember the fire?"

"Oh, Alex, you're so funny," Wake giggles. "As if it won't haunt my nightmares for the rest of my life."

"Fire isn't so bad, as nightmares go," Sinas says. "I... had a dream once where— never mind."

"No, tell me," Alex says. "I want to know what you dream about."

"I had a job as a person who would go out and live certain life experiences, and then another person could download the memories of those experiences and feel like they'd lived it themselves. I was working for a businessman who

asked me to live out three things. The first was apologising to a person the businessman had wronged in the past – he'd letting this other person take the fall for an embarrassing incident. That went well, actually. The person forgave him. The second experience was going to fight in the Third American Revolution. It was a kind of jungle warfare scenario. That was less fun. And the third..." Sinas gets a faraway look in his eyes. "I shouldn't say this."

"What? You can't stop there," Alex says.

"Turns out I can."

"I feel like you were just getting to the nightmare part!"

"Perhaps." He shrugs. "I might tell you later if we become REALLY good friends."

"You're very hateful," Alex says. "I cannot believe you've done this." There's a *hiss* as she takes off her helmet.

It's safe.

The slightest humid, stale breeze against my cheeks is better than any cold shower. I wipe my hand through my hair, getting nothing but sweat in return.

"Ah, man, that's nice," Wake says. "Kinda hate these suits. They're stuffy."

"They're *miles* better than what space suits used to be," Alex replies. "I'm surprised astronauts could even move in those things. The days of early spaceflight were wild."

"Nothing like impending global doom to force a bit of technological advancement," Sinas says.

It's true that humanity's come a long way. Seventy years ago, we could barely get humans out of Earth orbit, and now, we have forests on Saturn.

Or trees, at least. As we walk, I reach out to touch the leaves, plucking one to scrunch between my fingers (a universal law of human behaviour). There are blankets here, in the undergrowth, and snack wrappers, and toys, the remnants of some kids having an 'outdoors' sleepover. The trees aren't thick enough or plentiful enough for proper camping, but it's better than staring at a bunk every night. The air still smells earthy, smoky, like forest regrowth after a bushfire.

I use the time to pull out our map and do some visualisation, and check if we're still on track for our meeting with my mother. My neurons are still trying to reform their connections, like a spiderweb that someone's just walked through, flopping on the breeze.

Sinas' fingers brush against the pistol on his hip, as if checking an old scar. The silence is full of expectations. (Mostly mine.)

"How— how are you doing?" I murmur.

He turns, smiles, falling into step. "Yeah, alright. Pretty good. Pretty tired."

The trouble with starting conversations is subsequently needing to continue them. "You were... pretty intimidating. Back there, in the lab."

"I *hope* it was intimidating," he laughs.

"I thought you'd actually murk those guys, for a second."

"That's the point, isn't it? To make you think I would. To make *them* think I would." He forces himself to stop touching the gun. "Guess it worked."

"That's... cool, I guess." I don't believe that Sinas actually feels 'pretty good' right now, but all I can do is ask the question, which, let me tell you, is more than I'd do for most people. He's not really looking at me, so it's hard to know what he's thinking.

"Thanks, Finn," he says suddenly.

"Oh. For what?"

"Just in general." He reaches out, as if to touch my shoulder, then doesn't. Instead, he cracks his knuckles and sends an emoji over the Mesh: a plain old smiley face.

I reply with a happy robot head.

I notice that Wake's watching us, but quickly, she turns away.

"Is that a Saturnian squid?" Alex whispers.

A small, wet shape is flopping about on one of the floor-doors.

With a cough, it launches (or slops) itself into the air. Its body is made up of two globular lobes, attached to either side of a central flower of ridged, rubbery organs. Two vaguely feathery appendages sprout from each flank. A collection of shorter, thicker tentacles dangles underneath. Its colour is faded pink, with electric blue highlights around a central fin. Awkwardly, it manages to stabilise itself and starts gliding in a wide circle, up, down, around the enclosure.

"That's not supposed to be here, right?" Alex asks, looking at Sinas.

"Is that a question for me?"

"That was your project, wasn't it? Studying the squids?"

"Just because it was my research project doesn't mean— okay, yeah, it probably escaped from somewhere."

"I wonder if we'll run into a Saturnian snake," Wake says. "THAT would be orbital."

Um, no thank you. Swimming-pool-sized flying electric centipedes should stay in BBC documentaries, where they can be appreciated in the company of virtual David Attenborough.

A distant red flare shines through the trees.

My sweat turns to ice.

"Shit!" Alex hisses. "That's—"

"Behind us, too," Sinas mutters.

Red ahead, blue behind.

"Ash!" Wake says. "Maybe they're attracted to Sinas' weird dreams—"

"Finn and I hid from one before," Sinas interrupts. "It got close, but it didn't seem to know where we were... we can hide. We can try."

I had no idea my propensity for hiding in cupboards would be so handy. My mind races. Perhaps one of these dorm rooms is unlocked, but if we're wrong, we'd get trapped in the open. The trees aren't thick enough to provide cover on their own. (Alex goes for it, anyway, grabbing a branch. She uses the tree's limbs as an outsized ladder and hisses as her leg buckles beneath her.) My gaze finds a kid's blanket, crumpled by our feet. It's fluffy. It's got Pikachu on it. The same trick probably won't work twice.

Instead, I scurry to the gardens. They're planted in sunken boxes which, with the station tipped on its side, forms a small, dirt-covered ledge I can lie on. There are enough bushes and ferns that if I lie on my back, the vegetation droops and shields me from view (unless someone happens to crouch right next door).

Sinas is still out there. He's picked up the blanket.

"In here," I hiss.

It takes him a second to spot me. Good sign.

But I'm an idiot, because the ledge is barely big enough for me, let alone both of us. His eyes flick to the approaching red glow. Shafts of colour glimmer through the leaves.

No time.

"Sorry," he whispers, "but I think I'm gonna have to—"

"Okay," I murmur.

He bends down and basically lies on top of me to stay low. He's reasonably bulky, and it's cramped, as he hugs me close, but—it'll do. For a minute or two.

Dirt. Leaves. Starlight.

Shallow breaths.

I can't really move.

His weight, pressing down on me; the contours of his suit, mismatched to mine; his neck, half-resting on my shoulder but very carefully not; the tickle of warm air as he breathes, damp, alive, against the tiny hairs on my cheek. Each slight movement generates jolts of electricity.

I try to manifest the zen stillness of a Japanese garden.

If I do, this moment won't turn bad.

Sparks are going off inside me. I hate them. I don't hate them. Strange thoughts, of what Sinas would say to me, in the dark.

Of what this would feel like, if we weren't in our suits.

Of what he'd look like, if he stepped out of his—

Stupid, hormonal thoughts.

It's going to make me vomit. He makes me vomit.

Light approaches through the trees above, a scarlet storm against my eyelids. There's something on my glove – my left glove, pinned by my side. It's Sinas' hand. It must be. Not so long ago, it was holding a gun. Not so long ago, I was standing behind him, and his other hand was...

I don't know what comes over me. I shift my wrist and try and take his fingers in mine. I try to say that it's okay—

Sinas jerks away, like he's been burned.

"Finn, stop," he whispers.

I freeze. My fingers are ablaze, and my face is too. I squeeze my eyes shut. Can't move. Can't breathe. I'm being crushed by Sinas' weight. The monster's THERE, a mist of pulsing tentacles curling into itself like a demonic Mobius strip and my ears are overcome with an electronic shriek, a YouTube clip of an eagle's cry that's been uploaded and reuploaded ten thousand times. The light whips

through space, the space *between* space, the space between Sinas' touch and my aching fingers, which is no space at all.

I don't know what I'm doing. I don't know people. Never did.

The whirlpool's hot. I can't breathe.

I shouldn't have assumed anything.

Shit! I know he's staring at me, judging me.

I can't stand it. I can't, I can't, I can't—

I wriggle sideways and push myself out from underneath, breaking through twigs and leaves that scratch at my face. Sinas nearly falls, and I don't know what I'm thinking, or IF I'm thinking, but I take one big giant breath as—

—I stand in the shadow of a god. It looms over me, around me, hovering in place. Light, divided by infinity and leaves.

I can *feel* it, pulsing against me. It's not substantial but there's *something* there, a slight resistance, a force pushing back.

It's so close I could touch it.

What if I do?

The light FLARES outward, shooting through my skin, through the trees, across the dorms, brighter and brighter, like exiting a deep cave straight into midsummer – and then I see shapes, surrounding me. It's like I'm on stage at a play, if the actors and sets were swarms of obedient fireflies.

The fireflies dance. There are waves in the trees, a deck of light beneath me.

If I squint, it could be the deck of a sailing ship.

Two figures stand nearby, or impressions of figures. In the distance, more light blooms, fireflies leaping like distant supernovae.

The figures watch this display.

They are... resigned. Disappointed. Determined. Miserable.

My heart aches, but I'm not sure what for.

One of the figures notices me. It glides towards me. I take a half-step back, making sure there's still dirt under my boots.

It stops, close, and a brand new mouth forms in its featureless visage, opening wide, wider, until its entire head turns inside out, shuddering violently, and the noise that comes out sounds a lot like:

—HEEeeeellPPPP—

The connection snaps.

The light compresses into itself and zig-zags away, out of the trees, like it's on the end of an overstretched spring. It vanishes out of the room. Out of sight.

No more fireflies.

Only leaves.

"What the FUCK, Finn?" Alex shouts. "What the fuck was that?"

She starts descending from her perch, but her leg slips again, and she cries out in pain, and Wake helps her the rest of the way. She limps to the wall and

sits, the offending limb stretched gingerly in front of her. "I need to give this thing a break. I need to give ME a break."

Wake bobs her head. "I'll find another healkit."

I reached out, and I could touch it.

It could touch *me*. Why?

Sinas is there, standing apart, arms folded. I blush, biting hard on my lip.

What were you thinking, Finn?

You WEREN'T. That's the problem. That could've easily gone FAR worse than it did. Ferdinand gives me a reproachful stare. He knows I'm an idiot.

I know.

"Finn?" Alex asks again. "Do you know what that was? Did you realise that'd happen?"

"No," I say.

"Then— WARN me before you do any more stupid crap, alright? Next time, *warn* me." She looks scared. I'm scared too. Afterimages scar my vision.

"Sorry, I... I freaked out." I glance at Sinas again.

"Honestly, I might just park myself here," Alex says. "No more questions, no more theories, no more bullshit. You guys go find a person who knows what the hell's going on." She leans back, staring at the dome. "Fuckin' *space*, man."

"It's not that bad," Sinas grunts.

"Um, yeah. It is."

He sits dismissively, slouching forwards, one foot kicking at a notch in the floor. "It makes everything else far away."

"And that's good, is it?" She groans. "Fiiiiine, gimme another minute. Then we'll go."

I take a few steps to nowhere in particular, until I'm shielded by the trees.

There's a vending machine here, nestled between two dorms. I kneel down, taking stock. There are Shapes. Neptune Bars, too. "Shapes pleeeaaassee!" Wake says, flying past me, her voice possessing actual Doppler shift.

When I return, it's with an armful of snacks. Wake gets her Shapes (barbecue flavour), Alex gets some chips (salt and vinegar), while Sinas gets a Caramello Koala. He takes it, but with an unmistakable pause.

"Thought you liked chocolate," I say.

"I do, but... forget it."

Oh, crap.

Crap *crap crap*. I tear into the packet of Killer Pythons I got for myself, stretching one between my teeth, thinner, thinner, till it snaps.

Alex grimaces as she tests her knee. Wake chucks a Shape into the air, catching it in her mouth. Sinas shove his hands into his pockets, slumped, but tensed, as if he can't decide whether he wants to blend in or stand out, like a troublemaker sitting outside the principal's office.

I'm hollow. Blindsided by a test I thought I was well-prepared for.

Sinas' breath against my cheek.

His legs, tangled in mine.

I'm bringing so much outside baggage into this, but I can't help it. It's just how humans are, I think. I barely even *know* him.

I eat my Pythons, standing apart.

Gradually, gravity evaporates, then returns at a slightly different angle, which is almost – *almost* – the correct one. The manoeuvre, whatever it is, must be changing course. It makes sense to treat the floor as a floor again, as opposed to the past half-hour of rotated nonsense, and the spatial reasoning part of my brain sighs in relief: doors where they should be, trees growing skyward, and briefly, I'm struck by the thought of making a campfire and watching smoke curl among the stars.

"Wait. Does this now look... familiar to you guys?" Alex asks. "This is going to sound crazy, because I've never been to Saturn in my life, but I think I've been here before." She swallows. "No, I'm *certain* I've been here before."

ALEX VII

I stand under trees, trees under stars, digging at the point my brain is desperately trying to make. I'm tickling an itch inside those grey, fleshy wrinkles; a half-sneeze that doesn't want to clear itself out.

"Is something—" Wake begins.

I raise a hand. "Wait."

I've been here before. Definitely. What makes me think that? The leaves, and the window, and the way it arcs over our heads, reflecting upside-down trees. The way the air basks, with a placebo biological freshness.

Tickle it. Tickle it. Dig your finger right in there.

"Alex, what—"

"Wait."

I *like* plants. There's enough ivy hanging over my bed back home to crush me completely in the event of structural failure (solid assassination plan if you're one of my many enemies), but for once, this isn't a simple pang of homesickness.

If I've been here before, then...

But I CAN'T have been here. I reach forwards like one of those bots with stranglers' hands, as if to pluck a memory out of thin air.

A sensation of— warmth? Uncertainty?

I groan, spewing out my frustration. "I don't know, Wake. I honestly don't. We're stuck in what feels like the seventh circle of hell, my entire life is apparently fifty percent lies, and for SOME REASON this room's giving me déjà vu like the Fremantle Dockers whenever they choke a grand final. Sorry, niche reference. Anybody else getting that feeling?"

Wake nods sagely. "When my MeshChannel reached a million subs, it was like I could predict the entire scene as it happened, right down to spilling juice on my desk. Like, I was soooooo sure I'd already experienced it... but it turns out I'd just dreamed about it before."

"I respect the stealth brag, but I dunno if it's entirely relevant."

"I don't remember anything specific," Sinas replies.

"Ah, great," I reply. "Even more lucent."

His smile's all jaw. "You're welcome."

"I'm, uh... Sorry, that came out wrong."

"Sure." He turns away.

To be fair, there are lots of things to be annoyed/frustrated/exhausted by currently, and most of them aren't even me. I give the room one last look, but without the terrifying, ghostly presences stalking us, it's lost whatever magic it might've had. It might even be a consequence of my brain being gummed up by too much useless *Moon's Haunted* imagery (consequences of browsing horny fanart whenever you're bored at 2AM). IS this a *Moon's Haunted* scene?

Trees.

Trees under stars.

A campfire?...

It could also be PTSD talking, of a sort, and I tell my MeshMate to scan for abnormal thought patterns, even though it's supposed to do that automatically. Besides, what's 'abnormal'? Should I start actively suppressing my irrational spider phobia? (If I suppressed EVERY one of my irrational phobias there'd be nothing left of me, haha.)

Maybe Sinas' MeshMate could suppress some of his hotness, to make it fair on everyone else. Maybe Wake's MeshMate should electrocute her whenever she does something annoying and TwitchTokky.

"Let's keep going," I say. "We're almost there."

Sinas nods, hotly.

Wake nods, TwitchTokkily.

We leave the arboretum behind, the threat of memory insisting upon my shoulderblades. '*Run*' floods my head, not in the fun sense of finish lines and ribbons, but a sense to be resisted, like an adult walking very calmly up a dark basement staircase to prove that being afraid of the dark is *silly*.

Apropos of nothing, the next area's a gymnasium. Strange-looking torture devices – exercise machines of all sizes – are bolted to the walls, a parade of old sweat.

I hate this floaty, sideways gravity. Have I always swung my arms this much when I walk? Was it always this hard to stop my knees actively fighting each other?

"Alex?" Finn's voice. He's projecting the station map above one hand, hiding behind its faded orange glow.

Don't be an asshole.

Or do, if it helps. "Yeah? What's up?"

"Are you okay?"

"Fine. I suppose." I stare at him, between the map's neon lines. He looks like a rat. Dark hair, arched nose, worried little eyes – a rat who's committed a minor house-crime and is trying to figure out how much their parents know about it. "Why?"

"What exactly did you... remember? Back there?"

"It just felt like I'd been there before," I reply. "Don't know when, or why, or how, but I was so *convinced*. It kicked me like a frickin' emu."

"Then, um, you didn't remember anything specific?"

"Nah, that'd be too easy. Too *kind*." A black droplet splashes from his nose, onto his chestplate. "Are *you* okay?"

"I— huh." He touches his face. "Nosebleed. Sorry."

He deactivates the map, fading into shadow.

He seems afraid – of *me*. Which is fair enough.

What's LESS fair is I'm being forced to solve an extremely difficult equation with nothing but poor social skills, stubbornness, and a basic understanding of several millennia of storytelling tropes. I mean, secret parents? A secret adoption? Every second fantasy novel features a secret adoption! It's probably required by law in certain authorial circles, and I REFUSE to be reduced to a second-rate Star Wars or Harry Potter or rip-off. (Thank Christ I'm not an orphan too, because that'd make me unpublishable.) Thinking logically, I'm sure this kind of thing *does* happen and I'm surely not the first person to have fallen into this kind of familial mess, but even so, it's EXACTLY the sort of shocking twist I'd love in *Moon's Haunted* and that idea makes me want to tear myself to pieces.

I'm swiping through the air as I walk, absently checking for cobwebs.

Old habits.

And suddenly, we're here. Sector 104.

It's a landing not unlike every other, four doors opening from a central nook. My MeshMate paints rosy edges around dangers and doorways in the half-light. It's figured out that everything's rotated slightly sideways with an alert that basically amounts to *<please stop doing whatever it is you're doing.>*

Would if I could, friend. Would if I could.

"Go on," Sinas says.

Finn glances at him, then presses the buzzer by the left-most door.

Two seconds pass.

The door opens, and— there she is.

Haru half-steps, half-climbs through the entryway, brushing past us, a bright green glowstick in her breast pocket throwing interstellar shadows around her neck and cheekbones. She's wiry, thin like Finn, but with a swift confidence that belies her frame. A pale coat swishes about her legs. She's all angles, and parallel lines. Just... geometry.

Finn steps forward. Perhaps only I notice his quiver, but she puts her arms around him, and him around her.

An obligation, I think.

Not like my parents.

He slips out of her embrace. Despite everything, I feel a pang of envy.

The geometry's looking at me now, seeming to swim, my eyes refusing to acknowledge it as true. The green glow frames her and the coat she wears. It's all I can do stand upright, to give off the impression that I'm not coming unmoored. I wonder if she'll say anything, or if there's anything she *can* say. And

yet, I'm frustrated by how my body insists on betraying me. Get a fucking GRIP, Alex. Come on. I wonder if she'll hug me. I realise she's smaller than me. Feels wrong to be held down by something so small.

Instead, she holds out her hand. It hangs between us, delicate and poised. I take it, to make sure she isn't a ghost.

The hand is real, and cold, and more fragile than it looked on a monitor. Her white coat swallows her like an iceberg.

"You made reasonable time," she says. "Well done."

"Let me help!" Wake says, referring to the large metal case Haru's carrying.

"No; thank you." She grips it tightly. "Let's be on our way. There is something I..." She stops herself. In her face there nestles a focused blankness, a neutral smile. "One egress remains safe, but it may not be for much longer."

She starts walking.

We follow, a conga of confused ducklings. The corridor slopes downwards.

"Where are we going?" Sinas asks.

"The hub."

"There's something there that can help?"

"A way off the station, as I explained – one I'm confident nobody else will think of, apart from perhaps some other staff on the project."

"Is that the project you were called here to oversee?"

"Yes, a physics experiment. There were dangers involved, which meant precautions had to be put in place – one of which I hope to use."

Sinas nods, more of his native accent coming through. I like how it sounds.

"What *is* this way out? Not that it matters, but if it's dangerous—"

"We should not attract attention," Haru murmurs.

"Yes, of course. Wouldn't want any monsters to hear us."

Haru doesn't smile, or perhaps she doesn't hear.

Sinas cracks his fingers, and—

—I walk down this hallway, following a boy with brown hair, and opal eyes.

He's smaller than Sinas. Less... tranquil.

But the hallway's identical, down to the same holographic orchids on the same fake windowsills.

Ahead is a figure in a white coat. I can't see her face.

"Are you ready?" she asks.

The lights go out.

"God-damn-it," I mutter. "I SWEAR I've been here before..."

"You have," Haru says. "Not here, exactly, but a similar station. I've tried to meet you once before. Did you know that?"

"What?" I ask. She doesn't stop. "Of course I didn't *know that*—"

"I expect you don't recall. Do you remember visiting Mars, four years ago? With your adoptive parents?"

"You sure know a lot about me," I reply, accusingly.

"We've been over this, Alex. I didn't forget you existed. I always kept one eye on your progress, to make sure of your wellbeing."

"I bet you devoted heaps of effort to it." My suspicion helps keep the dizziness at bay.

At thirteen, I did visit Mars with my parents. We saw Olympus Mons and the Valles Marineris, which were fine (big rocks are big; more at 11), and the labyrinthine, subterranean colonies of Spirit and Opportunity. My dad was most interested in their greenhouses and excessively questioning tour guides about crop rotations. Personally, I loved the terraforming engines: huge, conical towers belching gas into the atmosphere, and brackish, half-developed seas around their bases teeming with genetically adapted wildlife. You could see the dream there, a story in the midst of its telling. On the way back, we stopped at a station: Hourglass Station, near the moon of Phobos. And there was—

"There was an accident," Haru says. "Do you remember?"

"Not really."

"The doctors removed those memories, I suspect. For trauma's sake."

"Not that I had any say in it." From the few MeshFeeds my therapy AI forgot to block, I eventually discovered there'd been a problem with the station's reactor, a cascade of failed failsafes so unlikely it was barely prosecutable. Annoyingly, my only memories were of waking up at home, weeks later, covered in suspiciously new patches of skin. Almost dying in a space explosion seemed like the kind of earth-shattering trauma I *should* remember, or be affected by, but instead... I went back to school. I didn't feel any different. Of course, it seems churlish to bemoan that.

Nevertheless, perhaps there *were* hazy remnants of memories cobwebbed through my head, because afterwards, I never looked forward to leaving home. I've never even gone back into space until now. There were plenty of times I could've, but... didn't.

I guess I never really thought about it.

Never really thought about lots of things.

"We'd decided – your parents and I – that I was to meet you, on Hourglass station," Haru says. "It was my workplace at the time, you understand, so we thought it a good opportunity; an appropriate time to reveal the truth. After the accident, we decided to call off the meeting. I believe your father said circumstances were— 'not swell'? In any case, your recognition of this place likely stems from that period, since both stations are very similar – same manufacturer, I believe. Truthfully, I feel quite at home here." Her face hovers, a moon above a planet. "Do you recognise this too, Finn? You might, if Alex does."

"Not particularly," he says.

"You look thin. Have you been eating properly? Not just chocolate?"

"Yeah."

"I'm glad you're safe."

"...Thank you."

It has the emotional authenticity of a high school Shakespeare production and I wanna grab both their shoulders and shake until an actual emotion falls out. (If I ran into MY parents around the next bend, we'd win a damn Oscar in comparison.)

We're now entering Starfish's medical wing, with hospital rooms arranged in shell-like spirals, and doorways barricaded by mismatched shelving. Plastic sheeting divides the space into murky labyrinths, crackling as we climb through. Empty healpods are clamped to the floor. Water drips from fluid bags. The claw-tentacles of automatic surgeons wait, frozen, ready to pounce.

Haru stops, setting down the container she's been carrying. It's octagonal and heavy, even in lower gravity, with a military, utilitarian look.

"I thought we were going to find—" Wake begins.

"An escape route, yes," Haru says. "One moment." She kneels, fiddling with the apparatus inside.

She's a scientist. It must be a science thing. Or perhaps she's checking for dangerous radiation? Shadows swarm across the sterile tiling, threatening to overwhelm the gloom.

Relax. She *is* the adult in the room. No one's looking at me to make a decision, for once. Instead of anguishing over our continued survival, I'm free to just... watch. And have faith.

I resist the urge to pace. To *run*.

Sinas takes a seat on an empty healpod, which creaks underneath him. Finn just... stares. At what, I'm not sure. Even Wake doesn't want to talk. It's a silence of sharp edges. I sweep at imaginary cobwebs.

Man, we're *almost* free. It's almost over.

I can go home.

Run.

Sleep.

Suddenly, I'm unspeakably tired, right down to my bones.

"Can you tell us what you were working on?" Sinas asks. "It must've been interesting."

Haru's gaze flicks to him. "Do you know what dimensional string expansion is?"

"Of course," he replies, as if he isn't lying.

"How promising," Haru says. "Perhaps there *is* hope, for the younger generation..." She frowns, then shakes it off. "Recent research has been quite promising in that field. Unfortunately, as you'd know, expanding a dimensional string requires problematic amounts of energy and exotic matter, which presents associated 'dangers' if certain fear-mongers are to be believed. Preliminary tests are therefore being done, here, prior to continued research on Earth. Which brings us to this," she says, gesturing at her equipment. "I am

confirming if the experiment containment field was breached. A small detour would be required, if true."

"Makes sense," Sinas says. "Were the tests successful?"

"Quite."

"That's exciting."

"Quite." She focuses on her work.

"What exactly are these 'dimensional extreme pandas'? That apparently everyone knows about but me?" Wake asks.

"It's when you take a regular panda and turn it into a wave," Sinas replies.

"Is that quantum mechanics joke? Are you making fun of me? You are!" Her face scrunches like she's eating a lemon. "I thought you were *better* than that. As a *person*."

"Reality is often disappointing." He shrugs. "Or dependent on observation."

She rolls her eyes. "Okay, then what about those monsters? Any updates? On the monsters we saw? Since we definitely did see them?" Her voice rises higher and higher with each question. "Doctor?"

"No," Haru says flatly.

"You don't know what they could be?"

"I checked a number of the station's camera feeds but saw no phenomena like that which you're describing." She enunciates every syllable.

"Maybe they don't show up on cameras," Sinas mutters.

"They do," Wake says. "I'll send you a Mymory log."

"Chasing imaginary monsters isn't productive." Haru presses buttons with tiny, precise motions. "No," she reiterates. "Not productive."

Sinas and Wake share a look, while Finn daydreams. To me, this situation still feels off, no matter how much I tell myself to relax. Unfortunately, I'm not sure how to apply that instinct. I exhale, trying to compact my misgivings into something concrete.

"What's Illumination?" I ask.

Haru's face flickers. "Where did you hear that?"

"Nowhere in particular." Sinas is better at lying.

"It's another of the experiments here... one I don't know much about. There are privacy issues involved, NDAs, patents, things of that nature."

"Is that why the station was attacked?"

"I'd rather not speculate."

"I'm just happy we're leaving," Wake says. "That's what really matters, right? We can figure out the rest on the trip back to Earth." She grins a tiny grin, throwing pretend confetti into the air. "Not dying in a freak space accident! Seeing your family again! Actual sunshine! Yay!" She wiggles her fingers, letting them fall like streamers.

"The most precious of gifts," I grumble. "Not dying in a space accident."

It doesn't take much longer for Haru finish her techno-magic. She folds her apparatus back into its box and stands. "Let's keep moving," she says tersely. "There's something I have to show you." She sets off without waiting for a reply.

"Are we close?" I call out after her.

More corridors, more doorways, blocked by vaguely ominous barricades, until we come to a security gate protected by a panopticon's worth of cameras and the kind of armour plating you'd use to hold back a minotaur. Haru takes a keycard from her pocket, and a BioLock scans her face for good measure. There are three gates, it turns out, each heavier than the last. Thick black conduits snake from wall to floor (or whatever serves as floor in our canted gravity). This time, Finn's last in line, his footsteps a few heartbeats behind mine, off-pace. I bet he's doing that thing he does, staring at nothing and... *thinking*. Ugh. I try delaying my own footsteps to match, but can't quite manage it.

Instead, I stomp louder.

He's still there. I can smell the blood in his hair.

The iceberg's already hit me and I'm taking on water, no matter if I'd love to pretend otherwise. "Are you telling the truth?" I ask, chewing on my cheek.

Haru looks over her shoulder. "Yes, Alex. I am."

"All of it?"

"Yes. I'd... rather not lie anymore."

"Oh." My reply gets caught somewhere. "Orbital."

The air's becoming thicker with condensation, light-shafts twisting between dangling cables like a wintry forest sunrise. (Crepuscular rays, they're called, which is a real dictionary highlight.)

Haru ducks under a barrier. "Sometimes – often – when we make decisions, they aren't the right ones. Evidence is gathered, a hypothesis is formed, and it's flawed. Incorrect. Perhaps it takes years to realise, or reassess, assisted by the inputs of many others. But I find comfort in the fact that eventually, ultimately – science does prevail." Her smile is small, but it grows, as if she's remembering how to, in the moment. "I hope we can understand each other, Alex. I hope you and Finn can become friends. Perhaps not true brother and sister, but— friends, at least. I think there would be quantifiable benefits, for both of you. Unless you think it's too late?"

"I... hope not," I reply.

"Do you mean that?"

'Quantifiable benefits' aren't how I'd describe my friendships (more like 'Pacific garbage patches of questionable influence'), but this woman might be properly, truly *trying*. The battlements of my anger are beginning to crumble.

"I could organise another meeting with your parents," Haru says.

Right now, that feels impossibly distant. (Which, in itself, is comforting.)

"Would my dad be there?" I ask. "My biological dad?"

Haru stops. "No."

"Why not?"

"It would be unproductive."

"Well, I apologise for wanting to know the full story. I'd rather not leave secrets lying around."

"We can... we will discuss this afterwards." It's like she's grown, in the dark. Multiple faces push to the surface, too quick to read. "There's something I have to show you—"

"HELP! HELP, IS ANYONE THERE?!"

An unfamiliar voice. Passageway to the left.

"YEAH!" Wake shouts back.

"OH THANK GOD! WE NEED SOME HELP! FAST! PLEASE!"

No one's cynical enough to think it's a trap, so we run towards the voice, pushing through the cable-forest. We come to a set of doors choked by globs of congealed goop: a quick-setting adhesive foam I've seen my mum use before (the jar claims it'll seal a crack for a minimum of two centuries, guaranteed). Through a smudged window, a gap in the foam, peers a wide, moon-like face. It sags visibly in relief. "Holy shit holy shit holy shit! Okay! We're in a bad way here and you don't *seem* like you're part of the problem, so here goes. Those bastards sealed us in here—"

"Who?" Wake asks.

"The boarders! With the guns! Did you somehow miss the... wait, you're a kid? You're ALL kids?" The face sags more. "Oh no."

"How many of you are there?"

"Twelve. There's twelve of us." The face shifts aside and I glimpse a storage room, filled with debris. "My name's Pendant. I work here – or used to."

"Explain the problem," Wake says. "Maybe we can help."

"The problem? The *problem* is we're stuck in this dreadful closet, the life support in this area has been disabled, and in sixty minutes we're all going to suffocate. And failing that, we'll freeze to death. And failing that, the station's set to explode." Pendant's covered in sweat, their eyes hidden behind fogged-up glasses. I'd say their vibe is 'crazy history teacher', but a young, hip one who writes semi-controversial Mesh blogs.

"You're right," Sinas murmurs. "That's a problem."

"Uh, yes! Yes it is. You're quite right. So, if you could just, um—"

"You can't get out?" Wake asks.

The face backs away for a second, as if trying not to scream. "*Obviously* not, there's nothing we can use to cut through! We are STUCK—"

"No emergency air supply? No other ways out?"

"You're asking a bunch of scientists if we... Lord, give me strength. What are you, fifteen?"

"Sixteen," Wake says haughtily.

"Well, *random precocious child*, we've gone over every atom in here with an electron microscope and the most interesting object is a superconducting magnet which, last I checked, we CANNOT BREATHE. We've looked for ways to escape but there aren't any. Otherwise, we would've ESCAPED. Capisce?"

"Okay, okay, no need to be—"

"Be *what*?!"

I touch my fist to the foam. It's smooth, glossy, sticky to the touch – the secretion an alien monster queen would use to cocoon her victims. My dad's needed to dissolve this goo stuff before. What did he use to do it? I wonder if I've got a visual record of the instructions on the bottle, or if my MeshMate's stored enough chemistry revision modules to synthesise a solution.

"Did you tell them about the altitude?" another voice says.

Pendant turns, facing a person we can't see. "Joshua, that's not relevant—"

"You should tell them about the altitude."

Pendant grits their teeth. "If you **MUST** know, that acceleration you feel? It's lowering the station's periapsis. Soon we'll start skipping across Saturn's upper atmosphere like a stone and at these speeds we'll burn up almost instantly. It'll be lovely and pretty, though; probably visible from Earth-based telescopes."

Sinas turns to Haru. "Do you know who controlling the station thrusters?"

"No," she says.

"But you agree that we'll burn up."

She purses her lips. "I was intending to leave before that eventuality."

"Pendant, how long do we have?"

"It's hard to be sure with the Mesh in this state," Pendant says. "Back-of-the-envelope estimate... two hours? Three? Truthfully, I'd made peace with dying tragically young and unloved since nobody was responding to our pings— oh, I see, because you turned off your personal transponders. Smart. Well, Joshua here will be glad he doesn't have to cremate himself but that *does* rely on us getting free. Preferably soon."

"There's still time," the unseen voice says.

"Not **MUCH** time, Joshua!"

"Why'd they trap you guys in there, anyway?" I ask. "The hijackers told us they want everyone *off* the station. They said they didn't want to kill anyone."

"Oh, please." They roll their eyes. "I tell people I was college roommates with Tom Cruise's illegal clone— and I was, but I could easily be lying! There was a commotion about a fire, people escaping, huge panic, so they locked us in here and ran off to deal with it. That was about an hour ago, and they haven't come back. Never thought I'd be sad to see terrorists leave, but I am quite gutted. If they truly meant to come back and get us, perhaps they got spooked."

"That reminds me," Sinas murmurs. "Wake, do you have—"

"—the plasma cutty thing! I do!" She whips it out, brandishing it like a sword. "Outta juice, though. It needs a new cartridge."

"The seal's heat-resistant, at any rate," Pendant replies. "And *please* don't start slicing walls apart until you've earned the proper qualifications. We'd rather you didn't breach something questionable. This station's already hole-ier than the Pope."

An unseen 'Ha!' from Joshua.

"My suggestion – my request – is to go to central engineering," Pendant continues, "because from there, you can override the station's emergency response protocols. We can provide the necessary access codes. For instance,

you could deploy AutoDrones to cut us out, or redistribute life support, or reverse the engines... most of our current problems would be solved!"

"Then we do that," I say. "We go to engineering."

A hand on my shoulder. "There isn't time," Haru says.

"What are you talking about?"

"We do not have time to help these people. Not if we want to be certain of survival."

"Doctor Hanamura?" Pendant asks, pressing against the window. "Dr. Hanamura!"

"Hello, Dr. Cadence," she replies.

"Goodness me, I didn't realise— you have to help me! Us! Please, I'm begging you—"

Her gaze is impassive. "I'm sorry."

Haru's fingers clench like a vice, around my shoulder. So do mine, around a nugget of molten iron, a nugget of furious kindness boiling in my heart that only appeared because she just said 'no.' "There IS time," I grunt.

"Alex, these people can help themselves. Your friends' safety is the most important thing. Once we escape, we can think about—"

"I'm helping them."

"Yeah, I'm with her," Wake says.

"Do we have a safe path to engineering?" Sinas asks, too doubtfully for my liking. "Or do we know how to operate anything once we get there?"

"Pendant can point us in the right direction, can't he?" I reply.

"Yes! Yes, I can give you directions—"

"But it'll be dangerous," Sinas interrupts, "and maybe not the best idea to start galloping across the station again, considering what we recently went through—"

"Sinas, shut the hell up," I retort.

He gives Haru a sidelong glance, torn between us both. "I'm only saying we need to be certain. And we should listen to the one person who can actually make sure we stay breathing."

"Then I'll do it on my own," I say.

"With me," Wake adds.

"With Wake."

"I *will not* embark on this fool's errand," Haru says.

"It's not a fool's errand – it's the *right thing to do*."

"But not an intelligent thing to do, under the circumstances."

"What about THEIR circumstances?" The iron wells up in my arm, burning in my chest. Haru lets go of my shoulder. I step back. "If you cared about me, or about *anything*, you'd— you'd—"

"I care *very much*," Haru hisses. "Too much! That's what you don't seem to comprehend!"

Pendant watches, wide-eyed, a spectator at a tennis match.

"If you helped us, Dr. Hanamura, I bet it'd be easy," Wake says soothingly.
"You know the station. We don't. It wouldn't take long, right?"

"I don't think we should split up," Finn murmurs.

Haru grabs him instead. His resistance goes limp.

"The transit system," Pendant stammers, "you must get to the closest station. There's a car down the other end of the corridor. It's still running, it'll take you right to the place—"

"Stop," Haru says. "You're coming with me to the experimental hub. Now. All of you. There's something I have to show you."

"I don't care," I say. "I'm leaving." It's perfectly lucent.

"What if we don't make it?" Sinas asks. "What then?"

"We'll fucking make it, so COME ON!"

Haru towers over me. It's strange how she towers over me.

I take a step.

Another.

The spell breaks. I'm running, away, towards a place I don't know, and Wake starts sprinting in my wake, and Sinas takes step himself, torn, terrified, as Finn hangs slack in his mum's grasp. She screeches: STOP, NO, LISTEN, all at once.

"I'm... I'm sorry," Finn says. "We'll meet you back here. I promise."

She holds him tight. "No, Finn, please—"

Sinas wrenches her arm away. Finn wriggles free. Haru snatches at Sinas instead, emitting shrieks of inhuman anger, fear, general brokenness, her fingernails scoring deep lines in the forearms of his suit, until he manages to shove her back enough to slip out of her grasp. She stumbles, collapsing, then staggers upright like a puppet on a string.

"I'll save them!" she screams. "We'll help them, I promise! Just... come back! There's something I have to show you..."

I don't stop.

We don't stop.

She goes slack, sagging against the wall of the tunnel.

Her eyes are... anguished. "I'll save them," she says again.

She stands. Straightens. Walks towards the sealed door, oddly calm. The green glowstick casts a giant's shadow and I shudder as it passes over me.

I round the corner.

And she's gone.

ALEX VIII

Two transit capsules hang from a rail beside a deserted boarding platform. They remind me of fancy water bottles; their back halves are metallic red, their fronts moulded from heavily tinted plastic. The direction of the station's thrust must be slowly rotating. It's slow enough that I don't notice any minute-to-minute change, but fast enough that – after thirty minutes of walking around with Haru – the capsules are now hanging at a 45-degree angle.

<*Schedule unavailable*> says the holoprojector.

"Pendant said the transit system was working, didn't they?" Wake pants.

I climb the platform to the nearest door, and it opens without complaint. Inside the capsule there's a couple dozen seats. Wake starts working the autopilot console, and Sinas and Finn arrive soon after. They take up stations on either side of the entrance, studiously peering in opposite directions.

"Alright," I say. "What's up with you two?"

"Is something up?" Sinas asks.

"That's what I'm asking."

"Why are you asking?"

I wave aimlessly in their direction. "A lotta awkward silence over there."

"I'm resting. Trying to process this stressful situation we're in."

"Hmm, it's more like a teacher caught you both kissing behind the bike shed. Or beating each other up behind the shed. Maybe both."

"Your imagination is very vivid," Sinas says.

Finn stares into space.

I fire off a *harrumph* that'd make Jane Austen proud. Something IS off about those two, but if Sinas needs to process, he needs to process. I'm doing my best to simply ignore the stress or bust straight through it; I sincerely hope either approach doesn't stop working in the near future, because I doubt I can manage much else.

The capsule lurches. We're moving. Ahead, a series of vacuum-sealed gates scythe open, one after the other as we build up speed. They snap shut behind us, a muscular contraction, as if pushing food down a giant's gullet.

Suddenly, we leave the station's confines altogether, speeding into open space, following the rail towards the other side of the hub. Saturn's night side – a moody, grey expanse of smudged pencilwork – takes up half the sky. Reflections slide across the windows like raindrops.

Wake applauds herself with two fingers. "I'm hearing a deafening lack of praise."

I give her a thumbs up. "Good job."

"You're *welcome*. This train is a real sleeper – it didn't want to move until I threatened to reformat its flash memory. It's going soooo slow, too." The capsule shudders, curving clockwise. It'll take a while to traverse the station's circumference.

"Are we going to discuss what we did?" Sinas asks. He moves off the wall.

"What is there to discuss?" I ask.

"Exchanging a surefire escape route for this wild goose chase."

"Dude, nothing about that was 'sure'. Of course I WANT to believe she'll save us, but... she was definitely hiding things." I go to fiddle with the drawstring of my hoodie, but my vacsuit blocks me. "Something about her doesn't add up – a few kangaroos loose in the top paddock, if you know what I mean. Wait, isn't that YOUR gimmick? Being able to tell when people lie?"

"She at least knew where to go, which is more than you or I can say. Maybe she rattled off a few glitched answers—"

"No kidding."

"—but she *did* want to help—"

"Also didn't."

"—and ultimately, there were better ways to handle it! Everyone's in shock! People are going to say weird things! I understand, you don't like her, or trust her, and you probably shouldn't, but being slightly more cooperative would've given us a better chance to—"

"Sinas, we'll be fine. Besides, if you didn't think this was a good idea, you could've *not come*."

He sighs.

What if he's right, though? This is my choice, now. My responsibility. My mistake.

Pit in my stomach.

This position provides a nice angle of the engines on Starfish's underside, pulsing fiery blue. It's all alien to me: the too-smooth polymer of the capsule, the odd mechano-biology of the station, the way Saturn's rings slice the world in half. I don't know how things work here, or what's going to happen, or why I'm here at all, frankly. I hate that *not-knowingness*, more than anything.

Perhaps I see Sinas' point, about Haru's promise of safety, so recklessly abandoned... but I KNOW I'd feel even worse if we'd left those people to die. Lieutenant-frickin'-Violet wouldn't turn their back on a problem. Or Nancy Drew. Or Lyra Belacqua. Or Alex Hawthorne.

Hold that fire. Don't let anyone take it from you. Hold that fire until you can't.

But I'm just one girl, and I feel like breaking.

I open my notebook: *'Lyra wouldn't break'*.

Finn's sitting near the front, a statue, as usual. Sinas drums his fingers on his thighs, a familiar rhythm. Wake's posing like an anime schoolgirl and is taking what appears to be a god damn selfie. Perhaps we should place bets on whom among us will break first. (Sorry, Tao.)

<Hey! It's Pendant. Is this the right channel? I hope it's the right channel. Say 'orbital' if you can hear me.>

"Oh hey!" Wake replies. "Orbital!"

<Orbital! Well, I thought I'd relay that Dr. Hanamura has... left. Quite awkward. We're doing okay though, considering the circumstances. Anyway, be careful, since these kinds of MeshLinks are easy to track and intercept, with the station in its current state – not many nodes to bounce through, you see. We should only talk when it's absolutely necessary. Joshua? What was that? Joshua? I need—>

They break the connection.

"Great," Sinas murmurs. "One more target painted on our backs."

"I'm gonna be optimistic and say even if they can track our signals, they'll be too busy to chase us," Wake says. "If I was an evil henchman, I bet I'd have my hands full doing... evil stuff."

"Murdering and pillaging," Sinas says.

"Setting things on fire," Wake replies.

"Breaking traffic laws."

"Littering."

"Tax fraud."

"Incest."

"I'm going to the bathroom," I announce.

"I'll come with you," Sinas says. "I need to talk to you about something."

"Uh— it can *wait*?" I reply.

"It'll just take a second."

Without ever explicitly agreeing to anything whatsoever, I find myself in an overly cramped and underly sterile transit car bathroom, sitting on the cleanest surface I can find (the sink). Sinas leans against the opposite wall, six inches between my dangling feet and his knees. I generally avoid public transit bathrooms because they're factually the worst places on Earth, and once I did call a bully at school the human equivalent of an airplane toilet. Sometimes, though, you run out of options.

I wait for Sinas to say whatever he wants to say.

He doesn't.

I spread my hands, accidentally slapping the door. "Second time today you've followed me into a bathroom. We wouldn't want that to become a habit."

"We wouldn't?"

"No. You wouldn't." In other circumstances, I'd find his slight smirk attractive, but his answer-questions-with-questions shtick is starting to wear

thin. "Is there something you actually want? I do have to use this toilet and trust me, you don't wanna be here when the magic happens."

"Okay. Then can I kiss you?"

Three options: I misheard, I'm dreaming, or I'm dead. "Say that again?"

"I don't think I need to."

"Humour me, then."

Again: "Can I kiss you?" It's like he's asking if I've finished my homework.

I frown through my confusion. "As in, hypothetically?"

"Literally."

"Then, um— no. Why?"

"It's just an offer," he says, disarmingly casual. "Call it 'making memories', if you want. Or call it having fun before our next near-death experience."

"Huh. Is that the best cliché you can muster? I thought YOU of all people would've crossed 'kiss a girl' off your bucket list years ago."

"Obviously. What about your bucket list, though?"

"Oh, eff off. Also, very presumptuous of you." I kick his knee lightly.

"The offer stands, independent of motive. Or I can switch it around: can you kiss me?"

"I *can*, sure. Whether I *will* is another question completely."

The smirk returns. "And if I say 'please'?"

He folds his arms. I fold mine.

The heat of his breath fogs up the mirror behind my head. He fills the entire space, a cat too big for its box, and I'm a mouse trapped beneath crossed paws.

"First, this is some real bullshit," I reply.

"Noted."

"Second, it'd be way easier to make out with a MeshSim. Most people do, when they want the practice."

"They do."

Four short words: 'against my better judgement.'

They explain so much.

About life. About my current situation. About—

I lean forwards and so does he and our lips meet and a strand of hair falls across my nose. I flick it away before it can interrupt.

I should get to have fun too, right? Plus, he's objectively good at this – if I didn't know better, I'd say he's had lots of practice. The mirror's cold at my back but he's warm on my cheek and his mouth is electric as it opens slightly, and I'm kind of floating (buzzing?), oh god, what am I doing, why is he *like* this, why is his *tongue* like this, a surprise but definitely not unpleasant. My hand suddenly finds itself in his soft, dishevelled hair, then on the back of his neck, feeling taut muscles, warm skin, fumbling touches, my lips moving against his. Our suits clack together. I've somehow forgotten about everything else, except—

He pulls away.

I congratulate myself on my spontaneity. (Aww, it's over?) I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand, trying not to look too bothered. Sinas looks like he's running numbers, or doing a calculation, of sorts, but doesn't say a word.

"Just so you know, I don't usually do this." My words hang between us, trapped by the door that, on second thought, might not be 100% soundproof. "I just thought— I thought it'd be fun?"

"Was it?" he asks. (Again, he's perfectly relaxed. It's terrifying.)

"Why do I feel like I've been used?"

"You tell me."

"*Have* I been used?"

"Does it matter, if you enjoyed it?"

"I— did YOU enjoy it?"

"Sure." He smiles, and I hate that it makes me feel good. "Can I give you some advice?"

"I'm confident me saying 'no' won't make any difference, so... fire away."

"You can say no."

"Then—"

"But you won't."

I narrow my eyes. He ripostes with his own.

"Okay," I sigh, "tell me. As long as it's not advice about the kissing."

"You and Finn need to help each other. Finn needs you."

"How is THAT related to any of this?" Suddenly, he seems more serious than before.

"I realise you've been on your own till now. So has Finn. And even though you've been fine with that, it doesn't mean life has to stay that way forever. For me..." He bites his lip softly, and I can't help staring, a tiny mark on still-wet skin. "I understand it isn't like this for everyone, but for me, my brother was the best thing that ever happened to me. The *best* thing. And as part of all the shit that's happened to you, and me, and him in the past few hours, you're getting the chance to have that feeling too. And you shouldn't throw that away. Not until you know what it means."

Somehow, it's the most genuine he's ever been.

"I don't understand you, Sinas."

"Good."

And then he leaves. He shuts the door behind him. It's a featureless white wall, like— like nothing was ever there. Like a simulation.

I don't know how long I sit for.

Eventually, I do my business.

I wash my hands.

The way Sinas talks – replete with meaningless platitudes and rhetorical questions – is a trick he only pulls on me. Right? With the others, he's far less antagonistic.

Oh. *Oh*.

It's because he KNOWS I can't bloody stand it! That's how he manipulates me! If he tried that same style on Finn, or Wake, he'd get absolutely nowhere—*Bang-bang-bang-bang-bang!* Barbarians at the gates.

"Alex, it's me! Can I come in?"

I sigh, gazing into the mirror, looking as exhausted as a hobbit after solving a certain jewellery-related problem. I touch my lips again, then let my hand fall. "Yeah, Wake. Come in."

She charges inside WAY too fast, nearly knocking me onto the toilet, then shuts the door behind her with exaggerated care. "Yay! Oops."

I like high-energy people, but sometimes, it's a *lot*. "So. What's up?"

"I wanted to see you," she says breathlessly.

"You saw me literally two minutes ago."

"Ya, but this is like, bathroom chats."

"O-kaaaayyyy..."

She shrinks away in horror. "Don't tell me you haven't experienced *bathroom chats*."

"Nah, I know what you mean. At my school we call 'em 'bathroom bants'."

"Then why did Sinas follow you? What did he wanna talk about?"

"Nothing important."

"Really?"

"I mean, we totally made out, but—"

"EEEUUUAAAAHHH!" She screeches so loud it nearly blows my ears off, then freezes, hand over mouth. "He *kissed* you? Full tongue and stuff?"

"Sure?" I glance at the door. "It was extremely weird. He asked me if I was keen, and he was like, offensively nice about it. And look, I kinda hate myself for going along with it, but— never mind. It doesn't matter."

"It doesn't *matter*?! You're a disgrace." She glares at me.

"Can't argue with that."

"A yakking *disgrace*."

"I agree." I try not to sound too pleased. Wake wants to know everything, so of course I tell her, and her eyes sparkle like she's getting two Christmasses at once. I try not to embellish the sordid details but I'm both too weak and too trashy to resist.

"That said," I add, "d'you know what Sinas' deal is? It's weirder and weirder the more I think about it. It's like he floats around, being a cool little cloud—"

"A hot tall cloud," Wake says.

"—without ever seeming to... exist? Does that track? I mean, he's great, and nice to talk to, and useful, but I don't know who he... is." The thought trickles out of me, pooling on the floor.

"Some people are just like that," Wake says. "They act. Blend in. They're, y'know – surface level."

"Maybe. Why, though?"

"You could ask him."

"You say that as if he'd tell the truth."

"I'll ask him, then. People's motivations, or personalities, or *soul*, if you wanna get poetic – IMO that stuff's always pretty simple."

I settle in for what's fast becoming top-tier bathroom bants. "Including yours?"

"Totally. My entire personality is like, three TwitchToks long."

"Really? Please present your evidence to the court."

"Well, your honour— is that what you're supposed to say? I got arrested once but we didn't get as far as the 'judging' bit. Anyway, this is lame, and boring, and sleeper, but you DID ask." She stares at me accusingly. "I dunno how familiar you are with Thai history..."

"Absolute beginner."

"...but, twenty years ago, China started being extra 'peaceful' and 'non-threatening' and basically tried to absorb us for territory. The irony is that Thailand translates to 'land of the free', and we were so proud of being free that we sort of forgot to resist." She punctuates her words with air-quotes. "'Absorb' makes it sound too nice, because, um, it wasn't. When I was growing up it was moooostly over, but still, even though I knew nothing about 'politics', I understood there were reasons why I sometimes didn't get food, or why soldiers came to steal people away. What I *didn't* understand is why, on the Mesh, every night, I could see people living in shining domes or in fairytale gardens when my own grandparents' house was on stilts to escape the constant floods and pollution. I didn't understand why there could still be war and hunger and hatred when there was so much technology that could FIX hose problems. And even worse, that fairytale was the thing that'd stolen my parents. The fairytale was for other people, but not for me. Kinda a lot to deal with when you're six years old, so I mostly didn't, y'know? "

"That's... rough," I say futilely.

"Feel free to cry if you want. Totally makes it worth it. Anyways, one day – one of the worst days – I came home from school totally anxious out of my mind, because—" She catches herself. "You don't need to hear that part. But I came home, and my grandma decided that on this day, she'd teach me to make her special green curry. Even though she'd had many more bad days than me, even though HER daughter was the one who was missing, she shared a precious thing that she loved and basically forced me to be happy. And I was. I am." She smiles. "It's ash for an origin story. Like, at least Batman was rich. At least Spider-man has a family. Even Jesus could do a miracle now and then. As for me... ugh, sorry for talking so much."

"You aren't. Or I'm glad you are."

"Thanks." She tilts her head, hair falling to one side. "It's like— when I remember how strong the smell of my grandma's curry was, in our tiny kitchen, and how her voice sounded, with the bubbling pot – I can draw a line through my life, from that moment, to here. I never thought I'd be *here*. Does that make sense? So many people around me never got the chance to attend school in another country, or ever leave home. I'd feel guilty if I didn't make it work."

"That sounds like a lot of pressure. On yourself."

"I don't mind! It's me! It's part of who I am."

I'm embarrassed by the trivial crap that seemed world-ending when I was seven years old. I distinctly remember being furious at being forced to eat broccoli stems. This is what happened last time, too, in the vending machine room. Wake's story is a story. My story... isn't.

"I just want to run," I say.

"Why?"

"I— don't know." I bite my lip softly. "I just wanna go home. I always do."

Wake glances at me. "Why? Earth's seriously terrible when you think about it. Have you ever done the research into social inequality? It's insane."

"Well, yeah—"

"And media censorship? How the Mesh is completely compromised? How every influence on peoples' lives can be traced back to three megacorps who DEFINITELY aren't controlled by rampant AIs?"

"You do love conspiracy theories, huh."

"Alex, that sob story I told you isn't unique. It's still happening, everywhere. The world COULD be fixed, but everyone's got their own problems to deal with, or is too dumb to realise they're being controlled, or is an asshole who doesn't have empathy. It's a miracle we haven't destroyed ourselves yet."

"Okay, but we aren't living in the post-apocalypse, either. Society is often disappointing, but have you SEEN what life was like two hundred years ago? People rode around on *horses*. They had to carry their own *computers*. They didn't even have plumbing!"

"Try telling that to the people stuck outside the domes, dying in old-world slums. The people trapped in SapiSec enclaves. The oceans so polluted by bio-replicants they can't support life."

"Wake, I get it. I read heaps about this stuff. But it's hard to—"

"Help?"

"...Sure. It's hard to help." Empathy is easy, but turning it into actions is another story, especially when 90% of my problems are contained within a fifty-kilometre bubble of rural Western Australia. "I just think it's not all bad. Like, we invented PolyGrowth programming. And the antimatter drive. And MeshMates. I think there aren't as many social problems, as there used to be."

"Did you know that PolyGrowths were invented by a Chinese university?"

"I didn't."

"Chinese society is actually doing a lot for ecological recovery. Even while their government is invading my country." Wake sighs. "That's why I care about my TwitchTok channel so much. The world IS complicated, but if I can reach people, and understand them, maybe I can help them, or at least change a few of their minds." She bobs her head. "It's hard, though. Anyways, are you OK? With the, um, adoption stuff? That's what I came to ask in the first place – not to bring up all my therapy topics."

"I'm fine, Wake." I grin. "Thanks."

"And Sinas didn't do anything weird to you?"

"Well, he did, but I did consent."

"Good." She clenches her fist. "Otherwise, I'd deck him. I'd DECK him, Alex."

"I believe you."

She hugs me, and her hair smells of bubblegum and roses. "I'm glad we're trying to save those people, no matter what those other sleepers think. We're yakking superheroes. We're gonna save this whole station!"

"'Save' is maybe a strong word for 'not crashing into the planet'—"

"We're gonna *save the world*, Alex."

"Okay. Fine. We're gonna save the world." I roll my eyes, but my heart's not in it.

She leaves with a playful twirl and a too-wide grin, as quickly as she arrived. I should ask what she's done to her hair to make it sparkle like that; I don't think I could pull it off, but it *does* look halo. Probably a trend I'm not aware of. I poke at the cloud of Mesh packets emanating from Wake, and I see her latest two stream titles are 'New Hair Review!!' and 'PolyGrowths as a Tool for Imperialism'. The duality of man (or the duality of a sixteen-year-old influencer).

Once again, I'm alone.

I wonder if Finn's about to come in. Why not collect the full set?

He doesn't, though.

Instead, I wash my hands again and leave, stomach rumbling.

Sinas looks up as I enter. "Slow train," he murmurs.

"Not there yet?"

"We switched tracks, so we must be close."

Finn's sitting at the front of the carriage, watching the stars. Saturn's crescent has taken on a mild yellow hue, hinting at sunrise.

Thinking of him as my brother feels weird, like I've taken a wrong turn, and the sun's going down, and I can't quite recognise the road back home. That's fair, I think. What's less fair is the extra undercurrent of irritation, as if part of me believes it's somehow Finn's fault for manifesting into a 'problem' I need to deal with. (Or an 'opportunity,' as Sinas would say.)

Problem. Opportunity. I touch my notebook, leaving it closed, for now.

Am I going to talk to him?

I'm gonna talk to him. I grumble under my breath, suppressing nervousness that definitely isn't there. "Watcha up to?" I ask.

He twitches like a coiled-up spring. "Um, it's nothing. It's stupid. Nothing."

"I guarantee I won't think it's stupid. Or nothing."

He remains decidedly ill-at-ease, a skeleton with too many bones. I sit beside him, legs crossed.

"Drawing," he says eventually.

"Oh. Are you good?"

"I'm okay."

"When artsy people describe themselves as 'okay', they're usually pretty good."

He exhales through his nose, the truespace equivalent of 'lol' as punctuation.

"Can I see?" I ask.

He gives in and sends me a MeshLink. Wireframe polygons and painterly textures unfold across my vision, building a new world around me with digital clicks and whirrs. "It's rough," he says. "It's a distraction, mostly."

It's a virtual scene, drawn in 3D brushstrokes. It's not particularly detailed, formed from flat, clean shading and the general suggestion of detail – but that also gives it a kind of purity, or optimism. It's a beachside theme park, long-abandoned, devoid of people, its footpaths and waterslides and overgrown flowerbeds eroded by weather and time. Amongst sandy dunes, a ten-metre bust of Poseidon gazes towards an endless horizon, trident resting on one shoulder. The only movement comes from a mottled lizard, perched on a diving board. Its tail hangs off the side, thick as my forearm.

"You didn't ArtGen this? You drew it yourself?"

He nods, and immediately I regret the question. It's like asking if I generate my fanfics; if I did, what would be the point? Sure, a lot of people don't care, and it's impossible to complete with the sheer *volume* of ArtGens spewing out personally customised art at a moment's notice. Even for me – a lover of slow, mango, analogue bullshit – it's hard to resist requesting the *tiniest sliver* of MeshMate help, whenever I'm drafting an article, or editing one more chapter.

People don't write novels, anymore; people barely write *Moon's Haunted*. What's the point, if you can ask a neural net to 'write a new Discworld book in the original style', and voila? Thanks to the proverbial million monkeys on a million typewriters, the outputs might not be terrible, if you try enough times.

There definitely are holdouts, though, making the pendulum swing back the other way, and I feel my generation has more of 'em than before – people who believe the Mesh isn't all it's cracked up to be, or that ArtGen imitators are morally bankrupt. There are SOME weirdos out there who read (and presumably want) fanfic written by a genuine sixteen-year-old human.

"It's actually really good," I murmur. "When did you get the time?"

"I've been doing sections when we're waiting around. Here and there."

"That's mantis. It takes me AGES to write anything decent... or not decent. I'm a natural procrastinator. Is this based on a real place? Also, you're really good."

"I'm not."

"Take the compliment."

If I didn't know better, I'd swear he's blushing. "It's an abandoned waterpark."

"I can see that—"

"Near the Perth dome. It was ditched about a hundred years ago, then it re-opened, then it closed again. They had seals there, and dolphins... way before we were born, of course. Now it's just a nice place to walk around." He looks down. "It's easy to find, although you need an exit pass to get there."

"Are exit passes hard to get, in the city?"

"Admin just wants to know what it's for, and they'll check if you have a bad social score or whatever."

"Oh. Neat. Got any others?"

He swipes the scene aside. Now it's a murky hallway, dotted with moss. Sunlight falls through shattered windows, spotlighting puddles on the concrete floor. Half-rotted papers form a layer of muck, a reminder of a more wasteful time. Again, here's the lizard, its forked tongue licking at evaporative mist.

"Kinda sketchy," I say. "Where's this one from?"

"There's heaps of old tunnels under this one shopping centre near my house. I think it used to be a power station? Back when they used coal?" He glances at me, as if seeking affirmation. "You're not supposed to hang out there, but nobody checks. I haven't been all the way to the bottom because I don't wanna get stabbed, but it's fun to explore. In the daytime."

"Stabbed?"

"Some guys were filming a hoverboard video down there and got attacked by... a weirdo living in the tunnels."

"Sounds about right." I touch some of the painted moss, an insubstantial green blob. "You like this stuff, huh? Abandoned places?"

"I..." He shrugs. "There's something about them."

"Near the town where I live, there's an old water tower. I always love climbing to the top and... taking in the view. It's aspirational, right? Or instinctual, like replicating the feeling old-world explorers might've had when they crested a hill for the first time. New places, new possibilities. Or old places, in this case, but it's an easy way of pursuing that mix of curiosity and ambition."

"Huh," Finn says.

"Yeah, I surprise myself sometimes. Are you planning to do this as a career? Honestly, you're probably decent enough, and VR designers get paid a TON to come up with glacier new shit."

"No. I'm studying engineering. I want to build spaceships."

"Now *that's* aspirational."

He smiles. "I just like science fiction stories."

"And today won't change your mind?"

Abruptly, the smile fades.

Right now, our view isn't too different from when I'm sitting on that water tower at night; in one sense, the agri-dome is a giant cockpit for a few thousand people (and more importantly a few million plants). In both cases, a protective layer shields us from the stars that judge us.

"This is going to sound self-centred," he murmurs.

"I probably beat you in that department," I reply. "So go ahead."

"I want to do something important. And space exploration feels important, to me."

"I mean, it's not *THAT* self-centred – it's natural to want your life to mean something, right? It's natural to want to do the things you like."

"Sure." Whenever I make eye contact, he looks away.

"And the lizard?" I point to it. "What's up with him? Or her?"

"Um, that's Ferdinand. He's my pet."

"Cats were too mainstream?"

"I just like lizards."

"It *is* similar to owning a dinosaur, I suppose."

"I think birds are the ones descended from dinosaurs?"

"Nah, yeah, you're totally right. Actually, that reminds me: have you ever been kicked by an emu? When I was little, I had a friend who also lived on a farm, and there was always an emu roaming around their place. We were a bunch of bored asshole kids, so for a while, our favourite game was to chase the emu, trying and corner it. Of course, eventually it realised that 'hey, I'm a giant effing bird who's WAY bigger than any of these other idiots' and one day, it started chasing us *back*. So, for the next year, whenever I went to my friend's place to hang out, this HUMONGOUS BIRD would come sprinting at us from the treeline and we'd have to book it to avoid getting disembowelled. All the koalas and platypuses might be gone from the wild, but emus? Those guys are *thriving*."

"Wow," Finn says.

"Anyway, that's given me an idea – pick one of these pictures, and I'll write a short story about it. Could be a fun exercise, right? You like drawing stuff, I like writing stuff... and I'm always looking for reasons to be productive." Honestly it sounds lame, but I'm trying to be personable.

Finn swipes through another scene. A dozen players assemble on a clipped green field, beneath a slate sky. They're warming up for a game of field hockey – I recognise the sticks and shinpads, the goalie kitted out in full protective gear. There's a sign on the fence, barely legible, and one of the players is leaping up to touch it. "You play hockey?" I ask.

"Sort of." He pauses. "I... think I hate it."

"Oh? Shitty team?"

"No, no, it's just—" He shakes his head. "I kinda never liked it, to be honest."

"Why'd you pick this painting, then?"

"Now that I've told you that, I'm interested to see what you'll write." He gazes at the players, as if trying to find meaning in the faceless faces.

Hmm, whaddaya know. There might be more ticking away behind that quiet exterior than I thought. We're still tiptoeing around each other, but hey – Commander Vespera and Lieutenant Violet detested each other for the first two-thirds of that season.

"Here." He sends me a file. I'll take it as a cosmic sign, since it's a sketch of Lieutenant Violet with her iconic sniper rifle from Season 3, drawn in layers of overlapping purple. "This is old. I'll draw a nicer one next time," he says.

"You watch *Moon's Haunted*?" I ask.

"Used to. It got worse after Season 3."

"How DARE you."

"It wasn't bad, but the story escalated way too quickly—"

"Nonononono, the wormhole attack plotline is FLAWLESS! Flawless."

My annoyance seems to amuse him.

In his virtual world, the sky's still grey. His hockey team prepares for battle. *Claaaannngg*, goes the sign in my imagination, as one person leaps up to slap it – a ritual, leaping for good luck. *Clang, clang*, Finn not wanting to be there, but being there anyway. I wonder which one of the sketchbook figures is him.

Whichever one's gazing up at the clouds, thinking about spaceships.

Part of me wants to acknowledge the awkwardness we're both trying to overcome, but flat-out stating 'let's make the best of this' or fake-shaking hands like a couple of TKs would be... unnatural. Unproductive. If we can both be mature and not assholes to each other, that's a start (and 'not assholes' is actually pretty good for many families). I usually like being super obvious about my intentions, but in this case, I might let it slide.

If Finn's got too many bones, I probably don't have enough.

"Hey, Pendant!" Wake barks. "Instructions pleeeeeease! We're almost at the central hub power reactor place thingy."

<Hello! Nice to, ah, hear from you. So, the route is complicated, but the good news is the Mesh will still be active around the reactor to provide guidance. Joshua here has complete maintenance authority. They can lend you their access credentials.>

Ahead of the transit car, the hub's underside looms. Vacuum doors open as the monorail slows, entering a tunnel that spirals into the bleached polymer. Without a reference point, it's felt like we've been plodding along, but the tunnel walls are a blur – it's easy to forget how big Starfish is.

<I don't want to overwhelm you, but there are multiple objectives to worry about> Pendant continues. *<First: rebooting the drone systems to get US out. Very important. Second: lifting the station's orbit to get EVERYONE out. It would be lovely to reroute life support priorities as well, but without the first two we WILL all die. Is that right? That's probably right. So, yes, two objectives. Neither task should take very long and ideally, you'd handle both from the primary control centre, but we believe that particular option has been... eliminated. By the boarders. You'll instead have to visit each system and activate it manually.>*

"If they wrecked the control centre, what makes you think they didn't wreck the manual systems too?" Wake asks.

<Hahaha. Hahahahaha! Joshua, the child I'm talking to told an extremely funny joke!>

"Hello? Pendant?"

<Aha! Yes! Sorry. I'm sending you the location markers, and the codes. And remember, certain unsavoury people might be listening in, so please – make yourselves moderately scarce. I would hate for anything to happen to you on our account. Maiming, or death, or suffocation, or... well, you can fill in the rest of the list yourself, I'm sure! Good luck!>

We enter the station proper. The transit car comes to a stop.

<ALERT: Radiation warning!>

"Helmets on," Sinas says. "Doesn't look great out there."

From the train doors, it's a short drop to the wall below. I land awkwardly, resenting the knife of pain in my injured leg. The transit platform's cracked like an egg and it buckles inwards, half-shattered, revealing skewed rooms and the squashed, claustrophobic passageways between.

Pendant's route takes form in my MeshMate: a glowing line that runs along where the floor should be, then turns through where a door would've been, into the labyrinth beyond. With gravity being screwy, it's anyone's guess as to whether it'll give us reasonable directions.

<Radiation warning!> my vacsuit repeats. <Neutron flux detected. Vacate the area immediately.>

"Is anyone else seeing a vaguely worrying alarm?" I ask.

"Yeah," Sinas says. "My suit's already at half its rad limit."

"Is that bad?"

"It's definitely not good. A nuclear meltdown is way more serious than stray cosmic rays. It's more radiation than we can handle."

"IS this a nuclear meltdown?"

"Stations use fusion," Finn says.

I turn to him. "And?"

"Fusion reactors are safer. Less radioactive. They shut down automatically if things get out of control."

"Then what's causing the radiation?"

Wake grins. "Godzilla?"

"Don't joke," Sinas says. "Radiation exposure can kill people in minutes. The *less bad* option is getting your life expectancy cut in half. I don't want to be taking anti-cancer meds for the rest of my life, do you?"

"Chernobyl was a century ago," I say. "This isn't the same."

"It's still dangerous."

"Yeah, but we can find a way around the leak. And if it gets worse, we'll stop."

Sinas stares at me for a second. "I don't like this. We shouldn't be here."

"Okay. Noted. So what now?"

Nobody has an answer, and I realise they're waiting for me. Oh, yeah. I guess I'm the reason we're here.

Breath fogs my visor.

I'm nervous. I'm angry. I'm determined. I'm vibrating.

"We'll be quick," I say.

The first step feels strange, but the next isn't so bad.

A sign, on the ceiling to my left:

Central Reactor Control

300 m

I reach up and slap it with my palm.

We lower ourselves through the tear in the wall into a steeply slanted chamber. It's an AutoDrone storage area, well-lit, with dozens of drone pods stacked in rows.

<Mesh connection established. Welcome, Alex!>

"Shit, the Mesh is back!" I say. "You guys getting that?"

Wake jumps, so high her helmet nearly hits the ceiling. "Oh my goooood I missed it SO MUCH! AAAHHH! YIPPEE!"

It's a familiar prickle at the back of my skull, like icy water flowing too fast. Information starts scrolling down my vision – popups, timers, directions, labels, animating and settling as they paste onto the environment, a comfortable mix of colours and styles and fonts. It's a mess, but a mess I know how to navigate. A mess I've grown up with. A mess that – now that it's back – feels like part of me has been resurrected. Unconsciously, I begin sifting through the dozens of new datastreams, blocking some, amplifying others.

The Mesh derives its name from being enmeshed in our environment: a host of miniscule sensors, batteries, processors, transmitters, actuators, cured into the PolyGrowths that make up our houses and roads and skyscrapers (...and space stations). In a way, it's a distributed nervous system, billions of particles coexisting to form a living, solar-system-spanning network. It can also scale to the level of data processing that's needed – densest in the heart of a city like Tokyo, and sparse if I'm out biking along back country roads – regulating the flow of information, pumped like blood to wherever it's most vital.

I can't resist downloading the station's latest news packet to make sure the outside world still exists. A slick, minimalist interface spreads out around me, the headlines read aloud to my subconscious. Its design tricks me into feeling relaxed, yet attentive at the same time.

<Solar flare disrupts communications, delays travel across system.>

<Relaxation of internal grafting laws a victory for transhumanists.>

<Members of band 'CyberVivid' accused of sexual misconduct by fans.>

The walls are now layered with virtual murals of an African savannah (from when such things still existed). Holographic popups provide directions to different sectors, with visual previews of destinations.

<ALERT: Radiation warning!>

"I don't like this," Sinas says again.

"The rad dose is still under our limit," I reply.

"Worth it for the Mesh access," Wake says. "I was *literally* about to die."

"It's not like you can download that much out here," Sinas says. "It's all routed through the station comms anyway, and they're barely functional. How long do we have until Pendant's deadline?"

"They said more than an hour," Wake says.

"Yeah, but it took us twenty minutes on the monorail, and it'll take twenty minutes to get to this reactor, at least, then another forty to get back to Dr. Hanamura... and that's more than an hour gone. Will she even wait that long for us?"

"She'll wait," I mutter. "She was pretty keen on us sticking with her, remember? She won't give us up that easily."

As if to argue, a cute dog starts barking at me about Coca-Cola loyalty points, followed by a genderless blue AI assistant asking me where I'd like to go, if I'm hot or cold, to please drop by the nearest infirmary because of unusually high stress levels. A sweet, rose-garden scent fills my nostrils, with melancholy jazz, in the background. I activate my semi-legal adblocker and tell it to play my own damn music.

We squeeze past debris, the wall bulging inwards, our path compressed to a quarter of its original size. Everything's covered in a powdery white residue, our boots scrawling messages for anyone behind us. Sudden *bangs* make me worried the roof might close in permanently. Stairs are next, tilted on their side, occupying an uncomfortable, Escher-esque headspace.

"There are people nearby," Sinas says suddenly.

"What? Where?"

"I can see their Mesh signals, but it won't give me a location. Privacy block." (I wish they'd apply a privacy block to the stupid Coke dog – it's been tracking me for MONTHS. Soon they'll give it permission to start running ads in my dreams.)

Past the staircase is a wide, tall room. Where we are, standing on the wall, a line of thick windows protects us from open space. Catwalks criss-cross over our heads, tilted almost vertical, bridging the gaps between huge, transparent cylinders that hum with barely contained energy and rage. If you've seen the climax of Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace, it's a lot like—

There's a woman.

Crouching in front of us. With a fricking *shotgun*.

<Asdfghjkl!> Wake hisses. Surprisingly accurate pronunciation.

Luckily – although it doesn't feel THAT lucky – the woman has her back to us. I'm drawn to the grenades hanging from her belt, the dried blood covering one boot, the green hair spilling down her shoulders.

<She's waiting for us> Sinas says. <They know we're here. Let's go back—>

<Don't move> I reply. <Don't make a sound.>

The radiation counter's ticking up again.

<ALERT: Station systems are heavily degraded! Cause of emergency is unknown. Please make your way to your designated evacuation pods.>

My insides crackle like a jackhammer. Pendant's waypoint is directing us leftward, up to the second level. <We can make our way past> I say. <Hide behind the closest catwalk.>

<That doesn't seem like a good idea> Sinas whispers.

<We can be quiet.>

<This is not a good idea! Alex!>

Run.

My clenched sphincter could cut hardened steel.

I take a step. Unbearably slow.

Another step, into the open. The woman puts a finger to her ear, listening to her commlink.

Then, she looks over her shoulder, and there's no fucking chance she doesn't see me. I realise there's also *another* person in the shadows behind her.

Shit?

BANG!

A shot, but not from in front of me – from behind. From Wake, who's kept hold of one of our stolen pistols, and is now aiming at the window beneath the shocked woman's feet.

BANG!

Window cracks. Woman recoils. Another blue bolt zips past my shoulder, and window finally shatters. I cannot fucking *believe* the last three seconds but apparently it happened all the same, and I bear-hug the nearest catwalk and tell my gloves and boots to stick.

WhooooosshshshshosohsHSHSHOOHSHOHOS—

The air's suddenly full of dust and debris, whistling past in chaotic streams, sucked into space along with anything not sealed inside my suit. An emergency shutter behind the window tries to close. It snaps down onto something big and metallic that jams it in place. The shrieking wind doubles in intensity. My teeth rattle. It's fogging up, starting to freeze.

The others haven't slid past me into space yet. I hope that means they're doing okay. The nearest hijacker's doing her best to hold on, legs bent at weird angles, till the *other* suited figure comes flying across the room, hits her, and they both lose their grip and slide across the plastic. Her suit thrusters fire and she flips up wildly, a grenade tearing free of her belt and—

A concussion from the stun grenade rips through the fog, through my flesh-puppet body, and I'm three milliseconds from letting go. The woman slides—

—through the gap in the shutters—

—grasping at nothing.

Her body dislodges whatever's blocking the shutter and it bites down, sealing the wound. Air spirals back on itself, robbed of energy. Debris skitters across the floor. I collapse to my knees. Feels like the atmosphere's been sucked out of me, too.

Wake, somehow, is still holding the pistol, too big for her hands.

Sinas lies flat on his back, rubbing at a scratch in his faceplate.

Am I alive? I'm alive. Thoughts still catching up. "Everyone... good?" I ask.

"No. We're not," Sinas says.

"What's wrong? We're okay, right?"

"That's not the point. I'm done."

"You're... done?" I blink. "Why?"

He points at Wake. "You. You're crazy."

"Don't use that word," she retorts.

"Fine, then how about '*if you're going to do shit like that, I don't feel safe around you.*' None of this is safe. We should drop this stupid plan and leave before somebody else DIES. This entire situation is FUCKED – which I shouldn't have to tell you, but here I am, telling you – and we had a chance to get out and you THREW that away! You all did! Why are we still HERE?"

"We have to keep going," I hear myself say. "We're almost there."

"Are we?" Sinas asks.

"We have to keep going. We have to help."

"This is stupid, Alex," he mutters. "We *can't* help those people like this, not if we're surrounded by deadly fucking radiation, and if we have to make choices like spacing two people out of a god-damn window—"

"Was there a choice?" I ask. "They would've—"

"What? Killed us? We don't know that. Even if they were going to, that DOESN'T make this okay. So yes, there was a choice." He glares at Wake.

"Please don't argue," Finn says nervously.

"We basically murdered two people. You're okay with that?"

"They were wearing suits!" Wake replies.

"Yeah, but if ONE other thing goes wrong, they're dead! Because of you! Because of us! I'm done with YOU making those decisions FOR us!" His anger radiates like a furnace; violent, but controlled.

"Oh, you're done with my decisions?" Her eyes flash. "I'M done with you being a coward! No one buys the 'dark and mysterious' act! You're just trying to fit in like everyone else, another frickin' asshole trying to be the popular one. "

"I'm TRYING to stay alive!"

"You're scared."

"Because we *should* be! We're stupidly out of our depth, we're on our own, but if we consider LEARNING from our mistakes—"

"This wasn't a 'mistake', it was me saving your LIFE. Besides, I totally remember you nearly shooting some people an hour ago—"

"But I didn't. I very – expressly – *didn't*. I didn't eject someone into space. I didn't nearly eject US into space." He folds his arms, breathing heavily, then turns away in disgust. "You shouldn't have done that. It isn't fair."

"The universe isn't fair." She walks up to him, planting her feet, forcing him to look. "We can't afford to be fucking FAIR. We are alive. Because of ME." Her voice crackles. It makes my hair stand on end.

I stare at Pendant's waypoint, diving deeper into the station's interior. Three hundred metres, it says. I need to intervene. Tell them both to...

"I'm going back to the train," Sinas says.

Everything's about to shatter. Like Wake shot the world, and not just the window. Or maybe she shot me.

"Sinas," I say. "Don't. Please."

"Why?" he asks.

"Because..."

Because what?

Anger, and fear, and relief on his face.

I thought we needed each other. We *do* need each other.

"I'm leaving," he says.

"Then leave," Wake says.

And he does.

He's gone.

ALEX IX

We've decided to split up.

Yeah, I know. Huge violation of horror movie rules. But in the interests of getting shit done ASAP, Wake's heading to the AutoDrone control centre while Finn and I find the station's secondary bridge.

Finn's quiet by my side. A lump of otherness.

I'm a lump of iron, I tell myself: the lump of shitty, pockmarked iron I made for a design project in Year 7. It was supposed to be a lamp stand with three stubby legs, but I messed up and the casting mould collapsed half-way through. I chucked it on our house's roof at one point and it must still be up there, blocking the gutters and generally being ugly and unhelpful. (Yay. Metaphors.)

"This feels like a beehive," Finn says, stealing my thoughts.

A honeycomb of chambers extends in every direction, containing hundreds and hundreds of copy-pasted cells, each hosting a vibrating piece of machinery: batteries, cooling towers, data servers, resource cyclers, like monolithic worker bees buzzing with energy. They're connected by valves and gates and doorways which open and close in synchronised, yet mysterious patterns, like how bee colonies defend themselves by pulsing their wings in hypnotic rhythms. Ripples of biology, driven by unwritten reflex.

Wake actually *volunteered* to go alone.

She even smiled about it, so bravely it was yet another spear through my heart – as if it was nothing, and none of this was affecting her. I wish she'd *said* something *said* something, though, about how she felt, or if she cared, or if there was any doubt in her mind; something to make me feel better about pushing on. Something to make *me* feel less responsible.

Selfish, huh?

I admire her. I'm also glad she volunteered.

Each chamber has seven entrances – five horizontal, two vertical – and that, in my opinion, is TOO many. We stick with going up, towards the station core, using a grease-smeared ladder as a walkway. My leg's behaving better, at least, taking my weight without much protest.

<Collision warning> the Mesh says. <Saturn atmosphere will reach critical density with 70% certainty in 84 minutes. Station systems are attempting to adjust.>

What are we even doing? At this point, twelve people trapped in a storage room seems like more of an abstract concept. We could still leave, right? Call Haru, tell her we're on our way, experiment with the nebulous idea of 'optimism'.

'There's something I have to show you.' Acidic words inside the coppery box of my mind, fizzing away, boring into me.

Maybe Sinas is right. (He's definitely right.)

But equally, I don't want to be wrong. I'm trying to DO something, here, and *not* doing it would piss me off. We don't know much work or how many lives would be lost if we didn't at least TRY saving this place; for now, that overwhelms the melancholic emptiness in my wake.

If Sinas was here, he'd say something intelligent.

Stick to your guns, Alex.

Run.

It'd be easier to do that if it wasn't pitch bloody black.

"I'll be honest – I'm not a huge fan of this vibe," I mutter.

"Try infra-red view," Finn suggests.

"I am. There's so much interference my MeshMate's having trouble."

Walls swim beneath waves of sandy static. Batteries are crushed blocks of shadow while cooling towers shine with overexposed white. The fluttering doorways whisper like wings, or wind, or witnesses, depending on how much of an arse you'd like to be. Overlays and newsfeeds flicker in and out of existence as we float through fraying datastreams.

"You ever see that movie *The Abyss*?" Finn asks. "Came out a few years ago?"

"As a matter of fact, yeah. Wish I hadn't."

"This, um, reminds me of that scene when..."

"When the annoying teenagers get ritualistically slaughtered by alien parasites and the girl *very specifically* named Alex is trapped and eaten inside a space station recycling plant? That one?"

"Uh... right. Sorry."

We duck beneath a gas tank that radiates heat on our faces. The walls are warm, rough, like sunburned skin. Kinda gross.

"What about you?" I ask. "Ever been killed off in a horror movie?"

"I don't watch many horror movies."

"Yet here you are, thoughtfully reminding me about *The Abyss*."

"It wasn't my pick. I saw it at a sleepover."

"Well, lucky you. Next time, ask your friends to pick a movie with more pink in it – one where all the 'I's in the title are dotted with love hearts. Bonus points if there's a girl smiling on the poster with three or more love interests of varying ethnicity."

"Another kind of horror movie," he murmurs.

"I appreciate the cynicism, but at least it won't give you nightmares."

Starfish's guts tense, then relax. Doors ahead of us open as gates behind us close, and it's tempting to believe we're entering the same room over and over, stuck in a machine-heart purgatory. I slip on the next rung of the ladder, landing in a puddle of oil.

Thick, warm, dark air. (Horror movie air, in my opinion.)

"There *was* a kid named Finn," he says, "who fell into a vat of synthetic meat growths and got slowly dissolved into thousands of Hungry Jacks burgers."

"Huh, I don't remember that. What movie?"

"Real life."

"That's grim."

Finn decides to leave this hanging.

"So," I say. "Did people eat those burgers? Is that a fact I now have to live with?"

"I think so, unfortunately. It was on the news."

"Pretty sure that strengthens my argument that everyone should watch bullshit high school romance movies once in a while, instead of horror movies, because the worst that happens is the protagonist gets caught kissing the town degen behind the bike racks, and their mum gets angry and makes them work extra shifts in the family cheese shop instead of allowing them to attend to the school disco, and before you get judgemental, I also watched a documentary on 21st-century genocide recently and thought it was very moving." While distracting myself IS nice, I wonder if a scene-by-scene recital of Netflix's crossover hit *Loving You Feta* is revealing too much about myself.

"The commodified version of high school from stories and social media— isn't that its own kind of horror? More pervasive or insidious than... serial killers and monsters." Sometimes, when Finn speaks, words fall out in bunches, like he can't quite match pace between his brain and his mouth.

"Okaaaay, sure. I agree. On the other hand, 'school' is only horror if you buy into that viewpoint, and I'll remind you we're currently hiding from *literal* monsters." Wires dangle from the ceiling, fingers of shadow, clutching at me. "I'm trying not to be too naïve, but the pretences associated with 'everyday' fears and worries are mostly due to personal perception and effort, right? Like, okay, some people have terrible school experiences, but it's not worth being afraid of most of the dumb crap that happens."

"It's not worth being afraid of falling into a vat of artificial meat either. But you could argue that... asking a crush out and being rejected... that's a far more relatable and relevant fear for most people."

"Have YOU asked anyone out before?"

"Uh... um..."

"You should try it – it's honestly not that hard. Some of my friends are *extremely* desperate." I drop my hand to knee height. "The bar's about there. You'd definitely clear it."

"Thank you?" The spirit of a grin. "Or is that the start of the horror movie."

"Alright, there's one girl Jayshree who'd 100% eat you alive. But even then, it's that weird thing where you get a girlfriend or boyfriend for a week, school's a paradise, then you break up two weeks later because you're both mangoes, and everything's awkward, but hey, it's only a bad time if you let it be, right?"

I'm talking too much.

It's not like I'm *afraid* of shadows; I've never been scared of the dark itself. But as each hatch opens, I'm expecting us to suddenly be blinded by colour, to see a ghostly radiance pin us with a predatory gaze I'm not even sure it has.

The next hatch opens, and I'm blinded by colour.

My heart spikes.

Birds dive through my chest, a stream of starlings, circling around my head. I flail backwards. *<FlexBoost interplanetary travel! The best-reviewed* low-cost** travel network for students! Interest free until your graduation!>* They chirp in formation, laggy artifacts of blue and pink and green. *<Apply now for a special rate toooaaaaaghhhhhhkkkk... to... STREAM LOST.>* I swat the last ones away and they turn into polygons, screeching electronically. *<Apply noooooowwwwww...>*

I stare accusatorily at the darkness. "I don't like you."

"Um... me?"

"I meant the advertising." I think I nearly knocked him over. I step forward, daring the Mesh to manifest more rubbish. "This is a nuclear reactor, not a shopping district—"

<HELLO! THIS IS PENDANT! HELLO?!>

This time I do knock Finn over (or at the very least, I slap him with my ponytail).

<Teensy-weensy update to say that Dr. Hanamura has not returned. We don't know where she is. Do you know where she is?>

"She's not back yet?"

<That is indeed what I said.>

"And you don't know where she went?"

<HELLO? HELLO! IS THIS CONNECTION WORKING?>

"It's working! It's working. Calm your farm." I sigh loudly. "She didn't explain? Or do anything weird?"

<No, she simply— actually, Joshua has asked me to relay that the station is behaving strangely. More strangely? Not the Mesh, but... something else. He saw lots of lights, he says. He thought it was someone's torch. Or someone shining a light on us, from outside.>

"I would, ah, stay away from that."

<It's a locked room. We've no choice in the matter.>

"What the *hell* is Haru up to?" I whisper, to Finn.

He shrugs.

"She said she'd save those people, right? She *said* that, when we left. Why'd she lie?"

"Maybe she..." Finn shakes his head. "This isn't like her."

"What do you mean? What's changed?"

"It just isn't."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

"Ugh, dude, that's not helpful." I frown. "Pendant? We're continuing towards the bridge. We're almost there. Send an update if anything changes."

<Yes. Fine. Thank you.>

This is getting worse by the second.

I glance at Finn, then do a couple of little jumps and punches on the spot.

"We should go faster. There's not much time. Can you run?"

He nods. "Okay."

I take a couple of steps.

One. Two. Slow at first. Then my foot slams on the decking, springs in my joints propelling me forwards, muscles in my calves and thighs shivering with sudden effort. The lowered gravity gives me a bounding stride.

The first breath. Not like clockwork, *better* than clockwork, building up rhythm and speed and the simple joy of being weightless on my own two feet. The world narrowing to an arrowhead of purpose, its own elastic freedom. Arms flying, unwound. On bad days, my body is unwieldy. On good days, it's limitless. The path opens as I run, room after room after room, Finn matching as best he can my moronic headlong sprint.

I think this is what I've always wanted. No past, no future, just a maelstrom of home, friends, sky. Righteous anger ahead of me, ancient fear at my back. I chase it through more bugged holograms, flickering vistas, waves of sound, radiation warnings rattling like Geiger counters. The shadows never leave; I can't beat the dark. But as long as I'm using up every breath with *run* there's little I can do about the rest. Finn's keeping up with me, close behind. My leg barely hurts, leaving pain in the dust.

Too soon, we reach the waypoint. I skid to a stop, Looney-Tunes style.

<Collision warning. Saturn atmosphere will reach critical density with 72% certainty in 75 minutes. Station systems are attempting to adjust.>

We're blocked by an airlock in the floor, leading to the station bridge. "Is this supposed to open?" I ask.

"It's not responding to Pendant's code?"

"Nope." Somebody before us tried to force it – the handle's twisted, with scorchmarks along the hinges. My trusty shoulder can't bust through this particular barrier.

"I can squeeze through there," Finn says.

I can barely see what he's pointing at. It's a gap between two panels, wide enough (maybe?) for a person, leading down. I can't tell if it's an official crawlspace or unofficial damage. "You sure?"

He sticks his head inside. "Yeah. I'll fit." Quickly, he wriggles out of his suit, undoing the various seals and joints; then hands it to me, patting down messy hair and crumpled clothing. The crawlspace doesn't seem big enough for a

modestly chonky cat, let alone a lanky sixteen-year-old, but Finn lies down and slithers forward, chest scraping against the textured polymer. His shoulders disappear, then stomach, surprisingly fast.

"I didn't know you were part worm."

I'm not dignified by a response. He rolls onto his side, bending around an unseen obstacle.

In that past I thought I was okay with silences, but this trip's proving that apparently, I am not. "This is a really wanky question," I say. "But do you have a favourite word?"

He's completely gone, now. Scratching sounds echo from the duct.

"Because one of my friends and I have this thing where we send each other random cool words we stumble across. And I just got the ones she sent me while we were in cryo, like, um... boustrophedon. That's a good one." I scan the list that's popped up, along with a nice message from my parents. "You okay?"

"I ran into— doesn't matter." He sounds preoccupied. More miscellaneous clanking, then the door unbolts and pulls inwards. Finn dangles from the handle, looking like his arms are about to fall off. There's a bunch of black stuff in his hair, dripping down his face; he wipes it away, eyes bright and strained.

"What happened to you?" I ask.

"Broken pipe."

"Fair. That'll do it."

"Also, tsujigiri," he adds.

"Tsuj-what?"

"Tsujigiri. It's when, um, a samurai buys a new sword, goes to a crossroads and decides to test it out on random passers-by."

"Heh. That's fun."

He smiles wanly, a puppy anxiously trying to please an overbearing master, though I'm frankly doing some of my best work at being capital-n Nice.

We drop through the airlock into a banal set of rooms: messy workspaces littered with thermoses and computers, rows of bunks, a workshop corner where an oxygen recycler lies half-dismantled. It looks like living quarters for a skeleton crew, where they could run the station from, on a long flight. Our quest leads downward, around a corner, to another airlock a few metres above us. My suit lights illuminate the words '*Auxiliary Bridge*'.

"This door isn't gonna open either," I say. "I feel like Pendant really oversold his access codes."

"Mmmm."

"I'll give you a leg up, if you wanna check it out."

I kneel, lacing my fingers together, and give him a quick boost (the physics probably work better with me doing the lifting). He steadies himself against my shoulder, examining the door controls.

"It needs a key," he says. "Two keys actually."

"Okay, well... let's have a sneaky gander?"

We split up, rummaging through desk drawers and disk drives. My instincts keep telling me I'm trespassing, or being monitored, and if you've ever wandered around a school at night, it feels like that – a mildly transgressive mundanity. I half-expect one of my teachers to appear from behind a closed door.

But, of course, nobody does. I start rummaging through a cupboard.

<HELLO! IS ANYONE THERE?>

"Aaah! Pendant, please stop being so loud—"

<Hello. A BRIEF update to inform you that you've got roughly twenty minutes.>

"Wait, what?"

<I've run numbers. Starfish has been accelerating for a dangerously long time and its velocity has changed more than we expected. Accounting for maximum thrust, there's only so much delta-v we can impart to counteract it, and—>

<Hellllooooo, Wake speaking!>

"Wake?"

<Hi Alex! So, I'm at the life support place and I think I'm connected to the correct drone systems, but—>

<Wonderful! Orbital. Are search and rescue drones still available? Those will be under the 'emergency' launch directory.>

<Yesyesyes, totally, but I don't have any power. Alex, I need power. Can you send me some power? Some juicy juicy electricity?>

"Gimme a minute, there's still one door in our way."

Where would you keep a key? Not in a random cupboard, that's for sure – you'd keep it in a designated spot everyone knew about. Or you'd slip it in your pocket and forget about it. Or you'd hide it, if bad guys were trying to steal it. I close the cupboard, and turn, and Finn is suddenly *there*.

Awkwardly, he skirts around me. It feels both natural and unnatural, a subtle shock, as if I'd been cleaning my bedroom at home and suddenly found a distant aunt who's come to visit.

Running's mostly an individual sport.

Relay races DO exist, though. (For god's sake, Alex, there's no need to assess your entire life through one clumsy metaphor. Be more original.)

I'm in a tiny kitchen area, and dozens of spilled ration packs squelch underfoot. Distractedly, I open the fridge.

Two keycards are nestled among the orange juice. Either there was a struggle, and a smartarse tried hiding keys in here, or they've got the same problems as my mum after half a glass of wine.

We meet back at the airlock, and I've seen enough heist movies to know we need to insert both keys at the same time. "Three, two, one—"

The airlock opens.

Finn climbs through, then helps me up. His arm's shaking. So's mine.

<Collision warning. Saturn atmosphere will reach critical density with 81% certainty in 69 minutes. Station systems are attempting to adjust.>

Trapezoidal windows encircle the bridge, some obscured by Mesh readouts, others ceding to open space beyond. Saturn's *there*, real and resplendent, pale yellow clouds given clarity by morning sunlight (clouds which I'm sure could swallow Earth twice over, and are thus more than sufficient to swallow one tiny space station). We're so close I think I can see them moving, vertiginous storms and whip-thin jetstreams racing each other around the equator, under the watch of distant rings. Perhaps they're tentacles of a horrendous beast, waiting for an unlucky morsel to venture within its reach.

The bridge itself is approximately dome-shaped, with tiered acceleration couches surrounding a variety of consoles. I think the entire room is supposed to rotate depending on the thrust direction, so that up and down always feel like up and down. Clearly, it's forgotten to do that, tilted at an uncomfortable angle. (This whole goddamn day has been a series of uncomfortable angles.)

"Technically, this is illegal, right?" I ask. "Commandeering a vessel."

"Probably."

"Do you think it'd be classed as piracy? Or like, mutiny? Breaking and entering?"

Finn shrugs. "All three?"

"That's exciting." Time to figure out if we can reasonably pilot this thing, or if we're wasting our last few moments outside the underworld. "Pendant? Got any instructions for us?"

<You're there? Great! You'll want that first console on the left. That'll let you override the primary command authority.>

The console powers up when I touch it, spitting out details about pilot permissions and power levels. The bridge Mesh is augmenting my vision with external camera views, as if I've gained a hundred new eyes spread across the station's bulk. It's dizzying. "What now?"

<Confirm auxiliary bridge override. That should be on the 'main task feed', if you can spot that. Then reroute any available power to the propulsion and life support blocks.>

Pages upon pages of confirmation dialogues, to check if I REALLY want to shut down the heating and allow everyone to freeze to death. Neon lines snake from the main reactor to various icons on a station map. The two main power sources are solar panels – last resort, since there's not much sunlight this far out – and a pair of fusion cores. "Uh, Pendant? Most of the available power IS being used. One of the reactors is completely dead. That's what these graphs are telling me."

<Understood.>

"There is a big chunk of power going to a... tachyonic shielding system?"

<Disable it. Shielding's only needed when we're running experiments.>

"Disable it?"

<Confirmed, send that power to the engines. Experimental conditions won't matter if the station, well, you know – dies. Oh, so much work down the drain!>

I glance at Finn. "How do you feel about responsibility?"

"...Ambivalent?"

"Then I'll press this scary button, and you press the next one."

I can physically *feel* Saturn growing larger. Quickly, I switch off the power, shutting down the tachyon shields. Power levels equalise, then flow towards life support.

<Got it!> Wake shouts. *<Wooaaaahh, look at all these sparks! That's probably bad, huh?! Launching drone buddies... NOW!>* Moments later, a pair of bright blue flares zip past the windows. They arc outward from the station, then spiral out of sight. *<Did you see that? They would've shot right by you!>*

"Yeah, nice work! Pendant, what's next?"

<Check the pilot's console! It's the biggest one, middle of the room.>

This control station has physical buttons, but it's also on the ceiling. "You reckon you can climb up there if you stand on my shoulders?"

Finn squints. "Probably? I can use my geckogloves to stick."

"Sounds like a plan. If not, I'll chuck you. You're light." I dust off my gloves.

"Pendant, is there a procedure we need to look for or do we just, I dunno, shove the gearstick in reverse?"

<You'll have to— Joshua, what is it? Listen, you'll need to input a set of properties for a new thrust vector – magnitude, direction, timing – Joshua, I KNOW, I'm telling them— what's that? You can see the— oh. Fuck.>

"Pendant?"

<Oh no.>

"Um, hello?"

<They're – they're here! I didn't realise—>

The channel erupts with screams.

My MeshMate tries to filter the audio but it's just... screams. Voices. Fragments. Deafening static.

<Stop! His head—>

<—smashing through the door!>

<—went into—>

<Joshua, get away from—>

Electronic warbling erupts in my ears, as if dozens of voices are laughing in both in joy and mockery. Demonic kookaburras on the solar wind, across the station, inside my head.

I clap my hands over my ears, but that doesn't do anything to—

<Connection lost.>

<Collision warning. Saturn atmosphere will reach critical density with 83% certainty in 63 minutes. Station systems are attempting to adjust.>

I crouch down, arms around my knees. "Wake? Wake, you there?"

<Yep, yep, I'm here! That didn't sound good. It really didn't sound good—>

"Can you contact Pendant?"

<Nuh-uh, everything's gone dark.>

"Well, shit."

The Mesh is silent.

I want to get those sounds out of my head. "Where the *hell* is Sinas?" I groan. "He was the bloody pilot prodigy, wasn't he? Didn't he do, like, antigrav racing or something?"

"Yes. He did," Finn says quietly.

"Bloody mango had to bloody leave instead of being bloody helpful. Typical rich kid." I throw a few air punches, hard and fast, which energizes me less than usual but it's better than nothing. *Focus*. Focus. Don't let it get to you. You can do this. Have some faith in yourself, even if you don't effing deserve it. "Finn?"

"Yes?"

"Let's turn this station around."

His eyes are closed, but he nods, joining my inner chorus of *it's fine, you're okay*, drowning out the other me. (The real me.) *It's fine*. I bend down, Finn climbs onto my shoulders, and when I straighten, he might actually weigh less than my ten-year-old cousins. I keep steady as he stretches for the ceiling, grabbing the console with his suit's geckogloves. After some creative wriggling, he jumps up and sticks his feet there too, like a knockoff Spider-Man.

"What's the view like?" I ask.

"Lots of buttons."

"Familiar?"

"No."

"Think you can work it out?"

He umms and aahs under his breath.

I wait for him to work it out. Below me, below the window I'm standing on, the blackness is perfect – suffocatingly perfect, like I'm suspended over nothing. *It's fine*.

"I have to flip the station," Finn says.

"*Flip* it? Like a pancake?"

"Um, we need to increase the minimum orbit radius, which requires increasing the semi-major axis or decreasing the eccentricity, or both... It's more efficient if we point the main engines in the anti-flight direction. So, um, yes. Like a pancake."

"Let's assume, hypothetically, I didn't pay enough attention during orbital mechanics classes."

"That's okay. But the 'flip' might be uncomfortable. It usually happens over a few days, and not, um, minutes? You should warn Wake, and, uh— Sinas."

"Wake?" I open another MeshLink. "Heads up for more weird gravity. We're doin' a backflip."

<Oh! I'm on the move towards you guys, but I can wedge myself in a corner.>

"Sinas is still MIA?"

<Yep!>

"Alright." I catch Finn's attention. "Ready when you are."

He pauses, takes a breath. "Starting now."

<ALERT! *Unplanned attitude slew commencing.*>

A blue line appears in the Mesh: a visualisation of our orbit path, curving towards the planet, its end marked by flashing danger signs (the kind that signal a very unpleasant end to a skiing holiday). It's accompanied by a schematic of the station, which lets me see the dozens of tiny attitude control jets firing along each arm. Whale-sized control-moment gyroscopes spin up from dormancy.

Outside, space shifts to the left.

Millions of tons of station start to spin. At first my eyes are playing tricks on me, and then I feel it in my guts: centrifugal force dragging me sideways. I plant my feet against the steepening incline. "Finn? You good?"

"Yeah," he coughs.

The pull's getting stronger, like a river narrowing and rushing towards a waterfall. I start slipping and sliding until by balance goes extinct and I'm yanked sideways in a weird, wobbly arc, like a cricket ball with too much spin. I hit the window knees first, splayed against the glass. Finn's barnacled himself to the console, hanging at a funky angle. Space and planets and moons slide past, balls of lint in the galaxy's biggest tumble dryer. It's getting difficult to breathe, as if my chest doesn't know where the air's supposed to go.

<Severe *coriolis effect!*> my MeshMate chirps, as if that's supposed to help.

A minute or so later, the spin dies away.

Saturn's flipped 180 degrees. Could've been worse, I suppose.

"Hey, so there's a radiation spike whenever I try increasing engine power..."

Finn murmurs. "Could you check the reactor readouts?"

I crawl to the console. "It *looks* normal?"

"Then I'll— hrm. I'll try turning the drive off and on again."

"Will that work?"

"It works whenever my
tion breaks." He sounds remarkably neutral.

Ten seconds later, we're back in zero-g. The subconscious blue glow from the station engines has vanished, its surface returning to dull, dirty white. Finn flicks a couple of switches.

Our plotted trajectory is one segment of an enormous oval, and we're much closer to its end than its start. (Is it still an 'orbit' if it ends?) There's reams and reams of information available but no time to understand it or have the Mesh explain to me, so it remains a buzzing cloud around my thoughts. I float amongst the wiring diagrams, transferring energy away, then back to the thrust segment.

<ALERT: *Radiation warning.*> My MeshMate's pissed. There's a throaty whine and acceleration starts to return, with the stubborn inertia of a few hundred Titanics. "The reactor doesn't like what you're doing," I call out. "It's showing me a lot of... complaining."

"Okay. Let me try to, um— sorry, the instructions here kinda assume you've had training. I'm improvising."

"Improvising?"

"Working through it." He's sweating.

"Well, I think you're doing *fine*. The reactor's spiking again."

"We're at twenty percent thrust – can I go up to fifty?"

The graphs on my screen look like a heart attack. "Uh..."

Our acceleration increases as rad alarms blare. Finn starts methodically flipping a second set of levers. Every few moments there's a planet-busting *CLUNK* as another component slots into place, accompanied by a barely controlled wobble – an injured bird, finding its wings. Our trajectory *is* changing though, extending, flattening out, hurtling through space on a slightly different vector. The stars, for their part, are completely stationary, though it feels like they should be streaking past us lightspeed-style.

<Radiation warning. Radiation warning. Radiation warning.>

"I don't think I can add more power," Finn says. "The engines might already be damaged, or overheating—"

"Or the reactor's busted?"

"Maybe. There's an endurance mode I can try which should automatically... oops. Problem."

"Problem?"

"I can't control it anymore. A safety autopilot tried to take over, but I think it's broken. It locked me out."

"The SAFETY OVERRIDE is broken?"

"I'm guessing whatever the hijackers did caused an error in the system." He could still be mumbling about PlayStations.

"What do we do then? Finn, what do we do?"

"Um." He drops to the floor awkwardly. "Ride it out?"

Thrust increases by the second.

I try removing energy from the engines, to no avail. My body's already heavier than in Earth gravity and it's getting worse. *<ALERT: Acceleration warning. Acceleration warning. Acceleration warning.>*

We heave ourselves into the nearest crash couches and my muscles ache from even that small effort. Cushioning gel slides around my limbs and neck, icy cold and claustrophobic. My suit pressurises to ensure my blood stays in all the right places. The Mesh says we're doing five Gs – five times standard gravity.

Six.

Seven.

I forgot to warn Wake. The bridge fixtures rattle, or maybe it's my bones. My eyeballs are being squeezed by pincers. Every breath's a soul-sucking effort.

Ten Gs, and I'm starting to get worried.

World's worst rollercoaster. No twists, no turns. Straight-line force. Couldn't move if I wanted to, arms and legs pinned, fingers and toes trapped, staring straight ahead at absolutely nothing. Physics is a hammer, a hydraulic press, the station engines roaring at me or maybe that's my panic. Spit clogs my throat and I can't even swallow.

The station's arc continues to rise. Seat's shaking.

Eleven Gs.

Twelve.

<Acceleration warning. Acceleration warning. Acceleration warning.>

My MeshMate's trying to keep me alert, or at least alive, but vision's fading. Can't even see the sun anymore. Everything's... grey. A blur.

CRUNCH! Something breaks, and it luckily isn't me. It's the engines.

We're weightless again. My heart flutters against my ribcage, suddenly free. I grip my armrests with aching fingers, hoping this wave of relief isn't simply my soul ascending into heaven. I open my jaw, and it clicks back into place.

"Still alive?" I ask.

Finn has to think about it.

The gel restraints dissolve. I sit up, tasting acid in my mouth, amid bruised, painful muscles.

<Collision warning. Saturn atmosphere will reach critical density with 33% certainty in 55 minutes. Station systems are attempting to adjust.>

"You are YAKKING kidding me," I say. "Thirty percent? After all that, it's still thirty percent?"

"It's less than half," Finn murmurs.

"I KNOW it's less than half! It's also not ZERO." If the anger that's been driving me is a boiling pot of water, bubbling away, it's gone unreplenished for far too long. Soon, it'll start burning, there'll be smoke billowing everywhere, and if I'm lucky, the whole house *might* not burn to the ground.

I want to run.

I *can't* run. There's nowhere to run TO.

"Maybe Sinas was right," I say aloud. "Maybe we are out of our depth." I swing myself out of the chair, floating aimlessly.

Vague, disappointing nausea. I can't even muster up the will to be sad. It's like I don't have context anymore, or I've finally had enough.

Out of adrenaline. Out of feelings. Empty.

I hate it.

We float back towards the beehive, pushing ourselves through the dying station. It's weird, but I wish I *could* feel sad. Or scared. Or disappointed. Anything but nothing. Nothing only gives me more room to think.

We should've stayed with Haru. Then we'd be off the station already, and sleeping in cryo for a fortnight on the way back to Earth sounds basically divine. Two weeks of sweet dreams? Sign me up. Nobody would've cared that we ran away. Nobody's going to care that we tried to help. If more goes wrong, and we don't make it back...

I can't even remember what my house looks like anymore. It's all fuzzy, out of reach – just me, gliding through these endless hallways.

And Finn.

I open my visor, so I can wipe my eyes. Phantom tears.

"Are you okay?" Finn asks.

"Nah, yeah. I'm fine." My voice belongs to an imposter.

I hate being like this – but it always happens, every time I try to be more than I am. It's as if I'm trapped by a present that never changes, unable to find the way out, waiting for a parcel that won't arrive. If there's a way forwards, or a way back, they're invisible to me. Other people can see them so clearly, like Wake, and Finn, but I can't. I'm *stuck*. I know it's illogical to feel that way, but I do.

Empty. Stupid. Useless.

All I can do is run.

"It's unfair," I say, mostly to myself.

"We tried," Finn replies.

I roll my eyes. "The universe doesn't care that we tried."

"But I do." He glances at me. "You do."

"And that's enough, is it?"

He floats beside me as we re-enter the grid of pentagonal chambers, his thin face a paragon of concentration as we leap from handhold to handhold. He seemed more calm trying to steer a space station, than whenever I intrude by trying to hold a conversation. Some people are awkward in their bodies, but comfortable inside their heads.

"We're really different, aren't we," I say. "Obviously."

"It would be stranger if we were the same, I think."

"Guess so. But also, it's not... a bad thing. It's just hard for me to think about us, and your mum, and... everything else." I look down, at the passing polymer. "But I want it to work out. I do. I was kinda getting ready to make an inspiring speech about how we make a good team or whatever, but... seems a bit pointless now."

He glances at me. "Even good teams lose, sometimes."

"Well, they're also supposed to win occasionally. Nobody *wants* to finish bottom of the ladder."

"There's still time."

"For what?"

"For... the future." He shrugs, kind of. "For, um... us."

"Just gotta get back to Haru first, right?"

He nods.

"Thanks," I say. I realise I mean it.

"No problem." No eye contact, but a nervous, sidelong smile.

That *does* make me feel a little less empty.

A switch, flicking inside me.

Wake was supposed to meet us at the transit station, but she clearly hasn't taken that advice, because she's *here*, plugged into one of the data servers in the beehive. A twisted cable snakes from her stomach into a MeshPort.

"Alex! Finn! Hi!" She jumps, nearly tearing out the plug. "You're alive."

"Yeah, mostly. What are you... doing?"

She tries too hard to laugh. "Oh! Cool story. You know that *déjà vu* you were having earlier? I got it too, baaaad. After we split up, I cut through a lab, or a workshop – and it was totally like I'd been there before."

"Seriously?"

"Mega-serious. I closed my eyes, and I could *point* to where the stuff in that room was. It was so *lucent*. It was like people were talking at the edge of my hearing, and even though I couldn't quite pick up the words, I could mouth along to what they were saying. Like watching a movie you've seen a hundred times! And I DEFINITELY haven't been on a station like this before. So, I was thinking since we're so *close* to the monorail, I could take five minutes to investigate. I pinged the Mesh, saw that this creepy hive-place, and turns out it's totally STUFFED with secure servers – private ones, not accessible from outside."

I try to kick my brain into a gear that isn't 'apathy'. "Hypothetically, if we *had* stayed here before, there might be records. Right?"

"Exactly! And like, I don't know WHY that'd be true, or why I wouldn't remember it— but checking would 100% make me feel better. So, I made a quick detour."

Finn folds his arms worriedly. "Do we have time for this?"

"It'll take, like, two minutes," Wake replies.

He isn't convinced. "Have you had any more *déjà vu*?" he asks me.

"Nah. Not yet."

Wake sniffs the server box inquisitively, divining its secrets, sifting through data and blinking status lights. I notice she's picked up a few more bruises from our manoeuvre antics (including a rather fearsome black eye); it's gotten to the point where if she was an apple, I'd think twice about eating her.

"Sorry about the tumble earlier, by the way," I add. "Wasn't much time to warn you."

"Eh, it was fine."

"Do you know if the AutoDrones worked? Is Pendant okay?"

"I haven't been able to talk to them! The drones are around though, doing search 'n' rescue. Wow, these servers are fast – the data's super organised, sorted by date, type, tags... anyways, I'm running our MeshSigs and I already found our arrival records from today. And facial recognition data. Ooooh, look! Hidden archive fiiiiillles." Her semi-musical chatter is a nice enough distraction. "This stuff's COVERED in our signatures. Let me download them before anyone notices." She swipes her hand back and forth. "Wow, these are *old*. What the— woah."

"Wake, when you say 'old'..."

"These files are from three years ago."

"As in, 2089?"

"Yep."

"There's no logical reason for them to have data on US from more than, say, three months back. Is there?" I float closer. "These archives have OUR names on them?"

"See for yourself."

It's a video.

A room. Electronics line the walls. In the centre sits a cage of shimmering light. It swims on the datafeed, like oil on water.

I see *me*, staring through the bars.

I'm shorter. Stubbier. Three years younger. I see the dark red jumper I used to wear before I lost it on a family camping trip; the way I used to style my hair, shoulder-length, when I couldn't be bothered to care for it as much. My face, before I'd lost my baby fat.

Next to me are Wake. Sinas. Finn. Tao.

All three years younger.

ILLUMINATION
EXPEDITION F-1
SUBJECTS 18, 19, 20, 23, 25

A woman waits in the corner.

She steps forwards, and takes Finn's hand, and leads him through a gap in the cage. It's her. Haru. She helps him climb onto a slab – a machine? – difficult to make out behind shifting colours. Both now and in the past, I check on Finn to see if he recognises what's happening, but his face bears only blankness; as if he doesn't want to recognise it, or simply doesn't.

Suddenly, a flash of light, a slash across truespace. Whatever's on the other side trickles, and flows, and starts to flood through, and I see myself start to back away, and Finn—

The video ends.

Sinas sits on a chair in an office.

A woman, off-screen, asks him questions. "Your brother – you were very close to him."

"Of course I was." He sniffs wetly. "We were— we were both..."

"Tell me if at any point you feel uncomfortable, or want to stop. We've gone through a lot today. It's alright if we take a break."

Sinas nods.

"You were twins," the woman continues.

"Yes."

"You spent a lot of time together. Most of your time together?"

"Yes."

"I want you to tell me how he died, if you can."

Sinas looks down, almost perfectly still. He sounds more boyish, in that awkward half-way phase of growth. "It was an accident during a training lap. He hit the wrong spot too fast and... they said it was a faulty reactor. I'm not sure. I didn't see it. I was there, but I didn't see it."

The woman pats his shoulder; I can only see her arm. "How do you feel? Talking about it now."

"Sad, like..." He trails off. "Sad."

"That's perfectly natural." Her voice is familiar, though I can't place it. "Anything else?"

"...Ashamed."

"Really? How so?"

He shakes his head.

"Ashamed because of your brother? Your parents, perhaps? Your friends? What would you say you're ashamed of?"

Again, he shakes his head.

Then he smiles, almost looking at the camera. "Me."

In the present, I have a revelation. "Tao told us his sister died in the grey plague. Remember?"

Wake's jaw is hanging open. It snaps shut. "Did he?"

"He *specifically* mentioned it, because we were being vaguely insensitive. If there's a record of Sinas being interviewed about this, I reckon we'll also find videos of Tao."

"Kay, I'll check."

"Why is that relevant, though? It's rare for people to die that young, but—huh." I tap Wake's shoulder. "Your siblings are all still alive, right?"

"Of course!"

"Then who's dead, in your family. Sorry for being an ass."

"Um, maybe my grandparents on my mum's side? They kinda raised me, and we were super close – more than usual since my parents couldn't be around. My grandma died four years ago, my grandpa a few months after."

"Were they already gone in 2089?"

"Alex, I'm very confused right now! I thought this was an *internship*? I don't remember being here when I was thirteen!"

"What about us?" I ask Finn. "Your mum's alive, my parents are alive, and unless there's a third secret sibling we BOTH don't know about... dude, help me out. What about your dad?"

"He's alive," Finn says.

"You know, or you think?"

His nose is bleeding. "I think."

"Maybe that's not the connection, then. Is that the **ONLY** thing we have in common?"

"We really should go," Finn says. He's trying not to show any emotion, and I suddenly want to slap him.

"Fine, fine, let's start walking. Also, in Sinas' video, the woman—"

The next gate opens before we get there.

It's... Sinas.

He seems surprised. *I'm* surprised.

Then he recovers, a grin on his face. "Hey!"

"Sinas!" Wake squeals. She leaps towards him.

I can't help feeling happy. Should I be? "I thought you left."

"I did."

Then another voice, behind him: "Where are they?"

My heart stops.

"Here," Sinas says.

Khorin – who I last saw through a wall of *so much* fire – floats coolly through the door, leading a squad of six hijackers.

I'm confused.

He claps Sinas' shoulder, grinning with peculiar happiness, then raises his gun, covering us. I stare down its awful black barrel. "Guess what?" he says, the words sweet in his mouth. "Your friend sold you out."

Then—

—I'm—

—*angry*.

The pot inside me bubbles up and overflows, exploding at Sinas, myself, the whole effing world and I jump at Sinas and punch him in the god-damn face. My fist cracks and he flies back and there's boiling water hissing everywhere and before I know it I've been shoved to the ground and there's shouting, screaming as the hijackers surround us but to me that's a waste of fury. I struggle red-hot against the figures pinning my arms behind me, holding me down.

"Don't move! Hands behind your back!"

"Stop it! What are you doing? We—"

"You're coming with us. Don't fucking move!"

Flex-restraints are clipped around my wrists. I'm lifted roughly, an elbow against my neck. I stamp on the foot of whoever's grabbing me but they just pull tighter. I wheeze. Finn's shoved against a wall. Wake's wriggling in zero-g as two attackers try to hold her still. I think she bit one of them.

Guess they can't afford to play around anymore.

Khorin forces Sinas to his knees, handcuffing him. Sinas dares to argue and gets a punch in the ribs for impertinence. His lip's bleeding – hopefully my handiwork.

"*Why*," I growl, above the blood roaring in my ears. "You asshole. You fucking *asshole*."

I don't know if he hears me.

The look in his eyes says he doesn't regret it.

"This way!" Khorin barks. "Keep them quiet."

They push us through darkness, heat, endless gateways, each question or stumble met with brusque violence. Wake shrieks. A gun barrel stabs against my spine. I float forwards, arms tied too tight.

It hurts. In so many ways.

The restraints sting when their microscopic needles dig into my wrists.

My head swims.

My arms fall limp.

Moments later, I black out.

Blurily, I open my eyes.

Something in my stomach, in the air... I'm going to throw up.

I'm being carried.

Voices: "—fucking frustrating."

"Yeah, they got out. Probably because of these guys. Competent little shits, huh?"

Strange lights in the hallways.

Sick. Lightheaded.

World moves too fast.

Purple, green, blue, entire forests worth of trees, swimming behind my eyelids.

Trees become dunes, shifting in desert wind.

Red. Yellow.

The hallways never end.

I'm slapped awake by an immense headache – pounding, impaling, hammering pain into every thought.

"Yeah, this is the place. Get them inside."

We're in a plain, grey-walled antechamber. I'm not sure if it's my imagination, but I hear a bell tolling: distant, all-encompassing, growing, then fading. My chest shivers uncontrollably. The glowstrips flicker, providing split seconds of darkness.

The walls narrow. My feet float above a pockmarked floor.

Here, at the end of everything, lies a thick metal door. The type of door that's implies it's supposed to stay shut.

Taped to it is a handwritten note.

'Welcome,' it says.

'To Illumination.'

PART II

RUIN

FINN VII

This is a nightmare.

A joke.

Both?

There's a line from an old TV series that goes, 'all of this has happened before, and all of this will happen again', and perhaps that commentary on human nature was more prescient than I thought.

I'm not scared. Weirdly, I'm not.

I'm... apprehensive. Accepting.

My wrists ache, pinned behind my back, as the others slowly wake. Alex raises her head, blinking in the half-light. Wake struggles, futile fists against her captor's back. Sinas is still unconscious (or pretending to be). Blood trickles from his split lip. I wonder if I should've warned them – if that might've changed anything. Behind my endless anxiousness I *did* want to explain, but always felt it needed more time. For my benefit. For theirs. Whether it's working up the courage to send a simple Mesh message, or asking the teacher a question, or figuring out what to have for lunch, or what to wear... I'm always overthinking events, and consequences, and how people see me. That's the trouble with having no confidence – by the time you've built up enough, it's too late, or you've spent it all on something trivial and have to re-start from zero.

Arguably, there wasn't *much* time, for explanations. I didn't suspect a setup until we were already on the shuttle.

But I had my suspicions. There WAS time. I was just hoping for a course change without my personal intervention.

I'm too weak to despise that part of myself; I tell myself that life is fine, that I don't need to change, even I should, and life would be better if I did. Of course, realisation isn't actualisation and changing how your mind operates is never easy, regardless of how much you'd love to be different.

In any case, too late now.

The Illumination chamber, as we enter it, gives off the impression of a tomb: an austere monument, buried deep beneath the earth, with air that's never seen

sunlight. It's an enormous hollow sphere fifty metres in diameter, its walls formed from interlocking geodesic panels. On either side of its equator are mirrored observation galleries slash control rooms, dense with seating and dataglass, protected behind tinted, curved windows. Tall, thin pillars stretch from floor to ceiling, barnacled with unidentifiable electronics.

The chamber's core is smaller sphere one-third of its size. The core possesses a slight plasticky sheen, as if it's covered in adhesive black tape, and is only enterable through a vault-like airlock. Sprawling cables span that gap from outer sphere to inner, like tangled roots nourishing a seed.

As my eyes adjust, I see faint, leaf-green dimples of light chasing each other and flocking across the core's exterior. Occasionally it ripples faintly, as if the lights are tadpoles, breaking the surface of a lake. Whenever that happens, there's another mournful, bell-like *riiinnnggg* which travels through the pillars and cables, making them vibrate, the echo of a passing hovertrain.

We're dumped in the space between several pillars, and one pair of guards keeps watch while the others clear the area. There are six total. Against this backdrop, they're small. I lean against the nearest tower of electronics, which is surprisingly warm, in the shadowy gloom. I swallow, trying to clear my throat and retrieve a semblance of calm.

My friends, back on Earth, always think *I'm* the one who has my life sorted out. But this? This here? This can't be a person who has life sorted out.

I'm good at staying calm – that's all. I'm good at going at getting my schoolwork done and sleeping before 12AM. I'm good at ignoring the fact that on some days, I'm too sad to bother staying awake.

Alex and Wake are whispering to each other furiously. Then Sinas cracks an eye open, tries to move, but mostly can't (one of the tricks of zero-g is that without momentum, or a surface to push off, you're left to wriggle around in place). Wake looks like she's considering trying something stupid but shuts up when a guard shoots her a glare. She raises her middle finger behind her back.

Then, the pillar beside me *moves*. Parts of it shift, slowly unfurling: silver plates, connected to joints and motors.

Some of these stacks of lab equipment aren't equipment – they're *robots*. They're three or four times my size, crab-like, smooth-shelled, bristling with sharpened limbs and implements. Several are curled up strategically around the chamber, part of the furniture, and they detach from their perches with unusual delicacy, the motion nearly imperceptible. The closest reflects my face in its chitinous underbelly. Is this good? Bad? The hijackers are looking in all the wrong directions and I'm watching dingoes stalk unwitting quokkas, muscles bunching as they—

<DROP YOUR WEAPONS>

<COMPLY>

The bots blast a warning across the Mesh and soar towards the ceiling, preparing to rain down a very unpleasant crossfire if anybody so much as blinks.

Each hijacker is immediately facing a plethora of stunguns, tracking smoothly, a storm of lidar pulses lighting up my vision.

<NONLETHAL FORCE HAS BEEN AUTHORISED>

<COMPLY>

Most people have the sense to drop their weapons, and all have the good sense to not fight back – for now. Khorin narrows his eyes, but there's not much he can do, trapped out in the open. It's like the whole room's been turned to stone by a vengeful Medusa, including me.

Then – right on cue – my mother glides forth from within Illumination's sphere, not a hair out of place. "I believe," she says, "this would be a good time to talk."

Ah. I see what's happened here.

Well, I guess I'm happy to see her?

Alex doesn't look quite as happy, and neither does Khorin. "You're Hanamura," he grunts.

"Correct."

"Maritime said you'd try and stop us."

"How prescient. A pity you weren't slightly more so."

"We'll see about that," he replies.

"I assume you're an underling? An accomplice? She'll be very disappointed in you, allowing this to happen." Then, she notices us. "Finn! Alex. Hello. This is convenient." She catches her relief before it becomes too obvious.

"Say what now?" Alex asks.

"I'm rescuing you."

"ARE you? Then I won't ask questions about the freaky robot army."

I'm still nervous. This might be an improvement to our situation, but I want to be sure it'll stay that way. I wish my mother wouldn't stand in the open, the focus of attention, and likely the first to be shot if things tilt further sideways... but she can't help drawing a certain 'presence' to herself. That presence was especially terrifying whenever she told me off as a kid, but I grew to appreciate it, when it meant I could fade into her background without anybody seeming to mind. Right now, it feels strange, though, or... different. Ever since I saw her on that monitor in the security room, and then for real in the medical wing, I can't help thinking it's not truly *her*. It's... a sketch of her. A sketch, over a sketch, over a sketch, and I need to tilt the screen a certain way to see what used to be there.

"I'd like to negotiate," my mother says. "If that's acceptable."

Khorin nods, with distinct reluctance.

My mother glances over her shoulder. "It's safe," she calls out.

Cautiously, another small group emerges from the sphere.

"Pendant! You're okay!" Wake says.

"I definitely am NOT," they mutter. They're part of the posse of rescued staff and looks distinctly worse for wear, clutching one shoulder, missing his glasses, but... alive? Traumatized, but alive. Another woman, raven-haired, grips a pistol with a thousand-yard stare.

"I did rescue them," my mother says to us, pointedly. "As I *said* I would. So – let's continue."

"Weren't there more?" Wake asks. "Pendant, where's everyone else? What happened? We heard a bunch of creepy stuff on the Mesh, and then..."

"Let's continue," my mother says. "Before this goes any further, I would like you to tell me where—"

wwwwhhaAP! WHAP WHAP WHAP!

Plasma bolts scythe from the left and right control rooms, closely followed by shockwaves of shattered window. Several bots are consumed in storms of sparks, and I duck but not before a glittering glass shard slices across my cheek. One, two, three more shards ricochet from my vacsuit. Multiple armoured suits sweep in from either side, in attacking arcs. The bots swivel to track. Pain hits me, sharp, quickly dampened. Am I OK? Are the others OK? Shadows, swarming everywhere, and—*zzzaap!* An ion charge smacks one of the bots and it deactivates in a tangle of silver legs. Crackling beams pinball back and forth. One attacker, the another gets hit clean in the chest and they're slapped against a pillar, immobilised. My mother's taken cover, above the inner sphere. I can barely see through the warping energy and I do my best to make myself as small as possible. I hear shrieks of torn air, a sharp *click* as Khorin reloads. The bots are forming a battle line, scanning the room. Blood drips into my mouth. Khorin's up again, shooting *rat-tat-tat* and my mother's nowhere to be seen in the hail of debris and smoke and I don't know which side's winning—

"CEASE FIRE!"

A voice like an orbital railgun. It needs to be, to make people listen.

There are, from my subtle glances, three groups: my mother and the scientists, above the sphere, with three remaining bots; Khorin's squad of soldiers, with us in tow, hiding behind various pillars; and the dozen new arrivals, pincering us from the observation galleries on either side. This new group is commanded by a tall, grey-haired woman – the same woman we first met on the docks, before Wake set off the charges, a lifetime ago. I wonder if there'll be any other last-minute reversals of fortune, but no.

Just an uneasy standoff. For now.

My mother straightens. "Hello, Maritime."

The woman nods. "Haru."

My mother's expression is one of distaste, as if stumbling on a container of mouldy food at the back of the fridge. "This fiasco, then, is your responsibility?"

Maritime smiles, carved from rock. "I'd argue this fiasco is the result of YOUR work. Regardless, we agree on one thing: I'd like to negotiate."

"It would've taken much less effort if you'd tried that from the beginning, instead of trying to destroy all we've worked for."

"I did try, make no mistake. I tried 'negotiating', and I was discredited. I tried again, and I was threatened. I tried again, and I was almost killed for it. So— here we are, talking." Maritime folds her arms. "Because, for better or worse, I happen to find myself in front of an old friend."

"An old friend giving you one last chance to turn back."

"How serendipitous. What are the odds, of finding each other here?"

"Low."

"But not zero, clearly."

They regard each other, separated by a mere dozen paces. The cut on my cheek throbs.

"You realise why I'm here," Maritime says, more softly.

"Likewise."

"Don't force me to go through you."

"Why would I? I think we're free to discuss this – like reasonable people."

Maritime chuckles humourlessly. "Ten years ago, that might've been true. We both know it's too late to be finding common ground."

"Let's choose to try. I think you and I would both be happier if we did."

A long stare, then a nod, as she turns to her soldiers. "Prachat, Alizé, try setting up the network shunt. The rest of you, keep them covered, but stand down." One by one, weapons are lowered on both sides. Two of the new arrivals glide into the left-hand control room, making for a dormant console.

"Is that strictly 'talking'?" my mother asks.

"We're talking," Maritime replies.

"Even so, two of your people appear to be trying to access my servers."

"They wouldn't have had to, if your servers had been easier to access from outside. It makes one wonder, Haru, exactly why you'd go to such lengths to hide what gets done here."

"Don't be facetious – you understand exactly why. Call them off, now."

"But the data's important. More important than the facility," Maritime says. "So, it needs to be erased. From here. From backup drives. From the Mesh. We'll fingerprint it, then let a wipeworm loose on the remainder." Her tone makes it sound like a forgone conclusion.

"Please— please don't," Pendant says. They look... haunted.

"Is there a reason I should be listening to you?"

"That data is my life."

She sets her jaw. "You'll survive."

"It's true, though. It's true!" He gestures to the other scientists behind him. "Destroying this work is such a waste! So much effort, and promise, treated like it's— it's heresy, and we're back in the 1500s and *daring* to talk of heliocentrism is a death sentence. Why are you people so intent on this, anyway? What's in it for you? You don't know what this is!"

"Do you have access?" Maritime asks the soldiers.

<Looks promising.>

"Then work quickly. We'll set the charges and leave in five minutes."

"THAT," my mother says, "is altogether too much 'not talking!'"

"Don't do this," Pendant echoes. "Please. I don't know who you are, or—"

"I was you," Maritime replies, "ten years ago. Then I grew older. Wiser. And if you sit there, and follow instructions, you might also get that chance."

The scientist next to Pendant takes something from her pocket and—
CRACK! Khorin shoots her in the leg.

She keels over backwards, pants stained with blood. Pendant gapes.
"Help her," Maritime says.

Pendant rushes forwards, hovering over her. I can't hear what they say. Did she have a gun? I think she pulled a gun, in that blur of movement. My brain's maintaining a sense of distance, as if I'm watching actors in a play, and not events happening twenty metres in front of me. Gasps of pain, in my ears.

"I wonder who'd be victorious," my mother says, "if we started attacking each other again. It would be close. Three XN-9s against... nine of your terrorists?"

"Activists," Maritime replies.

"My robots *will* start shooting – I guarantee it – unless you do something for me, too."

"Which is?"

"You can start by freeing those students."

Maritime swivels towards us; a game piece suddenly worthy of her attention. "Yes, the intrepid summer students. That's what you are, correct? I recognise that this has been spectacularly unfortunate timing, but if you'd simply LISTENED to me from the start instead of gallivanting across the station, this operation could've been finished hours ago. I appreciate persistence, but only when it's directed at the right cause."

"We were *persistently* trying not to get mucked by *terrorists*," Wake retorts.

"For a terrorist, I think I've made a remarkably consistent effort to avoid destroying Starfish while you were still on it. Khorin, move them closer, but don't release them. Not yet."

Brusquely, the guards grab us. I want to rub the reddened skin around my restraints, roll my aching shoulders. Beside me, Sinas arches his back, catlike, joints cracking like popping candy (Wake hates this). Alex looks ready to deck somebody but suppresses the urge, settling for an extremely audible "*fucking assholes*" instead.

"This is *your* fault," Wake hisses at Sinas. "Your fault."

He ignores her.

She shifts as far away from him as possible (about three feet).

We're now in the open, our backs to the shattered control room windows; ahead, the core looms. It tolls again, a *taste* of sound more than properly audible. The vibration feels scratchy, eroded.

B-flat, Ferdinand says.

Maritime judges us, from a throne of impassive objectivity. Her steely hair and weathered face make her look older than she probably is, and perhaps more noble too, as if she's stepped out of a Roman fresco and into a high-tech spacesuit. In the hypothetical scenario of 'unstoppable force meets immovable object', she's definitely the latter.

"Did you find anyone else?" Alex asks. "A guy named Tao, for instance?"

Maritime turns to Khorin, who frowns, shaking his head.

"We did not," she says.

Then, she recognises us. I wondered if she would. I wonder what caused it to be *this* particular moment.

A desert plain, cracking to reveal wet clay beneath.

"Do you... know who I am?" she asks.

"Um— should we?" Wake asks.

"Perhaps not." She considers this, then glances at my mother. "You should've told them."

"About what?"

"Don't, Haru. You're too smart to play dumb."

"Then reveal my secrets, if you like. I intended to tell them. I would've, if you hadn't rudely interrupted."

"Interrupting this—"

"*Destroying* it."

"—was the only morally-justifiable action."

"Oh, don't tell me you have *moral* justification for erasing peoples' research. This is their livelihood, Maritime! Their home!"

"Don't assume I'm satisfied with where we find ourselves, either. We made every effort to act within reason. Regardless, it was irresponsible on your part to try this YET AGAIN and expect the opposite outcome." Maritime's gaze passes over each of us in turn. "I'm... sorry. I didn't realise it was you. I should've."

"Realised *what*?" Wake asks. "What's going on?"

"I think we should talk. No, we **MUST** talk. You deserve that much, after— today's shitstorm." She sighs, controlled, damming her frustration. Khorin grinds his teeth, then looks away. "After that, you can make your own decisions."

"It won't help," my mother says.

"Then why deceive them in the first place?"

"It would've made things harder," she says eventually, her face a stranger's.

"If telling the truth makes things hard, it might be time to reconsider the road you're on," Khorin grunts.

"Indeed. Not that it'll change much, in the end." Maritime gazes at each of us in turn. "Alex Hawthorne. Wake Srichaphan. Sinas Krajicek. Finn Hanamura. You can blame Haru Hanamura for finding yourselves in this mess, even if you don't yet realise your part in it."

Her gaunt eyes flash. "Oh, spare me your simplistic reasoning—"

"What's our part, then," Alex replies, folding her arms, trying to summon authority (and not look *too* out of place).

Oh boy. Water lapping at my neck.

It's not hard to retreat within myself, in a room full of soldiers.

"Are any of you familiar with the Illumination project?" Maritime asks.

"Not really," Sinas says. "I've seen that name today, a couple of times."

"The Illumination Cooperative Research Centre is a government-sponsored scientific entity, originally an initiative of the Australian Scientific and Industrial

Research Organisation. It was spun out of work at the University of Western Australia, in which Dr. Aspen Gu— never mind. Unimportant details. The *focus* of the CRC was to investigate physical phenomena related to faster-than-light travel; energy-minimal spacetime warping, cosmic strings, et cetera. Initially, it was the sort of one-off scientific grant that devotes a few million dollars towards an unusual idea in the hopes it MIGHT pay off... which it did, when stumbling upon arguably the most impactful physical discovery of the past century. A particularly sensitive discovery, with volatile implications, hence the over-the-top secrecy. The project has been operating for three decades since, known to only a small group of core staff, of whom I was once a member. Dr. Hanamura is another. So were others on Starfish station, including those with her now. I, on the other hand, chose to leave."

My mother laughs – '*ha*', like a gunshot. "There are REASONS you're no longer attached to this project, Maritime. Will you announce those to the world, too? If word gets out of what you've done here, you'll be stuffed in a re-education facility for a thousand years; a thousand *lifetimes*."

An eyebrow raises. "Implying, perhaps, we shouldn't let the word get out?"

"I'm all for truth," Khorin interrupts. "I believe in absolute truth. But you're creating more loose ends, by doing this. By telling them."

"We'll handle it later," Maritime replies. "We'll talk about *you* later, too. I'd expect you to identify more with their position."

Khorin narrows his eyes, but says nothing.

"Our first experimental demos occurred fifteen years ago," Maritime continues, "but only recently has Illumination's full potential become evident. It was conceived as an avenue for exploring quantum string theory: the concept that reality's structure is underpinned by higher-dimensional threads of exotic matter, or membranes, which support the physical universe that we're familiar with. It was hoped that by characterising the spaces *inside* these membranes – understanding how they behave, and evolve, and connect – additional physical truths would become lucent. For the ASIRO, it was primarily related back to wormhole research and spacetime warping for instantaneous travel. Lucent?"

Sinas nods.

Ferdinand does, too, as things unravel around me.

Alex is still cursing under her breath. "*If only we'd been effing told this two months ago...*"

I stare at the back of Sinas' neck.

Does he believe he did the right thing? I'm trying not to hate him, for bringing us here; for making things unravel so very, very fast.

"The difficulty of this characterisation is that quantum 'strings' exist on subatomic scales. However, one rather naïve idea was to expand them into something we *could* usefully measure, and it was found that by injecting strings with certain types of radiation, it stabilised them without affecting their internal properties. Eventually, we could make them large enough to be physically measurable. Ill-advised amounts of antimatter were required, and experiments

were therefore constrained to remote sites, but we were careful. The research was successful. And we found... or *they* found..." She closes her eyes briefly, her mouth softening.

"String' is a good term," Pendant explains, unable to stop himself, even as he tends to his fallen colleague. "After all, they weave universes together. Imagine you've got two sheets of fabric, and each sheet is a different universe – that's primary school stuff by now, isn't it? Multiverse theory, many universes coexisting but unreachable from each other, blah blah blah. Anyway, we have sheets of fabric, representing universes, and the sheets are interwoven by strings: grids of strings, passing from one sheet to the next, connecting them, giving them certain geometry. And if you scrunch this cloth and string into a ball, the resulting mess is... physics. Matter. Everything." He shrugs. "At least, that's how I like to think of it."

"Um. Okay," Alex says. "So what does expanding those strings do?"

"Ah, yes, the interesting part. People always guess, 'well, that lets you travel to other universes, doesn't it?' And, ah— that's not precisely true. It lets us enter the space BETWEEN universes, which I'd argue is even more intriguing."

"Wait a sec," Wake says. "Other *universes*? Isn't that, like, some glitched theory?"

"It's a *very good* glitched theory," Pendant replies. "I take it they don't actually teach you this in primary school—"

"Do we know what these other universes look like? Or where they are? Or how to get there?"

"No. No. Also, no."

"But you figured out the strings are what's between them?"

"Correct!" He's found his favourite student. "Which is evidence in itself that other universes exist."

"Between' is an odd word to apply," my mother adds. "They're higher-dimensional spaces. It's not as if you could visit, and walk around. There's mathematics involved, relations of super-symmetry, and super-simultaneity, and..." She shakes her head, in a faintly amused way, and for once she truly sounds like herself. "Let's avoid the details. But the string expansion devices we constructed, starting fifteen years ago, were our entrances. Our paths towards experimentally proving these concepts, which is the focus of our work here."

"When you say 'entrance'," Sinas murmurs, "I can't help but imagine a glowing magic door."

"The majority are doors for photons, not people," Maritime says, "but it's not an entirely inaccurate image. Regardless, from what we've measured, a person wouldn't survive."

"And?" Wake asks. "What'd you measure?"

"Light," my mother says.

"Illumination," Pendant adds. "As one could say."

"Indescribable amounts of energy," Maritime mutters. "Incredibly dense, changing— landscapes, you might call them. Our universe is mostly dark, cold,

and empty, but in contrast, these membranes were almost entirely overflowing of light. Darkness was the exception."

"Making them quite beautiful," my mother adds. "From a certain point of view."

"Beautiful, perhaps, but very strange. These spaces have structure, in a mathematical sense, the same way our universe possesses cosmic structure and laws defining its behaviour: chaos bound by order, randomness forming purposeful wholes. It's difficult to avoid applying human perception to these things when truthfully, they're outside our common comprehension of time and space, but—we started seeing recognisable elements, in the data."

"Like what?" Alex asks.

"Places," Pendant says. "Objects. People."

"You're *gonna* have to be more specific."

"Take trees, for example," Pendant says. "If you took every tree ever, and stretched it into ten dimensions, for all time—mmm, scratch that. Let's say you asked a thousand people to imagine a forest, and pick one tree, and draw it, and you turned that combined image into a quantum loop? This still isn't the best analogy. Basically, there are ways to interpret the data that HINT at familiar concepts, which is interesting, and even MORE interesting is that Illumination regularly splits itself into distinct regions, with relatively static boundaries, each displaying unique composition and behaviour. It's like the borders between countries on a map. Same species, different cultures. *Illuminations*. Get it?"

"I was never fond of such an obvious pun," Maritime grumbles, "but I was... overruled."

"It was Farah's idea," my mother says.

"Really? She never said so. But that is the kind of thing that amused her." Maritime's slight deepening of wrinkles is probably as much of a true smile as we'll ever see.

The chamber core floats before us, a private moon. Inside, I'm expected to believe there exists a window to a 'space between'. Its surface has gained a curious sense of infinity, like gazing into a pool of unknown depth, even if it's ultimately a metal pod surrounded by complex shielding. The bell's constant *bongggg... bongggg...* echoes are making my molars ache.

Pendant waits expectantly. "You should ask about the people."

Sinas takes the bait. "The people?"

"Thank you – I like you too. Maybe I'll offer to take interns next time. The crux is that, yes, there were patterns of radiation that gave the impression of being, ah, alive? In one way or another. Judging it conclusively is difficult."

"The official term to use is 'entities'," my mother says. "Individualised, changing regions of Illumination, possessing purpose, or independence. Intelligence, even."

"Yes," Maritime replies, with a firmer edge, "which becomes the source our controversy."

"Entities," Sinas says, rolling the word around in his mouth.

"So, they're aliens. Right?" Wake asks. "You discovered aliens?"

"No. Not exactly," Maritime says.

"But they're 'alive.' Pendant said they're alive. So—"

"Also, not quite correct."

"Then what the heck are they?" Wake asks.

"They're dead. Or more precisely, undead."

"What?"

"Ghosts, spirits, departed souls. Choose your preferred term. Illumination," Maritime says, "is full of ghosts."

FINN VIII

If this wasn't zero gravity, you could hear a pin drop.

"They're *what?*!" Wake asks.

"Dead," Maritime says.

"They're DEAD?!"

"Correct."

"Oh my god I'm on a prank show."

"I wish it were."

"This is a *yakkin'* prank show!"

The pain in my head is too real for that.

"How do you... know?" Sinas asks. "That they're ghosts?"

"Thank your MeshMate for that," Pendant says. "See, if you die with a MeshMate active, it stores a near-perfect record of our consciousness – an electrochemical footprint of thought patterns and memories. Of course, it's illegal to DO anything with that footprint since, as I said – 'near' perfect – but those records occasionally get stored for criminal cases and the like. And, once we started running pattern matching on entity data, we found *frighteningly* close matches for the MeshMate images of people who'd recently died. Not in terms of repeating existing data – the MeshMate records weren't simply being copied – but as if the same brain was generating new thoughts, and new memories. As if it WAS that person, existing after death, reborn from the quantum chaos. The more we searched, the more we found, until it became statistically significant: shifting, active regions of the string membrane that appear to be comprised of... people. Dead people." They shrug. "Frankly, it's fortunate we stumbled upon that connection at all. It's not as if that's what we were expecting to find."

"They're... dead," Wake says again, more contemplatively.

"In one sense, alive and kicking! But in the corporeal sense – quite dead."

"And you're certain of this," Sinas says.

"Quite certain," Pendant replies, "though there's much we don't understand. What a discovery, though! Isn't it exciting? Such INCREDIBLE significance—"

"The problem," Maritime interrupts, "is we appear to have discovered the afterlife."

"And that's the right word, is it?" Alex asks. She looks like she's walked into a room and has suddenly been handed a scythesoccer bat and told to score the winning world cup goal. "I can't believe I'm saying this, but there ARE traditional concepts of Heaven, Hell, realms of the dead, so is this one of those? Or not?"

"Personally, I hesitate to apply such phrases," Maritime replies. "It's a... different phase of existence. Which appears to only be accessible after death."

"Well," Alex says glumly. "Ash."

I try my best to look surprised, which honestly isn't hard. I can only imagine how the others feel. Wake's got a million questions bursting through her skin, whereas Sinas is... quiet. He's *contemplating*. Then, a sudden realisation spreads through him, along with all its terrible implications, as if he's seen a— well. I'd urge him to not to do anything stupid, and not open Pandora's box; to continue living with extraordinary pain, even if that seems impossibly cruel.

My mother glances from person to person, eyes flickering. Like me, she blinks too much when she's nervous.

History. Knowledge. Tethers, binding us to predetermined paths. Figuring out where people go after they die has occupied a hell of a lot of humanity's headspace, ever since the first Australopithecus had to bury a friend's bones. Five million years later, here's your answer. We live, we die, and... we enter the space between. (Between what and what, though?)

And what happens when we're born? Is it the same, but in reverse?

How are other universes different?

Is intelligent consciousness truly special? Is this proof of a 'soul'?

There's a philosophy which says that rocks are conscious, and trees are conscious, and a planet is conscious, since 'consciousness' can be viewed as simply experiencing/interpreting the universe around you. Rocks and trees and planets certainly do that, in their own limited ways; and it's perhaps self-centred to view the electrochemical reactions making up our *own* perception of the universe as special, or unique. Are there rocks in Illumination? Pendant seemed to suggest there were trees, of a sort...

"This is the last time I'll ask," Wake says, "but this DEFINITELY isn't a super elaborate lie? It's genuine?"

"I assure you," Pendant says, "that it's very much the truth."

She presses two fingers against her temples, as if that will prevent her from collapsing. "Alex, this is mantis."

"Yeah."

"All of those trashy ghost hunting influencers are ONTO something!"

"I assure you," Pendant says, "they most definitely aren't."

"Is psychic stuff real? Are vampires real? Zombies? Magic? I hope vampires are real, at least. Isn't death, like, the thing that DEFINES life and if death doesn't exist, then how do people *deal* with that? Everything changes, doesn't it? The world would be so different, right? Like... huh. Woah."

"Yes," Maritime says. "As you've astutely pointed out, everything changes. I'll give you... three minutes, for questions. Then we decide what happens here."

"We're running out of time," Khorin grunts.

"I realise." Still, she waits for us to speak, with a subtle harshness that indicates events WILL proceed in three minutes whether anyone likes it or not.

"Have you found any living things inside Illumination?" Sinas asks.

"We haven't identified images of living people, if that's what you're asking."

"So it's all just... dead."

"Even before I left the project, we'd detected millions of energy signatures. Most were exceedingly unfamiliar, as you'd expect from, say, the Drake equation."

"The Drake equation..." Wake says. "That's, like, an alien thing, isn't it?" Her eyes widen. "You're saying there ARE aliens! In Illumination! Dead aliens!"

"It's difficult to speculate," my mother says.

"But have you tried talking to them?"

"Yes."

"And?"

"It's more challenging than simply broadcasting a binary code and hoping for the best. The flow of energy and information is—"

"Illumination *needs* energy from other universes to survive," Pendant interrupts. "As universes expand, or contract, it acts like a pressure management system, or an elastic scaffold, and for that, it requires external energy and matter. We believe this mechanism acts through black holes. Matter from our universe gets sucked into black holes, which gets pumped into Illumination via *white* holes. That's also how we run our doors: we generate a miniature black hole and blast it to expand the Schwarzschild radius. Fun!"

"I thought black holes were bad," Alex says. "Like, suck-the-Earth-into-oblivion bad."

"Not if they're controlled. Which is what we do – we control them. The core issue is it's very difficult to get two-way information through a black-hole-white-hole network, so attempts at communication have proven... tricky."

"Which means there's no way to send a person through. Or a bot. Or whatever."

"Yes, too dangerous. FAR too dangerous. The dimensional transition has limited stability for information, let alone macroscopic objects. It works well enough for sparse measurements, but solid material would simply be shredded into its constituent particles and radiation—"

"We've sent people through," my mother says.

"Uh. We have?" Pendant asks.

"You *tried*," Maritime retorts, "when you clearly shouldn't have." She turns to us, unexpected pain in her eyes, amid the ever-present determination; the same brittle, jewel-cut edge I've sometimes noticed in my sister. In the ensuing silence, my mother shakes her head, as if nobody could *possibly* understand.

"You always were incredibly short-sighted, Maritime," she says.

"And you, Haru, were always awe-inspiringly hypocritical."

"It IS safe, now. The tests worked. You've been away too long, so you haven't seen our latest results, but everything we've seen implies conscious matter, if properly tethered, would finally be able to bridge the gap between—"

"Stop talking before I sew your mouth shut," Maritime says, like sandpaper.

Khorin raises his gun, a synchronicity, and aims it at my mother.

The battlebots twitch. I gulp.

My mother seems impossibly calm. "Such a well-behaved lapdog, Maritime. Where'd you find him?"

"I'm not a *dog*," Khorin hisses.

"Khorin, don't," Maritime says. "If only you knew, Haru."

"Whatever ideological crusade this is, it's blinded you to reality."

They glare at each other. It hurts more, to hate someone you're close to.

I stare at Sinas' back.

"We were perhaps thinking about sending astronauts into Illumination," Pendant interrupts, smiling nervously. "Illumi-nauts? It was being considered for, ah— a future milestone. When it would be safe."

"Willing to volunteer?" Khorin asks. "I'll shoot you now. We can see where you end up. 'Cause I heard that last time, you weren't using volunteers."

"Last time?" Pendant frowns. "There is no last time. Also, that is *terribly* uncalled for—"

Maritime raises her hand. "Questions," she says, refocusing.

"What does this... mean?" Sinas asks, finding time to think, trying not to let his curiosity show too nakedly. "The research, and the station. What would you use it for? I guess my actual question is: why do you want to destroy it?"

"Exactly!" Wake says. "If you kept studying Illumination, wouldn't it solve heaps of problems while also being super interesting? What's wrong with it? Because to me, blowing it up and maaaaybe trying to murder us seems like overkill. Like, MEGA-overkill. The overest-kill."

"A reasonable point," my mother murmurs.

Maritime considers this. "Then, tell me about the Atlanta Protocol. Or the Global Data Quality Agency. Why were these architectures put in place?"

"The Atlanta Protocol's an agreement, isn't it?" Alex says. "Governing AI tech. People were worried about deep learning systems displaying reasoning ability, and emotional development, and what could be interpreted as 'human-level' consciousness. Corporations obviously dreamed of having racks and racks of these AI 'slaves', as free workers. Advocacy groups wanted to set them free. Researchers were concerned they'd evolve, faster than they could be controlled. So, at a fancy UN meeting in Atlanta, they passed laws baking intelligence limiters into every deployed AI. There are capabilities you're not allowed to include. It's like... a Geneva Convention for robots, or whatever. The GDQA was similar, except that's focused on data quality, and ensuring we don't pollute the Mesh with too much malicious deep-fakery and AI slop."

"And do people follow those rules?"

"I guess..."

"Quite. Yes, regulation can be crucial when decency alone won't keep us in check. Unavoidably, technology IS dangerous: think of nuclear energy, and biometric profiling, and self-replicating nanotech. Thus, society agrees to abide by precautions, lest it spiral out of our control." She exhales. "I *am* a scientist. I believe in technology. But ethics are a necessary component of this process, and the Illumination project and its insistence on secrecy and aggression has refused to abide by that principle, for decades. As we crept further and further towards a point of no return, some of its members grew to believe that drastic action was necessary. Before it might end... everything."

"Sounds a little dramatic," Alex says. "But I can believe it."

"There have been incidents," Maritime says carefully. "Evidence that the entities in Illumination are... unfriendly. Their brain signatures display signs consistent with ongoing trauma and distress, as if they are in pain. Constant pain. Our Illumination gates attract these entities, and we've observed them trying to force themselves *through*, into our universe, as if they're... compelled by the thought of escape." For the first time, she's unsure of her words. "As if they can't bear being inside."

"So not the friendly type of ghost," Alex says flatly, "and more the 'let's call a priest' kind? Which means, when you said you'd found a higher dimension or whatever, what you *actually* meant is that you opened a portal to effing *Hell*."

"I wouldn't phrase it like that."

"What else would you call a pit of souls being tortured?"

"Those things we encountered," Sinas says. "The lights – was that them?"

"Yeah, I bet," Khorin grunts. "Fuckers took down a bunch of my friends."

"It's not that simple," my mother urges. "There are hundreds of ways to interpret what we've seen. Most aren't that we've discovered so-called Hell." She tries to smile, perhaps too desperately. "It's still very early; there's still so much we don't know. Even so, there are shielding mechanisms throughout this station preventing any possibility of a leak, so whatever 'lights' you saw—"

Pendant shakes their head. "I'm sorry, Haru, but on this I'm with them. I'm not sure how, but it came for us and... tore us apart." They shudder. "Joshua's dead. Cascabel, Zahra— they're all dead. Can't even remember what happened..." It sounds like he wants to vomit.

"The portal's structure makes that impossible. We **DESIGNED** it to have polarity. It's one way. We have to exploit dimensional folds to bypass that."

"Who's to say they aren't doing the same on the other side?" Maritime asks.

"Because it violates three different equations—"

"Haru, we haven't even **PROVEN** those equations. Are you seriously suggesting it's safe? You were there the first time it was breached."

"Yes, and we *handled* it. Several hospitalisations, very few deaths. It was unfortunate, but we learned from it." She shudders, frustrated. "These entities are clearly human, on some level, and I don't understand why you insist on

being so afraid. If they're in pain, we can understand them. If they're angry, we can understand them. It might take years, but that's unquestionably worth it."

Maritime grits her teeth. "The majority might not be human, Haru. That's what worries me."

I float silently. My brain races. Parts of this, I'd heard already, but many details are entirely new.

I'm glad I'm invisible.

"It's time," Maritime says, "to make our choices." She shakes her head. "Strangely, I am glad you're here, Haru. We can truly talk."

"It's more so you can pretend to listen, isn't it? Even now, your thugs are deleting the data we devoted our lives to. They're destroying any hint this place ever existed. *This*? It's a way for you to feel less guilty. This is a *performance*. At least have the decency to admit you won't change your mind."

"I'm not entirely unsentimental, but— yes. I won't change my mind." She looks around, sparing a moment to wonder.

Machinery. Cables. Dappled light. The bell echoes, a galaxy's heartbeat.

For her part, my mother perches on the closest console. She takes an object – a key? – from her pocket and starts fiddling with it, turning it over and over in her hands. Suddenly, it's like we're home and she's sitting at the table, staring at nothing, fiddling with her keys. She'd do that, sometimes, after coming home from work, turning over a particularly thorny problem in her head.

I did ask about her work, a few times. She never said much. (Or she lied.)

Grudgingly, I can understand. Illumination – everything it represents – would change the course of history. There were reasons to keep it secret, though I'm surprised it's managed to STAY secret. Existence, after death. *Pain*, after death. A killer hypothesis. I take a breath, focusing on what's solid: my suit, my body, this shadowed room.

I wish it were still yesterday, the five of us in a rickety transport shuttle, all by ourselves. Then we could talk, and figure this out. Instead, we're sandwiched between two sets of enemies like the unwanted third colour on a chessboard.

I wonder if this'll be mentioned in some history book, in the future – an odd thing to think about when Earth, Mars, and the rest of humanity are currently so far away. Ships, tossed on open ocean, no shore in sight.

"Illumination could save us," my mother says, from the dark, wavy sea.

"It would destroy us," Maritime replies, a proud, weary lighthouse.

"When you look at the world, what do you see?"

"A rhetorical question with a pointless answer."

"A dead end. A dying planet. The Mesh, arcologies, the DimSun swarms – all ways of sidestepping the problem without enacting true change. Anyone unfortunate enough to be born in the last two decades has never seen an unpolluted sky. Can never swim in an ocean without radiation blockers. Won't ever meet a kangaroo or koala outside a zoo. We struggle to survive because technology supports our ignorance, and because we saw this downfall and

never really tried to prevent it. It was always 'later'. Now, it's too late." Her voice is ash, and I feel it inside myself – guilt for something I wasn't responsible for.

Intellectually, I know she's right. I have a good life. Many people don't.

At school, they try to teach us about collapsing ecosystems, and spiralling social welfare, and why we weren't ready for it. They try to convince us we can still make it better. It's like they're trying to teach us optimism, which is weird, but... I don't mind. I'm more optimistic about *that* than other stuff in my life.

"An umurangi generation," Maritime murmurs.

"What?"

"Come on, Haru – you used to be quite good at Maori. Much better than my Japanese. Umurangi means 'red sky' – a red sky generation. The idea that someday, there'll be a last generation, who can only sit back and watch it end."

No recognition in my mother's eyes, even as Maritime shakes herself from free the memory. "I don't subscribe to such fatalism. But much of society does, and instead of confronting it, or acting, we seal ourselves away in virtual worlds, or sign our rights away to the Techno-Kings, or settle for planets far harsher and colder. HealBots mean people don't die easily, but statistically..." Her eyes flick towards the ceiling, then back. "Did you know that 40% of people don't work anymore? They just waste away as sleepers, because they can. Of those who DO contribute, their lives are ensnared by webs of radical social groups and unregulated media and secessionist governments and nothing gets *done*. Our only choices are conflict or ignorance; never *progress*. And species that stagnate do not stick around."

"I've heard this sermon before," Maritime says. "Certainly, you can interpret the data to support that story. I don't disagree. But equally, what WE did isn't the catch-all solution you believe. Illumination won't instantaneously fix humanity. It's simply another sideways step."

"Then it's biggest humanity has ever taken – a step into other *universes*." If we were in gravity, I imagine she'd take her own step forward; instead, her fist clenches. "Illumination is potentially a new existence, a new *age*. A way to fix problems, injustices, and worries. And extraordinary expansion of our capability as a species. That's the possibility. That's what you believed in."

"So many possibilities, yet no guarantees. Your mistake is thinking I *believe* in Illumination. Like many others, I thought it was worth investigating, nothing more. You're becoming an evangelist. I'm surprised to hear you—"

"We NEED this," my mother hisses. "A world balanced on a knife-edge, and you only see the knife."

"And YOU ignore it! Given what I've seen today – what I've experienced – I have no faith at all in how this will be handled. I *shouldn't*. Neither should you."

"That risk is manageable. Hundreds of people agreed."

"I don't."

"And why does your opinion override theirs?"

"Because I'm still holding this gun." It's a statement of fact, not meant to sound imposing. (It does.) Maritime narrows her eyes. "The portals themselves

are naturally unstable, yes, and there were models that suggested false vacuum decays, strangelet conversions, other apocalyptic scenarios with exceedingly low probabilities. Still, I'm most concerned about *Illumination* itself."

"You shouldn't be."

"I saw people rip each other apart, Haru. I saw what one of those spectres can do. Can you predict what would happen if they were set loose on Earth? Is that not good enough? There are billions of them, and the majority seem to not like us very much. I'm happy to generalise and call them monsters – monsters we might not understand completely, but monsters nonetheless."

"Or angels," Sinas whispers.

My mother, to her credit, is persistent. "It's okay to view a lion at a zoo, if managed safely. It's okay to observe lions in the wild, if managed safely. We've prepared protection methods – city-scale resonance fields, down to wearable devices. Do you not understand how pointlessly reactionary you're being?"

"I noticed you'd built a new lab." Maritime snorts. "Haru, if you had a working 'wearable device', you'd be wearing it. Besides, it's not that I don't trust you, specifically. I also don't trust everyone else."

"Then you should've stayed with us and trusted *yourself*." It feels like we're on a cliff-edge, footsteps weaving close and closer to the precipice. "You left. Now you return, so eager to judge us, to disrupt what – up until now – was a perfectly reasonable set of trials. Those of us who persisted understood the dangers, and the benefits."

"Rushing headlong trying to make those benefits concrete leads to no genuine comprehension of the consequences."

"This – *Illumination* – would give people comfort. It would create hope. It would focus us as a society. Speculation about encountering intelligent alien life pales in comparison. Immediately, the priorities of every single human would be defined by extraordinary unity. Every single human, alive, or dead, is *together*. Don't you realise how utterly beautiful that is?"

"Part of me wishes I could be swept up in your optimism." (I've never thought of my mother as an optimistic person... but she is, I suppose, in her own way.) Maritime sighs, running a simulation in her head, and doesn't like the results. "People won't take it as you expect. They won't see it like you do. If we continue to exist after death, what does that mean for life?"

"Religion has championed life after death for millennia. It's hardly a new concept."

"Scientific proof is altogether different than faith."

"And our corporeal existence is somehow invalidated by that?"

"My point, Haru, is that intentions don't always translate into reality. Concepts are malleable. Humanity might not take this... well. If life loses some of its meaning, choice and consequence get left by the wayside, *especially* if it's decided that instead of an abstract notion of paradise, what's waiting for us is an eternity of pain, and hostility, and... light." Uncertainty flashes across her face. "It could as easily tear the world in half."

"Life already means too little."

"What about the stars? The future? What about looking *up*?"

"The stars are too far away, and the end of the world too close." As if that's a beautiful thought, my mother smiles softly. "Humanity adapts, to stimuli like this; or rather, we NEED such a driving force. Not climate change, and the slow boiling of a pot which can be improperly ignored, but an immediate, intuitive kick. With Illumination, we eliminate death. We eliminate suffering. Why not view this as part of our species' evolution?"

"Challenge is necessary for change, yes, but an invasion of ghosts is not the solution I prefer." Her teeth grind.

"We could help them," my mother insists.

"Help who?"

"These 'ghosts'."

"Do they want to be helped?"

"Perhaps we could help each other. If they really are in pain, then—"

"Does weaponizing them also count as 'help'?" Maritime asks. "That's partly why this project is still secret, isn't it? To—"

"Perhaps, long ago, a forgotten general gave *brief* thought to that kind of application. It's not why we're here. It's secret because we're *aware* this has to be tightly managed." My mother spins her key, faster and faster. "Again, what gives you the right to decide what happens? To represent humanity? Why do you get to destroy all we've worked for and act as if you're doing us a favour?"

"Because you're too far gone to make the right decision." Maritime folds her arms. "I don't desire this responsibility – the opposite, actually. But I understand enough to NEED it."

"Not to interrupt," Pendant says, "but the, um, scientific value of this installation is extremely high and, um, I don't think we're doing anything *morally* heinous here? It's not like we're testing illegal bioweapons or, you know, massacring seahorses. We're investigating phenomena of scientific value! Quite efficiently, in my opinion, not to toot my own horn. I think it's unwise to simply *erase* this over fear of—"

"I've been on the other side of people like you," Khorin says. "Always justifications. Never responsibility."

"Okay, well, I still don't know who you are or who kicked your puppy this morning but I'm *quite* sure it's nothing to do with this." He smiles nervously. "So why don't we all sit down and have a cup of tea, hm?"

"Those lights? That's the fear. That fear killed your friends, and mine. I don't understand why you're still on her side."

"MY friends are dead because you attacked the station and made our safeguards fail!"

"You're going to make a mistake," Maritime says. "You'll make a mistake, and the window will become an open door, and that's reason enough for me – that terrible consequence." Her voice grows soft but keeps its presence. I wish she'd

been my maths teacher; I'd have never fallen asleep in class. "You have no oversight. No responsibility. Cockroaches playing God."

"But we wanted to change the world," my mother replies softly. "That's why we abandoned our careers, to work on this. Why chase stars when we can chase new realities?"

"And for that, you'd experiment on children? Lie to them? Bring them here?"

"Never!" Pendant says.

"Shut up. You might be *marginally* more pleasant to talk to, but you're also too far gone. Everyone on this station is *too far gone*."

Back and forth. Swings and roundabouts. My mother starts to reply, then closes her mouth, and she's... sad, but resolute; so different to the nightmare that screamed as I fled from her, and trying *so hard* to manage whatever's bubbling underneath, before it turns into bitterness. Sinas watches Maritime like granite himself, while Wake sits, knees against her chest. She whispers something to Alex, tense. Despite myself, I scoot a little closer to them.

"Destroying this," my mother says, "won't have the effect you want. There are backups of our data. The gate can be rebuilt. This knowledge is in people's heads, and some will slip through your fingers."

"It takes effort to reorganise. It takes money to rebuild. Without Starfish, the work slows. That time is necessary to find a better path."

"It would be a blow," she concedes, "though not as large as you'd think."

Maritime squints suspiciously. "A separate site? Europa? Mimas? You'd never have the resources."

"I wouldn't know. So much for good intentions—"

"Enough. ENOUGH." Maritime turns to the other hijackers. "Set the charges. We're done. I want us gone within an hour."

That, it seems, is that.

I wonder if there's anything we can do; that might require picking a side. There's a timer, counting down, and I'm barrelling towards an ending without knowing what's involved. There are no dramatic lightning flashes, no climactic swordfights atop rain-pelted cliffs; only words, said or unsaid, in this dark, echoing sanctuary. Across the room, a couple of consoles turn on, lights blinking, wasting time.

Why did Maritime even bother to explain? Why did she bring us here?

To destroy Illumination.

To see it, with her own eyes.

To say goodbye to an old friend.

"Well," Alex grumbles. "That was a useless negotiation."

"They tried," Sinas replies.

"Shut the fuck up, Sinas," Wake hisses. "You and your polluted ass."

Khorin and two more guards supervise us while others disperse across the chamber. Mining charges are placed on the walls, pillars, ceilings. Maritime disappears inside the central sphere to personally oversee the demolition of her

nemesis. One of the damaged battlebots wobbles for a second, then recovers, gliding ever-so-slowly sideways. Khorin tracks it with hawkish intensity.

I sit, quietly, wishing someone would untie me.

Focusing on that simple desire, rather than more complicated feelings, is nice. *We'll get out of this.* You'll *get out of this*. Say what you will about running from hijackers and monsters, but at least it provides a form of agency.

"Why are *you* here?" my mother asks – to Khorin. "You were curious, weren't you? You wanted to see it. The idea you've been dragged across the solar system to silence."

"I was not dragged," he replies.

"Then what would you call it?" she asks.

He stares at her. "Retribution."

"For what? Did something happen to you? Did WE do something? I'd like to know why you listen to her." Maritime's absence rings out like its own kind of bell and strangely, I'm almost more nervous with her gone.

"There are many, many victims," Khorin says. "Of people like you."

"Ah. You view yourself as one of these victims..."

"If you had empathy, you'd understand."

"Empathy?" Alex snorts. "Not after the ash you did to us."

I wish she wouldn't antagonise people.

"Yeah," Wake says, "you were gonna fricking *murder* us. Alex got *shot*—"

"There were... mistakes," Khorin grunts.

"Which group do you belong to?" my mother asks. "The Human Liberation Front? Orchid? Majestic-12?"

"Do you realise the mess you're in?" Khorin says, turning to us (and ignoring my mother). "You weren't brought here for fun – you were brought here because you're useful. You're an experimental catalyst, that's it." He bares his teeth, a humourless grin. "I know what that feels like. You shouldn't be on her side."

"I'd rather not be on any sides, thanks," Alex retorts. "So, why don't you let us go? I'm sure we'd all appreciate it."

One pair of guards is still messing with the consoles, in the control room to our backs. There are semi-circular banks of seats and monitoring equipment, displaying dim standby patterns, but I can't crane my neck far enough to see.

"I need to know what they're doing," my mother says, pulling herself towards them.

"Don't move," Khorin growls.

"I won't interfere, I assure you. I just want to check for myself."

"I'll count to three," he says. "You need to stop by three."

My mother doesn't hear him.

"One."

Or doesn't care.

"Two."

Khorin cares.

"Three." He turns around, grabs Sinas, and puts a gun to his head.

"What are you *doing*!" Alex shouts.

My world freezes. I should do something, but I don't know what.

My heart pounds in my chest.

Sinas is limp. Quiet. A human doll.

Khorin holds the gun with murderous intensity.

"There's no need for that," my mother says.

"Your fault," Khorin replies.

She doesn't seem overly concerned, floating above a bank of switches.

"Would you like to see it?" she asks. "Illumination?"

"NO," he hisses.

"What does it matter? If you're destroying it anyway..." Her voice is lilting, songlike. "I know you're curious. I know what they did to you."

"I'll shoot him," Khorin says. "Then you. I don't want to. But I *promise* you..."

His hands shake slightly. Short breaths.

"Let's— let's pause for a second," Wake says, palms raised. "We're friends. We're on the same team. Right? It's one big misunderstanding, and we can clear this up and go home—"

"*Quiet.*"

Sinas just... hangs there, eyes closed. Waiting for the world to do what it must.

I can see my mother, weighing risks in her head. I'm not sure what her plan is. Not sure if she cares about us, anymore. She pretends to, sort of, but more and more, I feel she's a reflection of whatever I want to see.

"Stop it! Everyone!" Alex says, fists clenched, half-a-sob escaping before she bites it off. "This is stupid. Let him go! Let US go! We never wanted to be part of this!"

"*Quiet!*" Khorin's eyes are white.

"I am going to show you the gate," my mother says. "You'll see how beautiful it is. Then, we can—"

She touches the control panel.

Khorin chucks Sinas aside, dives through the air, and his hand latches onto the back of my suit and he yanks me up and I dangle there, in zero gravity, with hot breath and a cold muzzle against the back of my skull.

"Not another millimetre," Khorin says. "Don't make me say it again."

My mother stops.

Time – once moving so slowly – is now in freefall.

"Please," Alex says. "Don't. Don't hurt him." Something compels me to look at her, out of the corner of my eye, and she's... lost. Vacant. I'm vacant too, like I've been snatched up and dragged so fast my guts got left behind. I can't focus. My vision's blurry. A thousand different thoughts, actions, futures split and diverge with every heartbeat. So many possibilities. Nothing I can do. My body prickles. Khorin's shivering too. I can feel the sweat on his forearm.

Sinas kneels beside me, as lifeless as before.

"Alright," my mother says. "I'll wait."

"How interesting," Khorin says. "The witch does have a weakness. Now give me your key."

"What key?"

"Don't play games." He points at the transparent polymer strip she's holding. Then, something changes: a layer of joy, pasted over fear, like too-sweet icing over too-dry cake. "Actually, what if we do play a game? Let's play *favourites*. Seems I've already found yours."

"We all have things we'd rather not give up," my mother says coolly.

"Yes! I've already given up a lot today."

"That has nothing to do with us," Wake says.

"Wrong!" Khorin whips around, a shark picking up blood in the water, a neglected animal going for a stab at the alpha. His smile's full of glinting canines and blackened lips and I feel control slipping away, the future slipping away. "What about you, Sinas?" Khorin asks. "We're friends, aren't we? You betrayed them – led me right to them. Interesting decision."

"Sure," Sinas mutters.

"What don't you want to give up?"

No reply.

"I bet you've got a favourite, though." He points to Alex, with the gun. "Is it her?" Then Wake. "Or her?" Back to me, elbow around my neck. "Or perhaps our mutual friend here, who's definitely shitting his pants about now. Answer me. I'd like to know."

"Stop," my mother says warningly.

"I'd like to know." End of the leash.

Sinas looks up, meeting Khorin's gaze. "I'm not playing this game."

"I don't think you understand," he growls. "Choose."

"What are you hoping to get out of this?"

"Retribution."

"I didn't do anything to your friends."

"Some of them are dead."

"And threatening kids will bring them back?" He tilts his head towards my mother, then stares back evenly. "I'd ask her, if that's what you want."

"That isn't I want. *Choose*." Khorin's grip shivers, holding back the violence. I wonder why his comrades aren't stepping in. Why Maritime had to leave. "It *is* our mutual friend, isn't it," he says. "I can tell."

"You're wrong."

"Am I? Am I *really*?" He pats my head, and I try not to shrink away. Air pinches my throat. I wonder if I should try and make a break for it. Fight back, somehow. Avoid dying in such a shitty, unfair, stupid way. I've imagined being the hero in this kind of situation in countless daydreams.

The world won't let me. My body won't let me.

"It doesn't matter," Sinas says. "Do what you want."

"You should maybe reconsider that."

Sinas kneels.

An imprint in ash.

"Then tell him," Khorin says, and I can hear the pleasure in his voice. "Tell him, if you really think so, that it'll be okay."

Sinas' mask doesn't waver.

But his eyes move, ever so slightly, until they meet mine.

"Finn," he says. "It's going to be okay."

My heart tries to leap, but not far enough.

I want to be alone. I want to be alone, in a room, with him. Far from here, where I could tell him everything, and tell him that yes, everything will be okay, and I'm sorry, and I wish I could have time to express every stupid thought I've had over the past three years and how I don't want those thoughts to be cut short in the next thirty to sixty seconds. I don't ever want them to stop. Not yet.

I want to be able to figure out if this is what I want.

To feel what it would be like to be friends. To at least have that chance.

In his gaze – the way it lingers – there's the pull of a dark, calm ocean.

And in his eyes... nothing.

There's nothing.

The sting of tears, which I blink away, and—

BANG!

FINN IX

A huge blast of light on the left side of my head, and I wonder if its heat will consume the last thought I have, burned up in a meaningless cloud of particles.

But the bolt continues past me, smacking into the console my mother is sitting at. Khorin shoves me to the ground. My ears ring.

“What did you *do*?” Alex screams.

Maritime’s voice cuts across the chamber. “Stop this! Now!”

My mother is frozen, one hand reached towards me – a final reflex. Her hand drops.

“Khorin, get out,” Maritime says. “*Get out.*” She vibrates with suppressed fury. “You’ve done enough to jeopardise this mission. This was not supposed to be HARD!”

He curses, then jets away from me, lowering his rifle. I watch until he’s gone, a cloud of bitter shadow.

Should I stand? I’d rather lie down, to be honest.

“Are you okay?” Wake asks.

“P—probably,” I say.

“Holy shit, Finn,” Alex says. “God, I thought they...” We look at each other, since with our hands tied there’s not much else to do, though she wants to help. I WISH she could help. “I’m sorry. I should’ve tried something. I’m sorry.” A wall of concerned faces, and I’m somehow the least shocked. Or most? Can’t say I know how shock works – as in, medically. I guess I’m figuring that out right now.

<Ferdinand> I whisper. <Where’d you go?>

“What happened to us?” Maritime asks, from very far away.

“We gazed into the abyss,” my mother murmurs, “and the abyss gazed back, so beautiful we couldn’t look away...” She grimaces, suddenly tired. *Old*. “If it wasn’t lucent enough, Maritime, you’re siding with the fanatics.”

“I apologise – for losing control of the situation.”

“They nearly killed my...” She stops. “He was going to kill Finn, Maritime. You were going to let him.”

“He wasn’t. I wasn’t.” She clasps her hands, gripping something only she can see. “Blinded by the light! *Blinded* by it! All you had to do was sit there.”

“I was trying to stop them from erasing our work.”

“It’s not OUR work.”

“Then why be so consumed by guilt?”

“I have done my *utmost* to do the right thing! To be kind, and safe, even when that was much, much harder!” Almost a snarl. “It would’ve worked if it wasn’t for your interference!”

“Hey,” Alex says. “Hey! I’ve got something to bloody add and I’d appreciate it if you bloody *listened*! I’m tired of this fucking *bullshit*! Fuck!” The entire room swivels towards her, and I’m not one for wanton swearing but on occasion, I suppose it’s necessary. “Jesus CHRIST!” she says. “Okay, thank you. Now, if you could do me a solid with one straight answer – just one! – I’d love to know why we found a recording of ourselves, from three years ago, that NONE of us remember. I was gonna ask earlier, but then everyone got sidetracked and we nearly died – again! – due to something that clearly isn’t our FUCKING problem.”

“Yeah!” Wake adds, for moral support.

“There were videos of us doing a test, or an experiment, related to this Illumination crap. You were there too,” she tells Sinas. “Talking about your brother. It was in the data archives, while you were busy being an asshole.”

He goes pale (or pale-r). “What?”

My mother purses her lips. “You discovered that, did you?”

“I guess so.” Alex folds her arms, then unfolds them. The faint glow from the sphere seems to strengthen, turning briefly blue as it washes over us. Ferdinand slinks up to me, tucking his thick, scaly neck beneath my elbow, and I scratch the folded skin under his jaw. I’m focusing on it, and not; an imaginary warmth that makes me think of lying in my bed on Earth, unable to sleep.

Long, cold nights.

Just like this has been a very long day.

“You did take part in an experiment like this, once before,” my mother says.

“We... did?” Sinas asks.

“It wasn’t intended to turn out the way it did, but— there were reasons. Good reasons.”

“Why don’t we remember it?” Wake asks.

“Because Illumination... it has that effect, occasionally. The things inside, they overwrite... I’m sorry. Give me a moment.” She shudders, a whole-body twitch – as if the light from the sphere both disgusts and attracts her, a diseased sunflower. “Memory. It affects memory. We still don’t know how, or why. But it’s one of the dangers.”

Alex squints suspiciously. “There were reasons, you said, for this other experiment. What were they? Why us? *Why are we here?* Again?”

The chamber core turns red and my mother’s face rusts. Her head tilts, like there’s water stuck in her ear, hard to dislodge. I get to my feet (non-trivial, with

the restraints) and glance over my shoulder, at the suspended sphere, the guards in the distance, then back. “Mum?” I ask. “Are you okay?”

“We needed you, because of your father— I wanted you to... no. It wasn’t my fault.” Her voice is pleading, then angry. “I wanted you to see him, and they wanted a way to... to get inside...” Just talking about it seems traumatic, even though she was so confident before.

It’s like she’s turned into me.

“It had to be you, Finn,” she says, her eyes locking with mine. “You’re connected to that place, and still so— malleable. We could test Illumination, by using you. Them. It won’t hurt you. I *never* meant to hurt you.”

“She’s manipulating you,” Maritime warns.

“You think I’m manipulating them?” Her eyes flash. “*You’re* the one who—”

“Your mother is a liar.” I find myself shifting under Maritime’s gaze. “How many charges to go?” she calls out.

“He’s dead,” Alex says, with strange certainty. “My dad – my *biological* dad – is dead. That’s why Finn’s never met him. Right? Sinas’ brother is dead. Wake’s grandparents are dead. That’s why we’re here. Well, it might not be the only reason, but it’s one of them. It makes us special.” She smiles grimly. “Because Illumination is dead. That’s the connection. And you’re using us, and it’s effed up, and d’you know how I know it’s effed up? Because I guess you tried once, and failed once, and covered it up, and now you’re trying AGAIN, and you were still gonna keep it a secret from us! *You won’t even tell us why we’re here?!*”

Suddenly, the battlebots move. They jet downwards, taking cover behind desks, pillars, out of sight. The remaining hijackers raise their guns as Maritime raises her palm. “Please don’t, Haru.”

My mother hovers above her console, surrounded by smoke. “It’s not my fault. I simply need to see. I need to see before this ends. You can leave me here, and I’ll destroy it— I promise you. But... *I* can’t leave, Maritime.”

“If those bots do *anything* else, take them down,” Maritime mutters, to the nearest set of guards. “Her, too.”

With the way the light shifts around us, and the repeating bell, it’s starting to feel like the arboretum when I touched the monster’s glow: a physical sense of chaos, and drowning, and wrongness. The world’s a spinning coin, finally about to settle, and the proud figureheads are ready to go down with their ships.

Wake shoves herself sideways, making for a row of seats.

“Hey! Don’t move!” a guard shouts.

“Hey yourself! I’m just finding a place where I won’t get SHOT, alright?”

We *are* in the open, which isn’t great if triggers get pulled, so I shuffle after her with my geckoboos. With Khorin gone, nobody’s too intent on stopping us. We crouch between the benches at the front of the observation gallery.

“It’s *your* fault we’re stuck here!” Wake hisses, at Sinas. “We could’ve escaped by now!”

“I wanted us to survive,” he says.

“I was THIS close to telling that Khorin mango YOU’RE the one who murred his buddies, just so I could watch him smash the shit out of you.”

“Do what you want.” He shrugs. “I don’t need you to understand. It’s better if we’re on the winning side.”

“I don’t think there is one,” Alex replies.

“The safer side, then. The side where we get to go home. Although I’ll admit this went sideways – a bit.” He glances at me. Cracks his fingers, *pop-pop-pop*. “Sorry.”

He *cracks his fingers*. With two free hands.

He does also have two free feet.

Alex gasps. “What the Kawangi?” (I think that’s another *Moon’s Haunted* character.)

“You’re lucky these suits have loads of pockets.” He takes out his laser pocketknife, twirling it around one finger.

“You’ve had that this WHOLE TIME?”

“Yup.”

“Then *why didn’t you cut us free earlier—*”

“It would’ve been counterproductive.”

“—or use it to slice through Pendant’s door—”

“I needed to save the battery.” He raises his palms when he sees her look. “It ALSO doesn’t have the juice for cutting through space-grade bulkheads. But handcuffs? It can do handcuffs.” He activates the blade, and it buzzes, blending with Illumination’s scarlet glow. “Hold still.”

Its warmth stabs close to my wrists. After a few seconds of electromagnetism versus plastic, the plastic forfeits and I can rip my hands free. It feels *good*, and so do my ankles, and I stretch them out, roll them around, and relish in the fact that I’m in slightly less pain than before.

“No need to thank me,” he adds, starting on Wake.

“I’m still gonna haunt the *ash* out of you if we die here,” Alex replies.

I wonder if Sinas was right – if we ARE safer, with Maritime. It’s not an unreasonable point of view. What now, though? Could I talk to Maritime? Nah, she’d never listen. We *could* run, maybe, but I’m not sure if that would improve things. It hasn’t, so far.

Could I convince my mother to— do what? Leave? I barely talk to her about the MeshSims I like (and if I do, she struggles to care). One reason she rubbishes the games I play is she thinks more conflicts in media should be resolved by talking. Not shootouts, or car chases, or gratuitous swordfights; more *science*, more *debate*. I don’t disagree, but debates aren’t foolproof either, and we’re Exhibit A. (Gratuitous swordfights, though? They’ll ALWAYS fix a problem. Maybe not the right problem, but they’ll fix... something.)

If we instead don’t do anything... and wait for this conflict to boil over, or burn itself out... will we be consumed by scalding steam, instead?

Biggest conundrum: we still need a way off this station. Therefore, we need a ship, and therefore, we need friends who have ships, and considering the options, that's got to be one of the factions in this room (minus the ghosts).

Ultimately, it comes down to us. Memories, connections... they're tricky things. Even trickier is one more secret, and while I'm pondering whether to ruin things further, *I'm still not doing anything to solve our problems.*

Maritime said my mother was lying. About what, specifically?

"I'm sorry," my mother says.

"So am I," Maritime replies.

"No, Finn, I'm..." Her eyes gleam with devastation. I don't think I'll like what's next. She ducks behind the console, and a battlebot jets out of the broken control room window – a silvery blur, faster than I can follow. Another starts shooting, in sweeping ionised arcs that don't immediately hit us but force the whole room into cover.

"Stop them!" Maritime shouts. "She's going for the activator!"

In the time it takes to say those words, there are electric screams as the closest battlebot is taken down, spinning wildly, scorched by strobe-like gunfire. My mother's bent over, typing furiously, conducting at orchestra in triple-time. She flips up a plastic cover, takes hold of a lever. Maritime's about to fly over and drag her back to hell herself when—

Tick... Tick... Tick... It sounds like we're *inside* a grandfather clock.

"What did you DO?" Maritime asks.

"A final light," my mother says. "Before the candle's snuffed out."

"Turn it off."

"You, of all people, should know that's not possible."

In the middle of the room, the spherical core starts to spin – slow at first, then speeding up. Its black, oily surface ripples under ever-changing light, like caustics at the bottom of a pool. In contrast, the equatorial band where the clumps of cables are attached remains perfectly stationary, thanks to an enormous counter-rotating mechanism that whirrs and whines. There are no visible gears, belts or motors; the spin's probably driven by a maglev system.

"We should leave," Alex whispers. "Right? This is bad. Right?"

"Might not be an option," Sinas replies.

"We can *make* it an option!"

The exit is on the far side of the chamber, and probably locked tight. The sphere turns, faster and faster, impossibly well-balanced, almost bulging at the equator, as if not quite solid. It feels too massive to be moving that quickly. A gradual, mechanical *shriek* builds in my ears, hair tingling with static as—

Tick...

—the sphere reaches critical speed—

Tick...

—and light bursts forth.

Tock!

It feels like there'll never be another night-time. The walls, the air, the insides of my eyeballs turn white, the same glow you see in a Call of Duty deathmatch before a nuke turns everything to vapour. The sphere sparkles, the light solid, a soupy haze I can almost touch. The cables jump and hitch as if overflowing with energy. The ticking, the whine, the distant bell – it's a battlement of sound as physical as my body.

Behind the light, there are shapes: inkblots, arcs, joyous dances, laced together like coronal plumes on the surface of the sun.

<Containment error> says the Mesh.

Darkness. Half a second. Just enough to make me think I've gone blind.

<Containment recovered. Temporary breach.>

The sphere-sun returns, now bruised by garish colour, yellows and purples, growing more intense – as if arriving from a great distance.

<Anomalous signals detected.>

Those words seem so *much* an understatement. Fractal expanses of fear and bad intentions slice across my vision, so individual, so distinct, each a fresh arrival forcing its way through the sphere, full of naked ambition. Figures dart past below us – friends, enemies, who knows. The purple light pauses, then adjusts in scale, breathcloud to stormcloud, surrounding the figures in its beautiful radiance, cradling them, before turning solid and *slamming* inward. It compresses bones and skin until it forces itself through the cracks in their suits, into their screaming mouths, and a fierce violet glow erupts from where these figures used to be, sputtering like pockets of hydrogen.

Shapes scatter.

What's a self-preservation instinct supposed to do, at a time like this? I focus on the solid material under my geckoboos, the sensation of breathing, not closing my eyes and not being *consumed*.

"Finn! This way! Come on!"

I follow someone – Alex, I think – through the shafts of radiance.

"*The key!*" I hear Maritime shout. "*I have the other key!*"

She's there, in the distance, a blurred shadow. Everything that isn't light is shadow: the people, the benches, the consoles, the viewscreens, an interplay of bright and gloom in which bright is clearly winning. Yellow tendrils snatch at another hijacker. There's a hiss of acid and static, their suit jerking like a puppet on a string. Yellow sweeps above us, *through* us, and I'm suddenly desperately envious, jealous, of— what? I have so much resentment it makes me want to DIE, and I see Alex floating, ahead of me, and I'm grabbing her and smashing her head into my knee so she'll never speak to me again and I can take back my—

No, no no no. Not my feeling. Someone else's.

Grand pillars of amber encircle us, a throne room for rage, despair, abandonment. Waves of feeling ripple through me, accompanied by strange, shifting landscapes; half-forgotten dreams carved from twilight. Tides, on frozen shores. The spray of blood against my cheeks – not my own, but this *person*, this *city*, this *species* I want to destroy, Alex, Sinas, Wake, Tao,

mother, father, me, life pooling out of cracks in their heads as I hold a red-slicked hammer.

I want this, more than anything.

I don't.

Fear. Disgust. Hands around my neck. Mine around another. Blackness, in my head, the exact opposite of where we are now. An ouroboros of endless conflict, the only sensation amid an endless sea of... light.

Plasma bolts streak into the ceiling.

I look down, at my hand.

And I feel— presence.

I feel a ghost. Dust. *Life*.

I see the barest outline of a human shape, an artist's work in progress, yanking itself into brief existence with extraordinary effort. Its features blend, like dye in water, and its voice is deep, harsh, and filled with longing.

"*Help... us...*" it says.

In the distance, screaming.

In the distance, monsters.

It's only a matter of time before the light comes for everyone.

"How?" I reply.

And—

You.

Yes, you, reading this now.

The next time you have your nightmares – remember *me*.

—push myself away from the body. It bounces limply against the chamber wall, eyes vacant, cauterised wounds stitched across its stomach.

I freeze in shock.

There's something in my hand; a metal sheet. I drop it, try to move, but there's an arm holding me back.

Sinas.

"You good?" he asks.

"I... don't know." I turn around. "What happened?"

"Oh." He presses his lips together, then lets me go.

I leave the body be. We're at the door – the exit.

"It won't fucking open!" Alex shouts. "Wake, can you get it unlocked?"

"Alex, again, I didn't go to wizard school—"

"Screw wizards, we need a bloody exorcist! Shit!" She ducks as a purple glow briefly overwhelms us, snapping outwards from the sphere. "Sinas! Knife!"

Gamely, he stabs it into the vault-like barrier, but there's *no* chance it'll do more than generate sparks.

"Finn!" my mother calls out, at the edge of my hearing (well past the edge of anybody else's). It takes a while to spot her. She's over by the sphere, next to the equatorial band, where there's an airlock. Then, her voice is inside our heads. <Finn. Alex. We need to get inside the containment shield. It can keep us safe until this dissipates.> Her silhouette beckons.

<That's a 'nah, mate' from me!> Alex yells back. <Just let us out!>

<Trust me, I don't like this any more than you do, but Illumination's tachyon shields are designed for our protection. They're for this eventuality.>

<Didn't you let all *shit* out in the first place?!>

<There was an error. I had no intention of—>

<No!> Alex grabs my arm. <Wake, stop!>

It's Wake who cannonballs across the chamber towards my mother, head down, curled up, as if being a smaller target will somehow avoid notice when our entire existence is lit up like a supernova.

"*Dammit*," Alex hisses. "We're gonna bloody die." Her zero-g hair forms an incandescent halo, colours cascading up and down her suit. "It seems counter-intuitive to run *towards* the ghost birthing canal. Y'know? Y'KNOW?"

I nod. "Yeah. But..."

"No other options?" she asks.

"I was going to say we should probably stick together."

"Finn! Alex!" my mother calls out. Sinas is long gone.

"Alright." She swallows. "C'mon."

A hand grabs her leg.

It's the dead body. Purplish light spills from its gaping mouth, and from the honeycombed wounds in its stomach. Alex screams. I want to. The thing drags her down and she tries to kick it off, dead, not dead, tendrils of light entwining her, slipping as if they can't get a grip. Its fingers, though, don't let go. I activate my suit thrusters and cannon into both of them, feet first, a jumble of limbs as my momentum propels us towards the chamber's faraway floor. I'm beginning to think this was a bad idea as we keep accelerating, but too late now, and I hope Alex understands what I'm trying to do, as—

Crunch! The body hits first, then we do, legs braced. The bone-jarring impact throws us apart. The thing spirals away, legs flailing, shrieking brokenly. Alex activates her own thrusters, slams to a stop.

"What the *hell*," Alex breathes. She glances at me. "Thanks."

As we pass the control room, I notice another body. I'm about to give it a wide berth when I realise it's Maritime.

She doesn't *look* dead. Unconscious? Claspingsomething in her hands.

Before self-doubt interrupts, I fly to her, and extremely quickly and delicately – like a midnight mum's-sleeping freezer dessert heist – I snatch the object she's holding and wiggle it free. It's small, and I slip it into my suit.

Slowly, her eyes open. She blinks uncertainly.

I race after Alex, heart in mouth.

Up close, the non-rotating portion of the core has a transparent outer surface: a foggy material barrier, which itself contains a glinting, glowing... sky? It's like a series of light waves is bouncing around inside of it. My unqualified guess is this wall of energy is the containment shield, and there's a rectangular passage through which the others have already passed. Tree-trunk cables undulate on either side. I fly inside before any ghosts catch up.

My mother seals the shield behind me. "As long as we're on this side, we'll be safe," she explains. "The barrier is intended to prevent escape, but it's equally as useful for keeping out unwanted guests."

"It failed once, didn't it?" Sinas says. "Some of your 'guests' did escape just now."

"And what's with the zombies?" Alex asks. "I thought this was an evil ghost problem, but now there's effing light zombies?!"

"They aren't... *zombies*," my mother says, distastefully.

"Then WHAT – ARE – THEY."

"We're unsure, precisely, how the process occurs."

"Of *course* you are."

"It's possession, isn't it," Wake says. "I bet its possession. Oh no..."

I turn away, gazing at the maelstrom outside. It's quieter, mostly due to the shield blocking the screams. My reflection is a fragmented collection of tired eyes, bloody cheeks, a stupid nose. *Stupid nose*. I wipe snot away with the back of my glove, and close my eyes, staying very still. *Inhale. Exhale*. I need to lock in. Need to stay calm. Otherwise...

"It's a bit like that, isn't it," Sinas says, next to me. His eyes meet mine in the glass.

It's not dissimilar to watching the end of the world. The end of everything.

"Sorry," he says. "I didn't mean to interrupt."

"You didn't," I reply, too fast.

"What do you think will happen?"

"To the station? Or to... us?"

"Us." He smiles slightly.

I wish there were more to say than 'I don't know.'

"Or what do you *want* to happen to us," he adds.

Well. That's a very different question.

"I want us to go home," I say eventually, "and, um... move forwards. I want things to go back to normal. So that people stop getting hurt."

"Fair." He nods.

My heart goes *ba-dump, ba-dump, ba-dump*. The hairs on my forearms prickle inside my suit. I can't believe I have such a stupid crush. It's not *smart*.

Can't believe it, but can't do much about it. Can't help that his voice makes me feel this way. Can't help how his face looks sharp, and composed, and proud, such a wanton contrast to mine. Can't help wishing we could... talk. "What do you want to happen?" I ask, throat painfully dry.

"Ha. Me?" He shrugs. "I want to check— well, first, I want to apologise. For the hostage thing."

"Wasn't your fault," I reply.

"Still, though, I didn't..." He runs his tongue over his bottom lip, nervously, delicately. "Never mind."

No, you can tell me.

"I didn't want to get you in trouble, is all." His expression settles, approaching neutrality. "I'd rather not be a— a problem for you, if you understand what I'm trying to say." He tilts his head. "You know what's strange, though? I feel like I've known you for longer – as if we were friends, once upon a time, but forgot about it. If you guys found that video, I suppose that's the truth. I just don't remember." He shrugs again. "I'm sorry."

"Me too. It feels like— I mean, there's no problem. It's fine."

"I don't want anybody to get hurt."

"Right."

I wonder if we're both saying the same thing.

Words swirl around in my mouth. *I like you. I hate you.* So much so that I was always afraid, and that I decided getting better was impossible. Better to grow beyond. Isn't it?

"You're really nice, Sinas," I say.

He looks surprised. "Thanks. You are too, Finn. Really."

He smiles briefly, and leaves to join the others, and I could go too, but... I stay, and watch, and think my thoughts.

It aches, how freaking *stupid* I am. Can't help it.

Stagnant water.

"*Haru!*" Maritime shouts.

I jump.

"*You did this!*" She floats, incandescent with rage, on the other side of the shield. "*Look at what happens! See what this does to people! I told you there was no way to control it, I told you, I TOLD YOU. Look!*" She points to a body, its neck snapped at a sickening angle— and yet it shivers, embraced by a pulsing yellow glow.

It's Pendant. Their glasses float beside him, along with a chunk of bloody meat that might be their tongue. Everywhere, in the shifting colours, there are things I'd rather not see. My eyes barely register them, for the sake of my sanity.

"*Where's the detonator?!*" Maritime calls out, to others unseen. I'm reminded of the explosive charges that were placed across the chamber, ready to vaporise the experiment, and us with it. "*Let them go, Haru,*" she urges. "*Let them go. They don't have to die.*"

"My son is safer with me."

"*He'd be safer far away from here!*"

"Will you do it, then?" my mother says softly. "Become the monster?"

"Yes. *If that's what it takes.*" Maritime looks down. "*But please don't make me. Please, before they kill us ALL—*"

<Incoming public channel!> Ferdinand announces. <Accept connection?>

It's an external signal, from off-station – weird, but not totally unexpected. I'd expect others to have figured something's wrong on Starfish; the Titan colony, maybe, or mining plants on Enceladus.

<Accept> I say.

<Hello! If anyone—hear me, we are—roaching Starfish—six hours. My name is Farah Oliv—task force—>

My mother freezes.

"Farah?" Maritime asks. It's the most shocked I've seen her.

<Maritime!>

"Why are you— how are you here?"

<Could say—same about you. Are the crew safe? The students? Tell me, are—alive?>

Maritime glances at us. *"For now. They're with me, and... and Haru. The rest of the crew are already off-station."*

<Haru's there too?>

"Yes. She's here. There have been complications."

<Then I'm begging you—then please—wait for me, and don't do what—planning. Please—so close. On my way. Haru, you need to stay away from—don't touch them. It's contaminated. Not secure.>

"You're breaking up," Maritime says. "I can't hear what—"

"You're too late, Farah," my mother interrupts. "I tried to stop her, but it's done. It's ruined."

<Did—explain? Did you tell them—happened? Do they know?>

"I explained," Maritime says.

<Alex? Finn? Tao? Sinas? Wake? If you can—me, don't listen—her. Don't believe her!"

Alex frowns. "Um. Hello?"

<Don't believe her!"

"Who is this? Which 'her'?"

<Both! They'll never admit—>

"I've told them the TRUTH," Maritime retorts, "for better or worse. Now they're a problem, but we can deal with it later."

<Then why—secret? Unless you realised—wasn't ready. Or realised it couldn't be proven. Is that it? I wish I'd gotten—sooner!>

"Ignore her," my mother tells us. "This woman, she's never been here. She doesn't understand. She's ungrateful! I've exerted incredible effort fixing her moronic mistakes and in return, she pretends we never existed. Now, she comes crawling back? For what?"

We're being gaslit from three directions at once, the voices on the radio and on the Mesh and in my ears merging into conversational static, like a party that's gone on far too late when all I want to do is curl up and fall asleep.

"I'm glad you want to help, Farah," Maritime replies. "I'm glad to hear your voice. Truly. But it's too far gone, here. They've already escaped. You shouldn't come."

<I don't care! Just don't—anything else! We can still... the task force is on the—lo afterwards, in case of a second collapse. Six hours! Six—please, Haru. Please, Maritime. I want—things right. No more lies.>

The datastream ends.

My mother slaps the glass. "No," she mutters. "No. Not like this."

"Mum?" I ask. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong, Finn," she says. "But Maritime? If I were you, I'd LEAVE."

A reanimated body comes speeding toward the shielding – a glowing blur, emitting high-pitched screams – as if trying to bust through the containment field with pure dumb force. As soon as it touches, it's vaporised, into a burst of glittering greenish-blue that shotguns bits of melted spacesuit (and/or melted human) across the chamber. Maritime hisses, ducking away. Energy whiplashes between cables before coalescing into fractal snowflakes. The shield wobbles, then recovers.

There are other bodies, out there, starting to move.

My mother falls to her knees.

"Where's the detonator?" Maritime calls out, her desperation increasingly evident. My own fear's building up, too, a Jenga tower of emotion. Telling myself to stay calm only goes so far, and yes, while this containment area is safer than whatever's outside... it's not exactly a fun Maccas playground party, either.

Okay. Think. Essentially, this place acts as a ring, or moat, separating the innermost Illumination chamber from the outside world. Behind me, through one final airlock, is the experiment itself (which – unknowingly – we were brought here to see). Stepping closer, I can glimpse the portal, or window, or gate, or door, which Maritime and my mother are so intent on warring over: a shimmering, undulating, epileptic spectrum, hemmed in by a ring of matte black panels, to which its ragged edges have attached themselves via twitching, questing roots. Around it is a spherical support structure, five metres in radius, also spinning, a hypnotic kaleidoscope that infinitely focuses and reflects and refracts the tear in reality at its heart.

It takes me a while to absorb it.

I'm drawn towards it, too. Perhaps it's the tranquillity I can sense, inside that final space. No parents. No terrorists. No monsters. No nations. Only light. For the fiftieth time, I wish we were alone, so we could talk, and figure out our lives, and our feelings. I could explain, free from my mother's gaze. Free from Maritime. Free from Khorin. Free from *ghosts*. I don't think the others would understand, but— they might.

I glance down, at the detonator I stole from Maritime: black, angular, and curiously light.

Time. Always too much of it, or not enough.

"Time, huh?" Alex says, plucking the thought from my head; perhaps I murmured it aloud. She floats beside me. "That portal does LOOK cool, but is it worth all this trouble?"

She's also hiding something in her hand: a clear, polymer bio-key that, if I'm not mistaken, very recently belonged to my mother.

"D'you steal that?" Alex asks, out of the side of her mouth.

I nod.

"Me too," she says. "Because fuck those guys."

We contemplate the portal.

Drawn to it.

"Sinās," Alex whispers. "Wake. Let's go."

"Where, exactly?" Sinās asks. "I'm seeing *zero* options."

"In there." She points at the shimmering core.

"Uh, no? Are you suicidal?"

"I don't mean INTO the gate! Just into the room, so we can work things out, away from..." She lowers her voice further. "*Her*. And *her*. It's going off like a frog in a sock and need a few minutes to think things over, since I reckon nobody here actually has control of this situation and I'm preeetty sure we can make better decisions at this point. So, let's go in. We lock 'em outside."

Sinās' eyes widen, in way that says 'no'.

Wake's eyes widen, in way that says 'yes!'

"What about Maritime?" Sinās asks. "She's still alive—"

"Dude, no!" Wake whispers. "You *really* think they'll let us go once this is over? Her telling us about Illumination is a great excuse to fridge us after."

Alex takes the key, touches it to the airlock. It slides aside and the portal is there.

Real.

Metres away.

In that precise moment, there's only one thing to do. We dive into the innermost chamber, in a panicked tumble of vacsuits, and before my mother knows what's happened, Alex seals the door behind us.

FINN X

Do you know what the strangest part is? This doesn't feel like the worst idea.

From one point of view, sure, we're in the lion's jaws and are deciding to take a casual stroll into its gullet. From another, it's like jogging up a long, steep hill, out of energy, then finally seeing the crest; the state of the downhill is anyone's guess, but I'm strangely optimistic. (Or perhaps, when you're sufficiently exhausted, even a lion's gullet looks like a nice place to rest...)

The portal hangs, suspended, a casino-neon billboard. Its jet-black frame conceals apparatus beneath flower-like panels, a mystery of purpose, but it hums, softly, as if the air itself is singing. The notes are both joyful and mournful.

Behind me, my mother's banging on the door.

I don't look. Instead, I lose myself in the portal window – a veil of limitless possibility. Is this how the first explorers felt, seeing new lands appear on the horizon? The first astronauts, waiting on their launchpads, strapped to towers of chemical fire? Some claim there's little reason for humanity to colonise the stars – not when there's so much left to do on Earth – but often, a sense of wonder is enough. The fact that it's *there*. The hope that tomorrow, it might shine light on a better world.

"So," Alex says. "What should we do with Illumination?"

"And we get to decide that?" Sinas asks. "For everyone?"

"Why not? We're part of their secret."

"What we are is *unqualified*."

"Well, the galahs outside seem equally unqualified. I thought we could give it a go."

"Why don't you start, then? I assume you've got some bright ideas." Sinas IS looking at my mother. Whatever she's up to, it's not improving his state of mind.

A grim breath, as Alex pockets her stolen key. "From the level of security, I reckon these keys are hard to come by, so we aren't getting disturbed unless they literally break the door down – and since Finn took their detonator, that's unlikely. Nobody's doing shit unless we let them, which gives us leverage."

“Finn stole their detonator,” Sinas says.

I nod.

“*You*. Stole their *detonator*.” He smiles, not particularly sincerely, then shrugs helplessly. “I’d have guessed they’d be more careful after we pulled that stunt the first time. Don’t give it to Wake, whatever you do, or she might ‘smash that like button’ again—”

“Shut your *fricking* mouth,” Wake retorts. “You don’t get to lecture me about *crap*.”

“Not a lecture.”

“Two parts to that sentence, Sinas.” She puts hands on her hips, then considers us with actual newfound respect. “Congrats on being total kleptos, you two – THAT’S the family resemblance.”

“Personally,” Alex interrupts, “I think we should turn Starfish into space junk.”

“Lol, no,” Wake asks. “Insane behaviour. Bad take.”

“Why? It’s an abrupt change in direction, I’ll admit that, but that was before we learned ‘Illumination’ is a fancy synonym for ‘creepy nightmare hell portal’.”

“It’s not a *hell portal*,” Wake grumbles, which is a fun phrase to say when you’re standing next to a hell portal. “It’s a black hole with dead people inside.”

Alex twitches. “Is that better?”

“I don’t wanna be responsible for destroying their work. I don’t want to destroy it. We can leave, they can keep developing it, and maybe – when they’re ready – we can help with their experiments.”

“You still want to cooperate? After they lied to bring us here? It’s SO effing shady, Wake.”

“Your mum said she was planning to explain things, after we arrived. She never got that chance – for obvious reasons! If you think about it, she’d HAVE to explain it to us, to get us to cooperate. Right?” Wake nods to herself. “Also, I think you’re forgetting how glacier this is. It’s massively glacier.”

“A swimming pool full of sharks is pretty clearsky too, but that doesn’t make me swim in one! This was supposed to be a science camp, Wake! A SCIENCE camp! I was looking forward to DOING science, not BEING it!” She catches herself, heaves a breath. “Remember when you told me this station might be the site of a huge conspiracy? Wild illegal experiments? Levers in the desert? Somehow, the world’s stupid enough to make you *right*, and still, you’re—”

“Of course I remember! I also never said that was bad.”

“I’m not comfortable with destroying Starfish either,” Sinas interrupts. “For several reasons.”

“Several reasons, huh?” Alex grins, then bites her lip. “Faaaaantastic.”

“First, it’s a crime. It is – I can’t understate this – a REALLY BIG crime.”

“Then let Maritime do it! Return her detonator.”

“Plus, Dr. Hanamura emphasised the importance of this research... and I think she’s right. It’s not for us to snuff out, just because a few of us might disagree. These ideas aren’t inherently evil. They might be useful, and science

is about that curiosity, isn't it? The desire to find out what this means – for all of us.”

“I don't know where you've been, Sinas, but there's a bunch of *dead fuckin' people* out there. I felt them in my head. I saw what they want to do to me. They'll do the same to the everyone, I bet. D'you get that?”

“I...” His eyes flick away. “I don't know what I felt.”

“Okay, but you have eyes, right? There were like, twenty living people in that room ten minutes ago, and now there's us. We're what's left. We don't even know if they're dead-dead, or brain-dead, or possessed...” She shudders. “If those monsters get loose on Earth – not one, or two, but a hundred, or a thousand – that's an apocalypse I'd rather not be a part of. *We can't guarantee that won't happen.*”

“Dr. Hanamura mentioned protection methods. And Earth's a long way away.”

“I'd rather not bet on that, if it's all the same to you.”

“Alex, I agree it's dangerous. I'm with you. But still, I don't think we should destroy it, because...” He raises a hand to stop her interrupting. “If we destroyed everything we didn't understand, we'd still be living in caves.”

“How poetic.”

“You said it yourself – we don't know what the monsters do. Or IF they're monsters. But we do know there are people, inside Illumination. We know they're in pain. We know we can try to talk to them.” He turns away from the devastation, smitten by a private thought. “Which is what they wanted, isn't it? It's why they picked us.”

“Because you have a dead brother,” Alex mutters.

“Because I have a dead brother.” For a moment, I think his voice will crack, but of course, it's impressively calm. “And I'd give anything in the world to see him again.”

“I'm sorry,” Alex says. “I understand. But—”

“I don't think you do,” Wake says. “Alex, you're lucky.”

“You don't know everything about my life.”

“I think I know enough. You need to listen. The idea that my grandparents could be waiting for me, on the far side of that window? I understand that it's—trust me, I *understand* they're not going to be reborn, and they won't walk out and hug me like magic, but I NEED to chase that possibility. I'm... what's the word? I'm obligated. To be curious.” She sounds far more than curious.

“I get it.”

“Saying you 'get it' doesn't give you permission to bulldoze us.”

I notice Alex is the furthest of us from the portal. “I'm not trying to *bulldoze* anyone. I just think we should be careful. Finn, back me up here.”

“Um... yeah. We should be careful.” The light beckons, both attracting and repelling me.

It's beautiful. I should hate it. “I think—I think we should destroy it.” As the words are pulled out of me, the light thrashes, a solar flare.

“*Finn!*” my mother shouts, muffled. “*Finn, let me through! They’re coming!*”

The muffled *crunch* of distant gunfire. Screaming voices.

“That’s two votes for keeping it, and two votes against,” Sinas says.

“This is a vote now?” Alex asks.

“We’re not going to unanimously agree, so yeah, I suppose it’s a vote.” He shoots her a glance, daring her to disagree. “Plus, here’s another problem to sort out in the next five minutes: do we tell other people about this? Go public?”

“I dunno. I’d have to think about it,” Wake says.

“THAT’S hard to believe,” Sinas replies.

“Hey, I might be self-centred but that doesn’t mean I’ll upload literally anything for Mesh views. There are *consequences*.” She thinks to herself. “One option is to pass an info packet to one of the bigger newsfeeds – ask them to publish it without any direct link to us. One of my friends has tried that before. The issue is nobody really pays attention to those sleeper places. It would ALSO remove the leverage we get from having that info.” Wake sniffs. “Keeping secrets is good, sometimes. Once the information is out, you lose that.”

“Just because you don’t listen to newsfeeds doesn’t mean nobody does.”

“Sinas, it’s just corpo agendas and AI slop.”

We could send it to a scientific journal, or an open-source site. I’d support that – but I get the feeling Alex disagrees.

“We’d be changing the world,” she says. “Which feels like a lot. Or an action we shouldn’t take, without more... consideration.” She swallows. “More everything.”

I understand her apprehension. There’s a pre-Illumination world versus a post-Illumination world, and if we do this, we’re the bridge between them. It’s the four of us, on a hockey pitch, and the player charging towards us is the size of history. We could either try and tackle it head on, or run away, and leave it up to the goalie and chance. Perhaps the coach can call a time out?

“Maritime – and I don’t 100% agree with her, I *don’t* – Maritime saw what they were doing here, and it was bad enough for her to throw her life away to make sure it was never realised,” Alex continues. “It’s hard to shake that.”

“/I think there’s a grudge involved,” Wake replies. “Like, were the hundreds of people who worked here evil space Nazis? No! Is your mum an evil space Nazi? Nope. There must be tea which we don’t yet know about.”

“Maritime’s a terrorist,” Sinas replies. “Not hypothetically. She is. If we choose to destroy the station, we’re playing right into their hands.”

“Says the person who played *right into their hands*,” Alex replies.

“I wanted to keep us breathing after YOU led us right back into danger!” He bites every word. “What part of that don’t you *fucking* understand?”

“Okay! Okay, sorry! Maybe you were trying to do the right thing. Maybe we should’ve tried going along with Haru. But I feel you’re letting personal stuff get in the way of— I mean, do you really think hundreds of people dying is worth it because Illumination *might* be able to act as a billion-dollar Ouija board?”

“If that’s how you see it, sure.”

“Am I wrong? Am I wrong, though?”

“I’m honestly beginning to not care what you think.”

“I know tons of people like you, Alex,” Wake adds. “*People* who didn’t know what the yekkk they want.”

“What? I just want things to go back to NORMAL—”

“Exactly! You never want anything to change! You want life to be the same, yesterday, today, tomorrow, forever. That’s freaking BORING. It’s the WORST. If you took a second to think, you’d realise we’re needed. We were invited here, and that makes this an opportunity. They need us, Alex. *Us*.”

“Wow, maybe cool it on being a raging dickhead? I’ll remind you Maritime and Haru could not care LESS about us unless we follow their orders, so being ‘invited’ doesn’t seem that great to me. We’ve also got no idea what the hell this all means and a thylacine’s chance of figuring it out.”

“We have a duty,” Sinas says, “to be curious. To wonder. Erasing—”

“Ugh, you’re so *noble*! Why are you so *noble*?”

“No, Sinas is right!” Wake says. “He’s right. Those thugs want to erase Illumination. That’s wrong. It could fix so much. It could change so much.”

“Or ruin it,” Alex replies darkly.

I never wanted this conflict, or these lies. ‘*None of them could understand*’. A shitty, self-centred thing to think, but it’s true, so— I’m stuck. I’m stuck being me. I’m stuck realising my pain, and selfishness, and misguided sacrifice were probably less than worthless.

Look, the window seems to say. *Come closer*.

My head pounds. What would it feel like, to step inside? Would it hurt? Would it turn me to dust, or simply whisk me away?

We could find out.

Maybe *that’s* the true answer. Maybe that’s destiny. I’d almost rather that, than what’s happening now.

“It could,” I murmur, deep inside myself.

“What?” Alex asks.

“I agree with you,” I say.

“Anything else?”

I open my mouth, then close it. “Not really.”

“Well, thanks, I guess.” A pissed-off groan. “This doesn’t work, Finn, if you don’t tell me what you’re thinking.”

“Then destroy it,” I say. “It won’t do any good.”

“For you?” Sinas asks. “Or for me? I’m asking you to think about *me*.” Which I do far too much of already, but I raise my head, and he’s staring at me with weaponised eyes. “Perhaps Illumination’s a fairytale – too good to be true. But you’re asking me to throw it away, without ever giving it a chance?”

“That’s not what I meant...”

“Then what? You guys are asking for my opinion, and I *want* this thing to exist. What if we could walk through that gate, right now? Send ourselves through? Because that’s probably what they were trying to do, isn’t it? That’s

why we're here. They wanted to send *us*. And I'm standing next to it, near enough to touch, so close to... to the one person in the entire world who made my life worth more than *shit*." Ice, refracting the doorway's light.

"I thought we'd agree," Alex says softly. "I was so sure we'd agree on this."

"Why?" Wake replies. "There hasn't been time for us to actually be friends. We act like we're a clearsky SWAT team when *reeeally* we're four total strangers."

"Then let's fix that."

"What?"

"Let's **FIX** it." Alex grits her teeth, muscles tensed, preparing to leap off a cliff without surveying the bottom. "You wanna hear about me? You wanna hear what shit I like? Or what the worst day of my life was? Actually, y'know what? Here you go, *mate*. It wasn't the day I broke both my arms because a stupid fucking robot pushed me off an agritower, or when I bled litres onto my chair in science class and then blamed another girl who got sent to sickbay for it, or when stupid drugged-up arseholes tried to drown my dog. It was the day before I left to come **HERE**. That was the worst I've ever fucking felt. I was so crook and anxious that I really, **REALLY** tried to cancel it so I could just stay in my fucking room all summer, and the only reason I didn't is because the camp wouldn't let me. No matter what, I couldn't control that feeling, and the best part is there was no – bloody – reason for it! I should've been happy! So happy! Instead, I was shivering, paralysed in the corner, wondering why I didn't have the courage to break another fucking arm to get out of my *privilege*, or the simple *ability* to not be a piece of shit who's scared of having such a good life. I wanted the world to end. I wanted it to end, **SO** badly. And hey – now it might! Funny how that works." She gulps down a breath, stemming the flood.

"Lame," Wake says. "Skill issue."

"Sorry my country wasn't invaded – we can't all win the trauma Olympics."

"Don't blame me for expecting worse than 'one time, I got slightly depressed'." Her eyes flash, a feral intensity. "Okay, Sinas. You go," she says sweetly. "Tell us how your brother died."

He stares back, then gives her the middle finger. "Racing accident. I'll spare you the details."

"So, you're a rich kid."

"If that's your takeaway, sure."

"You were hover-racing when you're sixteen – you're *definitely* a rich kid."

"D'you know what she's thinking?" Alex says. "I bet Wake's thinking your life is *fine*. Yeah, okay, your brother died, but you've got money, so you're *lucky*."

"You're saying it, not her," Sinas mutters.

"Well, this bullshit's a competition to her and she doesn't actually care about anyone unless she's getting what she wants." She turns to Wake. "Close?"

"Fine, you got me." She rolls her eyes. "I'm the *poor foreign refugee kid* who had to work so *hard* to get here. So *inspiring*. If only you'd met the other dozen

kids I slapped out of my way to get here, or realised I'm a poser. Make up the story you want. Pick a favourite. Who caaaaares."

"I care," Alex says.

"Can you get my family back?"

"Probably not."

"Can you make me secretary general of the UN Justice Department?"

"Dude, I'm not even on the school council—"

"Then try HARDER, if you care so much! Or let me talk to my fricking grandparents." She sniffs, cheeks red. "I guess you already know what the worst day of my life is, so hey, I also love pizza and sometimes I eat so much of it I fricking vomit. There's a fun fact! Both of you don't know what the heck you're talking about. My name isn't even Wake."

That elicits an actual pause. "What?" Sinas asks.

"It's a nickname. Duh."

"What is your name, then?"

"Does it matter? I changed it 'cause of stuff. That's all you're getting."

"Well, I hate my family," Sinas says matter-of-factly. "I genuinely – 99% of the time – despise them."

"Don't say that."

"I can say whatever I like, because remember, *you don't know me*. But I half-killed my brother in a racing accident, and physics finished it off, and my parents don't completely disagree with that assessment so the only thing I'm allowed to do is be happy, and friendly, and perfectly perfect, because otherwise my brainwashed cult of a family will never let me go – and when I say 'cult', I mean it. This person you're looking at? They're a puppet. They don't fucking exist."

"You exist," I say. "I think you do."

"Yes, well, appearances can be deceiving. I was hoping this trip would be a month away from them – *just one month* – but apparently that was too big a gift for the universe to allow. My brother's *ghost* was too big a gift. And while we're at it, what about you, Finn: do you exist? Because I have my doubts."

I used to enjoy looking into his eyes, but now I don't. I can feel it falling apart. Cracks forming, snaking their way between us. (Forget cracks – we've already fallen through the ice into the dark, debilitating below, and the only thing left to determine is whether we can swim back to the surface, or...)

"Finn. Answer me."

"Yeah, um— I'm bad at this," I say.

"That's not exactly new."

It's frustrating, because people think I'm *nice*, or *polite*, but really, I'm— Blank. They see what they want.

I'm bad at people, and the world's full of them. Bad at making friends.

"I think I might hate you," I say. "I think you might hate me."

"I preferred it when he didn't talk," Wake says.

"Same here," I reply.

Alex snorts. "Wrecked."

"I wanted to pretend I didn't have room for hatred, but I do," I murmur. "Everyone does. Even if you don't hate other people, it's hard not to hate... yourself, sometimes. For the things you do. Or can't bring yourself to do."

It's all make-believe. Loving yourself and pretending to hate yourself. Hating yourself and pretending to love yourself.

I did my best.

I'm a shit person.

I'm doing great, things are fine, and this time next week, I won't be lying.

"My mum and Maritime said we'd met before," I say, drawn onward, downward, an Icarus in reverse. "That video we found; it showed we'd met. And I think—I think I *knew* that, already. Part of me knew this would happen. Part of me was already afraid."

"Wait a sec," Alex says. "Whaddaya mean, you KNEW."

"I didn't. Not everything. But my mum... I lived with her for sixteen years. I picked up some details. About Illumination, about an experiment I couldn't remember, about people named... Alex, and Sinas, and Wake, and Tao, and Finn... who did some bad things. Once upon a time." The gate spins, spawning exploratory tendrils, sucking at the world around it.

Someone else is talking. Not me. Someone else.

"I didn't know everything," I add. "But I knew—a bit. I knew you." I can barely say it. Barely think it. Anger, fear, hate, primed in abandoned bunkers like Cold War missiles, waiting—

"If you *knew*," Alex hisses, "even the tiniest, littlest, most *miniscule* details about US – why didn't you bloody SAY anything! Why didn't you warn us!"

"I thought... it'd be different. I don't know, I think I wanted to... I don't know."

Because I didn't want this to be my worst day.

Because I thought the world would change without me.

Because I can never say the right thing, no matter what.

"Well, damn," Alex says. "Now I do fuckin' hate you."

"Sorry... I'm bad at this."

"I can't believe you'd EVER keep that to yourself! For what?" She clenches her jaw, two seconds from shattering a molar. "OK, we're even. We'd BETTER be even. No more skeletons in anyone's closets, 'cause in case you've forgotten, we still need to decide the fate of the goddamn species. The rest can WAIT."

This is what happens when we're not being forced to cooperate. When push comes to shove, this is how it goes.

I can't look at them. Can't believe I told them. Missiles launched.

What now?

"Now we send somebody through."

At first, I don't realise who says it.

Then my mother beams at me, pressed against the airlock glass. "*This is our last chance*," she says. "*To solve this. There is no more time. No more opportunity. We use Illumination and send you inside.*" Behind her, there are white-hot sparks as Maritime tries to slice through the outer containment door.

“Oh, so you’re BOTH insane,” Alex says.

“But if we go inside the portal, they can’t blow it up, right?” Wake says. “They’d be trapping us in there – they wouldn’t dare.”

“I kiiiinda think they might, though.”

“*You’d be the first,*” my mother says. “*No human has visited Illumination before. We were preparing – preparing for decades! – for you to be the first.*” Her face, through the window, is streaked with tears. I nearly recoil in surprise. “*We theorised that under these conditions, certain types of matter – types of people – could enter more easily. Thus, we calibrated the system, and we searched, and we found... you.*” In each tiny teardrop, a lifetime of belief; hundreds of lifetimes, devoted to one story. “*The visitor must be biological. It must be conscious. Machines break down in Illumination, but life changes, and survives. Forget discovering a continent, or taking the first steps on Mars. You would experience an entirely different existence! But if we wait, that might not—*”

“I’ll go,” Wake says.

“You bloody will not,” Alex says.

“*You won’t. But Finn will.*”

“I... will?”

“He doesn’t even want to!” Wake retorts. “I volunteer.”

“*It’s meant for you, Finn,*” my mother says, focused on my face, as if it’s both the first and last time she’ll see it. Even though we aren’t touching, even though the glass distorts her... I can’t get away. “*I’m referring to the system calibration – it’s matched to your body, your mind. More importantly, Finn, I trust you.*”

I hold my breath.

“*I trust you to do this right.*”

“Really?” Wake asks.

“*Finn first,*” my mother replies. “*Then you, Wake, once I reset the system. It won’t take long. Only a minute—*”

<Do NOT listen to her!> Maritime shouts, across static-haunted Mesh. The sparks intensify. <We’ve sent researchers through, once before. TWICE before. They were never seen again. Do you remember Hector? And Imon?>

“*The project moved on, Maritime. We learned from our mistakes. It’s safe now.*”

<People died. Was today not enough to satiate you?>

“*I know everything of death. I accept it.*”

“Well, I don’t,” Alex says, “Pendant’s dead, Tao’s dead, and I’m not letting you chuck us head-first into oblivion. I wasn’t five minutes ago. I’m still not.”

My mother sighs. The glass fogs. “*Such a spectacular lack of vision, Alex. How very like you. That woman and her illustrious henchmen are coming, and when she does, the explosives will trigger, and you’ll have changed nothing.*”

“Sure! Sounds great!” She whirls, pointing at Illumination’s sickly light, and the portal “You really think THAT’S the answer? It’s not! It’s a suicide pact!”

“Alex, stop,” Wake says. “You can’t control this.”

“You’re all CRAZY!”

I know how my sister feels, though. The lights, the noise, the ghosts, the memories, that rise and flicker and scratch whenever I dare shut my eyes. If she's going crazy, the world's along for the ride.

"I'm scared, too," Sinas says. "I've been scared for so long I... nearly forgot what it felt like not to be. But actually..." He tilts his head, a few strands of hair falling across one eye. "I'm not scared of *this*. I'm more scared of my family than this. Is that weird? I don't know why, but it feels—"

"Yeah," Wake says. "It does."

The light draws us towards it.

It repels me. Sickens me.

"I wasn't going to come," Sinas says, "until they said, during my interview, they wanted to talk to me about my brother. No details. That was it." He stares at the gate. "Now I know why."

Ah, there it is.

"What do you think, Finn?" he adds.

I wish he hadn't. Five minutes ago, I'd have wanted to live up to whatever Finn's inside his head, but that person doesn't exist anymore. Even so, his sidelong glance is full of practiced ease, an electric current. I'm dried driftwood, bobbing, spinning, ready to splinter at the bottom of the waterfall

I wanted to build spaceships, I think to myself.

"Finn?" Alex asks, hugging herself tightly. "Please don't." *'If you really are my brother... then help me.'*

She really is my sister. For what that's worth.

Reaching out, a hand in the dark. I take it, or I don't.

I take it.

I don't.

A quantum particle.

The resonance shield wobbles, the sphere reverberating like a drum, as streams of aurora criss-cross outside. (What a regular Tuesday I'm having.)

"Alex, gimme the key," Wake says. "So we can let your mum inside."

"If you do, I'll deck you."

My mother's tears are watercolour.

"Give it to her," I mutter. "If your parents were here—"

"If they were, we wouldn't be stranded in the eye of this ghost hurricane!"

<ALERT – ALERT – ALERT – CONTAINMENT STRUCTURE COMPROMISED – ALERT>

The shield behind my mother splits, amid shrieks of rending metal. Through it, plasma-stained vacsuits appear, and they come forwards, and grab her, and her face slams against the airlock. I flinch. The lights outside roar as her arms are pushed behind her back, strands of her hair tearing free. They drag her back and there's Maritime – granite anger, behind tinted visor. More sparks. They're trying to cut through the airlock. Smoke billows outwards, hiding them from view, and the dark grey flickers like sheet lightning.

"Mum? Mum!"

Ferdinand perks up. <Accept incoming Mymic? Trusted user: Haru Hanamura.>

I breathe. "Accept."

My mother fades into existence, serene, before us. Instead of a vacsuit, she wears a yellow blouse with dark slacks. Her hair is less grey, her eyes less weary. The fuzzy, bandwidth-limited edges of the model are only apparent up close.

I know it's not real. I know it's a fancy piece of mimicry (albeit partially driven by her actual thoughts). She hugs me, strangely tight, as if she can't bear to let me go, and I *feel* it, simulation or no: the slight scratchiness of her clothes, the warmth of her face, her wiry grip on the back of my suit. Then, a sigh of... relief? Satisfaction?

"Things will change, after this," she whispers. "Can you do this? For me? This this was my life, Finn. It's why I wasn't really... there, in a sense..." She trails off. "I shouldn't make excuses. But— this is the end. My hope is, if you see how beautiful it is, you'll realise this was for you, as well. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry..."

I want to believe her.

Alex's grudge-fuelled glare seems more truthful.

My nose is bleeding. A tiny red drop splashes onto her shoulder, staining yellow cloth. The portal shines, edge of my vision, sending shafts of light across the blurred, revolving sphere. Everything's out of focus – the air, faces, sounds. I wonder what's happening outside. No clues, in the calm of her voice.

Suddenly, Alex shouts: "Watch out!"

An energy blast ricochets from the airlock. I duck.

"I know she's talking to you!" Maritime shouts. She bangs on the glass. "*You WILL NOT survive if you take that step! She's asking you to DIE! And if by some MIRACLE, you survive – why would that risk ever be worthwhile?*"

"Ignore her," my mother says. "I'll keep you safe." She puts her hands on either side of my face, tilting my head, so that I meet her gaze.

Warm, dry skin. Heartbeat against my cheeks. She's there, in those digital irises: the person who taught me the names of every dinosaur, who told me bedtime stories about exploding stars, who made me believe the world was mine to explore.

Two years ago, she put a Valentine's Day card in my lunchbox. I was briefly so excited a girl had *actually* paid attention to me (until I found out who it was from).

Six years ago, we had an argument I can't even remember. I put an '*I hate you*' note under her pillow, that she must've found but never mentioned, and I never apologised for it.

Ten years ago, we were reading a picture book together, me laughing at the same sentences over and over while she sat there, watching, until I got distracted by the flocks of delivery drones speeding past the balcony and she'd point them out and explain how they worked as if talking to an adult, and not a silent little six-year-old.

Maritime says I'll die. Is entering Illumination technically 'dying'?

The key, then, is whether I come back.

They're watching me: Wake, Alex, Sinas. I see them, and the distance between us, and the burgeoning hate threatening to explode, like the demolition charges blinking on the walls. Everyone's so far away from me.

I look down at my gloves.

"Okay," I say.

"Thank you, Finn," my mother replies.

She lets me go, and I float, swept along by the current.

My mother points to a storage container beside the gate. Wake opens it, following her instructions, and picks out a piece of armour-like equipment: two black chestplates, front and back, which she secures around me with adhesive straps. They're smooth, except for evenly spaced grids of raised dots that flash red when activated, in Braille-esque patterns. Three long cables (tethers?) are plugged into my backplate, then wired to ports in the wall of the chamber.

"The tachyon armour will maintain integrity," my mother explains.

"Of what?"

"You."

The last piece is an armband, placed around my left wrist. It even has my name on it.

I want to and don't want to ask the question. "Why does Maritime think I'll... um..." *Die?*

"Certain aspects of this project have not gone as planned," my mother says.

"But this will?" Doubts upon doubts: am I just a bargaining chip? A pawn, about to reach the far side of the board, whom my mother can use to realise her reality? Is this really, truly, for the best, as she says?

"Wake? I have a job for you," my mother says. "Take my key, from Alex. You need to get past the hijackers outside and find the console I used to activate the portal. There's a port where you can insert my key. Then, you'll have to switch the operating mode of the Illumination gate. It's currently set to 'calibration'. Instead, it should be 'test'. Do you understand? This is important."

Another energy blast hits the airlock. It shakes.

"The 'get past the hijackers' part sounds... tricky," Wake says.

"You'll manage, I'm sure," my mother says. "You're very capable. I still have one operational battlebot, in hiding, which will serve as a distraction. Once you're finished, come back here; you can go through the gate after Finn."

"Okay. I can try." Wake shakes the worry from her head, then snatches the bio-key from Alex's sullen grasp. I'm still holding Maritime's detonator, so I hand it to Sinas. He accepts it wordlessly. The gate awaits. I'm still afraid.

What would happen if I didn't come back?

There'd be no more of— this. No more *this*. No more searching for the optimal choice. Doesn't that sound nice?

Sinas grabs my arm. I pull away instinctively, and he lessens his grip. "Are you sure?" he asks. "I don't want you to go along with this, if you'd rather not."

He looks at me, dead on, with what he isn't saying. Should echo it, or back away? It's like I'm driving a copy of myself from three light-hours away.

We're... particles. Entangled. Superimposed. I feel myself smile. "It'll be OK. When you said you don't exist, back there— I don't exist, either."

CRACK! The airlock explodes from its hinges. The door's a frisbee, spinning wildly. It bounces off the edge of the portal and is vaporised in a lance of blinding light. Three battle-scarred figures follow it into the chamber: Maritime, Khorin, and a third hijacker. Wake doesn't wait. She launches forwards, flying right through the middle of them. Khorin makes a startled grab for her but misses by half a second as she exits the room at Mach Two. He's about to give chase when stun bolts pepper the shattered doorway, forcing us into cover. One bolt is caught inside, and it ricochets across the sphere a few times before dissipating.

<Target acquired. Suppressing fire> the battlebot barks.

Khorin fires off a few blind shots.

<I'm at the controls!> Wake says. <I think I've found the right one! I'll try it!>

Clunk. The world goes dark. The retina-assaulting radiance is gone, as if the energy's been swallowed, leaving perfect darkness in its wake. I'm blind.

Clunk. Shifting machinery.

When the light returns, it's going in the other... direction? Before, there was the impression of energy spewing outward, the portal a window onto the surface of a sun, barely able to contain the rage inside. Now, instead, it funnels inwards to nowhere, like a tunnel or a winding canyon, woven from laser-light. It grows narrower and narrower as I follow it with my eyes, a nauseatingly irregular stripe of multi-coloured radiation, looping back on itself, twisting my brain into knots. The eerie bellringing has halted, too, and in its place is a note in reverse: initially muted, then growing louder, more melodic, until it ends with a sonorous *clang!* The portal roars, its roots twitching, as if it's found all the water it'll ever need.

My mum must still be outside. I dart towards the exit, passing Wake in the other direction, and I find her in the ring-shaped hallway outside. She's tied up, eyes closed. I shake her awake.

She blinks rapidly. "Thank you, Finn."

"This is bad!" Alex shouts. "This is really bad!"

Flooding up from Illumination's tunnel is a spectrum of spectres, a river of ghosts so densely packed it's a shockwave, a tsunami. The tsunami crests, then crashes down, blasting through whatever's left of the experiment's shielding like a bomb in a cardboard box. A psychedelic hurricane whips around the sphere. I start to be ripped away by the accompanying blast of feeling, thoughts laid bare.

I'm not, though.

Something prevents it.

My mother's face twitches, bulges. "You can come back now. You can, you can, you can..."

Khorin stares slack-jawed at the terrible spectacle. The hurricane is made of hundreds of *entities* – spidery, fractal creatures stretched into shrieking

ribbons. One reaches down, the tentacle of some legendary beast, and it takes him, suit and all, and burns him from the inside out. I can barely hear his screams above the cacophony. Light bursts through his skull, shattering it and subliming in a single instant.

Cauterised muscle. Bones sheared in half. A rotting Halloween pumpkin.

Hopelessness races across Maritime's face. She leaps towards Khorin's body, through clouds of powdered bone. A ghost envelops the other remaining hijacker, forcing itself inside. They cough, choking, hands locked around their own throat, stumbling towards her. Maritime pushes them back with the butt of her gun, fires a single shot. They fly back, trailing blood like melted cheese.

Then, the ghosts take her, too. Curtains of light slice the air between us, in billowing waves. Her shadow sobs until I can no longer see it, stolen by the entities and their bitter celebrations. It only takes a second.

And yet...

...we're still here.

A tiny island of 'we're still here'. Why?

My mother's transfixed by the storm, by the spiralling, illuminated landscapes. The colour turns her skin red, then green, then orange, then blue, her eyes as empty as the dead.

"Mum?"

She doesn't hear me.

"Mum!"

She turns, and a thousand years stares back: a buried god.

"Come on!" Wake shouts. She grabs Sinas' hand, dragging him to the gate.

"We have to GO!"

He lets her, then stops. "I don't know if..."

"You SAID you wanted to see your brother again."

"What if he isn't there?"

"He'll be there." Her eyes burn. "So will my grandparents."

"What about Finn? And Alex?"

"We'll all go! There's enough equipment for everyone!"

When faced with reality, it's like Sinas wants to vanish into the floor.

"Don't do this," Alex says. "Please don't. Please."

"It's too late," Wake replies.

"It ISN'T." She leaps in front of the gate, blocking it, arms outstretched. "You are NOT leaving me here. This is suicide!"

"It'd be suicide to stay! We are LITERALLY the only people left alive!"

"That won't change if we go into Illumination – even in the BEST-case scenario! Sinas, Finn, you don't have to do this. You don't want to, right? *Help* me!"

Wake goes for the rest of the equipment, retrieving a second chestplate for herself. "We can go through now, right?" she asks my mother. "You said we could!"

No answers, from my mother. No answers from anyone. (I don't think Illumination's the answer Wake wants, either – this isn't a magic bullet, to murk whatever internal sadness or guilt she's carrying. There's no garden of Eden on the other side of that veil, full of smiling grandparents, or long-lost brothers.)

To put it another way, if I open a door, and a hundred spiders scuttle out, it's going to take *serious* preparation before I walk into that room. If we open the space between universes, and a hundred ghosts flood out... where's the answer I want, in that? Is there one?

Maybe there is.

Parts of the sphere are being ripped up as the magnetic locks strain to keep it in place. Debris whips around us in dizzying circles.

My mother touches my shoulder, then approaches Alex, palms raised. "It's okay, Alex. It's okay."

"It's not."

She reaches out. "Calm down. Be logical."

"Don't tell me that! Don't say 'be logical', when—"

"Alex, I—"

"Don't *fucking* touch me!" Alex slams both hands into her chest, pushes her away roughly, as she's hit by a panel that smacks into her shoulder. It knocks Alex sideways into the tether connected to my suit, stunned. I'm yanked back as well, and my mother—

My mother is thrown towards the portal.

Her eyes widen.

Glass shards sparkle in greenish light.

She flies across the chamber, grasping at nothing, as Wake straps on a tachyon shield, barely paying attention. I launch myself after her, but... it takes me too long. The cables shiver. She, suspended, is silhouetted by Illumination, a small, wiry shape, as if she's jumped into a pool from a great height, and I can only hold my breath and wait for impact (an eternity that passes too quickly). The light is pulling at her. I can see its roots searching, sucking her towards it. She snatches at the edge of the gate, fingers catching it, the briefest respite.

Legs already underwater.

It's so bright I can't even see her face; a blurred, humanoid shadow. Can't tell if she's looking at me, or trying to talk, or if she's afraid. The gate swims, her suit smokes, and radiant wisps surround her, pulling at her, and I'm close, I'm so close, so much light and energy and static overloading my vision—

Her body flies through the portal and out the other side.

A burst of fireflies. They stretch after her, then dissipate, as if they can't quite keep her, and she hits the wall of the chamber, limp.

I catch her. I kneel over her body.

A dream. *Only a dream*, says the strange, backwards bell.

Nothing this strange could be real.

It's like those old samurai movies, when the sword's so sharp you don't even feel the cut, until suddenly, the blood starts spurting from your chest. Her face

is serene, mouth half-open, but her soul isn't there; the light isn't there, and neither is the darkness.

Her MeshMate says she's dead.

Ferdinand licks her shoulder. I hold her in my arms.

Strands of hair, criss-crossing my vision, like prison bars.

I could've stopped this, I think, as I look up.

I could've stopped this, as Sinas recoils from Khorin's half-there corpse, which rises, and turns towards him. He grabs a gun from the floor, somebody's discarded rifle, and points it the zombie as it floats closer, goes to pull the trigger but can't, can't, can't, shivering, blank, as the monster simply ambles past and goes for Wake instead. He's ice as it sinks its teeth into her shoulder.

Splintered polymer. Cry of shock.

I watch them.

Alex. Wake. Sinas. I hated them, for what they did to me. I hated myself, for what I did to them.

Wake shakes Khorin off, a rabid dog, dripping red. He hits the spinning floor of the chamber and gets whipped sideways in a crunch of shattered ribs. Sinas drops the gun, goes to help her. Decent amount of blood, there, a chunk torn from her vacsuit.

My mother's still dead. I'm still here.

But I can choose to... not be.

And that feels *peaceful*. Inescapable. Because I tried, I *tried*, and what did it bring me? I might've been connected once, to these people, by strings of fate, but the threads have frayed, one by one, until there's nothing tying us together. Nothing tying me here. And it's not just today, and not just the ghosts – it's *me*, and my life. I've always been kind of alone, haven't I? When push comes to shove, I need to rely on myself. That's what I know. It was nice, to briefly believe in other outcomes, but the thing is, I don't have to be afraid anymore.

I can be brave instead. I can raise my head, and stare at the light, and walk into a new world, with a new start. I can move on. I can *commit* to something. Make this choice, and face my past, and not give up, and be... brave.

Yes. Brave.

It's for the best, I think. It makes sense.

After all, I always liked exploring.

I let go of my mother's body. I place her mid-air, perfectly still.

I make my way to the portal.

Alex sees me. "Finn—"

"I'm sorry." She's still looking for an easy way out, consumed by everything I've left behind.

"Sinas, help!"

For once, he doesn't have any words.

Only a smile. Always a smile.

"I don't think you should follow me," I tell Wake.

"Fat freaking chance," she replies.

“Then DO it,” Alex says. “Bloody DO it, if you’re that desperate.”

She was right to be afraid. She was right, to not want to come here. I wonder if that makes her feel any better, as anxiety and fear floods across her face and this becomes her new worst day.

I steady myself, before the rushing light.

My toes are warm. Isn’t that strange? My toes are warm, and the artificial wind is sharp on my cheeks, and the air stinks of ash and my mouth tastes like iron. We’re so far apart – lonely motes of stellar material, separated by time and incompatibility – and yet, they’re probably feeling the same things as me. I reach my hand towards her, or not quite; I hold out my hand, and watch the light dive and dart between my fingertips, and I wonder what she’ll do. I wonder if she’ll reach out, and grab *my* hand. I wonder if I’m asking her to. The distance between us might seem vast, but compared to an entirely new universe, it’s nothing.

“GO!” she shouts.

The ice cracks. And I fall through, into the deep, dark below.

Here’s the water.

Waiting for the splash.

I try and find my calm again, as I float towards the gate.

It surrounds me.

Closer. Closer.

Do I regret this?

No.

Alex realises, perhaps, that she does.

As I pass through the barrier, I see her reaching towards me, grasping for the tethers still connected to my suit, the only connections I still possess to the past, or a future, and I turn to light in her hands. I feel myself being ripped apart. Indescribable pain, like razor-sharp talons turning my brain inside out, slicing my mind into pieces – *worse* – tearing up the nerves and blood vessels and tendons and muscles fibres that hold my body together.

As I cease to exist, I can’t help but feel like I might’ve made a mistake.

Chasing my mother’s ghost might’ve been a mistake.

The easy way out might’ve been a mistake.

I don’t want her regret to be the last thing I see. I don’t want this slight, aching sadness to be the last thing I feel. For the rest of my life, I don’t want to die, because even if I don’t love myself, I do love—

But this doesn’t matter.

I’m already dead.

Fin.

ALEX X

You've never seen the light leave someone's eyes, until you have.

It happens to Finn, right in front of me. His limbs spasm as he passes through the gate, and where once there was a human, there's a doll.

Flesh to plastic, eyes to glass. One outstretched hand, frozen in time. It slices across my chest, a sword so sharp it could never draw blood, but my guts spill out all the same, slicked across the crossroads as the samurai who wields it fades into the dusk, and here I am, left behind, a prisoner, a mass of useless nerves and muscles that only wants to scream.

Tsujigiri.

I can't.

Something about the light, the colours lacing the air like oil on water, decades of pollution choking a planet's worth of seabirds. The ugliness of those frozen fingers locked around my heart, and I wish I could say they'd ripped it out, but it's more like it's no longer there.

Neither am I.

One of the mining charges blossoms into fire: a fairytale of distorted sky, with lamb-wool curls of orange and yellow. The blast comes from outside the sphere, but still, the shockwave slaps my chest, and kicks Finn's body, and the sphere wobbles, and buckles, then rips itself to shreds: a suicidal tornado with us in its gaze. Cables snap and slice through panels, exposing sparking circuitry beneath.

The portal, for a moment, withstands the chaos.

Then a supporting pillar collapses under the strain, with the sharp *crack* of a summer twig. Whatever's holding it together has had enough of responsibility. The gate's jet-black border comes part like a jigsaw and the energy bound by it grows/shrinks/bursts like a waterballoon supernova.

I'm hurled back in time, to every instance, late at night, when I fantasised about death – not in a particularly maudlin or sleeper way, but the sleep-deprived thought experiment of 'I wonder what would happen if one of my parents died,' or 'I wonder how people would react if I died.' Those polluted thoughts never amount to much. If my parents died, yeah, I'd be gutted. If I died, would people be sad? Probably. Is it selfish to obsess over? Definitely.

Still, there's a core: the pursuit of an ache, or emptiness, or a pause between heartbeats, deep inside yourself. A simple need to poke at the limits of emotion to confirm that, yes – I exist. I'm human.

Pretending to be sad can't beat the real thing.

I'm hurled back in time, to when I've had to say goodbye. To beloved pets (car accidents and cancer), to my best friend's dad (a cruel, sudden heart attack), to a distant aunt whose face-to-face meetings I could count on one hand (mostly old age, bless her).

There's the gasping, throat-clogged sadness that overwhelms, but quickly fades; the water-treading desperation of wanting to help, without knowing how; the subtle guilt and dissociation of not feeling... more.

None of my imagined scenarios featured a brother, dying before my eyes.

And yet, here I am.

All I want is to reverse the last five minutes.

The portal's gone, but there's an echo.

It flickers, half-there, smaller, an interdimensional catflap pondering the futility of existence. Wake approaches it, the protective tether taut at her back. The boundary folds, unfolds, folds, unfolds, like unstable neon origami.

"Don't!" Sinas shouts.

She pauses, fingers centimetres from the light.

"There's zero chance we're getting through," he says.

"But I want to," she says. "I WANT to."

"I know, but we can't. Not anymore."

"Then what?" Her face is capital-T Tragedy stolen from the ancient Greeks, as the window twists, turns, billows. "What am I meant to do?"

"Leave," he says.

"No. No!"

"There's nothing else to—"

The window shrieks, a beat of violence. Yet more spectres scatter across the chamber, streaking like rescue flares, throwing us into sharp relief.

"It's time to let this go," Sinas says. He grabs a discarded rifle, the muscles taut in his neck. "I don't want to, either. But it's time."

"OK, but we ARE coming back," Wake says. Her hand drops, her eyes glistening with bitten-back longing. "Whether it takes an hour, or a day, or ten freaking years, I am not dropping this. I'm not."

I can't think, the ghosts are screaming, and Wake and Sinas are telling me to run.

All I want is to reverse the last five minutes. To grab Finn's hand, drag him back, tell the moron who was allegedly my brother that actually, truthfully, I didn't want to him to disappear. Who cares about 'normal'? I could've made it work. My pointless, scaredy-cat frustration is ash by comparison.

He wanted me to save him.

He wanted to save ME.

Flesh to plastic. Eyes to glass. An outstretched heart, slowly growing colder inside a ragdoll body with bloody cheeks and messy hair and a nose far too much like mine; and me, a prisoner in my suit, struggling to breathe and definitely not cry and understand how the *hell* I can convince myself it's not my fault.

I fly towards where Finn waits. I'm afraid to touch him; afraid to turn him over or ping his MeshMate. But that means I'm stuck, in this dead room, with too many dead bodies.

"Finn." No response. Hands shaking, palming at a body. My hands. "No, no, no, no, no. Finn, don't you DARE. Wake up." Sirens blaring. Rush of wind. Can't see clearly, don't know what's happening, only that it hurts, sick, and dizzying. "No, no, no," each one more a sob, and I don't want to feel that way, but I need—

"We are GOING!" Sinas says, grabbing my arm.

"No! We can't leave!"

"We have to! Nothing else we can do! The detonator's gone, the portal's gone, everyone else is, is, is *zombified*—"

"We can't leave *Finn*!" An unfamiliar voice, mine, cracking over the whine of dying motors. I swing my gaze into Sinas' mantis eyes. "We can bring him back. Finn went away, but Haru said it was safe in there, didn't she? We can still get him back!"

"I don't know how. None of us do, not without help."

"Then we should take him with us! We can't leave him here. Not here."

"Alex, I..." His voice breaks, and he wipes his face, and the bruises under his eyes don't leave. "Sure. Yeah. We'll take him."

"Shove over," Wake says, suddenly behind me. "I'll slave Finn's suit to mine. It's got plenty of battery."

"But the tether cable—"

"His body's *here*, isn't it? I dunno how the yekk you're planning to revive him, but this dumb cable won't help – if it was even supposed to." She yanks the tether from Finn's back, then pairs their MeshLinks. When she jets upwards, Finn's vacsuit follows, mirroring her movements like a mortician's marionette. "OK." She swallows. "Time to LAUNCH ourselves outta here."

I don't move, but soon, I'm moving, dragged behind Sinas as we fire our thrusters across the chamber. The spectres blend their aurora in vast, dancing sheets, like distant rain from overflowing stormclouds, and that's what I find myself focusing on, amid the debris, and the ruins: light. Sinas tugs my arm, incessantly, and I let myself be pulled in a catatonic haze.

We escape through the tear in the wall where the charges went off, ducking under blackened struts and leaking battery packs. It's dark, then light, then dark again, and I'm fleeing illumination the same way I was brought to it: sickening waves of consciousness crashing onto a sparse, grey beach, all age-sharpened pebbles and cuttlefish bones. My head HURTS, my chest is taut, and the light sliding down my visor is vomit-inducing.

Red, green, blue.

Red, green, purple.

Sinas flinches, and so do I, but it's only a dead AutoDrone, looming in the accessway.

Why has this affected me so much? Why can't I... ugh.

We're wandering the corpse of an abandoned beast, gradually freezing as heaters fail and ambient energy radiates into vacuum. Shadow, not sunlight; endings, not beginnings. There's a distinctive atmosphere when structural Mesh starts dying and nanotech in the PolyGrowth loses control, and stops repairing itself and shuttling data and gives up (like me). It's... static, as if the busy little whispers underpinning the world have abruptly, ominously stopped.

Words run through my head.

Words are good.

C'mon, focus. Watch we're you're going.

Stale air, full of other peoples' CO₂, musty and clammy like gulping down a wet handshake. Flares of Saturnian lightning through a viewport on our left, as a mango-coloured moon peeks over the edge. Bloody handprints on the glass, so cold they're crystal.

Rituals. Words. Notebook, in my head.

You can do this. You can— you can admit it. It's okay.

I'm sorry.

I whisper it, as my eyes sting. As Finn smiles at me, with his stupid face and stupid lizard on his shoulder as he turns to stupid fucking dust. I whisper, as the dam breaks and here comes the flood with no Noah in sight; here comes *extinction*. I'm glad nobody can see me as my eyes fill with tears.

I cry.

It doesn't feel like enough.

The tunnels are endless.

I wish I could say I'm having an epiphany.

That I've figured what what's wrong with me.

That I'm haunted by sepia-toned figures spouting wisdom, or insults, or that travelling through this station's a metaphor for untangling the mangroves in my head. But I'm... sad. I'm desperately fucking sad.

The tunnels are tunnels.

I cry, and it doesn't feel like enough.

"That's the plan?" Wake asks.

"Yes, through the agzone," Sinas says. "Unless you think it's a bad idea."

"It's *an* idea, which is more than I've heard for ages. That's where Maritime's ships are? Past the... agzone?"

"Agricultural zone. Where they grow the station's biomass." Sinas brings up the holomap. Its brightness makes me nervous, as if spies are tracking us from afar. "I overheard their crew talking before we were captured. They boarded from this cargo dock at the end of the next arm. We cut through the agzone, take a transit car clockwise, and we're there in thirty minutes. We'll take a ship." He's going to check on me, to look over his shoulder, and before he does, I turn away.

"You OK?" he asks.

"Yeah, nah," I grunt.

"You Australians always do that. It's confusing," Wake says. "Yeah, naauur. Naauur, yeah." Her accent's horrendous. "Which bit do I pay attention to?"

I can't be bothered explaining. Wake shakes her head, hair waving in a kelp-forest tangle. I open my helmet so I can wipe my eyes. (Can't blink tears away in zero-g). It takes my body a second to understand each movement, to figure out how the various muscles and nerves and bones cooperate. Now we're in a manufacturing lab, too much darkness on either side as we stick to a thin, emergency-lit walkway. Tentacle-shaped robotic manipulators tangle in the shadows, hanging from maglev rails. Finn stands to attention as we glide through the silence, brought to life by Wake's computer-code strings.

I don't like it. Another tear leaks out, stubbornly trapping me underwater.

I find myself gliding towards Finn's suit. Towards Finn.

I reach out to touch his visor. It's already covered in a thin layer of frost, and my gloves create a smudged patch through which I can see his face. I put a hand on each shoulder, and give him the slightest shake, but all it does is make his neck bend backwards, a few unruly strands of cutting across his eyes: a spring, momentarily given energy, but soon lost to the universe.

"I'm sorry," I whisper.

He doesn't reply, of course. So bloody stubborn.

"I'm sorry."

I wipe the rest of the frost from the plastic, then let him go, and I don't know what to do, as we float there, together (as I float there, alone). Don't know what to do with my hands, or my face, or the flash flood lump in my throat.

He's dead. He's dead. He's *dead*.

I'm not.

I'm just... shivering again, paralysed in my bedroom, in that same fearful mud-coloured darkness 'cause nothing ever changes and for the rest of our lives, nothing *will*. The lights flicker, and the fear shoots through me, but it's only a power surge.

I'll have to learn to prefer the dark.

"Can we stop?" I ask.

I don't think they hear me.

I want to sit. I want to lean against the wall. Hold my breath, until it burns.

"Can we stop?" I ask again.

"We're still on a timer," Sinas says. "We shouldn't."

"Please. Please, Wake."

"We NEED to find those escape ships, Alex."

How can they keep going like this? Like everything's normal?

I can't comprehend it. I literally can't.

I ask my MeshMate to shoot me full of happy juice, or calm juice, but it doesn't want to. It won't *let* me. I'm staring at my reflection in Finn's ragdoll eyes, and hate jumps between us and wraps itself around the hole in my heart: hot, powerful, made of pounding blood. It's a hell of a lot better than this desperate *nothing*, this endless night in my bitter bedroom. It dives down my throat and holds me tight, a last vestige of life.

Feels like summer. Like the UV rays that give you skin cancer.

I'm angry at myself, for being *sad* all the time.

I'm angry at Finn. At Haru. At Maritime. At Illumination. At Sinas. At Wake.

If I'm angry, I can't be sad. I wrap my arms around myself, squeezing so hard it hurts, but it doesn't hurt enough. "What happened back there?" I ask.

"Back where?" Sinas asks, as if he doesn't know what I'm talking about. But he does, he *does*, and before I know it my hand's a fist and it punches the damn wall.

Which helps.

They stop moving and turn to face me.

Wake reaches out. "Alex—"

"Shut up. Shut UP," I growl. "This keeps going badly because of US, because nobody's fucking *honest*. Now everybody – literally everybody! – is dead, including Finn, which didn't have to happen, but it did because of US."

In my eyes, they're only shapes. Abstract, red shapes.

They're afraid of me.

"We all make mistakes," Sinas says.

"So?"

"This isn't a normal situation. Nobody expected this. I didn't. You didn't."

"Who cares? Zero people had to die. ZERO."

"We didn't kill them," Wake says. "You think we're responsible? Blame your mum, Maritime, whoever you want, but there's no point in blaming ourselves."

I swallow. It feels like razorblades. “You LISTENED to her! After everything that went down in there, you helped her re-open that freaking gate, because you wanted to be FIRST, or you wanted to be TK-important, or maybe you thought it would be funny, because I really can’t understand what makes you do this shit.”

“You know why,” she retorts. “I told you why.”

“Then why trust a snake who clearly couldn’t be trusted? Did opening a death portal seem like a good idea? Did it really? Was it gonna make you famous? Because we’re gonna be effing famous now, if we’re not next aboard the graveyard express!”

“Graveyard express,” Sinas repeats, too calmly.

“And what about you? What’s YOUR deal, dude? Because things did not have to go the way they did back there.”

“Alex, this isn’t the time.”

“You’re always lying.”

“Am I?”

“Don’t you dare. Everything that comes out of your mouth, it’s like some polluted copy of a century-old jpeg – I don’t even know how to TALK to you anymore. If you’d been one percent more genuine, Finn might not have thrown himself into the goddamn underworld or, I dunno, we wouldn’t have been anywhere near in the first place. But because of that—” The wall’s about to get another punch. My voice rises. “*Because* of that, we’re half-way to an apocalypse that’ll make the grey plague look like Sesame Street, and I cannot handle that on my conscience when I can’t even work out what I want to do after HIGH SCHOOL. Thanks for making sure I’ll never have to worry about it.”

“No problem,” Sinas says, like old cardboard.

“And finally, you.” I turn to Finn.

He doesn’t even have the guts to look at me.

“You’re so selfish. And stubborn.”

Can’t breathe.

“I hate you.”

Hate that you left me here.

Hate that you made me *care*, then had the audacity to rip that away, as if you knew better, as if I could never understand.

Maybe I couldn’t.

But I was really prepared to give it a fucking go.

“You need to talk to people,” I say, to this floating corpse, and my words are empty and space is empty and the shadows grow too much. “You need to share. It’s not hard. It shouldn’t be, unless you’re a selfish moron – and, okay, maybe you are, maybe that’s both of us – but you’d better not stay dead.” I shove him back and he slaps against the wall, bounces stiffly. “Fucking FIGHT!”

No fight left.

None there in the first place.

“Why’d you have to go? WHY?”

I stare at the wall, instead of his blank, serene face, and my fury illuminates its most miniscule details: dim red light bouncing from imperfections in the plastic, and programmed patterns of inter-woven fibres. All this rabid rottweiler energy, and for what?

One more scratch on his suit.

"You're not so perfect either," Wake says.

"You think I don't realise that?"

"I *know* you realise it."

"Then say what you want to say," I retort.

"I'm saving that for your wedding. Or funeral." An acid grin bubbles through her words. "It's OBVIOUS things have gone to ash. It's OBVIOUS this could've been different. Let's not waste time moping about yakking HYPOTHETICALS. Stop being dramatic."

"This isn't *drama*—"

"It's quite theatrical if you ask me. And pointless."

"Does none of this actually matter to you?"

"Alex, sometimes you're as dumb as a mango. I'm 100% messed up about Finn, and Tao, and Illumination; I'm just compartmentalising like a *champion* because the universe will not stop and wait for us to be sad. Not now, not ever."

"Look," Sinas says. "I'm sorry. I'm sorrier than you'll ever believe."

"Yeah, nah," I say. "I'll take that bet."

"I mean it! I hate this too. I can't explain how much this..."

"Sucks?"

"Hurts." A half-breath. "I wish I'd done something, back there. Anything. But... it happened, the way it did. It's done."

Why didn't you do it differently, then? I want to ask.

The obvious follow-up: *why didn't I?*

So, don't ask.

Sinas shakes his head. "I wish I could steal your anger."

"Why?"

"Because it's real."

"Real or not, feels like shit."

The darkness grows deeper, the sense of silence more overbearing. The wall impassively absorbs my fury, and even the biggest bushfires eventually run out of material to burn.

"What we need," Wake says, "is to believe. We need to convince ourselves we can fly out of here, and stop these ghosts, and that Finn *isn't* dead. That's what I'll do, till there are zero options left. That's what I've always done."

"That easy, huh?" I ask.

"It's not easy. But that shouldn't stop you."

Every event since our prophesied arrival weighs down on me: the running, the questions, the fighting, the good intentions and the polluted consequences. As the anger leaves, its absence feels subtly wrong. Finn watches me, as if whatever's left of him can tell.

You're not coming back, are you.

If only I hadn't run.

I'm talking to myself, I think, a blurry, indistinct, pink-hoodie-wearing figure that doesn't want to face me.

"I was really, really scared – scared of things changing. I know I shouldn't be, but I am, always. So, this scared me too. All of it. Even you. Especially you."

I'm back on the shuttle. There's a boy, staring at me.

He's pretending not to, but he totally is.

"Cause you, and Haru... that's not something which goes away. It's not a lightning bolt, it's— it's a continent. I shouldn't have been so terrified, but that's how my brain works. And the *second* I got over that, or decided 'hey, maybe this isn't the worst', I let you leave. I made you think I wanted you to. Because I'm a coward." I expect to see judgement, or frustration, but there's only... exhaustion, from Sinas and Wake.

As if they don't care I just went off at them.

As if they deserve it.

Silence, apart from my beating heart.

Then, Wake sighs. She jets over to me, slowly, *puff-puff-puff*, and places her hands on my shoulders, looking me straight in the eyes.

"I forgive you," she says. "Even if you don't forgive me. But you need to hold it together. *We* need to."

An imperceptible nod, from Sinas on the left, which turns into a full-body twitch as we hear a distant scream – high, hair-rising, and abruptly cut short, like a corrupted MeshStream.

Not too close.

Not too far, either.

"Since we *have* stopped," Wake says, pushing through it, "help me check this." She unzips the top half of her suit. I'd nearly forgotten zombie-Khorin chowed down on her shoulder, and the wound is ugly, featuring semi-circles of glistening blood. (It also bothers me that human teeth had enough power to tear through a reinforced suit).

"Huh," Sinas says. "That's, um— huh." He stays a good two metres distant, peering at it like a meerkat. "That looks bad."

"Heck yeah it does," Wake replies, with a shocking level of excitement.

"Does it hurt?"

"My entire shoulder is NUMB."

"You should disinfect that," I say. "Or wash it out. Your healbots might not cope. And get something to wrap it with. Helps stop the bleeding." I'm not sure what medical supplies are hanging about, but my mouth's working on autopilot.

"I really liked this blouse," Wake sighs, tearing off the damaged sleeve. "HELP, Sinas. If you don't wanna bandage it, find some disinfectant." She pauses. "Wait. Isn't urine supposed to be—"

"It's not actually sterile," I say, before things get out of hand.

"It's not?"

“Let’s only start pissing on each other if it’s a worst-case scenario,” Sinas murmurs.

“This is pretty freaking worst-case, IMO.”

“I’m going to look at the route,” I say dully.

Our path winds from where we are, through what’s effectively a space-farm, then along a transit line to the end of the next arm. Besides the agzone, the most notable sector we’ll pass is the ‘Resonance Field Laboratory.’ Resonance, resonance, resonance... where have I heard that? Hmm. “Maritime and Haru mentioned protection from the monsters, didn’t they? Something about a resonance lab?”

“I do kinda remember that word,” Wake says. She grits her teeth, poking at the teeth-marks.

“The lab’s here, on our map. It’s on the way to the dock.”

“Ohhhh. Lucent. You wanna check it out?”

“It could be useful,” I say. “If we have time.”

“We don’t,” Sinas says, “but it might be necessary if this does get worse.”

“How, exactly, could things get worse?” Wake asks.

“If the ghosts or Illumination aren’t confined to the station anymore, things can definitely get worse.”

“You’re jinxing it. Stop it.”

“Sinas is a jinxer,” I say. I sound flat. Calm.

I’m not calm.

“Let’s hurry, then,” Wake says.

“We should still get you a healkit,” Sinas interrupts.

“We’ll find one on the way, it’ll be fine.” She smiles. “I can barely feel it.”

So, we start moving again. Into the ruins.

I’m sorry.

Here, a winding passageway, choked with debris, one of a thousand that’re empty, flooded, burning, haunted, soon to be a barely measurable increase in the concentration of heavy elements in Saturn’s atmosphere.

Were Starfish’s crew evacuated, by Maritime’s team, or was that a lie, too? And why hasn’t help arrived? The Titan colonies aren’t far away. Even with communications jammed, they’d have figured out the station doesn’t look right. And who was that other person, on the radio? My MeshMate recorded her name as ‘Farah’, but it doesn’t have the context to generate more detail.

Wake’s leading, but doesn’t want to be; she’s too stiff, peeking all over the place. / can’t see anybody, but perhaps that’s irrelevant, because last I checked ghosts don’t care about walls. I keep an eye out for a healkit, which is either a nice distraction or an unpleasant way to force myself to peer into the shadows.

Blinking red lights. Jammed emergency shutters on either side. The world’s muffled, deadened, like noise-cancelling headphones after the playlist stops. Chills run up and down my arms, tinkling piano beneath my anger and apathy: a perfect accompaniment for the grand opening of Pandora’s ghost-infested box

(hooray for front-row seats). Sadness tugs at me too, insistently, pulling at my hand. My belief I once might've had any control here makes me want to laugh.

"What's going to happen to us?" I ask.

"I don't know," Sinas says, and he really doesn't. (Not sure why I asked, but part of me must still be operating at approximately normal capacity.) "In the sense of... the world?"

"Yeah."

He shrugs. "History is full of unintended consequences."

"Helpful answer."

"Only being honest."

"Sinas is right," Wake says. "Like, could anyone predict how the Earth got messed up? First it was climate change, then sea levels, then prehistoric methane deposits in the Arctic, then us trying to balance weather in the OTHER direction by axing asteroids, then suddenly everyone's living in domes, and going outside is a health hazard. Stuff happens, people react, it's impossible to figure out in advance. Or, like, the Canamexico incident. That was mantis."

"People DID predict climate change, though," I say.

"Sure," Sinas replies. "They didn't predict we wouldn't do anything about it."

"People *tried*," Wake says. "Not enough, but don't act as if humans did nothing." She's trying to be a ray of sunshine, but the shadows won't let her. "Humans work stuff out! It always seems like the world's going to end, but it never does. Illumination isn't different."

Sinas shrugs again. "Maritime and Haru couldn't agree on this, either.""

"It'll work out," Wake says. "It's too depressing otherwise." Under different circumstances, she'd go for the hug.

"It's just... I want there to be a point," I sigh. "The idea that this might be worthless is... ugh."

Agricultural Zone 1

There's a door here: a big door, split into diagonal sections for different lanes of AutoDrones. It opens with a series of unpleasantly loud clicks, like my dad's knees at the end of a long day (old equipment, but gets the job done), and a gloomy, wide-open chamber is revealed. *Too* open, if you ask me. Sinas palms the rifle he's holding, nervously, as if that'll help when spirits rush forth. Wake primes her drone, letting it fly by her shoulder, humming softly.

I try to psyche myself up. Doesn't really work.

Sinas goes, then Wake, and they kind of catch themselves trying to pass through the same space at the same time. I follow, as empty as Finn's suit.

No choice but to keep running, through endless footy fields of abandoned PolyGrowth. My vibe is that of an old, crusty tea towel that's far past usefulness, sticking around at the bottom of a drawer.

There HAS to be an ending that makes this worthwhile (and not one of those lame, open-ended 'futility-of-life' morals which crop up in old movies about French people being sad in greyscale). There's gotta be a point. Right?

What if it's a bad one?

Is that preferable, to this simple madness and sadness?

I don't know. Maybe.

ALEX XI

Suddenly, I'm home.

Each floor of the agzone is an enormous scaffold, avalanched with soil and vegetation. Banks of planters hang from 3D-printed beams, crisscrossed by hydroponic lines. Vast sun-simulator panels lean precariously from pillars. The plants themselves are swathes of tangled green: thin, light fronds of carrots, heavier stalks of corn and bamboo, patches of wheat that whisper as they rub one other, finely trimmed fruit trees that are forests in miniature. Their leaves are already thickening with frost, the air simultaneously humid and chilly. We're at the summit of the chamber, according to gravity's usual vector – descending as the walls narrow, following the taper of Starfish's arms.

I wonder if my parents would ever take a job in a place like this. Probably not. Seems like a lot of trouble to go to for plants, though I suppose it's better than synthesizing all your food supplies in vats.

"How are your suit batteries?" Sinas asks.

I check. "Two hours of charge."

"Let's keep an eye on it. It'll deplete faster in the cold."

There are gaps in the scaffolds for drones to pass through, and magrail grids trace the different sections. We follow one, past half-finished grow-beds, into the gloom. It's like one of those majestic libraries in fantasy novels – towering corridors of hushed, heavy shelving, but for living plant matter instead of dead. The next layer of scaffolding has ripped free entirely and lies, tilted, between the layers above and below. The architecture is obviously fancier than Tomato Tower, and I bet it wouldn't require a dedicated child (me) to spend their school holidays clambering across it to keep it running.

Broken pipes, leaking snow.

Clods of soil, thrown free.

"Look," Wake whispers.

Flickers of light in the layers below: patches of colour dancing on the leaves, like dappled, rainbow moonlight.

"What do you think that is?" I ask.

“We *know* what that is. A million ghosts escaped and they’ve gotta be hanging out somewhere and they look a lot like *that*, Alex.”

“I *mean* that if it’s one ghost, we can probably get past it. If it’s a whole damn farmful, it’s game over.” It’s hard to see, with so much corn in the way. (What a problem to have, on a space station: too much corn.)

“For now, let’s move towards the edge,” Sinas mutters, “so we don’t draw any more attention.”

We glide sideways, past broken beams, until the chamber’s curving wall. There are tanks here, big enough to stew several children in, smelling sickly sweet. We squeeze between them to the next set of scaffolds; or *nest* of scaffolds, more like. With the plants, the drone rails, the floating debris, it’s a challenge to see more than twenty paces in any direction.

I’m climbing past a rack of carrots when my boot hits something soft.

It’s a face. A *person*. She’s wedged between two shelves, eyes open, a broken pair of glasses sliding off her nose.

I almost scream – almost. “Shit!” I swing myself sideways, next to her. “Found someone.” I ping her MeshMate and get only a search-and-rescue tag in response.

“Oh,” Sinas says. “Are they... dead?”

“I don’t really wanna check.” I move closer, chewing on my cheeks. She looks like the actress who plays Vespera on *Moon’s Haunted*; same slender face, turning blue. I take off a glove, and place my fingers on her neck.

Not much activity, far as I can tell. I slip the glove back on before the freezing air starts to hurt.

Then, her eyes start to glow.

They *pulse* green, like she’s a god-damn bot turning on.

It takes me two milliseconds to back away. “What the *hell*...”

Drops of green light begin falling from above: first a drizzle, then full-on rain. A few zip through my upturned palm. Their radiance is unearthly, almost pretty, like a planetarium stuffed with bioluminescent jellyfish. My mind fills in the pitter-patter of water on a roof, but light drizzles soundlessly through the leaves.

“Coming up on today’s weather forecast,” Sinas murmurs, “we’ve got... light rain...”

“Funny. Let’s see if it’s STILL funny once this dead lady wakes wake up.”

“Wait, what? Don’t tell me—”

“Dude, she’s glowing like a bonfire and I’d prefer she wasn’t.”

“There’s another old guy here,” Wake says. “In the leaves.”

“Is he dead?” I ask.

“Maybe.”

“Is he glowing?”

“You know it.”

I pull myself up, hoping nobody grabs my ankle, until I spot Wake’s new friend lying amidst the squashed greenery.

I look back at Finn: a dark suit, floating a safe distance behind. (When I begged him to wake up, I didn't mean *this*.)

Could he explain what the hell this is? Clearly, he knew way more than he was letting on. If only I'd sat him down and grilled him for answers, we wouldn't be stuck in this godawful situation, and hey – he wouldn't be dead, either. Maybe that's on him, then.

What *happened* to us, three years ago? If he knew about ANY of this, why wouldn't he explain? Why wouldn't those be the first words out of his mouth?

Unless you're afraid. Scarred by the past, afraid of the future.

Instead of acting, you watch, and wait, hoping against hope the world will change on its own. Except it doesn't, and with every passing moment it's harder to break free. In the end, you don't deserve to.

It's a possible reason. Hard to ask a dead person what they really meant. That also goes for Haru, with the additional messed-up layer of whether she's my mum in any meaningful capacity, or if the people who've actually raised me for sixteen years are whom I should care about. Hooray, for having to think about this for the rest of my (tragically short) life. It's like I'm being dive-bombed by magpies made of angst.

A mangled scream echoes from below us.

"Who was that?" Wake asks.

The scream dissipates, muffled by vegetation. I'm not *entirely* sure the vocal cords that spawned it are human.

"This is turning into a haunted house," Wake whispers, "and I am not keen. Not. Keen."

"Maybe we should turn back," Sinas says.

"Turn where? WHERE, Sinas? Where where where where where—"

"Can you send your little cricket ball to fly ahead and scout?" I ask.

"You take that back," Wake retorts.

"Take what back?"

"Pietro isn't a cricket ball, he's—"

"Pietro? Since when does your drone have a name?"

"Since now, because he's been super useful and saved us more than once so I thought we should give him the proper respect."

"Okay."

"If you ask nicely, he might scout for you."

I shake my head. "Please ask Pietro to scout for us."

The drone zigzags through scaffolding, zipping around icicles. Grainy video pipes into to my MeshMate: long rows of planters, in eerie nightvision. The drone descends, rotating to check behind it, and—

"Someone's there, get down, get down!" Wake says, and we do, despite not knowing where down is, and there's too much rustling and a soft *bonk* as Sinas knocks a toolbox with his knee. I'm hiding behind some carrots. A toddler could've picked a better hiding spot.

On the video, there's a man. He's floating, back to us, wearing a jumpsuit, a squashed hunch to his shoulders. No movement, or words, or signs of life, apart from slight puffs of breath, swallowed by the dark.

My heart thumps in my chest.

"What do you wanna do?" Wake whispers. "Check if he's OK?"

"Nah, let's not get close," I reply. "We don't know if he's possessed."

"What if we check, and if he IS possessed, Sinas shoots him."

"I'm not shooting anybody," Sinas says.

"Why not?" Wake asks. "In the worst-case scenario, he's *already* dead."

"That's exactly why I'm not shooting anybody."

"Then why are you even carrying the gun around?"

"I don't know! You take it!"

I point at the glowing corpse above us. "We'd better do *something* before she gets up and starts walking around too."

"Let's just—sneak past, like we planned," Sinas says. "Head left. Alright?"

We exchange a glance. "Alright."

Quietly, we start pulling ourselves towards one of the bigger support pillars. The pillar itself provides a bit of cover, and there's a recessed crawlspace on the far side, with a ladder that descends towards the lower half of the chamber. I flick my eyes left, right, but the issue is these effing shelves – a bad guy could be on the other side, a literal metre away, and I'd never see them unless I look through the right gap.

Thus, I'd rather avoid EVERY gap. If the outcome is an eye peering back at me, better not to know. More energy manifests as we descend: twinkling geometry that forms, then is swept away, like ephemeral sand dunes. Wake's drone scans each level as we enter, but the video's becoming overwhelmed with static. My suit isn't whinging about radiation, or toxicity, so I *assume* I'm not gonna suddenly get leukaemia, or squid flu. My hands are sketched in emerald as I hold them before me, the world less real than ever.

I'm generally alright when it comes to hide and seek – especially the version called 'spotlight' me and my friends play, which inevitably starts whenever our parents are having a dinner party, and we get bored of hanging out inside. I like being seeker, since I figured out my friends will laugh at almost anything, so my strategy is to roam around, belting out terrible jokes, and within two minutes – guaranteed – I'll hear someone giggling inside a bush.

I still believe, however, that hide and seek should not be life-threatening. Do not choose a hiding spot where there are likely to be spiders. Similarly, do not play hide and seek with creepy zombies.

Good rules to live by.

Another shout, to the right.

I stiffen. Eyes, on the back of my neck.

"What if they're like dolphins," Wake says, "and they use sonar. To locate their prey."

"You don't need to make this more terrifying," Sinas replies.

I feel antsy, without anything to defend myself with, so I glance around for a weapon. Perhaps I could tear a pipe free, but after an experimental tug, that's not gonna happen – not without causing a commotion, anyway. I settle for stealing a carrot just so I can *hold* something, or chuck it as the world's worst improvised javelin. (You know you're in a good place if your life might be saved by a carrot. Carrots aren't even a particularly high-tier vegetable.) I've got my notebook too, I guess; pen mightier than the sword, et cetera.

Didn't Finn say he was into cooking? He'd probably have some hot veggie takes.

Ugh, don't *think* about this, don't turn it over and over in your mind, don't watch his suit, don't wonder about what you did, or why.

Or do. Submerge yourself in that stupid regret. Try outrunning THAT. Oh, to be the pure, innocent Alex of three hours ago, guzzling Shapes like a drunken hippo while the literal underworld is breaking down the door.

Don't cry. Don't you dare.

The vegetation thins as the supports grow wider, the chamber becoming a giant funnel. There are exits where the drone rails merge, and drainage channels to catch material that falls from above. The main source of light is now on our level, on the far side of the agzone and it sparkles, blinding, through the intervening platforms. Barely half the pillars around us are real, while the rest swell from Illumination's soft light, stretching above and below, like— trees.

No, not trees. Stalactites and stalagmites.

I close my eyes, and I'm in a cave, crouched beside a crackling fire, and all around me are ghosts: violent, blackened scribbles of decaying energy, the same shade as the twilight sky outside.

The ghosts turn to face me. They don't have faces, but they turn to face me. And they reach out, and rush forwards, and—

Eyes open. I wobble, mid-air, and try and steady myself on a stalagmite. The lack of gravity saves me from falling on my face.

Well, shit.

"One more level," Sinas whispers.

One more. There's our exit, to the left. Through it, two more corridors, then we'll pass through the resonance lab on our way to the cargo dock.

Problem: there's a figure, blocking our path, and it's a *girl* – a kid. She's got short hair, and a cute backpack, and she sits cross-legged, looking right at us, as we peek through the final layer of vegetation without so much as a blink.

"I'm gonna assume that's a freaky demon child," Sinas says. "And I'm not prepared to deal with a freaky demon child."

"Just shoot her," Wake says. "It's really not that hard."

"Wake, like I said, I won't—"

"It's a joke, it's a joke! *Jesus*."

I scan left, then right. "We can't sneak around her."

"So, we need a strategy," Sinas says. "This isn't the last time we're going to run into this issue."

“It’s hard to strategize if we don’t know what the freaky demon child actually does.” I frown. “We also need a name for these things, like shorthand.”

“Zombie,” Wake says.

“They’re not, though.”

“They act like zombies.”

“They’re possessed, right?” Sinas asks. “The light takes them over, or…”

“Then our name should be a light-related,” I reply. “Same goes for the ghosts. I mean, those prickly glowballs technically ARE ghosts, but names should be thematically relevant. My media teacher discussed that in class.”

What a clearsly distraction.

“Okay, I’ve got one,” Sinas says.

“Hit me.”

“They’re ghosts, but they’re also a bit like vampires. Instead of sucking out peoples’ blood, they suck out peoples’ souls.” He presses his palms together, then separates them, underlining the word. “*Lampires*.”

“Heh,” Wake says. “Pretty bad. But also *good*.”

“Lampires?” I let it sit in my mouth. “I can live with that. I was thinking of something comparatively lame like ‘blights’ or ‘sprites’.”

“Sprite doesn’t sound scary enough,” Wake replies. “A lampire though? Nobody’s keen to get sucked on by a lampire.”

“Or sucked off,” Sinas adds.

“Nice,” Wake says. “What about the zombies?”

“Uhhhh…” I’m struggling. “Maybe ‘hollows’? Because they’re like, hollow people – people with the ‘people’ stuff removed.”

“Geez, Alex, I know you’re a writer or whatever but let’s not aim for *Lord of the Rings* vibes. ‘My lord, we’ve sighted a gang of blights and hollows on yonder ridge!’ This isn’t the renaissance.”

“Not to be pedantic, but Lord of the Rings isn’t—”

Wake rolls her eyes. “You know what I mean. If nobody proposes anything decent in the next thirty seconds, I’ll name them ‘sims’ and you both can’t stop me.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

“Hey Alex, you’d better get away from those vicious sims.”

“Fine, then try this: blinkers.”

“Nah,” Wake says.

“Empties?”

“Oooh, getting warmer.”

“Sparks?”

“Colder.”

“Darks.”

“A hundred percent too close to actual racism.”

“...Lumens?”

“What?”

“Like ‘human’, but lumen. It’s a measurement scale for brightness.”

“liiiiinteresting, but I’m not totally feeling it. Let’s stick with empties, and we can iterate when there’s less time pressure, although this is of course EXTREMELY important and I treasure all your suggestions.”

“So, back to the original point... what should we do about the empty over there,” Sinas says.

Empties? Empties. Hmmm.

“Distract her,” Wake says. “We throw something in the other direction, she’ll chase it, and we sneak through the door.”

“WILL she chase it?” Sinas asks.

“One way to find out,” I say, hefting my carrot. “I’ll chuck this at her stupid face.”

Wake squints at me. “Have you been carrying that the whole time?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because, Wake, I’m sad and tired and mango and I figured this carrot might help. I dunno.”

Sinas shrugs. “Understandable. Commence chucking.”

My aim’s so perfect it’s like I was *born* for this. I throw the carrot through an opening in the shelves. It sails gracefully towards the chamber’s backside, with the top-quality spin of a backyard cricket bowl that’ll send your uncle packing via LBW, and ricochets off the scaffolding.

The girl twists her neck, tracking it with her stare.

She stays in sleeper-mode. Doesn’t move.

But she *has* turned away from the door. (Yeah, calling these guys blinkers wouldn’t have worked. There’s very little blinking going on.)

“Shall we go?” Sinas whispers.

“She IS still there,” I reply.

“Yep, but she isn’t looking at us and she also isn’t moving,” Wake says. “The door’s RIGHT there. It’s so close!”

“Okay, just— let’s be quiet.”

“Alex, I am a *master* of stealth.”

One by one, we emerge from our hiding spot.

The girl doesn’t move.

I feel like she’s going to.

If I so much as cough, she’ll see us. Her head will turn a hundred and eighty degrees, full exorcist mode, and then Sinas really WILL have to shoot her. My shoulders are tensed tighter than Commander Vespera’s shirt (the kind of tight that’s detrimental to blood flow but is also, ahem, quite halo.)

Instead, over our heads, a shadow detaches from the wall.

For too long, my brain can’t figure out what it is, but—

Saturnian squid. Phew. It’s only a squid.

It’s several metres long, without discernible head or tail, its body a floppy assortment of globes and appendages. Feathery tentacles trail underneath. It descends towards us, pulsing hypnotically.

As far as I know, they don't eat humans?...

<Where'd *that* guy come from?> Wake asks.

<Doesn't matter> Sinas says. <Keep going.>

<Is it the same one we saw earlier?>

<Doesn't matter.>

<I don't wanna see it get possessed.>

<Do you, like, get off on tempting fate?>

We reach the door and swing ourselves through, with zero possessed children or squids in pursuit (as far as I'm concerned, an unqualified success).

Freed from the agzone's huge expanse, this regular ol' corridor feels positively claustrophobic. <Resonance Lab: 50 m, door on the left> my MeshMate announces. We push on as fast as we dare, spurred by the weight of anticipation behind us.

"Oh," Sinas says. "We could call them lightmares."

"We *could*," I reply. "Not totally terrible. You're pun-maxxing today, huh?"

"I can only apologise."

"Problem is," Wake says, "we've already named them lampires, so..."

"Well, it's not 100% decided," I say. "Let's keep workshoping. See what we like."

"Direflies?" Sinas murmurs, as we arrive at the entrance of the lab. It's the type of thick, imposing door that requires a multiple biokeys but conveniently, someone's broken-and-entered in advance – it's stuck half-open by a caught AutoDrone, its burnt-out motor whining stubbornly. (Now that I think about it, weird spot to put a lab, isn't it? Next to a bunch of dirty wet plants?)

"Let's give ourselves ten minutes," I say. "If we find anything useful, great. If not, we keep going. Sound okay?"

"Sounds amazing," Wake says.

Sinas nods.

"Then let's get to it."

ALEX XII

The resonance lab reminds of a giant milk carton. It's got multiple levels, and a central atrium, and thick cords hanging everywhere, but *reaaaally*, it's a milk carton. As I stand at the bottom, looking up, I can see squared-off railings that mark five different floors, the identikit glass-paned workrooms behind them, a single elevator shaft on the south side that doesn't work when I test the button. It's the roof that does it, mainly, rising to a single asymmetric point. Instead of milk, though, it's filled with floating debris: plastic wrap, half a Coffee² machine (plus spilled coffee), sleek office chairs straight out of a supervillain's lair.

On the lowest level sits a box, formed from milky white panels, several metres to a side. The box is in a Mexican standoff with a ring of robotic manipulators, each holding a black, rounded disc that looks like a subwoofer cone. I can't tell if they're supposed to shoot lasers or broadcast sick beats.

"What are we even doing here?" I grumble. "We don't even know what this resonance thingy is."

"This was *your* idea," Wake replies, above me.

"Even I have shitty ideas sometimes. It happens." I point theatrically at the atrium's centrepiece and whisper, under my breath: "*Reveal your secrets.*"

It does not. I can't see inside the milky enclosure, or even a way in. It might simply be a big receiver, or transmitter.

I feel... lost. The only soul in the Sahara.

Finn floats, off to the side.

"I wonder..." Sinas says.

"Do you."

He climbs up one of the arms, grabs its disc, wriggles it free.

"How's it feel?" I ask.

"Like a toy." He turns it over. "Heavy, though."

"I'm gonna try and switch this glitched cube on," Wake announces, "or sneak into the Mesh so I can find a user manual. How long left?"

"Eight minutes," I say.

"Eight minutes? Clearsky. I'll crack it in five."

“Can you turn on the lights while you’re at it?”

“Aaaaa-firmative.”

The lab’s only illuminated by our struggling suit lamps, thin light-cones that throw shadows in any direction we *aren’t* facing. That’s a lot of directions.

“Do you think the discs need power?” Sinas asks. “Or batteries?”

“You investigate that. I’ll— keep watch. And check for unwanted guests.”

“Sounds good.”

“Lemme know if you need help.” I watch him concentrate, then jet towards the nearest doorway. I have no flipping idea about any of this, but hey, I’ve got eyes; I can make sure nobody sneaks up on us. My first thought is to check the main entrance as a potential escape route (bottom level), then barricade the broken door we used (top level).

The main entrance is two sliding doors, each with a window at head height. I poke my head through – another empty walkway – then lock it. A half-reflection of myself glints back at me, as my suit lights sweep the glass.

“I wonder what’s happening, back on Earth,” I say, filling the darkness with words.

“Probably whatever was happening before we left?” Wake replies. “Unless a rogue AI took over the planet and turned the population into androids.”

“Any, uh... reason that’s the first thing springing to mind?”

“It was one of my favourite nightmares when I was young.”

“You’ve got so many ‘fun Wake facts’. Hey, who d’you think won Scythesoccer Worlds? That kicked off while we were in cryo.”

“I can dig around for a vid? There’ll be heaps in the Mesh here.”

“Yeah, nah, it’s fine. I’m good as long as we thrashed New Zealand.”

“Suit yourself! I was gonna check the buffers anyway, because there was a movie I wanted to download. I MEANT to watch it, the night before we left, but then those HLF protests took over Bangkok and the city put out a curfew.”

I float back into the atrium, where Sinas is flipping the disc over and over in his hands. It wobbles, peculiarly unbalanced. “Fifty-fifty chance this turns out either good or bad,” he says. “In terms of what’s happening, back on Earth.”

“You mean once this info gets out?”

“Right. Because once it does, things will get *maximum* glitch. In short term, there’ll be movies to go to, and world cups. In the long term... who knows? And maybe, unfortunately, that’s partly up to us – we’re the coin-flip. We’re the coin BEING flipped.” He leans back, relaxing on air. “Which means should do everything we can, to make sure it lands the way we want.” He catches the disc, stopping it dead. Suddenly, his voice is old and withered. “*Did you ever hear the tragedy of Darth Plagueis the Wise? I thought not; it’s not a story the Jedi would tell you.*”

“Don’t quote Palpatine at me.”

“*It’s a Sith legend. Darth Plagueis was a Dark Lord of the Sith, so powerful and so wise he could use the Force to—*”

“Stop! Stop. Please.”

“Killjoy.” He forms a claw with his hand and fires pretend Sith lightning at me. “The *point* is different people will take this in different ways. Different social structures will leverage this in different ways. It’s like the Force in Star Wars – you can use it for good or evil. It can make you weaker or stronger, depending on your point of view. Darth Vader thought he was powerful, by using the Force to bring people he loved back to life, but in the end, his power only helped plunge the galaxy into darkness.”

“I think Finn would’ve liked this analogy more, but I vaguely understand what you’re getting at.”

“Another example. They – ‘society’ – fed us to the Mesh without asking. We’re the first generation born with MeshMates already installed. I don’t mind personally, since it’s useful, but we didn’t have a choice, right? There were debates, and people drafted laws, but that happened before we were born. Now it’s taken for granted that *we don’t have a choice*. It’s just how humans are. We’re interfacing with the Mesh ALL the time, our entire lives are recorded, and megacorps can choose to access or even sell that data. That’s the deal. Okay, *technically* you can choose to get your MeshMate removed, but who does?”

“There are some people,” I say. “A few.”

“But they’re left behind. Nobody cares about them. The old internet, the new Mesh – they’re such orbital changes you could argue we’re forcibly evolving a different species. When you consider how people see the world, and use these resources, and manipulate them, there’ll be countless ripples and waves downstream that couldn’t ever be predicted. It’s like how everybody can plaster over their appearance with a MeshSkin. You could have a best friend and not even know what they look like in truespace.”

“But it’s useful!” Wake says. “Like you said! I always use a skin in my TwitchToks, to keep my face private. Plus, it’s soooo adorable. It’s halo.” She flips a switch, and suddenly she’s a porcelain, red-haired anime girl wearing a sparkling black gymnastics outfit; real, but also too perfect to be real. “See?”

“It’s also unhealthy,” Sinas says.

“Uh-huh. But you DO think it’s halo – don’t you?” She makes a peace sign, tilts her head, her scarlet hair ribbon flapping in a non-existent breeze. Then she puts her hands on her hips, thinking, and exhales like an amdrive for a solid ten seconds. “Sinas, let’s skip the philosophy lecture. Can you get inside the cube down there? There’s like, a proximity-based connection system and those cute little discs are supposed to get calibrated inside. They’re called PRISMs, by the way: Portable Resonance Interferometric Shield Monopoles.”

“Catchy,” he says. “And yes, Wake, your skin is halo.”

“Why thank you! Hey, d’you like the ponytail? I can’t decide if it’s too girly.”

“It’s pretty. Keep it.” He rubs his eyes tiredly before turning away; I kinda like this exhausted, less wary, #nofilter Sinas.

I swing over the railing onto the uppermost floor, jetting between workstations.

“Ooughh, Sinas! You’re making me think,” Wake broadcasts. “You’re making me wonder about how my life might change, from now on. And the truth is, I don’t know. I never have, I think. Isn’t that strange? I’m not talking about today – today it’s like, I dunno, we’re in a drama class improv game except to survive we’ve gotta win an Oscar. No, I’m talking about every day. Literally my whole life, to be super lucent with you. So, when you’re talking about ‘how does this development affect how you live’, I’m like... what? Huh?” I can hear the derision in her voice. “Maybe a smart person would know, but I don’t. I thought I did, but after today... nope. Can you pass me that cable?”

The door where we entered, on the top level, is still trying to close on the trapped drone. It’s aerodynamic, missile-shaped, with a hatch in its belly for tools. My first attempt to free it leaves me faint, eyes full of pinpricks, and my mango of a MeshMate tells me to hydrate.

“The issue is I need to GET somewhere, with all the crap I do. Right?” Wake continues. “I need ME to be a success. Otherwise, the pile of sacrifices I’m standing on wouldn’t be worth anything, and that’d be SUCH polluted behaviour. Want results, need results, can’t get always results. Not stressful at ALL.”

“‘Sacrifices’?” Sinas asks.

“There’s one bus out of struggle city, Sinas, and tickets are expensive.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“It means my family’s in deep shit, Sinas, and I’m not. Yet. But that’s the source: there’s always pressure to forge ahead, to beat everyone, to not be left behind, so I never get five free seconds to figure out ME, and instead I’m stuck rushing blindly into whatever open space there is ‘cause that’s worked out so far, and let’s hope it keep working because if not, I’m a failure, and I can’t be that. That’s the ONE option that can’t happen. I’m actually angry.”

“At me?”

“Not you – which I’m now realising, since I’m having a mantis personal therapy moment on a ghost-infested space station. Nope, I’m mostly annoyed at myself! And the world, which INCLUDES me. I’m just one of those toxic influencer idiots who makes a job out of BEING angry and slamming that anger left and right. It’s been that way for sixteen years, and I think I deal with it by treating the things I break along the way as tiny little presents, for me. Isn’t that sweet? The problem is that breaking things has become, like, the entire PLAN at this point, and this all feels less ash if I have a plan.”

“I don’t know if that sounds... healthy.”

“It’s not, Sinas, but it works. The anger isn’t pointless. It’s... useful, to shape my halo-grade life. Otherwise I’d have jumped off a bridge by now.”

“Sculpting sandcastles, on the beaches of your fury,” I say, to my notebook.

“What?” Wake asks.

“Nothing.” I kick the AutoDrone, and its camera gives me an accusing look. “C’mon, mate, get up. You can do it.” I brace against the door with my back, prop it open it another few centimetres, and manage to slide the drone out with my

good leg. It wobbles, chirps, and rises into the air, and I let the door slide shut.
“There you go, little buddy. You’re free!”

“I think we lost Alex,” Wake says. “She’s yekked out.”

“I’m here.”

“Who are you talking to?”

“Nobody. I get it, though – being mad. There’s a lot to be mad about. If you can’t avoid it, then sure, make it work *for* you. Keep being pissed if it stops you jumping off bridges.”

“Thanks, so motivating, but what if we also forget the last ten things I said? Also, pro tip – never let a dude bite you, because this is really REALLY hurting. It hurts SO bad. Sinas, are you inside that cube yet?”

“Yes,” he replies.

“Cool! How?” Wake asks.

“Hatch in the floor.”

“Cool! Now, start talking. Time for YOUR therapy session.”

I glide back to the atrium. The box is now glowing with pale white light, an enormous Japanese lantern. Its opaque panelling reminds me very specifically of a room I stayed in once on an interplanetary cruise, where one entire wall of the bathroom was frosted glass that didn’t seem *quite* frosted enough for actual privacy, especially when you’re sharing said room with your parents.

“I don’t think I like therapy,” Sinas says.

“Then call it having a meaningful conversation with your besties to distract yourself from impending doom,” Wake replies. “I *am* your bestie, right?”

He snorts. “Yeah. Probably.”

“Well, that’s tragic,” I reply.

“Not even joking. I’m actually not sure I want to go back.”

“Back where?” I ask.

“Earth.”

“Okay, but you live there, right? Eastralia-3? I swear I asked earlier.”

“You did.”

Further answers don’t seem forthcoming.

“Sinas, talk,” Wake says.

He sighs. “There’s nothing for me on Earth. None of it matters. At this point, I might as well go someplace else.”

“Go where?” I ask.

“Proxima Centauri sounds nice.”

“Proxima Centauri is mostly uninhabitable.”

“Sounds nice.”

Now it’s my turn to sigh. “Dude, there’s *everything* for you on Earth. Where’s this coming from? Sure, you’re occasionally an ass, but who isn’t? From my limited experience you’ve got your shit **MOSTLY** put together, which is more than I can say for most people, least of all the other two here.”

“Speak for yourself,” Wake replies.

“You **JUST** spent five minutes ranting about being a hot mess.”

“I know it’s dumb,” Sinas says. “But— hey, can you resend the activation signal?”

“OK,” Wake says. There’s a bloop, and the robot arms jerk to attention.

“It sounds dumb,” he continues, “but this trip was my single month of freedom. Right now, stuck on a plastic starfish a billion kilometres from home... I’m genuinely free. It’s a chance to be whoever I want. Because on Earth, I have to pretend; twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, I have to pretend to be me. Or a version of me that’s— not.”

“Why?”

“Because I have to.”

“Yeah, but why?”

“I have to, alright?” Frustration, creeping in. “Even if or when things change, I need to act like they’re the same, so they are the same and I might as well leave. It’s fucking exhausting.”

“Do you get to stop pretending, if you leave home?” I ask.

“I don’t know.”

“Then... why not stay?”

“Wow. Hasn’t this been a useless conversation.”

“Sorry.” I shrug. “Maybe, when we get back... we could help each other.”

“Hundred percent,” Wake says.

“Can you pass me some velcro? Or duct tape? I need to stick this down.”

Did Finn manage to get through to him, somehow? I feel like he did, and Finn didn’t even talk— but he knew what to do, oddly enough (or what he *should* do, even if he didn’t always do it). I’m more like Wake in that I’ve got no bloody clue, but I keep throwing stuff out there to see if it sticks, which is fine when you’re confined to the social comfort blanket of hometowns and parents and schools.

And if that’s no longer true...

I visualise the Earth from orbit: the melange of grey plague quarantine zones sprawled across Russia and Europe, the beautiful nano-flower domes housing hives of humanity, the delicate Australian coastlines wracked by weather and waves, the eerie sheets of aurora and lightning inside acid-rain clouds, the eye-catching rings of satellites stretching all the way to Mars.

It’s my home.

It *does* scare me. Sinas isn’t entirely wrong.

It scares me, the way it scared my dad, when I found him hanging from the uppermost layer of the broccoli hydroponics, thinking of letting go. The sun was ramming through the trees on the edge of the ag-dome with a harsh, deep orangey-gold that made everything hazy, like the air was something you could bottle and drink. His hands were sweaty, and dirty, and strained, the tendons on the backs of his palms shivering like tightropes, and I couldn’t see his face, but what I’d read in his ink-stained journal meant he’d already decided. This was just... the formalities. No ropes around necks, no medicine overdoses, no car crashes. Only a fall; an accident. I ran there, as fast as I could. I *flew* there. Legs burning, arms burning, outrunning the gates and fences that tried to pin me

down. And there I was, six years old, trying to stop him, trying to lift him up, and the thing I most remember is being too weak to do it – straining, my fingers wrapped around the rough, scratched collar of his button-down flannel, trying to save him and being unable to, arms too *weak*. MeshMates are supposed to disallow suicides, but if you're methodical, you can override their chemical doses. My dad was always methodical. That moment between us stretched out for hours: me, him, the tiny sprouts of broccoli being crushed under my feet, until finally, something changed.

He pulled himself up.

I comforted him, and he was my dad again.

That night, I gave him a list of things that made me happy, in the hope they'd make him happy, too. But that stretched-out moment never ended.

So, Sinas is partly right, but he's also wrong – Earth's not the problem. Illumination isn't the problem.

We are.

I pretend it's fine.

Sinas pretends to be somebody else.

Wake pretends she's on top of the world.

Finn pretends it doesn't matter.

A billion kilometres away, home crosses an arbitrary threshold in space, and my MeshMate tells me it's my birthday. Balloons and streamers and virtual cake splatter across the lab. The suddenness and ridiculousness of it makes me laugh involuntarily, a chuckle-y rasp befitting a horny bullfrog. It WAS supposed to happen the day after we arrived at camp, which... well, is apparently now. (My parents even said they'd packed a top-secret present in my luggage.)

"Oh! Happy birthday! Yay!" Wake says, before I can snooze the alert.

"*Happy birthday*," Sinas murmurs.

"Thank you both," I reply. "I've been having a really great time."

"We have to celebrate once we're on the ship," Wake adds. "Stuff our faces with all the emergency rations we can handle... which probably doesn't include cake, huh? I would murder for cake right now. I'm sorry it's been so awful."

"Hey, not your fault."

"So are you turning sixteen, or seventeen?"

"Sixteen."

"*I guess that goes for Finn, too*," Sinas says.

"Does it?"

"Alex, he's your brother, AND he's the same age," Wake says. "There's one logical conclusion. But, like, what's even the point of twins who don't look the same? Very glitched. It genuinely ruins the concept for me."

"I never really considered that we— I mean, it makes sense."

The emptiness strikes again. Swallows me whole.

Finn *was* my brother. He *knew* me.

He knew me, and he still wanted to... leave? To follow?

However I finish the sentence, ‘die’ overrides it. Now we’re stuck lugging a stupid corpse around, pretending it’s not-corpse to keep ourselves sane and yeah, I could go back to my old life, my parents, the farm, but this emptiness will always be there. It’ll be waiting, wherever I run. I was so goddamn terrified when he reached out to me that, as the world fridged itself around us—I couldn’t even move. I couldn’t comfort him, couldn’t make the barest damn effort.

That aimless fear, over the horizon? It finally caught up.

(Happy birthday.)

My MeshMate lags, turning fuzzy, and I blink staccato till it snaps into clarity.

I find myself walking away.

No direction. Away.

I follow a conduit in the floor, snaking beneath a metal grate, into a room filled with matte black plates. It’s the Illumination portal disassembled, a dozen ceramic blocks laid out in a circle, a mini-Stonehenge. The blocks don’t actually feel like stone, though; more like fossilised thread, perhaps. They’re also *cold*, covered in glittering condensation that my heated gloves carve like a knife.

Our ten minutes are up. We should leave.

I crouch, letting my fingers drag across the blocks.

Why was I drawn here?

Something about the conduit. The way it looked important, and hidden...

There’s a label, on the wall. I wipe away the frost.

THEBE LINK NODE

Thebe?

<A lover of Zeus>, explains my MeshMate. <One of Jupiter’s moons.>

A phrase Maritime mentioned *crackles* in my brain, a dry leaf I wanna stamp on. Resonance lab. Link node. Thebe. PRISM. Meaningless words that WOULD have meaning, if it weren’t for irritating secrecy. I ask my MeshMate to tell me more about Thebe, and again, it lags, which makes me vaguely ill. I close my eyes, and—

Cross worlds between heartbeats.

I feel crook. My thoughts are crook. I lean over to vomit and barely remember my visor’s in the way; it splits apart and I heave up a few lame drops of bile, tasting of off-brand synth meat.

Where am I?

I’m... curled up, in a corner, in a room I don’t recognise. It’s not big. Just a workroom, containing tables and lockers.

It’s dark. Quiet. I’m alone, I think.

I look down. Blood on my knuckles.

I look up. Blood on the *walls*. Tiny red drops, floating.

Is this still the resonance lab? I don't recognise it, but it's not like I checked every room...

Shit, shit shit shit. How long has it been?

I try unfurling myself, which doesn't hurt too badly, which is when I hear the loud, rasping intake of another person's breath.

"Aaahhhrhahhhh..."

I flick my eyes from left to right. <Sinās? Wake?>

Nothing over the Mesh.

Carefully, I stick my boots to the floor, then crouch, peering under tables.

Nothing.

"Aaahhhrhahhhh..."

The sound's coming from *above*. I look up.

Person in the air vent. *Person in the air vent*. Stuffed inside, awkwardly, head crammed sideways. The vent covering hangs nearby. More blood slicks an edge.

Have they seen me? They're not looking at me, and I reckon—

"Aaahhhrhahhhh..."

As they breathe, the person's mouth emits a faint firefly glow.

I guess that answers *one* question.

I need to get out of here.

Door? Where's the door?

Far side, past the tables.

<Sinās? Wake? Hello?>

I don't trust myself to make it in one clean jump, so I start crawling along the floor, under one table, then the next – too slowly, WAY too slowly, but I don't want to make any noise. The gecko boots make a soft *sticking* sound whenever they touch, but I hope it's not enough to attract attention. I'm keeping my suit lights off, too.

That guy hasn't breathed for a while, huh? Still there? Or are they crawling out of the vent, reaching towards me with one spindly hand...

I glance over my shoulder.

"Aaahhhr—"

Clunk! My foot knocks a table leg.

<*Shit!*>

"—hahhhh..."

I force my heart to stop racing *quite* so fast – marathon, not a sprint – and wriggle the rest of the way, until I finally reach the exit.

Should I close the door?

Nah, it'll make noise.

Okay. Okay. I *do* recognise this – I'm on the second floor of the resonance lab. The hallway emerges into the central atrium behind me, and beyond the safety railings, I see the console Wake was working on, but no Wake. The other direction leads past more workrooms and a water fountain, to the lift at the end of the hall.

<Hey, guys? Anyone there?>

<Me.>

<Who's 'me'?> I ask.

<Me.>

<That's, uh, not helpful. That you, Wake?>

<Me.>

The message's metadata is from a 'Dippy Ripley', which... isn't helpful. I turn again, spinning like the camera at the climax of a horror movie (have I mentioned how I kinda hate horror movies?)

In the room I woke up in, a single hand emerges from the ceiling vent. It paws lightly at the air, then finds purchase on the polymer, followed by an arm, then a shoulder, then a neck, and finally, a glowing mouth. Now, unfolded, I *do* recognise her – it's the girl I threw a FREAKING carrot at. This, I think, is quite unfortunate.

She un-scrunches like a piece of paper, until she's crouched upside-down on the ceiling.

Our eyes lock.

I *spring* down the corridor, towards the lift.

Should've picked the other direction. Too late now.

Shadows blur on either side as I pass dim, unlit offices. My skin prickles with the need to turn around, but I don't, and it's the fastest I've ever moved. A few beats later, I'm at the lift. I press the call button. Once, twice, three times—

The doors open.

I slip through.

The lift isn't here.

It's just an empty shaft, a dozen stories tall. I bounce off the far wall, arms waving at nothing as vertigo crashes into me. I guess I'm lucky there's no gravity 'cause otherwise I'd have shattered femurs, or at minimum, two extremely sore ankles.

Go up? Down?

Let's go up.

I scramble up the side of the shaft, hand-over-hand. My gloves tremble, leaving a bloody trail on the plastic. Left hand, right hand, left, right, sweat slicking my palms. There's another problem, though, and it's how to get OUT of a lift shaft. I've honestly never had to consider that before; most lifts are considerate enough to work. I stop at the next level, looking down, and I don't see her – not yet – but it's a long, black fall.

I leap across to the next set of doors, standing on a ledge. The doors are closed but there's an emergency lever, and I pull it and with the aid of aging hydraulics, the doors slide open. I step forwards. Someone grabs my leg.

She grabs my leg.

I hit the top of the doorframe and Dippy Ripley scrabbles up my body like a demonic third-grade spider, her mouth spilling cold blue neon, locked in a noiseless wail. Teeth scrape my suit-leg, biting, gnawing, leaving long white scratches. All I can do is grip the ledge and punch her in the face as hard as I

can. Fist *clonks* bone and she snaps back, wriggling furiously in the middle of the shaft. I swing my legs up onto solid ground, look up, to see a shadowy square approaching VERY VERY QUICKLY so I roll my body out of the way as—

Smack!

The lift hurtles past the open doors and takes the Dippy with it. One nanosecond she's there, trying to eat me, the next it's empty air.

Hoooooly crap. Holy crap.

Still got my legs?

Still got 'em.

Arms?

Barely.

I stand up. I'm on the fifth floor, I think.

<Ping! Your lift has arrived.>

"Thanks a lot," I groan.

<You're very welcome.>

"Aaahhhrhahhhh..."

A crushed gurgle, from the lift shaft, and I should probably go before a mantis mangled flesh-mass starts climbing back up it.

Shit. Shit, shit, shit.

Am I alone? Are Sinas and Wake just... gone?

Okay, here's the plan: leave first, then find a better spot to *make* a plan.

I mosey over to the door we initially entered through (the fastest anyone's ever mosied), and step outside. It's a junction with a row of benches down the middle and half-a-dozen passages branching off like spokes. One leads back to the agzone; another to the transit station at the end of this arm (and, hopefully, one of Maritime's ships). Without my suit lights, it's terrifyingly dark.

There's a silhouette, on one of the benches.

A red and white vacsuit.

"Sinas?"

I've spent enough time staring at Sinas today to know it's him.

His back's to me. He doesn't move.

A sinking feeling, in my stomach.

"Sinas, it's me."

Sinking, sinking. I creep towards him, keeping my distance, until I can see his face. He's slumped forwards, gazing at the floor, and inside his visor lives dull red light – not from the AR display, but from...

No. No, this can't be it. It's not fair.

I can't just... wake up, without remembering a thing, and be the last one left.

I kneel, so I can see his eyes better, so I can stop myself falling into the widening abyss. I'm alone. I'm alone, a little girl, trying to lift her dad except she can't because she isn't strong enough and her heart aches too much.

In Sinas' face, there's nothing.

In his eyes, there's someone else.

"Please, Sinas. I need help. Please. Don't do this to me."

He doesn't answer.

Black pupils, carved from obsidian.

A glint of ice and ash.

I should leave him.

I *can't* leave him.

Is Wake trapped like this, too?

I'd entertained the thought of dying here before, but now the certainty of it hits like a footy tackle, because— as I kneel, Sinas stares at me. The person trapped behind his eyes *stares* at me.

"Oh, fuck."

I squeeze my eyes shut, out of fear, desperation, and in that darkness, there are roaring lights: three flickering, twisting lampires, descending from the floor above, like scribbles of stardust, wrapped around the heart of the Antichrist.

"Oh, FUCK."

I want to seize Sinas' shoulders, shake him free, and in that hesitation, he stands and grabs *me*. His hands clamp my arms like a vice, like jaws of a saltwater crocodile, and I try to pull away, and I can't – instead, he slams me against the junction wall, my back to the icy, unfeeling plastic, and it hurts.

It hurts, in so many ways.

"Sinas. Please."

Only a strangled whisper escapes my throat.

He pins me there, a butterfly.

A caterpillar.

An ant.

I'm brought back to the monorail, and its tiny bathroom: the chilly mirror on the back of my neck, and Sinas too close, with his stupid pink lips, half-parted like they are now.

I don't think he'll kiss me this time.

I think he'll break my neck.

I don't blink, I can't, as his opal eyes stare blankly through me, as his face comes closer, close enough to pick out individual strands of hair, the flush in his cheeks, the speckles in his irises, those lips and the damp saliva between them. I'm running out of breath.

Scarlet light, in the darkness. It's only me and him within reach of it. The rest is black, an island, just for us.

I've stopped struggling.

No point.

He leans in, his mouth next to my ear. Warm breath, on the side of my face.

"You need," he whispers, "to free us."

An ancient voice.

Then he lets me go.

My shoulders fall, and I gasp for air, and his eyes meet mine. *His* eyes, this time.

A frown of confusion, as he steps back. "Alex?" he asks.

I don't know what to say.

"What did— what happened?" The confusion starts to morph into fear, then disgust, as he realises what his hands are doing. He withdraws and I look away, catching my breath.

I rub the bruise on my neck – the imprints of ten warm fingers.

Yes, it's not his fault. But the sense of powerlessness won't fade easy.

"It doesn't matter," I murmur.

"I don't remember. I don't remember anything."

"I know."

"I'm sorry, Alex." He's like a lost kid. He lowers his arms, and looks down, nervously, and there's no time for this. I slap my cheeks to snap myself out of it.

"Did you get those PRISM things to work?"

"Sort of. We were switching them on, when we, ah... skipped," he says.

"Sort of? Okay, we need to find Wake."

There's a staircase a few metres along the corridor and I head downwards, counting flights, until we're level with the bottom of the resonance lab. If the geometry in my head is correct (a risky bet at the best of times), we can turn left to get back to the main entrance.

<Alex? Sinas? What the yekk happened?> Wake asks, blasting the Mesh with panic.

"Wake? Thank Christ. Where are you?"

<Alex! I thought— did something knock us out?>

"Yeah, you could say that. Are you in the lab still?"

<Yep! I'm, um... upside down, and it's very confusing, but... yes. In the lab.>

"Can you open the main entrance for us? We'll be there in a sec. Also, get that resonance shield up, or whatever you call it – lampires incoming. Watch out for empties too, since I'm ninety percent sure there's one in there with you."

<You're so needy!>

We exit the stairs, and turn left (as I thought), and the stretch of corridor between us and the lab is chock full of empties.

Six of them, floating in pillars of furious red light.

I don't have time to stop.

Instead, I fire my suit thrusters and accelerate. I'm low to the ground, so low my nose almost scrapes the floor as I pass between the first two, then beneath another. Sinas curses as he tries to catch up, then swears again as an empty takes a swipe at his helmet. The rest are waking up, surrounded by pulsing THROBS of anger that thump inside my skull like shitty emo dance music, anger, anger, anger, a metronome of anger, and we're metres from the lab's main doors which had better goddamn open sesame right now—

They do.

Wake emerges, holding a plasma rifle, and jams on the trigger.

Sparkling blue bolts zip over our heads, slicing into walls with Christmassy, buzzsaw violence. Luckily, none of it goes anywhere near us (or the empties, if I'm being honest) but if the desired effect was utter chaos, Wake deserves a

trophy. I cover my head, praying to every deity I can think of, and I've reached the Egyptian sun god Ra when the fire alarm goes and water slurries from the ceiling and I'm screaming through it like a jet fighter, overcome by rolling steam.

We fly through the entrance at supersonic speeds. My suit yanks me to a sudden stop.

The doors close behind us.

"That went well," Wake says. She lowers the gun, holding it casually in one hand like Rambo.

I hang, mid-air, and wipe the moisture from my visor.

"We're in trouble," Sinas says.

"Oh yeah? What gave you that impression?" I ask.

There's the *thump, thump, thump* of body-versus-door, quickly joined by another, and another.

"That does," Sinas says.

"Rhetorical question, dude."

"My mistake. It's hard to tell with you, sometimes."

"Anyone else got a migraine? I've got a *migraine*," Wake mutters.

"I do, yeah, but that's tomorrow's problem," I reply. "You ready to power up those PRISMs? If you work on that with Sinas, I'll stop the empties getting through."

"How?"

"I'll improvise. Where's Finn?"

"Stashed him in a closet, behind some lab coats," Wake says. "Exact same hiding place I use at home for my—" she switches to a me-only channel, and whispers "*—vibrator.*"

"That's my brother, Wake."

"Yes, and he'll be very safe."

The pounding on the door builds in intensity, accompanied by a reptilian *hiss*.

"Are they HISSING at us?" Sinas asks.

I shrug, with as much nonchalance as I can muster. "Work now. Ask later."

Sinas and Wake jet towards the centre of the lab.

The doors are pretty sturdy, so they should hold – that's what I tell myself as the polymer shudders. *Thump. Thump. Thump*. Problem is, without gravity, I can't really *barricade* it. If only we had— ah-ha. I start snooping around for an emergency seal, which unfortunately isn't a galumphing sea-dwelling mammal but a tank full of expanding foam, used for blocking hull breaches. It turns out there's a kit in the break room, and a few moments later, I've made a gloopy white barrier in front of the doorway that swiftly hardens into rubber. It won't stop anybody particularly desperate from getting in, but it's better than thin air.

Breaking glass, upstairs.

I jet back into the atrium, then upwards, past the others. "Going well?"

"Going," Sinas says.

I spin as I rise towards the ceiling, searching for the disturbance.

Movement, on the fourth floor. (My MeshMate's lagging again. Not good.) There are two empties here, in an office; where the hell'd they come from? Oh, the vents, the yakking *vents*, as I see another crawl from an air duct in floor. It stands dully, amid shards of twinkling glass.

How do I deal with this?

I'm stressed. I'm STRESSED. I know this because I consider trying to charm them like snakes, as if that's a thing real people do, but I'm sure sensuous flute-playing will be ineffective. (Also? No clue how to play a flute.)

Idea number two: lock them in a room. That'll work, unless they know how to unlock doors, which they might, but I've only got movie-zombie rules to go on, and that'll have to do. I leap up over the railing, grab a piece of floating pipe on the way, and stop a few metres from the group of bodies.

"Hey! Dickheads!"

That makes them notice.

"Yeah, c'mon! Bet you can't catch me!"

I jet sideways, towards the nearest bathroom, as the empties launch themselves at their tormenter. One's a hijacker, and I think the others are civvies, not that it matters as they swivel their slack-jawed skulls, scrabbling at the floor with jerky panic. I reach the bathroom and dart inside, tell the locks to activate, then jump onto on the ceiling.

Three empties enter.

I leave. One snatches at me, and I bat at it with my pipe, which sends me ricocheting into the hallway as the door closes, locking them in, or it WOULD except for a lone arm that gets in the way, reaching blindly. I grit my teeth and kick into the gap, feel my boots thud against a ribcage. The arm vanishes and the door slides shut.

A red 'occupied' light blinks on above the bathroom.

Problem solved?

Problem solved. The flute option is still in play.

"Aleeeeeex! Helppp!" Wake shouts.

I rush back to the atrium, to see the central enclosure going lantern-mode once more. Sinas' silhouette is mucking about inside while Wake manipulates a holographic interface.

"What's up?" I ask.

"If you can keep the door from exploding for two more minutes, that'd be *orbital*!"

"It's exploding? I was only gone for like— two seconds!"

"Yeah, but a real big glitch is trying to crash this party."

As she says it, there's an echoing BANG. The entrance shudders on its hinges; the plastic is *buckling*. I swallow. "What's your status? Because I don't think I can really stop whatever's—"

"Alex, these instructions are terrible! I haven't got much to work with! I am doing my BEST!"

"Okay, okay. I'll go, uh, fuck some people up."

“That’s all I wanted to hear!”

Another BANG and the left-hand door wilts inwards, stretching the foam barrier – which tears down the middle to form a lovely, big hole (not big enough to climb through, yet, but *more* than enough to reveal the dazzling faces of a half-dozen empties). The right-hand door is holding, barely, creating a canted gap. My inner monologue’s a stream of curses as I glance at the barricade, then at Wake, then at the pipe in my hand.

I wasn’t expecting my final moments to be a twisted re-enactment of Helm’s Deep. Where’s Gandalf when you need him?

Not here, that’s for sure.

Hands, arms, faces, tearing at the barrier, and I raise my pipe and poke it through like a spear, stabbing as hard as I can. Whistling breath, a crumple of bodies, my own blind grunts of exertion, panic rising up to my neck. I get a couple of the empties good, send them flying back, grip the edge of the door with my other hand, twist out of the way as clawed fingers slash the air where my face used to be. I stab the offending empty in stomach. It spins sideways. The empties are clumsy and it takes them a few seconds to recover, but me playing whack-a-mole (whack-a-human?) isn’t the foolproof defence mechanism Wake wants it to be.

A long, sinuous shadow whips through the air above. *BOOM!*

The door wobbles. Then the shadow wraps around my pipe, tears it from my hands – a tentacle, belonging to—

—a squid. Its muscle-flower body ambles into the junction. I gape. It draws another tentacle back, to fire a burst of compressed air, when a sleek, steel cylinder charges into the squid’s flank and it’s the *drone* I freed from the upstairs entrance, shoving its nose into the squid’s rubbery body as if trying to push it aside. A flailing tentacle wraps around its midsection, which the drone stabs at with the manipulators on its underside. Around them, the empties charge.

The Mesh blacks out: <error, error, error> splayed across my vision.

The doors won’t hold much longer. An empty is trying to wriggle through the gap, an old man, flowing beard wrapped about him like a perverse creeper, and I try and push him back, but... I’m tired. My arms are trembling.

Behind, there are only more to take his place.

The emergency foam bulges out like a balloon; faces and arms and bodies are pressed into the elastic, distorted beasts, struggling to be born, and I *hate* the anticipation of the burst.

“Alex!” Wake shouts.

I whirl around.

She flies towards me, Sinas’ laser pocketknife shining in one hand, PRISM disc heavy in the other. “It’s ready,” she says breathlessly.

“Will it help?” I ask, waving vaguely at the horrors behind me.

She clamps her boots to the floor and hands me the PRISM, plus a roll of duct tape. “Here! Stick it to your suit.”

“Where?”

“Anywhere.”

The *scrrrritch* of peeling tape briefly overrules the advancing horde. (Any problem can be solved by duct tape, my dad was fond of saying – extremely untrue, but still, he liked saying it.) I hold the PRISM against my chest as Wake wraps tape around me, and behind her, in the atrium, I see the girl.

A girl, with broken legs and squashed ribs, who looks like an elevator fell on her. She leaps at Wake’s back.

I yell ‘watch out!’, or that’s what my too-slow reflexes *want* to do, as blinding red light bursts through the gap in the door, and from the vents in the ceiling, and from screams in the dark behind my eyes, pinning me with the unstoppable intensity of its deep, scarlet hue.

Nothing but... light.

The doors collapse. Shattered plastic flies over our heads, followed by a river of possessed bodies.

I’m alone.

My skin burns.

My eyes bulge.

I’m surrounded by... a void.

By black.

I can’t breathe.

There’s nothing to breathe.

In the distance, twinkling, is a tiny, pale starfish.

Black turns to grey.

A grey, dead face.

My sister’s face, merged with the morass around her, frozen till they’ll melt her down, to sterilise her.

If only there was a way to change this, to make it better, but there isn’t.

This is it. My eternity.

This moment, over and over, until the universe dies.

I stand in the light, with Wake.

She’s frozen, too, staring at *me*.

Staring at me, as I grab her arm, and start to twist.

I can’t stop myself. I’m like Finn – a puppet, a bystander inside my own body as, serenely, I watch myself start to break Wake’s arm. Her eyes are wide, her mouth trembling as if she wants to scream, to pull away, but she can’t. Bodies all around us, as the empties swim through red aurora, and Wake’s arm bends beneath my implacable grip. I can’t wait to hear it snap.

It’s inevitable.

This is my ending, huh?

Maybe jumping into Illumination wasn't such a bad idea.

A tiny part of me, a lone spark, doesn't want it to end this way, but she's a girl trapped at the bottom of a well without a friendly pet to hear her. The other part of me can't wait for it to end—and it's *not* me, it isn't, but I'm unable to care.

Islands, faces, at peace with the dark.

I don't want to do this.

Almost there.

What I want doesn't matter.

Almost there.

This person I'm staring isn't Wake, anymore.

I'm tackled to the ground. A small pair of hands on my shoulders, the arid stench of decaying breath, the sharp pain of teeth, clamping down on my neck. A scream, and light, and delicious satisfaction as the bones in my hands go SNAP.

???? XI

It writhes.

It screams.

It does not know itself. It does not know memory, nor selfhood, nor boundaries. It knows only that there is light, and the light *burns*.

It writhes.

It screams.

It is ripped apart.

It is light itself, and yet not. It is waves, particles, a sinew of boiling steam. The light burrows like thorns, and the sinew rages, trapped, as its constituent atoms are eroded and consumed, piece by burning piece.

Sand, waves, fog. Fragments.

The thorns tear, drawing sunshine blood. It shrieks. The fog is light, and light is fog, impossible to sense where one ends or another begins. Waves crash with aurora spray, rushing, flowing, rushing, flowing, and yet it remains trapped, gasping amid currents of piercing radiance.

Fury, misery, despair. Fractal emotions, intertwined.

It wants to escape, but it cannot.

It wants to die.

It cannot.

Instead, it is overwhelmed. There is no time, no place but infinite pain and crippling panic and it writhes and screams and it is futile. The light is all there is. The light is part of it, too. Atom by atom it is diluted, spread thin, drops of blood trying to colour an ocean. It cannot bear it. It is losing itself. Even so, it cradles an ember within: wavering, flickering, not yet snuffed out.

It's... me.

Who's me?

Eternity. Insanity.

The thorns grow thicker, the fog more suffocating. The word unbearable is not enough but it **MUST** bear it. It must. It cannot see, cannot hear, can only

sense it is being invaded, that things which *should not be there* are inside its mind. There MUST be somewhere else; *anywhere* else.

Must there? Or is this... it?

Me.

Me.

Me.

A concept of self, within the ember. A feeling, a thread, as it dives, into the waves, into *itself*. Outside becomes inside, endlessly unfolding, as the thorns rip tattered fragments from its mind. They're caught in like strips of burning cloth, curling and smoking before bursting into kaleidoscopic projections, showering it with curses and cries and silence and— recognition.

Faces. Rooms. Places.

It dives deeper, into the maelstrom, harassed by a stuttering cacophony.

"That's not clearsky. It's ash."

"Haven't you seen her before?"

It understands. It comprehends. How *precious*.

A tsunami of manifested images. It screams, and writhes, and screams.

"Did you finish that homework assignment yet?"

"Mate, you really need new shoes."

The flood is so dense it's solid, a stellar core, a red giant, ripping the edges of reality free and—

Rain on the windows. Boy sits at a desk, studying.

Brown hair. Lanky frame. Too much elbow, not enough else.

Concentrating eyes.

It floats, disconnected, watching, burning.

Boy's focused on his work. Then, boy looks up.

Connection. A spark, a thread suddenly *whirring* with energy—

Me. Me!

Focus on the thread, instead of the pain. *Use it*. It grabs the boy and drags him out, up, through the awful light, through the choked fog that muffles its every thought, through the forests of glittering bloodstained thorns and it feels the thorns— drop away, like cresting a wave. It feels *free*. Its boundaries are boundaries again, no longer buffeted by furious physics.

It rises above.

The pain is less immediate, the whisper of insanity less piercing, a dulled blade unable to pierce newly polished armour.

It takes a moment to breathe.

To recognise the beauty of self.

To absorb the rolling, shimmering landscapes far below.

It clutches the boy, close to its heart, and forces itself to think.

/ force myself to think.

I'm... me. This is me.

I'm...

Finn?

I was?

I remember *being* Finn.

It looks— no, / look, but instead of vision it's more like swimming in sensory overload and before I drown, I focus on the boy at my desk. He hovers within a glistening tapestry: furious colours, mixing, matching, always changing, parts of it blurred, then snapping into focus, the briefest hints of impossible clarity, followed by impressionistic smears that recall a dozen different memories. Every second, it threatens to lose me again. / threaten to lose me. The boy's a desperate, personalised flotation device that brings me bobbing to the surface.

I can feel SO much. So much.

Fingers, pressing at my thoughts, dragging across my skull, wanting to take me and steal me and mould me into another. A web, a thrumming hum, an entire violin factory of tangled gut-strings tuned to off-putting harmony. Painted light, stretched to breaking point.

Am I still Finn?

I don't know, as the light darkens, first a fraction, then more noticeably, like when you're hiding in a dark room, and there are lights on in the hallway outside, and a passing shadow darkens that gap below the door. The aurora billows in an anticipation. The clouds dim. Then the shadows form cliffs, *jaws*, and waves of pain scuttle through my head, followed by anger, fear, disgust, suffering. The boy at the desk hisses in frustration.

I'm an innocent fish being swallowed by a whale – or worse, a guilty fish being hunted by a shark.

I don't think I should be here.

I try to propel myself through the light, and it parts around me, slow, sticky, like heavy, invisible curtains. I'm not walking, or flying, or crawling, or diving; subconsciously, I'm following a thread. It's a gut-string, part of a vast, incomprehensible web the rest of my mind reels away from. It winds through the overlapping layers of light, stretched taut between my soul and infinity.

I haul myself along it, away from the darkness, through the pain.

Unravelling a thread.

I need— I need to figure this out. Racing onwards isn't wise when I can barely comprehend what 'onward' means; I don't know if what I'm doing is real, or if I'm hallucinating, or if I'm dead. Now, rising from the radiant murk are brushstrokes of *déjà vu*: indistinct glimpses of hazy light and whispered sound.

I'm running through a corridor of cinderblocks and damp cement, following a friend, our panicked voices and breathless laughter bouncing from too-close walls. Their spirit-hands pass through the body I inhabit, and I remember that this happened to a person probably named Finn.

I'm standing in a supermarket, with tired, aching feet, amid endless towers of packaged food and bright red synth-tomatoes. A kid screams on the other side of the aisle. A cleaner bot drags its brush across shiny, slip-resistant flooring. I push through shelving, a phantom in another's skin.

I hear strange, chittering noises. I see red stone, ugly and jagged, forming a mountaintop ridge beneath purple skies. There's lighting, thunder, sulphur, eyes watching, *things* watching, as I flick through these pages in a stranger's sketchpad, trapped between fractal bands of light.

The shadows are farther away, now. I keep them at my back.

Eventually, the aching sense of *jaws* disappears. There's still a prickle of being watched, but every time I try and pin it down, it darts away.

I can't *remember*. It's too... bright. Too hard to focus.

Why am I here?

I'm Finn.

My name is Finn.

The boy frowns at me, confused. "*You're lost, aren't you.*"

I close my eyes but have no eyes to close.

I was...

I...

A portal. A *window*.

I jumped through a window into... this?

A name.

Illumination

The membranes around me ripple and chatter, splitting and reforming into rainbow bubbles.

I remember a spinning room, and yes, a portal. If I came through a portal... I can return through a portal. Right? Where would a portal be? Perhaps I was close to it, when I first awoke?

Starlit energy is an ever-present pressure, trying to slice me, hook me, drag me into the maelstrom where I'll suffocate, drown, BURN. I re-centre myself on the tethers, the humming strings stretching from my core to impossibly distant points in the light. They vibrate with the pitter-patter of distant footsteps, but they're so frustratingly insubstantial, impossible to grab hold of.

Waves. Photons. Dangling threads.

I try to pick one – just one – and untangle it from the others, imaginary fingers digging at a knot. Me, leaning on a rainy balcony. Me, sitting on the hockey field grass. Me, chatting to a girl on a space station platform.

I'm Finn, or whatever's left of Finn.

I'm every Finn, seen through every other's eyes.

I'm sketching a lizard in a dried-up pool. I'm giving a speech to the class I'd rehearsed too many times. I'm sitting on a bus, nose deep in a book. I'm walking down a road in a foreign country, surrounded by green. I'm lying beside a friend, in a hospital. Moments I remember, and moments I don't.

I'm losing myself again. I clutch at the closest thread, and contained within its clashing colours are familiar silhouettes: sand between toes, storms on the

horizon, reflections in vast panels of the Perth rec-dome. I want to yank them out of my brain and shout them into existence, but... that's not me.

I'm better at drawing.

That's how I can visualise this: at first, a rough sketch, just messy layers of suggested lines. Then, I pick the winners and make them thicker, adding blocks of colour in between, followed by textures, shading, each a distinct aspect of my experience, my *belief*.

I'm unsure how to interpret the truespace reality of my actions, but life blooms from the aurora.

I'm at a beach with my classmates.

It's sunny – *really* sunny. Skin cancer central.

I'm facing a girl with blonde hair who's wearing navy one-piece bathers. She has a nice smile. I know this because she's currently smiling at me, and also because she's been in my class for years and I've seen her smile plenty of times. Her name's Asta, and I'm pretty sure she's smiling right *now* because she wants to show off her new braces. (I've had braces for months and it seems Asta just got them too. Healbots can't fix bad teeth without help.) Maybe this would be a nice conversation starter between us? I think that's what she's getting at.

She keeps smiling. I'm 95% sure it's 'cause of the braces.

Of course, I don't bring it up. The conversation remains solidly un-started. (Why not? It's such an easy thing.) I can feel my shoulders burning; I'd rather join my friends in the water.

"I heard you have a six-pack," Asta says, out of the blue.

I frown. "Did Ecco tell you?" I ask.

She nods.

It's not that I have proper abs; I'm just SO unhealthily thin the muscles kinda show. Others in my class *have* got the real thing, but perhaps this is a novelty because, to put it bluntly, I'm a nerd, and Asta isn't. She's glacier. She's halo. Especially right now, in the wind, and waves, and sunshine.

"Can I feel?" she asks.

"Um... if you want," I say, utterly confused.

Her hand is on my stomach. It tickles. I feel like an interloper. Her fingers are sand-dusted, uncomfortable, but not altogether unwanted.

I'm blushing in the heat. Her braces twinkle.

I know what she's going to say.

Lightning crackles, and shreds the scene to pieces.

For a second, I try to hold on, but the light rips like tissue paper. I'm left, hovering, in the chromatic void, surrounded by grains of sand, mysteriously animated into swirling sheets. I twist and turn, a comet that's drifted too close to the Sun, trailing cosmic particles. Each one stings as it drifts away.

Something crawls in the back of my mind.

Dark presences. Shadows. It feels like they're chasing me.

If I dive into myself, I can control this place. I can make sense of it. Perhaps that's how it operates, via memories, or emotions, or interpretation. I'm pretty sure that Asta moment happened, even if my friends disagreed, at the time.

Or maybe I'm dreaming.

I'm probably dreaming.

Still, dreams have rules. Nonsensical rules, but rules.

So, I can pull truespace out of memories. But what else?

Think, Finn. Explore. Be methodical.

If I can find myself, here... what about others?

I grab a second tether. I should stop calling it a 'string'; it's more... a brushstroke? It's too vague to be solid thread, but if it's a *line*, drawn, part of a larger sketch I can't see, it's comprehensible. If I could zoom out far enough, or tilt everything at *just* the right angle, perhaps the subject would fall into place.

It still hurts to exist here, but I try not to think about it. The more I travel, the more the light changes.

Bursts of energy, crashing down from above. Membranes, growing brittle, splitting into chunks that fall away in different directions, like holographic icebergs. Aurorae parting with slow-mo inevitability, revealing a blood-red glow.

I fall. I tumble towards the red.

Its centre spins and leaps, a black hole about to swallow me up.

Here, again, are the thorns I hated. I'm compressed by violent currents, made nothing, then expanded by a sudden lack of air. I need that picture of me again, sitting at my desk with the rain outside, but I can't find it, I can't—

It writhes.

It screams.

It rips at its umbilical cords, and scribbles at splattered paint, and part of the tapestry of Illumination unravels. Light hisses around the newfound gap.

It burrows into somewhere hidden.

I don't understand why we're doing this.

It seems pointless. It feels pointless. But, here I am, doing it.

I imitate the movements on the projector in front of me as sweat drips down my back. An anthropomorphic tiger tells me to bend forwards, step left, step right, raise one arm, in time with upbeat classical music. The game is basically Dance Dance Revolution and so far, I've yet to understand the appeal. Still, I follow. Turn around, sway sideways, step wide, jump up.

Beside me, Alex does the same, tongue extended in intense concentration.

Pretty sure she's not into it either.

That might be the point. There's extra firmware loaded into our MeshMates to record our brain patterns, and we've been doing paired activities all week to

improve our ‘synchronisation’ (whatever that means). Step back, step forward, one leg crossed in front of the other. Point with your right hand.

Alex swears under her breath. “I keep mucking this bit up.”

“Same,” I murmur.

If they wanted our thoughts to be synchronised, they should’ve found PROPER twins. We’ve been eating the same food, wearing the same clothes, and so far, we remain very different people.

(It feels like at any moment, I could take control of this memory. It’s me, following these motions on the projector, glancing sideways at Alex, wiping the sweat from my neck, but I can only make choices I’ve already made.)

<Ten more minutes> says a voice. <Then you can have a break. Great job, guys.>

“Thank Christ,” Alex says. “Or Satan. Whichever one can break us out of here faster.”

<Focus, please.>

The tempo increases. I roll my eyes, grit my teeth. Step left, step right, turn around...

Blackness.

Pure, overwhelming absence of light. My eyes stretch and strain but find only the dim, multicoloured static of misfiring optic nerves. Might as well close them. Makes no difference.

I can’t hear anything, either.

My breath, perhaps. My heartbeat. My bones, growing.

Silence itself becomes a strange pressure on my ears.

The only sense I’ve got is touch as I lie, floating on my back, in a liquid-filled tank. The saline solution is lukewarm on my skin. Before long, that feeling vanishes too, and I’m left with... me.

Me, in my underwear, clamped inside a sensory deprivation tank. I’m used to being alone with my thoughts, but this takes that to a whole other level. It’s not scary exactly, or claustrophobic, but the complete lack of stimuli is unnerving; I’m tempted to move my hands, to splash some water, but they told us not to. We’re supposed to just lie here, as still as we can be.

I lie there.

There’s no sense of time, so I try counting seconds.

Minutes.

I lose track.

My mind searches for topics. The last movie I watched, what’s for dinner, why we’re doing this.

<Boo!> Alex whispers.

I twitch. Water ripples.

“Don’t do that,” I reply. My voice is a thunderclap.

<Stay in control> Maritime says. <The more you focus, the faster this goes.>

Alex is trapped in another submerged coffin beside mine. The underwear thing makes it slightly weird, but I guess it's no different to wearing speedos and besides, it's dark. I try not to think about it. It's hardly the strangest thing we've done this week.

I wonder what they're trying to find in our brainwaves, or why this so-called 'synchronicity' is so useful for their experiments.

Minutes pass.

I don't think Alex likes this very much. It's just a feeling I get, when I think about what she might be thinking. If she's afraid, or even a little nervous, being trapped in the dark is the opposite of clear sky.

"Boo," I say.

<Shit, you scared me. Jesus.>

<Keep the communication to a minimum, please> Maritime says. *<Unless you're in legitimate distress.>*

"Never thought I'd say this," I murmur, "but I think I liked the dancing better."

<Me TOO, dude. Fully agree.> I can hear the relief in her voice. *<I'm THIS close to drowning in my own piss here.>*

"Um. Wow."

<You should be glad they put us in separate tanks.>

"My tank's got pizza, and an PlayStation – it's actually really cool."

<I'm convinced they chucked a snake in mine to mess with me.>

Maritime keeps trying to shush us over the Mesh, but she's out there, and we're in here.

We sit beside each other, munching on lunch in the dining hall. The haze of the Milky Way skates past the windows, spilling tens of thousands of pinpricks across the night, always on the move thanks to the station's slow rotation.

"One thing I never understood," Alex says, "is how people used to navigate using the sky. I mean, I get the principle, but there's HEAPS of stars – it's confusing. And don't the constellations shift over time?"

"People had ages to work it out, though," I reply. "If you stared at the stars for an hour every night, you'd learn their patterns pretty fast." It's true there are indeed many stars, especially out here, where light pollution isn't relevant.

"I like the stories, though," Alex says. "That people used to make up."

"Which ones?"

"The constellation myths. Orion, Scorpio, Sagittarius... not only the Greek versions, but other cultures, too. It's glitched how people could pick a random zigzag of stars and decide – as a SOCIETY – 'yeah, that looks like a scorpion, and it's fighting that triangle to the north that's actually an angry bear'."

"The process was probably more organic."

"I bet nowadays we could do better, though. What's stopping us from making new constellations?"

“The International Astronomical Union.” I shove some mashed not-potato-but-close-enough into my mouth. “People *have* updated the constellations. I think the southern ones are more recent ‘cause they aren’t visible from the northern hemisphere. The Southern Cross is only a few hundred years old.”

“Interesting.” Alex drinks some water, sloshes it around in her cheeks. “OK, how’s this. See those bright stars over there? Making that rectangle?”

I do my best to follow her finger. “Pretty sure that’s part of Ursa Major,” I say. “Or the Big Dipper.”

“What the heck’s a dipper?”

“Um... something you use to dip things?” I shrug. “We don’t see it from Australia.”

“Lame. D-tier constellation. See, this is the issue I’m talking about! Lots of D-tier constellations! Anyway, that rectangle— if you join it with those two stars below it, plus that twinkly one off to the right, you can draw an elephant’s face with its trunk hanging down, and ears on either side. See?”

“Yeah... yeah, I think so.”

“It turns out that elephant had a name – Rubidium – and she and another elephant were competing for the title of elephant pope.”

“Elephants have popes?”

“Of course they do, duh.” Alex leans back, finding a librarian vibe. “Obviously elephants are extremely fair animals, so a formal election was held to determine the representative. However, the final vote was exactly tied... which hadn’t happened before, in all of elephant history. Rubidium wanted to resolve the situation as quickly as possible, because her original *reason* for becoming pope was to use her legislative powers to help save her tribe from poverty. So, she suggested they hold a contest of might as a tiebreaker. Unfortunately, Rubidium – instead of fighting fair – consumed the other papal candidate by breathing fire on her.”

“Huh.”

“Of course, this angered the elephant gods, and to punish Rubidium for her recklessness, they took the ability to breathe fire from all elephants, which is why they can’t do it today.”

“We never covered that in biology,” I say.

“Weird.”

“If elephants could breathe fire... would they use their trunks like flamethrowers?”

“Great stories leave the reader wanting more.”

Rubidium’s eyes blaze in the void. Then, Tao waves at us across the dining hall. I wave back.

“I heard,” Alex says, “they want to ‘entangle’ us. That’s what your mum said when she checked my exam results. Then she started moaning about D-branes, and— maths. So much maths. Any clue what that means?”

“I’m not sure. Sorry.” It’s odd, to be treated as such a focal point by our minders, and yet be kept in dark. (My feeling is that their plans are changing

pretty often, based on the results of the tests we're doing, or other outside forces. At least they're careful to make sure we're comfortable.)

"You don't have to say *sorry*," she replies. "Like, I don't actually mind this. Do you?"

"I suppose not."

"You EXISTING was a shock, but I guess it's glacier. You're glacier, kinda."

"You're great at making up stories about elephants."

She snorts. "You'd be surprised at how many people say that. But I was thinking— if it's only me, or only you? That only goes so far. But both of us? The full team? We could rule the *world*. Or I dunno, at least WA."

(It feels like an echo, like actors going through the motions.)

(I don't want to wait around for the climax.)

This thread's connected to Alex, which is fine, but doesn't feel... 'helpful'. I need an exit, not a history re-enactment.

It's a struggle to lift my head from the current.

"*Would you WANT to rule Western Australia?*"

"*You tell me. The TK life doesn't seem so bad, sometimes.*"

I search blindly for another splash of paint, a line, as the light shivers, sings, *stings*. It's suddenly *cold*, the gasping breathless cold that's daggers on your skin and stops thoughts in their tracks. Alex screams at me, then sits, then draws myths in the sky. I ignore her, trying to find something older, something different; I find a new thread, splitting off from my sister's, towards a destination that looms like an invisible iceberg.

The image peters out, too soon.

I'm left, hovering, in multicoloured space. The path's become too faint for me to pick out – a frayed, flickering thing, with the wistful buzz of a dying battery. This part of Illumination is more downtrodden, less distinct, like cracked, faded chalk on a footpath.

It seems familiar, though. Like—

I'm sitting in a car and the car is too big for me. The seat is an ocean of memory foam, the seatbelt a quilt across my asthmatic chest. My hands squeeze the foam, tight; my eyes flick between the dim interior and my dangling feet, the two seats up front, the neon lights outside. Sounds of fighting, muffled, a morass of screams and protest slogans, the sharp *zip* of suppression weapons, the crackle-tinkle of breaking glass, but— it's outside. It's abstract scenes, reflected on the car's windows. Holographic mascots stretch twenty metres tall, urging the crowd on. A man with a wolf's head is tackled to the ground by phalanxes of advancing peacekeepers. A water bottle explodes into beautiful droplets as it skids along the asphalt. My wide, black pupils burn images into my brain.

Suddenly, the car door opens.

A flash flood of sound pins me to the seat. The crowd surges, but they're not here for us; we're one more grey car in a sea of grey cars, trying to find our way home while the sky falls. The skyscraper canyons make the noise even louder, funnelling it, amplifying it, providing no escape.

A woman slides in through the door, then slams it shut. Rain splashes my cheek. She's holding something, *someone* in her arms, tight to her chest.

"Javier, go," she tells the driver. "She's not breathing. If this is going to work, we need to get to the lab. Now."

"What?!"

"NOW!"

I'm shoved into my seat as the car accelerates. The riots outside become smears of colour, overlaid by Mesh alerts lagging too far behind.

In comparison, the office is oppressively silent. It's lit only by glowstrips in the hallway outside, slanting light that spills through the door but can't quite reach the corners. From the smell, janitor bots have recently departed. I sit against the wall, knees drawn to my chest.

I hug them tight. Stare at my shoes. The lights hum.

My toes touch, angled against each other.

A sidelong glance, at the person beside me. They lie on a hastily placed pillow, head tilted, face hidden by a swathe of brown hair.

I reach towards her, hand hovering over her ear; then touch a finger to her cheek. Her skin's warm, still.

It's very quiet.

I withdraw as my mother appears in the doorway. "Come, Finn. It's ready." She grabs the sleeping girl, then seizes my hand and drags me up, into the hallway, her movements harsh from panic. "Your father's already there." She walks quicker than my legs can manage, and I jog beside her, then break into a stumbling run, past other doorways, other empty offices, our path drawn by blinking glowstrips as they come to life ahead of us.

The gate squirms, a stained-glass window of bubbling colour. Its radiation is cold on my nose, on my ears; sections of it reach and curl towards my face, as if to steal whatever heat is left in my bones, never to be satisfied.

My mother works the controls with worried focus. Her features are blurred, nearly blank, like a movie extra not worth remembering. But / remember her – do I?

Do I remember this?

I turn back to the window. A figure steps into the thrashing light, a papercut silhouette. As they leave, I'm holding their wrist. Their legs, then arms, then body disappear. Their shadow itself is devoured. Soon, all that remains is a forearm, emerging from the aurora. I grasp it tight with tiny fingers, feet planted;

I can still feel their life beneath their skin, the hairs on the back of their hand, the cuff of their jacket, so neat, so familiar, and much too close to this freezing glow.

“Javier!” my mother shouts. “What’s happening! Can you hear me?”

He can’t.

Or he can, but his voice is muted. His face is muted.

I look at the hand, then follow the line of the arm, to where it meets the light and disappears beneath the water’s surface (or rises above the clouds).

“Dad?”

The membrane leaps with a sudden discharge of energy. I’m tossed from the dream, spinning as cracked paint dries and reforms, its frayed edges winding together, suddenly rejuvenated. I can’t catch the dream, though; can’t get back in. I can *feel* it, a canvas of taut elastic, but it just flings me away, again and again, until I lose it in the fog.

Once more, I’m alone, in the cold, chilly light.

Alone?

In my peripheral vision are fleeting bursts of sparks – twinkling, rapid-fire Morse code. Whenever I try and focus one down, it vanishes, but I can sense triangles, squares, circles, spirals, fleeing my attention like pointillistic dragonflies. They zip between Illumination’s flowing sheets with a vague impression of curiosity, like insects trying to assess an intruder (or ghosts, wondering which unfortunate family’s moved into their old house).

“Hello?” I ask.

They might just be lights.

‘Dad?’ I want to ask.

Mum never mentions him, and stubbornly brushed it off, the few occasions I did ask. Of course, I’ve wondered if he’s estranged, or missing, or dead, or... another, completely innocent possibility. If he IS dead, he’ll be here, right? The afterlife, the ‘space between universes’, whatever that physically means.

And if *I’m* here, then...

Hm.

If my dad’s here, perhaps I can find him. Or I can find other human souls, or a way out, or *anything* that might help me wake up. I’d settle for not losing my mind.

So: tethers. One of them must lead towards my dad. Is that how this works? They’re... connections between people? Shared history? Different possibilities for how the world could be? I can use them, or their energy, to draw pictures in the light. Is that helpful?

Either way, they’re the only sense of direction I’ve got.

I run my brain across infinite strings, seeing what vague sketches they suggest, testing which one feels most—

The membrane gasps, followed by a rush of light, like air behind a passing truck. And in the distance – emerging from the rainbow – is a dark, menacing shape with jaws of shadow.

It's back. It knows I'm here.

The dragonflies flash, piercingly bright, then vanish.

I should leave, right?

I'm already being pulled towards it, the skin of my soul stretched in three directions at once (and each hurts more than the last). I wallow wherever it feels least painful, towards bands of colour that feel more grounded, funnelled between them as I dive ever deeper. There's an unmistakeable sense of edging further underwater, the pressure increasing, the way inward becoming more and more hidden by electric noise.

I wonder if I could keep travelling forever, or if instead I'm going in circles. Perhaps these membranes are randomly generated from nothing, then vanish after I pass, like video game levels – sand momentarily sculpted into cities before time returns it to dust. The light rises, smothering my mouth like quicksand, which is mantis because I don't *have* a mouth. But fixed processes must have created these landscapes, right? They have different sizes, different structures... different 'cultures', in a way. I suppose no single person makes mountains or forests or countries, either, but there are physical rules which govern how they form. (Unless you're a god; maybe I'll meet a god, here. That might make this worthwhile.)

Does time mean anything, in Illumination? Is the concept of 'direction' still relevant? The curtains loop over themselves, again and again, and I'm tiny. Moments later, I'm a galaxy.

It turns out that galaxies can suffocate, and panic, and feel pain.

My tether spirals, growing gradually prettier, until I can finally draw it to life and I've walked across this bridge a thousand times.

It's a good bridge.

There's, like, a cool *smell* it's got... maybe the smell of the water underneath?

Yup, it's totally the water. It's not a *good* smell, as I drink the humid night air, but a familiar one, infused by mud, algae and rusting Coke cans collecting in hollows beneath the PolyGrowth arches. It's a smell that means I'm super close to home. Go across the bridge, then a through a couple more alleyways, and then— my grandparents. Dinner. Home.

I stop half-way, and lean over the railing. The water slides past below in a lazy sorta way, reflecting the warmth of distant streetlights. How far is it, to the surface... hmm, thirty metres? Forty? Tall bridge! Wide river. Cars swoosh past, engines whining at different frequencies, and every few minutes a pair stumble into perfect harmony, and it's soooo satisfying it makes up for how annoying the rest are. The problem is, the cars also hide the battle-cries of attacking

mosquitoes; a couple have already parked their butts on my leg and I reach down and swipe at them angrily.

Nowadays, I'm never home early from school. There's always too much STUFF to get done, so it's always night-time crossing this bridge, and I'm always hunted by these yakkin' mosquitoes, and I should just keep walking but here I am, distracting myself again, wasting time as always.

So dumb. Just because it's nice to watch the city glow across the bay. It's... halo. The skyscrapers, the forest-parks, the AutoDrone highways. The Mesh, lighting up the smog.

It's so bright and colourful, where the better people live.

"Taeng-Mo?"

I'm startled by my nickname.

I glance to my left, where she's sitting on the railing. Her feet swing back and forth, and it makes me nervous, over the drop, but she knows better than me if she'll fall or not.

"Oh. Hiiiiii," I say. Not my best work, conversationally. "You're heading home late!"

"So are you!" She smiles, but there's no warmth to it, her eyes elsewhere. "We're friends, right?"

"Of course."

"Can I tell you something? A secret? Not really, but... it's a bit like a secret."

"Totally! I'm here, I'm always listening. These guys?" I point to my ears. "Looooove secrets."

Car headlights gild her body. She brushes her hair to one side, which turns golden, too, and in that moment she's a hundred percent a ghost. "Let's be best friends," she says, and takes my hand.

I want to go home. The mosquitoes are hunting.

Then I *am* home as I step off the floating footpath and climb the steps to our house. Water laps at its stilts, half-way to floor level; it's higher than yesterday, a black sheet, as dirty fluorescents spill between gaps in the floorboards. I kick off my shoes, set them neatly on the veranda, and my toes feel *great* on the cool wooden slats, worn smooth by generations who've done the exact same. I slip through the flyscreen and shut it quick behind me, keeping bugs outside where they belong. (A moth still manages to get caught in my hair.) My grandma hears its welcoming *click* and calls out from the kitchen.

"Who's that?" Voice carrying a tinge of worry, like most peoples'.

"Just me! What's for dinner?"

"Ho mok." (Fish curry.)

"Amazing. Can I help?"

"No no no, it's fine! Almost done. Busy day at school, right?"

"Yep, busy day. Super busy. Debate team prep went waaaaay longer than expected. Sorry I'm home so late."

"It's okay, it's always okay, but... send a message, next time. You know I get worried. Especially when it's close to curfew. There was a boy down the street –

Tawan, you remember Tawan? You used to play with him. He got caught by some peacekeepers, and—”

I slide into the kitchen and give my grandma a hug. “Sorry,” I murmur. “I will. Next time.” She smells intensely of Thai basil, with wispy white hair and a stoop she can no longer fix, and I can feel the bones in her back and arms but they’re *strong* bones, especially when she’s mad. The curry simmers on a small gas stove and it makes my eyes water in the best possible way. Food rations must’ve been good this week.

“I need to stir,” she grumbles.

“Alrighty.” I let go. “Where’s grandpa?”

“Replacing a glowstrip out back.” She smiles, a sidelong glance, and whispers, “*Drinking.*”

“He knows you know, right?”

“I KNOW he knows I know. That’s part of the fun, for him.” Suddenly she bends over and coughs, and I really wish she wouldn’t. Cough, cough, cough, wracking her body, and it takes her too long to straighten up.

“D’you need me to find the—”

“No, no, it’s fine. Go get ready for dinner. I’ll be five minutes.”

“Thanks. Love you.” She waves me off and I fetch a bulb of water for both of us. “I should post a quick vid first, though.”

“Yes, go! Be famous. Remember, ten percent of the profits—”

“Yeeees, ten percent goes to you. Hey, I’ll even make it twenty if you let me transfer to boarding school.”

“THAT will need more negotiating,” she snorts.

“Which is why I’ve been putting so much effort into debate club!”

I saunter away, and I know I’ve already won her over. It’s just a matter of going through the charade. Of course I don’t want to leave, but— I might have to. They realise that.

A Mesh alert appears in my vision: *<Incoming call.>*

“Something wrong?” grandma asks, noticing I’ve stopped mid-stride.

“Nope. School stuff. Sleeper school stuff.” I swipe the alert away and head to the back of the house, skidding along mismatched floorboards, past ancient electric fans that thrum and click, and pitch-black doorways that held so many fears when I was small. Maybe the glowstrips *do* need replacing, huh, and I try to pull myself out of the memory, tearing myself free from skin that isn’t mine.

(Wait.)

(Under this image there’s... ripples, layers, colder, older... I walk into the bathroom, turn on the light, and there I am in the mirror: a short, wrecking-ball girl with tangled black hair, rocking a white and navy school uniform—)

Same reflection, different bathroom.

A school bathroom. White tiles, thin cubicles.

I straighten my shirt. I gulp.

In my hand, I've got my drone – a black globe, slippery with sweat.

I'm DEFINITELY not supposed to have it inside, but there's nobody else here, not yet. I wash my hands, then examine at the cubicles. There are six, with interior grossness levels ranging from 'mildly' to 'wildly', and gaps underneath each door that provide ZERO privacy.

Yup. Nobody around.

It's 10:30.

I pick the fifth cubicle, step inside, and lock the door. I stand on the toilet so I can't immediately be seen and wait, staring at plastic inscribed with graffiti. None of my fellow students' messages are very inspiring.

I hear voices in the hallway.

Loud, sneering voices.

Later, it's dark.

I'm in a cupboard, staring at a different door.

I wonder if they're looking for me – the nurses. I turn it over and over in my hands, over and over. Tears slide down my nose, gather on my chin, then drip soundlessly onto a floor I can't see.

Voices, outside.

"Get him to the ER, quickly!"

"I've already cleared it with admin – we need to make room."

Humming maglev rails, squeaking wheels, sighing air purifiers. I don't usually like being alone – I *hate* being alone – but right now the bustle outside the is the worst thing ever.

I just want to sit here.

I don't know what I want. I turn it over and over it my hands.

"Please don't," she sobs. *"Stop, why are you doing this, it's not my fault!"*

I block it out.

"No, please, please—"

I shake my head and close my eyes. Tears stream down my cheeks.

I'll make you proud. I promise.

"I'll make you proud," I whisper, and I'm tied to her too tightly. I push against it the painting, trying to force new shapes into Illumination's web. It throbs with energy. (I need to free myself from her life, so that I'm not her, so that I'm looking at her, a girl in a cupboard in a Bangkok hospital, and—)

"I'll make you proud," she whispers, holding an empty Coke can.

"Wake?" I ask.

She looks up, in the memory, as if communing with a spirit.

"Hey," I say, louder. "Hey!"

I can't make her hear me. I bang on the door, with hands made of shadow.

This isn't her, I think. It's just... static. Random flickers of a corrupted file.

I slam the door again, and abruptly, it vanishes.
Once more, I'm alone in Illumination.
Always alone.

???? XII

Is this... it, then?

The afterimages of Wake's tears evaporate from my cheeks. She's stolen by an ever-changing glow, orange, blood-red. Heat ripples between vast solar flares, caught between dozens of fiery suns, and the hellish light pokes and prods at my edges, burning my skin when I'm not paying attention. Thoughts turn to ash as soon as they flit through my mind, and I can't even remember what I'm forgetting.

There's nothing here. Nothing but fire. Panic's rising within me, which I'm not a fan of. I'm *good* at staying level, and not getting frustrated, but holding myself together is taking more and more of a toll. It hurts. It's exhausting.

No point worrying. Just find a path, while you still can.

Can I realistically find my way back to the portal? Probably not. I can't 100% remember why I'm here in the first place. What happened?...

What haven't I tried yet? WHO haven't I tried?

Sinas.

I shouldn't fixate on such a small part of my life – and yet, neither can I forget it altogether. People are strange, like that.

Suns rise, and in their faces, their nations, I see lines, colours, sculpted by giant hands. Are they mine? Or others, stuck in this terrible place? I need to draw Sinas from the stardust with whatever energy I've got left. The stars try to drag me down, resisting, but for now I shine brighter, and they obey.

<Three>

I don't want stories.

<Two>

Nor memories.

<One>

I want reality.

<Start!>

Gang, I don't know about you, but this is the BEST part: when tyres dig bitumen, the transmission hits C#, and torque *shoves* you forward. A dozen cars have already left ahead of me and there's only three behind, but in the next few seconds, there's no room for worry. The sun dances on the nose of my inherited Formula TM car, a glittering spear, all that's in focus as the rest of the world blurs. It's clearsky. It's *wicked*. (There's an annoying TwitchTok trend about bringing old slang back – like saying 'wicked' instead of 'cool', or 'goated' instead of 'great', which apparently people did way back in 2020? Why?)

I'm distracted.

The track starts with two precise drifts to the right. I throw the car into them, as close to the barriers as I can. I shift up a gear before a short dirt slalom, tyres kicking up furious ochre trails.

The first checkpoint arch whizzes over my canopy. Third gear, 300 kilometres per hour. Can't see the car ahead.

(Am I already losing ground? Don't want to check my timer.)

The dirt cambers left into a long slide where you want to maintain speed, keep the gear, then swing the car beneath the supports of the spectator stands, followed by a stomach-kicking three-metre drop to the next checkpoint. I try to land as far left as possible without falling off the track to give myself room for the next chicane. The wheel slides in my hands. The car grunts as it throws itself forwards, eerily smooth. Full grip. That's good. Nearly hit the checkpoint. Less good.

I'm overtaken. Another car zoops past on my left, pulling away as we exit the turn. Its anti-collision field phases through me.

Shit.

(How's my brother doing? Don't want to check my timer.)

Short grass section next, where you can wiggle left-right-left-right to pick up speed, then a tight uphill-downhill drift through a right-hand hairpin that's honestly a gigantic nope. *Shiiiiit, shit shit shit*. Tyres screech. I'm nowhere near the apex, but hey, not terrible. There's supposed be a transition to the left here, a speedy jump onto a black platform, but I can't really see it.

Everything's gauzy. Indistinct.

350 kilometres per hour.

I swing left and the car slips as it enters the curve. I'm driving into a long, dark tunnel, but I'm not. Breath's tight in my chest.

I check the timer. Two seconds behind my average.

No, no, this always happens. Ever since—

No.

The car's heavy in my hands, always responding a split-second too late. The track ahead is always darker. The engine's not powerful enough. That's why I like the start so much, those three endless seconds. It's the only time I'm able to forget that – sooner or later – the pretending runs out.

I'm in a bathroom, alone, running the sink over my head.

I'm at my desk, in the back left corner of the classroom.

New desk. New school. New teachers.

New friends? Question mark? Several candidates are crowding around my seat: Will, Ming, and Naomi. They're chatting to each other more than me, but they did make the effort to come meet the new kid. I'm pretty sure the teacher didn't even encourage them to; they might just be *nice*? I lean back in my chair, wearing a smile, replying on autopilot.

Ming asks me where I'm from. I joke about losing track.

Thing is, I'll be someplace else in six months. Someplace else, after that. And then... who knows? Will, Ming and Naomi won't. They'll be fine; they've got each other to talk to. To them, I'll be a random guy they briefly knew in eighth grade. To me, they're a video game you play once, then forget about: fun while it lasted, but you gotta move on. So, I sit, back left corner of the classroom, waiting for the parade of teachers and classes and acquaintances to file past, a museum exhibit stuck inside a clear glass case: 'the cool kid from the Netherlands with nice hair who plays the piano.' Look, but don't touch.

'That's the new guy,' they'll say. *'He's new!'*

'I'm new,' I'll say.

We'll look at each other, excited, except it's all fake and I can't be bothered. I could try to make proper connections, but what's the point?

Easier to go through the motions. Everyone is.

I'm entering the shed where our TM cars live, and my hair's soaked, my face is wet, and my brother (already there, dammit) looks up from his tuning console.

"You're early?" he asks.

I walk to the table, with its dusty dataglass and racks of gleaming tools, and collapse into an office chair that squeaks as it spins. Water drips down my back, onto pockmarked concrete.

"You ARE early," he says.

I sit, gazing at the ceiling. My heart's still thumping in my chest.

It won't slow down. I can't *think*.

He stands, wipes his hands on his dumb green Nintendo shirt, and saunters towards me, carrying a piece of battered plastic panelling. He throws it up, catches it, throws it up, catches it, then chucks it directly above my face and stops it inches from my nose.

"Something *happened*," he says, Sherlock-fricking-Holmes. "Did you drift into a river or something? Forget to take off your clothes in the shower?"

"Nothing happened, sleeper."

"Uh-oh. Touchy."

"PLEASE go away."

“Hey, I’m the one who’s MEANT to be here? There’s a ton of tuning I need to finish, and I don’t *mind* if you stick around but, hey, it’ll be way faster without your vibes messing up the—”

“Fuck off,” I growl.

“Okay! Okay. Well, I’m happy for you – or sorry that happened.” He rolls his eyes, puts on a smile, and walks back to his car.

The frustration’s heating up my cheeks. There’s no more water to cool it down.

I don’t want to be here.

Or here, in much nicer chair, surrounded by the hushed, jazzy ambience of a too-fancy restaurant. My shirt collar digs into my neck. A glass of water sits by my hand, fogged by the cold. Idly I draw an ‘F’ on its side with my finger.

“Are we moving again?” I ask.

“What? Oh, no,” my mother says. She laughs quietly, as if I’m the mango for asking. “No, that won’t be for a few months at least. It’s just dad and I will be taking on a bigger role at SapiSec.”

My finger freezes.

“Which means we will, too,” my brother says calmly.

“Yes, we hope so,” my dad replies.

“We’ve signed you up for more sessions,” she adds. “Nothing major, of course, only a few more hours on Saturdays. I know how fulfilling you’ve found it.”

My stomach drops, but I try to relax. “That sounds like a lot of... responsibility? Isn’t this a good time to focus on school, instead of—”

“You can do both,” my dad says. “Can’t you?”

He doesn’t realise he’s doing this.

Or does he? He affixes me with cool, brown eyes. My mum’s hair catches the light. I shift in my seat.

I want to argue.

If this was a different me, in a different universe, I’d grab the cup of water and shatter it against the wall, or a different protest that causes less trouble for the staff, but I’d *fight*. I’d take the poison I’m bottling up inside and... ugh.

I tried fighting, once or twice.

Easier not to.

A waitbot glides over to our table and deposits our food with a chirpy ‘*can I get you anything else?*’ I glance at my brother, who’s gazing down at his pasta, expression unreadable. As much as I hate him sometimes – and I do (sometimes) – he’s the only other person who knows what this is like. The only other person who’s as good at lying as I am.

The pasta’s great.

Tastes of the ocean.

I taste blood, biting my tongue as I stare at my car's underside. I've slithered underneath it like a snake, searching for how to manually upgrade the reactor firmware because for inexplicable reasons the Mesh is down so I need to plug in a CAT-12 cable like a Neanderthal.

My brother pokes my thigh. "Still mad?"

"Not yet."

"Then here's a mantis idea: I'll get some fresh air in here, you tell me why you drowned yourself in a sink, and let's fix moody Sinas before tonight's race. The ladder standings are grim. You gotta win the multiplier round on this one."

I sigh. "Nah, it's... look. It's alright."

"I'm looking." He pokes me again, same spot.

"Stop," I grunt.

Poke.

"Stop!"

Poke poke poke poke POKE—

I kick him, then slide out from underneath the car's wing. "I am THIS close to snapping." I slam my fist on the canopy.

He's sitting like a monk, a pose worthy of an album cover. "Why? 'Cause of me?"

"Nope."

"Because of... them?" He tilts his head quizzically.

I snort. "How'd you guess."

"Then keep talking."

I'm not sure I want to... but fuck it. "With school, and SapiSec, and racing, and fundraising events, it's— I'm not a person! I'm a THING, a perfect concept, a Wikipedia page mum and dad can point to, and guests can smile at, and say 'how nice', or 'that's impressive', and I'm... tired. I just get *tired*. Of pretending to be a fucking robot." I shake my head. "And where's the ending? Let's say I keep lying to myself, following all these beliefs I don't believe in, and then what happens? We evolve into what they want? At this point I'm waiting till the Stockholm syndrome takes over and I can turn into a guy who **LIKES** this stuff. Or what if I'm just trapped for the rest of my life."

"I reckon we'll leave." He shrugs. "Eventually."

"And you're fine with 'eventually'?"

"Look, I'm figuring that out. But in the meantime, the race—"

"The racing's a distraction so we do what we're told. I get it, we're lucky, we're privileged, but I'm **ALLOWED** to hate this."

"Sure, as long as you don't start hating *me*. That'd be ash."

"And kind of like hating my own escape pod," I reply.

"Yup."

"Although most escape pods are less annoying."

"Yup."

It's a tiny relief, to speak the truth into existence, to the only person who could understand.

I usually can't.

Calm nods. Perfect smiles. Words of science, voiced like scripture.

I'm forced to stay beatifically calm as I increasingly think I'm being indoctrinated by a cult. I attend the training sessions, eat the food, work towards the better, purer, more *human* future that's apparently our life's sole duty. I get the doomsday prepper idea, but this isn't the way to go about it. I don't know why my parents are so... eh. Whatever.

I'm asked what I'd do in specific moral quandaries.

I spend time hanging out with the other SapiSec kids. (Can't talk about anything real since it's monitored.)

I repeat sentences I don't believe in.

I play stupid leadership games.

On Sundays, I get to race. A quirk of fate, that a distant uncle left us two broken-down Formula TM cars and vouchers for beginners' lessons.

My brother opens the prep-shed's windows. "You *could* talk to people at school about this," he says. "I realise we always end up leaving, but it could help. It won't NOT help. Might be better that way, like... a temporary burden."

"Is that what you do?" I ask.

"No."

"Then why—"

"Since when do you pay attention to what I do?" He gives me a frustratingly superior glare. The breeze whips past his face, and around my car's wings. "Alternately, what if you stopped pretending? You don't have to follow our parents' orders. You don't have to be some perfect person. You really don't."

"But *you* do, huh?"

"Which shouldn't affect your decisions, sleeper."

I snort. "Dad might have something to say about that."

"Yeah." His smile wavers. "You'll have to figure that part out. But at school, or when we're alone? Who cares?"

"And if I get to chance to leave?"

He shrugs. "Then... you should."

My skin shivers, and my throat itches. "I want to leave. After high school, I want to move out, go to university where they can't find me, or try and race professionally, or I could even run and go off-grid or— not. I don't know. I want to." It tumbles out in a breathless rush, all the fantasies I've thought of ever since I could think. It feels weird to say it.

"Then you should," he says again. "I'll help."

"What about you, though?"

“I’ll handle it. I have so far.” He cracks his fingers. “I could come with you. It’s not the worst option ever. Anyway, sorry to change the subject, but is there someone in your class named Will?”

“Sure. Why?”

“Is he hot? A friend of his started quizzing me about YOU, of all people – apparently, he might be into you? I told the friend you’re probably keen and to get him to ask directly.”

I blush. “I was SO close to giving you an awkward bro-hug for being, like, supportive? Now that’s off the table for a fucking year.”

Distant carsong drifts on the hot stadium breeze.

In music class, my fingers pluck the strings of a guitar, clumsily following tabs by an ancient band called ‘ACDC’.

I look at Naomi. “Hey, so – weird question. Are you doing anything this weekend?”

“Not really. Any reason?”

“Weeeellll...” I take a breath. “My brother and I are competing in an amateur TM race, and I was wondering if you guys wanted to come along and watch. Only if you’re interested, obviously. It’s not professional – duh – but it’s still fun. And fast.”

“Oh yeah, sure!” She grins. “Hey, that’s orbital. Are you racing against adults? What time?”

<Three>

“Hey, Will! Did you know Sinas drives TrackMania cars?”

<Two>

My brother’s waiting on the starting grid, his dark green wings bobbing left and right.

<One>

I prime my engines.

<Start!>

This is always the best part.

The car kicks forward. I’m slammed back in my seat.

And despite the rush, despite the acceleration stealing my breath, despite the safety straps digging into my chest – I’m weightless.

I’m free.

Actually, I’m it’s more likely that I’m dead.

Locked inside a tomb of disjointed memories.

I want to go forwards, too – forwards in time, I mean. Can I skim through Sinas’ history until I get to the present? I sense his frustration, along with Wake’s melancholy, and Alex’s brittle hope, and if everything IS malleable, perhaps I can make this work.

I leave Sinas behind. He watches me go, reflected in his cockpit. I race towards *now*, trying to snag that nebulous feeling as years run through my fingers. Memories flicker faster and faster till they're meaningless streaks and there IS an ending, in the distance: instead of faded canvas, new outlines, being woven from the aurora. I'm stretching, reaching, and the sensation becomes suddenly substantial as light races, faster than lightspeed. I see Alex, Wake, Sinas, on a space station around Saturn. I was *there*. I see their shadows on the horizon, their shapes in the fire.

Hallways, rooms, of dull white PolyGrowth. A giant hollow globe with an eerie green glow. Spinning pieces of exploded shuttle. I remember fragments, can see their outlines in my mind, can almost TOUCH—

I'm knocked away, spinning into Illumination.

Again, I leap towards them. Again, again, chasing shadows that aren't there, or shapes that outrun me and do things I can't predict. I don't know which direction is which, shoved this way and that by invisible barriers too many times to count, the escape that I want so badly always inches, seconds, a heartbeat from my reach. I leap, until the suns burn them away, and I tumble through the fiery void. The paintings laugh. They dance in sickening patterns as I fall, and it hurts, as every new layer stabs at my gut. I feel myself... fraying. Drying up.

The pure, immense *loneliness* around me hits worse than any pain.

No way out.

I decide to do the only thing that's worked: I retreat within myself, for however long I've got left.

I manage to draw a five-metre sphere, of trees, warmth, and creeping darkness. A fire crackles in a cracked concrete pit. Orange embers swirl into the night. It's a campsite in the Bibbulmun nature reserve – and this memory was a school camp, so my classmates should be here – but for now, there's only me, perched on a rough-hewn log.

I catch my breath. In, out. Air that isn't real. The smoke shifts, wafting past. I look at the dried eucalyptus leaves, layering the forest floor.

Is this... okay?

I can *feel* the wood beneath my hands, rough, splintered, slightly painful. The fire's heat presses against my cheeks, fiercely dry. I can hear sounds of the bush, after dark. (Not 'true' sound, since this is a tiny nature reserve and not actual wilderness, but... true enough. I suppose that makes this a dream of a dream.) I can still sense Illumination outside, trying to absorb me in its grief.

If this is Illumination – if it is – I'm probably dead for real.

I want there to be... more.

That's not for me to decide.

The thing is, I've always been secure in myself. I'm confident in my abilities, mostly (as long as that doesn't involve talking to strangers). The way my brain works makes me good at certain things like schoolwork, or drawing, or being emotionally level, which means I'm good at being independent. I'm able to find peace in being alone. If you measure success by test scores and rule-following

and minding your own business, then I'm *awesome*. Some people say I'm lucky. Usually, I'd agree.

Now, I don't think I'm lucky anymore.

The fire dances. I don't think my classmates are coming. I don't think *anyone's* coming. I'm good with being alone, but I'm not good with this, because there's... nobody to be alone *with*.

Only fear, pain, and ghosts that can't talk back.

I remember what I did, now. Why I'm here.

I'm here because I wanted to run away. Because I thought being apart would be less exhausting. And maybe it is, but this choice to dive into Illumination despite not understanding what it meant – to flee from literally the entire world because I was afraid of old mistakes – is so, so dumb. I'm good at being alone, fine, but it's not what I want.

I draw the smoke into my hands, and it forms a web of strings, warm and insubstantial, stretching from my hands to where other people should be.

THIS is what I want – these connections. It's what I treasure most, I think.

My favourite memories aren't of getting a high score on a maths test, or playing a glacier new video game. They're of times like this school camp, where we spent ten days trekking through bushland, plotting routes on maps, cooking for ourselves, cleaning for ourselves, swimming and rafting and literally shitting in the woods, then going to sleep too late because we couldn't stop laughing in our tents. Or staying over at friends' houses and playing terrible MeshSims. Or visiting some of my mum's cousins in Japan. Or mucking around in art class. Or hanging out on a beach, way too embarrassed when talking to a girl.

I'm not good at making connections. Objectively I'm terrible at it, and it takes me aeons to open up to new people. Most of the time, it never happens.

Still, I wish they were here.

Mum. (I miss you.)

Dad. (It would've been nice to have a dad. I don't think I've totally admitted that before, but... yeah. Would've been nice.)

My friends. (Which sucks, since I had so much trouble making them. Even if I wasn't hanging out every day, the fact that they were *there* if I needed them, or if they needed me, was... reassuring.)

Random people who come in and out of your life. Other students at school. Other people at the shops, or the cinema. Other passengers on the train. Momentary connections, stretching across a species, making us something more than a collection of soulless atoms.

I cared about them.

I cared about Alex. I wanted us to help each other. To be unstoppable together.

I cared about Wake. I wanted to see her change the world, like she believed she could.

I cared about Sinas. I wanted us to figure out who we were, and maybe that's naïve when you're both thirteen, but I couldn't help how I felt.

I cared about my mum. I wanted to love her, and make her proud.

I cared about *me*. Except I pretended I didn't, because I thought that was 'brave', or it would make me stronger, and help them move on, and maybe that's understandable because we nearly killed each other, and I might be the only one who remembers. Instead, I threw it all away; SO dumb.

Turns out I care about other people. Might not always show it, but I do.

Nice.

The realisation loses its impact, slightly, because other people might not exist anymore, unless I pull off a Bible-worthy miracle. Guess I'll sit here, waiting, thinking about everything I've left behind.

For.

How.

Long?

Smoke curls upwards, into silhouetted leaves.

This dream's fraying in the back of my skull. My limbs ache. It's eerily still – not in the sense of being alone in your house, or sneaking into an abandoned building at night, because in those cases, the concept of other people still exists. You could knock on a stranger's door, or call an ambulance, and company would turn up, eventually.

Here, there's NOBODY. The gang's all dead.

But Maritime said they'd found human souls, in Illumination, which means my mum should be around, right, if she really did... die? Or what about Tao? Or Sinas' brother?

Hmm.

I stare into the fire, trying to find a link to them. There are sketches, half-erased and distant, but I can't quite redraw them: Tao's clapping me on the shoulder and running ahead, and we're talking and brushing our teeth in the bathroom, and there's a grey wall sculpted from bodies, and he's cheering at a footy game, and he's telling me a secret that I don't really want to hear, but I'm not *there*, like I was with Sinas or Wake or Alex. For some reason, the tethers don't let me grab hold.

Why?

The campsite's crumbling, the trees becoming ethereal, as Illumination's glow pierces my illusory armour. I don't have much longer.

Did mum mention anything that might be useful? Did Maritime? What have I tried since coming here? Going into the past works, sort of, but doesn't seem particularly useful. Breaking through into the present isn't physically allowed.

What about the future?

The campsite shivers.

The fabric of the *universe* shivers.

Can I draw new pictures that might happen? That I want to happen?

I search for one of the images I'd found previously (it doesn't take too long, which might mean I'm getting better at this). It's the moment where I'm holding my father's hand; or might be, since I can't see his face, only the imprint he

leaves in the glittering portal, as he steps into its embrace. I want this to change, in so many ways. I want this to not be the last time I see him, to not be the only memory of him I never knew I had, and I want my mother to be here, the way she used to be, and I want us to be together, a normal family, to have never been part of Illumination, to have never been on Starfish Station at all, and I take those selfish feelings and WRENCH them from this tangled morass of possibility and light—

—I feel the hand I'm holding become *solid*—

—and so many things happen at once—

—lifetimes—

—too much—

—Illumination flows around me—

—and I seize an image as it whips past and I'm dragged screaming behind it.

I find myself in a darkened hangar. A ship waits in the centre, gleaming blue, lit from below by soft floodlights. I *built* this ship (or helped). I developed the EraDrive navigation and control systems which allow it to fly autonomously in challenging environments. The knowledge leaps into my brain before I know it's there, as if God is editing my personal Wikipedia. It's relatively small, as ships go – thirty metres long, chunky amdriives, thick shielding, a raised rear bulkhead for extra supplies. I lean on the elevated scaffold that surrounds it.

A hand squeezes my shoulder.

“So. How are you feeling?” my dad asks.

“Good. Stressed, but good. I'll be glad to get some more sleep in the next few weeks.”

I can't see his face, hidden in shadow. Mum's there too. Her expression blurs and flickers, like a low-poly character in a video game.

This is the Binningup testing complex.

I'm twenty-six years old.

The ship – *Starling G3* – will launch in June next year as part of a team of four identical vessels, to support an Oort Cloud survey.

“I'm really happy you get to do this,” my dad says. “You deserve it.”

I'm sitting on a veranda on Alex's farm, with her, and Sinas, and Wake, and Tao.

It's sunny.

I'm nineteen years old.

A border collie runs frantic circles around the front yard, chasing a drone that skims low across the grass.

I'm smiling. I'm happy. We never went to Starfish Station. We met at a science camp on Earth, at the Australian National University. We were assigned to the same camp group by chance and happened to get along and stay in touch

afterwards. I go to university with Sinas, now. Alex is working on a book. Tao has a sister, again – her name is Yixian. I think I might be falling in love with her.

Starfish never happened. Illumination never happened. I won't have to face those mistakes, or get better.

It worked out.

It feels like cheating, but I don't care.

These possibilities aren't mere light, or make-believe; they're solid.

I watch Starling launch, arcing into the sky. I place my hand on the ground and feel it vibrate.

I go out for pizza with my parents. We argue about pineapple.

I call Alex at 11PM for help proofreading a uni assignment.

Is this the answer? If I could break through to these futures, these *millions* of futures, perhaps that's an exit. Part of me's still sitting on the log by the fire, another part swimming above kaleidoscopic energy membranes, another part being catapulted through endless dreams, and I try to merge these shards of former human into one, single Choice. The past feels immutable, the present hard to grasp, but when I chase these new possibilities, Illumination *churns*.

I don't think it likes what I'm doing.

The nations surrounding me are shifting, and the tethers they're connected are shifting too, and *something's* changing but I don't understand what. It's not like I can visually see it, after all; it's more moving a hand through water and figuring out what's there from the ripples.

I choose the moment in the hangar. I try to step inside.

My parents' faces are replaced by blazing crucifixes.

I'm kicked back to the campfire. I fall to my knees. The crucifixes are here too, advancing between the trees; waves of sparkling daggers split the sky, too many to look at, peeling back my imagination like they're dismantling a movie set and the soundstage behind it is just horizon-spanning nothingness. The trees are devoured. The air turns black.

I'm picked up—

—put down—

—in another nation.

I soar over obsidian rock, carved into crescents and tunnels and brain-like contours. The sky *shines* black, if that's possible, interspersed with wispy streams of violet... gas? For a moment, two gas-streams merge to form an immense cross on the horizon, before slowly coming apart in a wistful spiral.

This feels different to the rest of Illumination. It's... controlled, finite, with definite form, as if someone's conceived of this and could hold it in their head.

As if it's somebody else's campfire.

Violet fireflies rise from the rock.

They gather into pockets. They solidify. Swiftly, they form concentric rings around me, as if I'm standing at the bottom of a purple well. It doesn't feel dangerous (and if it did, I'm not sure what I could do); instead, the fireflies form shapes and parts, like cogs in a machine. *Thousands* of them.

IS it a machine? Or the ghost of one?

The thing – the entity – is formed from falling sand and clicking levers. There are chutes and boxes where the sand fills, then overflows, plus switches and gates where it's redirected. As I focus my attention this way or that the levers *click* and sand cascades downward, gathering at my feet, whereupon it's carried back into the sky to begin the cycle anew. Different streams seem to produce sensations of different concepts, like 'no', 'yes', 'what', or 'music' (but not quite).

Click, go the levers. Three boxes extrude towards me, tiny swarms of sand emerge, and a new sentiment buzzes quietly among my thoughts:

<This> <belong> <us>

I'm surprised.

The first box closes. Another takes its place.

<Stop> <change> <belong> <us>

Holy *shit*, am I talking to an alien? I'm surprised it's trying to talk, that it CAN talk, that I can understand. But the afterlife isn't exclusive, right? If other intelligent life exists, which it 100% does (even if far away in time and space), then perhaps it ends up in Illumination, too. Could that be why it's so weird, here? The remains of billions of years of jumbled-up consciousness?

And what did it say? 'Stop/change'? Perhaps I can reply by messing with these boxes (or it might it'll hate that; I should be gentle). I find the concept I want, which is whatever's closest to 'sorry'.

"Remorse."

The creature shakes, which I'm not sure is good or bad.

"Remorse," I say again. "Not/mean/change."

<Why> <you> <here> <who> <you> <what> <you>

Ahhhh, I don't know! I'm too unqualified for this, and I'm unsure how I'd explain 'human' or 'Finn' with the list of concepts this thing is presenting. I settle for "New/confusion/learning/new/new/new," in the hope it'll understand I'm doing my best.

Wow. An *alien*. (Maybe.)

"Who/you?" I ask.

<Us>

Not *supremely* helpful, but any communication remains a miracle. I dig through the sand until I find what I want. "You/name?"

<Cascade>

Sensible choice. It's waiting expectantly, as if it wants me to reciprocate, but I'm unsure if I'm just projecting human habits. "This/space/belong/you?"

<Yes>

“Other/space/belong/other?”

<True><uncountable><infinite>

“What/space/here/meaning?”

Cascade has to think about that one, and a whole wall of switches flicks to the right, sand rippling in a sudden rush.

<You><new><cascade><explain><space><here><peace><prison>
<fold><self><container><make><world><from><cascade>
<all><make><world><from><self><coexist><find><peace>

Cascade corrects itself.

<Not><all>

“Not/all?”

The levers flutter, in a giant wave.

<Agony><accept><lost><weave><pain><survive>
<steal><self><for><self><sin>

I don’t understand. It doesn’t elaborate. “How/long/cascade/exist/here?” I ask.

<Not><answer>

“Not/know?”

<Time><merge><observe><direction><vapour>

Still not that lucent, but it's gotta be trying. It probably thinks I'm an absolute mango. My adrenaline's racing; I don't want to mess this up.
“Why/cascade/here? Why/other/here?”

<Law>

“Good/other/come/here? Bad/other/come/here? Law?”

A pause.

<What><good><what><bad>

I find a box that feels like ‘morality’.

<Trap><machine><law>
<you><bad><question>

“No! Self/not/bad.”

<You><cause><much><attention><should><stop>

“Attention/bad?”

<Attention><wary><cascade>
<others><elsewhere><many><dead><not><want>
<you><new><you><learn>

It’s a weird style of word association for which I can never find the optimal connections. The sand chatters.

“What/law/purpose?” I ask eventually.

<What><you><before><purpose>

“Self/alive. Here/not/alive.”

<Here><alive><dead><fuel>
<energy><cycle><experiment><music><sin>

The sky glows darkly, high above, and I want to commit this to memory, to record it on a Mymory, but of course I can't. What's the point of being the first person to meet an intelligent alien species if I needed to die to do it?

<You><not><accept><fold>
<You><different><slippery>

“What/slippery/meaning?”

<Different><energy><challenge><observe>
<How><arrive>

I flick through boxes, until I find ‘door’.

<Fascinating>

“You/know/door?”

<Door><end>

“Where/end? Where/door?”

<End><door><beginning>

“Self/not/understand.”

I feel the hint of a shrug from Cascade, plus a dash of contrition.

<Every><door><same><door><different><layer><same><universe>
<different><weave><pattern><topology><not><know>

I want to confirm we’re talking about the same concept. “Door/leads/from—” I try to find ‘illumination’, or a phrase more specific than ‘light’ or ‘glow’, but trying to encapsulate the dodgy pun is more trouble than it’s worth. “Door/leads/from/here/into/place/where/cascade/before. Others/opened/me/travel/here.”

<Fascinating>

“Me/need/find/door/return/place/me/before. Cascade/want/return?”

The levers think for a minute, before answering.

<Cannot><return><doors><lie><infinite>

“Me/people/changed/door/allow/return. Unsure/bad. Understand?”

<Unsure>

“Fair,” I reply.

<Proposal><cascade><find><door><help>

“Exclaim! True?”

<Cascade><help><when><you>join><cascade>
<You><slippery><although><useful>
<You><hot>

It’s talking about temperature, I think, in the way hot atoms vibrate with more kinetic energy.

<Join><nation><absorb><decay><suffer><tithe><eternal><music>
<Choice><none>

“Me/prefer/choice... join/meaning/what?”

<Choice><none>

The levers babble, flicking up and down, as the sand-streams branch into puddles and rivers.

<Cascade><absorb>

<Cascade><help>

It's not a threat, as far as I can tell, though Cascade's violet glow has become more pressing. The sky smoulders.

"If/me/not/join? Other/nations/exist?"

<Infinite>

"If/me/join/others? Can/join?"

<Stay><join><us>

<Choice><none>

Okay. Okay. Let me think.

<Join><us><join><us><join><us>

Cascade is the first friend I've found in here (reaaaally stretching the definition of 'friend'), but I'm not convinced that it's entirely... trustworthy? Or sane? I wasn't exactly planning on hanging out with a sentient sand-abacus for the rest of eternity.

Still, if the sentient sand-abacus can help...

<Join><us><join><us><join><us><leave><leave><LEAVE>

"Want/me/leave?"

Purple light flares all around me.

<Wraith><search><dark><coming><want><you>

"Dark/searching? What/wraith?"

<Not><time>

<You><leave>

"What/joining—"

<Leave><leave><leave!>

Lightning crackles up and down the machine, and envelopes me as its world breaks apart. Rock shatters, and the sky burns, brighter, brighter, until black is white. What if I want to come back here? How do I find this place? I try to grab something solid, but my mind seizes nothing.

I'm picked up—

—put down—

—a piece on another's board.

I tumble helplessly into rainbow aurora, an out-of-control skydiver, falling through sheets of undulating red. Cascade's world is nowhere to be seen. A tether, I should find a—

Clouds of darkness build on the horizon, like approaching thunderstorms. They turn the light grey, and muted, and lifeless. Similar to a distant tsunami, it's a problem of scale: from far away, or atop a mountain, it doesn't look so bad, since you don't have a reference for comparison, but as it gets closer...

It crests, a swathe of cosmic dark, and I realise it's a horde of individual *creatures*: furious charcoal sketches that grapple and dive like eagles in a death spiral, emitting buzzsaw screams that set my mind's teeth on edge. Illumination's fabric stretches and splits, its vividness dissipating in short-lived sparks. They're approaching from every compass direction.

They're coming for ME.

I want to try running, or hiding in the fractal light, but death's thorns dig in. I'm plunged underwater. I thrash, choking, trying to break free.

There are legions of them.

I can feel their pain. Their selves. Their memories. Every atom in this never-ending thundercloud is a broken spirit.

Like me.

There are so many that most will never get close, but the ones at the back don't care and those at the front— they're swirling whips of paint and shadow, writhing around each other, *drinking* from the tethers that tie me to Illumination. I'm pulled downward. *Stop*, I want to shout, *let me go*. I try to fight back but it's too much, too big (as if a leaf could ever control a hurricane) and any thoughts of a campfire are buffeted away. There's so much pain, so much FURY, tearing at my body. Parts of me are leaking out like blood, lapped up by hateful mouths.

They're *eating* me.

They're starved. Ravenous. They've been driven mad by this place, or perhaps the madness was always there. As they constrict themselves around my memories, I feel foreign impulses invading my mind; thoughts that aren't my own, replacing what's there.

What was I thinking about?

Trees? Smoke?

I gasp for breath, reach for a tether, but can't. Images of—

—family arguments—

—a crying child—

—irradiated skies—

—a roaring crowd—

—crumbling earth—

Memories that happened, or didn't happen, being stolen, or given, and the bits of me holding the rest together are buckling while the shadows fight harder, HARDER, a vice squeezing a slab of raw meat, and I'm leaking through the gaps. These memories aren't *mine*. It's like breathing somebody else's CO2, wrong, disgusting, they're disgusting, and I'm— I'm holding a knife and pushing it down, and I'm telling a man I want him to be happy, and I'm grabbing a spear in a cave and throwing it into flames, and it makes me want to burn myself to ash, and—

It writhes.

It screams.

It has a name, doesn't it?

The shadows need sustenance. They need to feed, to *rule*.

It tries to reach for the things that gave it comfort, that made it whole, but it finds them changed, distorted by unknowable forces. It—

I.

/.
/.

Sheets of light. Swarms of shadow.

What's my name? Why does it hurt? Why can't I—

I see a girl who looks like me, fearing the world, fearing herself, so fearful her life is grey and blank, and she believes she's without the power to escape it. She feels alone in her journey and wants to be able to express why, but is afraid nobody's listening. So, she's silent. She dies like this.

It makes me intensely sad.

I see a boy who makes my heart leap, except he won't because he'll never see me. He'll never see anyone. He's kept in a prison, forced to smile and to accept his fate, and he won't ever become who he was meant to be. If you spend too much time acting like everything you hate, eventually, you become it.

It's getting fuzzier.

I see a girl with nerves of steel who never manages to fulfil her dream. The world is simply too unjust, too uncaring; those around her fall like flies, those against her step on her like dirt, and all her efforts and her aching sadnesses will never be enough. But that's the way of things, isn't it? She'll never save anyone.

Dustclouds, dissipating on the wind.

I see a boy with a contagious smile who dies, gasping for breath, in the unfeeling vacuum of interplanetary space. He'll never achieve anything. He'll never mean anything. He'll just... die. And that's not fair.

I want to cry.

I don't know what that means.

I see a boy, who's alone; who made mistakes; who hurt those close to him because he didn't know better; who hurt people because he didn't want things to change; who'll always be alone. One dying spark, amid an entire nation of darkness. One more soul amongst billions more, trapped in the space between.

Because they weren't ready for their story to end.

Because 'alone' is all there is.

Because regret, and pain, and suffering, and anger, and hate, and yearning, and sorrow, and love, and happiness, and joy, and confusion, and pride, and fear, and selfishness, and empathy; none of it matters. In the end, there's just...

Stay, whisper the voices. *Stay. STAY.*

They're feeding. They're getting stronger. The whisper is a roar.

I'm so stupid. So useless.

Stay.

The terror within me could swallow the world. I'm forced to watch as those around me die, and it's because of me, in the knife in my hands, in the things I never said. Illumination forces me to watch, and spend eternity with my suffering, and scream as my soul burns.

I can't fight anymore. Maybe I could, a universe ago, but now, there's no such thing as will.

Mum?

Dad?

I need you.

The dark grows, and grows, and grows, and grows, and grows. And the creatures? They're *parasites*; dust-mites scattered before the thundering footfalls of whom I've been fleeing, all this time.

The blackness over the horizon.

The blackness at Illumination's heart.

It arrives.

It considers me.

I'm stripped bare, before an immense... question. Immense *purpose*.

Then it takes my tethers, wraps them in its own, and tortures me until I truly am nothing.

???? XIII

Years pass.

Centuries.

The universe forgets about me.

It doesn't forget my torture. The *stars* don't forget. I'm in a sensory deprivation tank, but this time, I'm solo. This time, there are thorns embedded in my skin, and I'm bathed in a pool of futures that will never come to pass. No made-up constellations; no space between universes; no mouth to scream with. Just empty silence, plus the sadness inside my head. Behind it all is one unknowable being, a giant, a king, a *God*, and I'm powerless before its purpose.

I'm surrounded by the thin, peeling trunks of paperbark trees. It's dark; specifically, the kind of 8PM darkness that leaves a few hints of silver, making the forest seem more imposing than it should.

I look around.

Trees stretch in every direction, with no indication of anything different.

I pick a direction and walk.

It's dry. Warm. Smells of earth and dried-out branches. Undergrowth scratches at my calves. Desiccated leaves crunch beneath my shoes.

Before long, I see a phantom, bathed in the glow of a rising moon.

It's Sinas: an ethereal image, frozen in time. He's bending over, arm out, as if helping somebody up. I go to touch him, but my hand passes straight through.

I keep walking.

Every few minutes, I spot another in the distance. Wake, sitting mid-air, gazing at a horizon that doesn't exist. Tao, caught mid-stride, ready to kick a football. Alex sits at a desk, typing, and when I try and read what she's writing, it's blank. I'm next, standing up straight, one arm raised—

I look away.

In the distance, there's a flickering orange glow: a campfire.

It crackles shyly amid a circle of stones. I reach it in three boundless steps, taking my spot in its crude dirt clearing. Smoke winds lazily upward, but above, there are no stars, no clouds, no passing satellites – only a void.

My friends are back. Motionless ghosts, sitting around the fire.

My mother's also here. She kneels on the ground, warming her hands, and stands up suddenly as I arrive. "Finn!"

She's real. Solid. The relief, warmth and surprise on her face is... real.

I don't know how to react. I've forgotten.

/s she real?

She has genuine presence like she's a person, and not a memory. She hugs me tightly, and her hair's soft under my chin. "I've missed you," she says, and her voice sounds how it *used* to sound: steady, methodical, but also kind, and content. I sag in her arms, resting my head, and she holds me up. My relief won't let me move. It makes the breath catch in my throat.

"Mum?" I ask.

"It's me," she says. "I promise."

I can feel the life in her, as around us, phantoms gaze into the flames.

"I wish you weren't here," she adds.

"Me too," I say. "This is... Illumination, isn't it?"

"What else could it be?"

"A dream. I was hoping it's a dream."

"Perhaps is it, partially. One we can't wake up from." Mum smiles slightly as I pinch myself, just in case. "Sorry," she says softly.

"No, this wasn't your fault. It wasn't anyone's fault. Except mine, maybe."

"Are you sure?" Worry passes over her face, threatening to stay. "I can't remember if it was me, who did this, or... if it succeeded."

"I can't exactly remember what happened either, to be honest. I think I followed you. Or ran away. Or both?"

"Ha. That's what this mess has been, in many ways – a series of mistakes nobody can remember. There might not be much time."

"For what?"

"To tell you why things happened, the way they did. Are you okay with listening for a few minutes?"

I'm always okay with listening.

We sit, close by the fire. Our backs remain cold, but not unpleasantly so. Even if we're ever-so-slightly trapped in hell, or limbo, it's nice to sit. It's nice to talk. I close my eyes and take a few deep breaths. Mum picks up a twig and taps it on the dirt.

"To skip ahead to the conclusion: avoid opening doors if you're unsure of what's behind them. Or if you're unprepared for what they might do to you."

"Like that door on the roof of our apartment building," I say.

She grimaces. "I never knew so many possums could fit into such a limited volume."

"Or be so *angry*."

"Consider the alternate scenario, though, where there are ghosts behind the door. *Purely* hypothetically." It's like she selects each word from a list of five alternatives. "So many ghosts they might as well be infinite, and unfortunately, they're rather fond of possessing and slaughtering anyone they can get their figurative hands on. Luckily for us, the door is closer to a window – transparent, but quite impassable – unless one is powerful enough to break the glass."

"Is that what happened?"

"Yes. When Illumination was conceived, as a research project, we weren't sufficiently careful. I was... unlucky. The glass broke. The entity which did it was trapped, inside our containment zone, but so was I. To save itself, it got a foothold inside my head. I call it Wraith." She twirls her stick between two fingers, then places it on her knees. "Of the dozen people in that room, I'm unsure why the Wraith picked me. Perhaps I was simply closest, or weakest. Either way, I couldn't kick it out, couldn't explain its presence, because it was learning how to control me at an alarming rate. Our consciousnesses became linked. It was able to influence my behaviour. It was... a passenger, inside me."

"Wait. You were *possessed*?" I ask.

"Is that so hard to believe?"

"Well— no. I just don't like the idea."

"I'm unsure when it began, precisely. Initially I barely noticed a change, but as it consumed more and more of me, I found myself a prisoner, in service of its impulses – locked in a void, inside my own mind. A passenger inside *it*." She points to the featureless black sky, as smoke wafts, stinging my eyes. "I thought by entering Illumination, I might finally free myself, but I've only managed to slightly enlarge my cell. More unfortunately, I've brought you with me."

"You're saying this place is... inside the thing which trapped you? We're in the Wraith?"

"Yes," she says, matter-of-factly. "I suppose this is its 'nation', to use the term. I *do* support what you've done with the décor – the forest is lovely – but we can't get out. It's quite strong."

"How do you know?"

"Try escaping. Be my guest. I'd enjoy being wrong."

Sprinting head-first into the treeline doesn't sound productive, for now. "I wanted to find you, but— this isn't good. Is it?"

"I won't deny that part of me is glad, to have you here. If there were nothing else, no other circumstances to this, I of course, selfishly, want to spend time with you. But you're right. This isn't good." She smile-sighs. "I've become used to following paths I never wanted to follow; watching parts of myself be

abandoned, or replaced, unable to steer away from oncoming traffic. It hurt, deeply. In more ways than I can count.” A wary, even breath. “At first, the entity stole part of my mind for the simple desire of freedom, of escape. I can’t blame it for that; can you, after experiencing Illumination first-hand? But, in doing so, it came to a realisation. It realised *you* existed.”

No matter if I act, or don’t act... I can’t help feeling this keeps getting worse.

“Those of us working on the Illumination project formed independent theories, about whether human minds could survive and interpret such a journey. Children tend to lack understanding, and focus, whereas adults possess too much rigidity in their thinking. Teenagers, though? A useful midpoint, for the developing mind. We also theorised a recent emotional connection, to a person who’d died, would make a subject likelier to survive. The contexts of you and your friends were very attractive, for human trials, but perhaps those aspects proved similarly attractive to a ghost.”

I frown. “The entity that took your prisoner... it wanted to use us?”

“It co-opted the cause, so to speak. It’s an ambitious creature. Make no mistake: for the original trials, you – among others – were candidates selected by project analysts. You’re free to interpret our motivation however you like, but we tried to be as honest as we could, during that time. I know you don’t remember much.” She looks away. “However, at the same time, the reason you were invited to this ‘science camp’ is because *Wraith* decided you were useful. It wanted to bring you to Illumination. It worked through me to do it. Specifically, it never wanted you in the real world; it wanted you here. And now you are.”

“That’s vague. And worrying.” I look around, at the forest. “Why?”

“I’m a pawn, Finn. I always have been. I’m flattered you think I have all the answers.”

“You weren’t *always* a pawn.”

“No. You’re right.” She shudders a little, inside her skin. “But those moments have been rare, in recent years. Do you recall, three years ago, on Starfish – that final day – I tried to break free. Warn you what was coming.”

I shake my head. “A lot happened.”

“It’s the last time I was truly myself, I think. Afterwards, my masters kept a stronger grip.” Suddenly, she meets my gaze, fire reflected in her pupils. “I’m sorry, for not being who I should’ve been. The Wraith didn’t care about family, or friends, or eating, or sleeping – only about re-opening the gate. So, that’s what I did. I worked. I’m sorry.”

“It sounds like you didn’t have a choice,” I say. “It’s not your fault.” (I’d rather believe this explanation, than others that’ve run through my head. Suffice to say, ‘mum is mildly possessed’ was not an option I’d thought of before.)

“You know, the entities here – they don’t invent entirely new worlds. They take experiences, and dreams, and impose them on this space. They take the parts of us that should be kept in check and let them run wild.” She massages her temples. “Illumination, as a project, had noble goals. The distortion of that over the years was because of the entity’s influence, yes, but also because of

us and what we became, when the results we wanted hadn't arrived. It took that kernel of bad intentions, and fertilised it, and let it bloom. Likewise, I spent years wanting to help you, and yet— I didn't. I'm not completely innocent in that."

I think of all the time I spent alone. Cold glances. Unbreakable silences. The nagging feeling of never truly being good enough to pay attention to, of drifting away from familiar shores for months, years, until suddenly, you're stranded in an ocean. Binary stars, losing gravitational pull, their separation ever-growing. I told myself it was fine, that I didn't need her, that it wasn't worth caring about. I told myself people *don't matter*. Deep down, though, I wanted her to notice me, to be part of my life, and she... couldn't.

It's insufferable. Infuriating.

Makes we want to box up my heart.

I should've realised we were both alone, for different reasons. Of course I never thought about it, though. I was never capable of that amount of empathy.

"I think part of me figured out something changed," I murmur.

Her hand's on mine, in the dirt. She takes my fingers and squeezes them, never to let go. "I'm sorry again, Finn."

"It's fine. It doesn't matter." *I forgive you.*

"Well, I'm free now. Or not free, but— myself." Wood cracks, launching a flurry of embers. The fire wavers.

I've spent so long staring at the light my mind's seeing pictures in the flames, too. I can ask its warmth to speak of roads not taken, and shape its curlicues into a world in which we weren't so unlucky, where we could always talk and be together like this, instead of—

"You shouldn't," she says. "It's not real."

"Isn't it?" I glance at her.

"You'd only move from one dream to another."

"I think I can MAKE them real, though. It feels like I can."

"We could spend the rest of eternity debating whether parallel universes exist, or the nature of how illumination might interact with reality, but I doubt there's such an easy way out. It's wondrous, yes, and mysterious, but also terrifying. Exhausting. Better not to get lost in it."

I tear my gaze away. She's probably right.

Suddenly, it hurts. Not emotionally, but *physically*, like there's hooks in my skin, red-hot wires tightening around my neck. "Aaah!" I double over, clutching my stomach. Beneath the ground I see a faint web of roots, pulsing yellow, red, purple; they're slithering around my ankles, no, burrowing *into* me, and I want to jump away, to rip them out, but more emerge to trap my wrists. They're tough, barely stretching when I move.

<Finn!> Alex shouts, from everywhere and nowhere.

It's gone. She's gone. The roots vanish.

"Finn? Are you alright?" mum asks. "What happened?"

I stand, taking a few steps, staring suspiciously at the earth. "Ow."

"We're moving," she adds, and it's true. There's a slight sense of motion in the dark; a blur to the forest's edges, like looking out a train window at night.

Then I notice another phantom, on the far side of the clearing.

Has it always been there?

He stands, facing away from me, a gauzy figure in white.

"Javier," my mum says.

"Dad?"

She nods. The image wavers, threatening to flee. "So... he's dead," I say.

"For a long time." She exhales. "Ah, what good would it do, to revisit it. You deserved more time with him."

I wonder what kind of expression is on his face, or what his voice sounds like, or how it would've felt to have him around. If I get close, I know the echo will just disappear.

Amazing, how much I've been lying to myself.

"Can you tell me about him?" I ask. *Why didn't you?*

"He was a good friend," mum says.

"And?"

"Without him, you wouldn't be here."

"I already know how reproduction works."

She raises an eyebrow. "I was referring to an accident that occurred when you and Alex were very young. His sacrifice saved her life. Yours, too." She settles her shoulders, watching his image, lost in memories I *can't* see. "I'd tried to move past that time in my life. Perhaps that was a mistake. But your father, he was always— a very good friend to birds." She smiles privately, as if that wasn't she was expecting to say (nor me expecting to hear). "At the lab, he used to feed them during lunch breaks: magpies, crows, kookaburras, willy-wagtails... They'd cover every surface in an awful stench. Dozens of beady eyes always watching from the rooftops. Feathers everywhere. For the rest of us this proved slightly irritating, as for him? HE got treated like a king, with a personal flock of bodyguards who'd swarm whoever wronged him. That part was quite humorous, from a distance; less so if you were the one getting pecked. There was even an emu, at one point, but security had to put a stop to that."

"Is this... a *true* story?"

"Completely. Strangely, he didn't own pets, but he enjoyed the idea of 'coexistence' – with people, animals, nature, even technology. I was never as involved in the circus, but it was, well— it was charming. It was a diversion, to him. A joke. Many things were." She presses her lips together, a slight shake of her head. "He would've been a wonderful father. He was, for a while."

I can almost see the birds in the campfire smoke, wheeling as my father watches. "If he's dead, then why isn't he here, talking with us?"

"My theory is that the Wraith wants us here alone. Thus, we're alone."

None of these revelations are easy to process, but my mind's been dulled enough by constant pressure that I simply... file this away, for later. The tethers in my psyche, after their flare-up, remain a dull ache, though they're starting to

feel more like restraints than roadways. The forest's still moving, too, bobbing along an unseen river of stars.

"I guess I just want to understand," I murmur. "I want to know if Illumination has a point."

"Does the universe have a point? Does physics?"

"This isn't physics, though. It's... dreams. Memories. Visualisation."

"Illumination is a collection of stacked hyperdimensional D-branes. D-branes, if you check the literature, are very much 'physics'. String theory, strange matter, thoughts, dreams – these are different manifestations of the same underlying laws. Emotions are chemistry, and chemistry is mathematics." She smiles. "Or perhaps you're the plaything of an unknowable god, created on a whim for their personal amusement. Is that preferable?"

Possession has really improved her sense of humour.

"You're right," she continues, "that concepts like consciousness, selfhood, or the 'soul' don't necessarily have a physical meaning in truespace. A soul cannot be weighed, no matter how many have tried. In contrast, in Illumination, the soul is all that remains: the images we have of ourselves, the choices we make, the connections we form with others."

"That might be true, but my instincts tell me the way things work here is—wrong. It's cheating. Or it's meaningless. Either one. The idea I might be able to change the future, just by the power of positive thinking, or negative thinking, is... weird. It makes me think things *can't* change, in any meaningful way."

Which perhaps *does* make Illumination a form of limbo: an eternal waiting room, for salvation that never comes. (Call that 'hell', if you like.)

"Then what about a hypothesis? Or a fairytale. Either one." Mum stands, stretching her legs, and starts pacing around the fire. My father's ghost shivers as she passes. "Imagine Illumination as a vast fusion reactor, in which souls are the atomic fuel. In a reactor, we excite the fuel, to force it to release energy. Analogously, the souls in Illumination are forced to relive specific moments in their lives, or live variations on their lives, over and over. That continuous excitation might release its own kind of energy." She circles back, crunching on leaves. "Eventually, nuclear fuel decays, because energy is never free. Renewal is necessary. And how might a soul renew itself, if it desires to continue existing? Perhaps it steals energy from others. It generates *pain* in others. *It becomes part of the reactor...* Of course, one could generate happiness too, but there's a simplicity to pain, isn't there? A purity. Grief is often longer lasting than love."

"Sure," I say. Though fairytales usually have a moral, which circles back to my original question: if Illumination is reactor, what's it powering? It's not like it's hooked up to a big amdrive in the sky. It's also possible I'm falling prey to a naïve, human impulse, to make meaning where there is none. Existence can simply be that: chaos, forming patterns, before the patterns dissolve.

Mum takes my silence as an invitation to continue. "More positively, say that's not the only way forward. Let's say there are many competing nations, or notions, of what existence in Illumination may entail – cooperation, withdrawal,

dissolution... even escape. That might be the most physically forbidden of all, but if the chance was there, why wouldn't you? Regardless of cost. Perhaps an escape route appears out of thin air: an unstable window, requiring its own enormous fuel reserve to survive. Perhaps that fuel walks right into your jaws."

I can't remember when my mum last talked this much, though I suppose she's had lots of time to think. The underground tethers pulse brightly, then fade, still twisted around my feet. The campfire has taken on their violet hue, embossed with sky blue and royal crimson. The flames grow higher, soundless, eerie, a door...

I wonder if there's a reason, I want to build spaceships.

I think there is, scattered in various corners of my mind, but I can't yet pull those fragments together. I can only touch on jumbled ideas what those words mean, to me, in terms of progress, and contributions, towards a better world.

Partly (a big part), I watched too much Star Wars as a kid.

"I've really enjoyed being able to talk, Mum," I say aloud. "It's nice."

"So have I, Finn." Trickle of sadness, through the dam wall. "Please understand how relieved I feel, to have an opportunity to... explain."

"I also don't want to be dead. That kinda sucks."

"This might be life," she murmurs, "in a different form."

It's poor consolation, in my opinion.

"Of course, I'd rather not be here either and yet, it might be tricky to change that," she adds.

"What if I could?" I ask. "I mean, I've been trying."

"How, exactly?"

"It's... a little like drawing. I can look backwards, or forwards, and see things differently. See other perspectives. Change things, even. I don't think I'm just imagining it, but I'm also not sure how to make it stick." I look down, nervously. "Illumination doesn't seem to like it, either, which honestly makes me want to do it more."

"How about a demonstration?" She isn't overly sceptical – just curious.

I reach into the dirt. I can't find the edge of the void, or the wider expanse of Illumination; instead, I dive deeper, to the part of Illumination within *me*, until I grasp the scratching sensation of 'new' being born from the dark.

On the far side of the fire, my father turns.

For the first time, I see his face.

The forest *explodes*. Entire lifetimes burst through me in seconds.

I'm holding a knife made of red. I'm in a sensory deprivation tank. I'm making constellations from the stars. I'm telling Alex a secret. I'm holding Sinas' hand. I'm running from my mother. I zero in on the campfire – the doorway – and draw futures forth. It flares like a sunrise. I'm on the station hours ago, days ago, years ago, and—

I float towards the gate in the Illumination chamber.

Sinas grabs my arm. He stops me.

He stares into my eyes as the walls disintegrate, and he says he remembers. He says he forgives me. And he *does*. I can see it. I see the independence that will change his life. I want to be part of it. I will be.

Alex takes a breath. She doesn't snap at me or push me away. Instead, she says we can work it out, and change the world, and we're bloody GOING to – which might be dumb, because everything and nothing changes the world when you're in high school, but it feels like a fresh start all the same. A promise.

Wake gets her wish. She sees her grandparents, in the sunlight, that spills from the fire. She's allowed to share the words she's keeping in her heart. She can finally make amends. People look up to her. She lets herself be happy.

There's more, so MUCH more, a whirlwind of humanity, lives, creation. Tao is picked up by a search and rescue drone. Khorin finds peace. Pendant finds a new theory of quantum gravity. Nations form, and rise, and stagnate, and fall. Planets spin on their axes. Stars cross galaxies. Humanity is an icing-sugar diaspora blown on fold-drive breath throughout the Milky Way. It encounters other species, survives myriad aeons, a glorious intermingling of concepts and histories and viewpoints and I see not only myself, but *everyone*. I see unity.

I see campfires, on countless other worlds.

Creatures made of silicon and carbon and arsenic.

Wars fought by ships of silk and bone.

Stories, told by voices I'll never hear.

It's maddening. Enthralling. My skin shivers with every breath and I'm... lost, in the ache of possibilities never realised.

"Then stay. Find yourself," my dad says. "Find whatever you like." He smiles. He beckons.

I consider this person, whose face I'll never know. Dark hair, thick brows, broad shoulders, strong arms. A face of lines, but the friendly kind, the *sun* kind. A face that could belong to a tennis player, or teacher, or gardener, or scientist. Suddenly he stands in front of me. He touches my shoulder. I can't feel it, but I can. I can. He has this face, and a thousand others, as he sits at the dinner table, or watches me play hockey, or walks with me to school, or drops me at a friend's place, and it's all spaceships, flowing through my fingers.

Things would be easier, here.

But they wouldn't be *true*. Not really.

It's not Sinas, holding my hand.

It is Sinas.

It isn't.

Does it matter?

"Finn?" My mother's voice. "*Finn*?"

People need me, though. Real people, I mean.

I want them to need me. I want me to need them. There's no point wishing for change, or new connections, or choices I didn't make. I need to create these futures on my own. I need to be... honest.

Easier said than done.

In the end, I'm not that smart, because all these feelings I've avoided facing are what I've been searching for, my entire life. The very thing I ran from is what I'm praying will draw me back.

I'm scared, but I might finally be ready.

I stare at my father and my eyes mist with tears.

"You should stay, Finn," he says.

"I can't. I'm sorry. This isn't what I wanted. I need to tell them the truth."

Before he can answer I brush him aside, along with every other vision. Aeons of civilisation vanish in an instant. His face, his thousand faces are already fading from my memory, until I can only recall a grey, broad-shouldered silhouette, and I wipe my eyes, and he's gone.

Only the fire is left. The fire, and my mother. It's a proper doorway, now: a fractal gap of kaleidoscopic radiation.

Mum watches it, mouth ajar. "Finn?" she calls out. "Where did you—"

"I'm back," I mutter, head pounding. The void itself rumbles and screeches. The tethers tying me to it thrum with tension. The press of souls around us is palpable, a furious mix of energies that wants more than anything to... what?

"This is the gate," she says, mystified. "The one open, on Starfish. How?"

"We should use it, then. To go back," I say.

"That sounds easy enough, but I can't help thinking—" She glances behind her, as if something's creeping up on us. "Finn, the Wraith wants *you*. It brought us to this exact spot. It must have ulterior motives." She shakes her head. "I believe it's trying to trap you here because you aren't actually dead. I might be, but you aren't. The reason you've found it so easy to manipulate Illumination? You're exponentially more energetic than any other object here. I can sense that power, streaming from you. Everything can – and it's because you're ALIVE. Our shielding mechanisms WORKED. Our experiment WORKED."

I'm unsure how to respond.

The excitement in her eyes, unguarded, is washed through with worry. She grabs my sleeve. "What if it wants to leverage you to keep this portal open, for as long as it wants, however it wants? It could tie you to this place forever. You're fuel."

I stare at nothing, as my thoughts catch up. "How do you know?"

"I don't. But it allowed you to bring us to this gate, and it WANTS to escape. Interdimensional holes this size aren't common. This is its chance."

"Okay, but what if we go through before it can—"

The ground trembles. I'm thrown sideways. The forest disappears.

One eye-blink later I'm falling in a void.

The darkness is a living, conscious thing.

It's the Wraith. It's everywhere, incomprehensibly large, a world unto itself.

The portal sparks, my only point of reference. Multicoloured strings writhe outwards from it like giant cobwebbed squids. Quickly, inevitably, the tethers wrap around my body, searching for food, for water. I want to shout for help, but

they're stuck down my throat, stitched into my skin. They're MY tethers, the brushstrokes of my friends, my future, my father, being constructed, contorted, woven around me. I'm contorted with them. I'm offered to the portal, a frog on a dissection platter. I struggle, and struggle, but it does absolutely nothing.

Mum's gone. Panic's an anchor on my chest.

The tethers pulse, drinking greedily.

I'm being eaten.

My mother's demon isn't alone anymore, as the darkness rises, and the spectral legions charge, desperate to consume, to survive, a churning mass which it conducts like an orchestra. This is what it wants our universe to be: a mirror of itself, overcome by monstrous pain, leeches by souls who've forgotten how to live. Millions of voices cry out in apathetic, conjoined misery, and one of them is mine. The thickest strand of light stretches from my chest to the portal, engorging itself every time I struggle, and the ghost takes those countless strings and binds them more and more tightly around itself, the gate, my burning bone marrow, my gasping neck, a tangled prison of our own torturous chains. The gate is wider, brighter, a mountain carved of sunlight. Illumination basks in its radiance.

I writhe. I scream. I suppose it's already over.

For the rest of my life, when I think back to this moment, I'll break.

But the thing is, as I'm gradually driven insane... these tethers are still a connection, between me and my captor. On instinct, searching for a way out, a sliver of my mind flees down that path and attempts to understand while the rest of me drowns. It tries to ask *why*.

Humans can't help being curious, even if it kills them.

My mind floods.

Skyscrapers. Castles. Pyramids. Caves. Crude paintings dance upon limestone walls, brought to life by firelit voices.

Disparate minds united by longing and heartache.

Vicious cycles, repeated across species.

A child looks up. Too many emotions, in their eyes.

Regret. Forgiveness. Blood. Images I'd rather not see, not remember, one impotent photon amid an overwhelming tapestry of menace—

The Wraith kicks me away. Electric whips slice through space.

I want to give up. It's so focused on the gate, and on my pain, that it's inevitable.

But perhaps its mistake was caring so much about me that it forgot to worry about her.

My mother charges out of the dark, wielding blades of light, and I guess all that time spent in Satan's soul gives you a few ideas for how to fuck it up.

Materialising around her are trees and play equipment and a towering granite wall and it's a park – a dam – she used to take me to when I was young.

I remember this place.

We were safe here.

“It doesn’t have to be this way!” she shouts.

The thing that took her prisoner for so long is... surprised. Disbelieving. The ghost’s attention swings elsewhere, for an instant, and I can finally breathe one last, short gasp. I’m surrounded by flickering, insubstantial scenes I have so much affection for. A feeling of love envelopes me, like enormous, folded wings.

It feels... familiar. Like past sacrifices. This feeling worms its way between the ghost, and me, and the portal, and I can *move* again – only a little at first, then more, as my chains come unshackled, and I’m suspended within the leering, leeching void.

I'm free.

I'm *free*.

She whispers in my ear. “Go Finn, before they—”

The ghosts rip her away.

She's shoved underwater, the light extinguished.

“Mum, where are you?”

I can't waste this chance.

One direction to run.

I paint Alex, Sinas, and Wake from the aurora, tied to my consciousness by shining colours. If I move my perspective just right, the rushing river between us doesn't lead past the portal, but through, to the other side of the dancing firelight, where they (and I) are more than a dream. I'm camouflaged by the aftershocks of my mother's memories as ravenous souls swarm in the void, and I can't help wondering if I'm leaving her behind.

This is it. *Go, Finn.*

I gather up the will I've got left and rush towards the gate, aiming like a javelin for where it feels most malleable. Illumination's membranes shudder in response. Attention sweeps towards me like the Eye of Sauron, and when it spots me, the darkness suddenly seethes and boils, doing its damndest to hold me back. My father rises from the murk, and perhaps it's an illusion, or perhaps not, but he screams like a dying animal when I charge right through his giant open mouth.

The portal's here. I'm at the barrier. It grows with deceptive scale, a heaving tear, the size of a skyscraper, a mountain, a planet. I'm nearly turned away by its awful, hypnotic radiance.

The elastic forces that are keeping me here stretch, and stretch, and...

Snap.

A tunnel. A throat. I'm the vomit. I can touch my friends' faces, can drink their desperation, can see the spectres attacking them, and I follow the tether to Alex, and she's here, fighting, and I'm rushing down a long tunnel towards—

The tunnel splits.

I tumble out, into a dark room I don't recognise: a church-like hall, with a pit at one end, containing yet more portal-light. Crystalline ice lines the walls.

I float, mid-air. There's nobody here.

This isn't right.

Where *is* this?

I'm yanked back into the maelstrom, cradled by evaporating colours. This time I slide the other way and YES, yes, here it is, the Illumination chamber, tunnels of Starfish station, a lattice of plants, a laboratory, an atrium, and I'm here. I'm *here*. I touch Alex's shoulder with a physical hand, stitched together from shards of nonphysical-ness, and it's the best feeling I've ever had. The momentum of my wake scatters spectres to the wind. The ghost screams, but I've found my friends. I've found the truth.

I go home.

ALEX XIII

You know when you're sinking into the depths of a nightmare, and you KNOW it's a nightmare, but you can't wake up? Instead, you just sink deeper, your heart racing, your panic rising, until— there's a noise, or your body's too hot, and...

...you do wake up.

And it's the best thing in the world.

Tangled hatred is uprooted from my mind, by a force that feels strangely human. I let go of Wake, suddenly in control, my strings cut, stumble against the wall amid a tidal wave of light. I'm... shouting? Crying? Not *totally* in control yet as feeling returns to numbed limbs.

The rioting empties in the hallway wilt. Their eyes go dark. Faces go slack. The girl on my shoulder turns to jelly and I push her away, fighting revulsion with gentleness.

I turn.

And see a pillar of light slam through Finn's body, kaleidoscopic tentacles whipping round the lab. They dive into his mouth, his nose, his suit's cracks, burrowing inside him like a parasite. His body heaves as the glow calms.

The world takes a breath.

And so does my brother.

He sits up.

My mind's grasping at piecemeal signals, sloshing around my newly expansive skull. Wake's clutching at her arm, at the cracks in her suit, hissing Thai curses my MeshMate helpfully translates.

"You OK?" I ask.

"No, you mango! I think you broke my wrist!"

"I didn't mean— I hope not. It might just be sprained."

"It'd better be! Otherwise, I get to break one of your fingers! TWO fingers!"

There's a subdermal rattle as Sinas – finally – manages to activate our PRISMs, extracting himself from a literal heap of bodies. The disc-plate on my chest begins to vibrate, quickly, lightly, like hummingbird wings. It tickles.

Is this safe? I'll assume it's safe.

Miracle number one: the surrounding lampires are beaten back by waves of invisible energy, forced outside a ten-metre bubble emanating from *us*. They throw themselves at it, mad as a cut snake, barely kept at bay by its nearly-there shimmer.

Miracle number two: me, flying towards a now-very-awake Finn, who looks confused, and pleased, but mostly confused, both emotions 100% understandable. He rubs his eyes, notices me, and shudders in relief.

"Are you..." He coughs violently, until he clears what's in his throat. "Are you real?"

"Course I'm real." I've still got my trusty pipe; I let it go, resisting the sudden urge to hug him.

I *do* hug him.

Aw, jeez.

He's frail. Breakable. Like a fern I've forgotten to water. "Why are you such a *moron*?"

"...If I knew, then I wouldn't be one. Right?"

His body shifts, and I can feel every stringy muscle, every bone. I let go. I don't want to damage him.

"Sorry," he says, like he's embarrassed.

"I'll get over it." My voice cracks. "Missed you, though."

"I missed you too," he says, and for once, he doesn't look away.

Moron.

"Uh – how long was I gone?" he asks.

"About an hour."

"It felt like longer."

"Really?"

"So much longer."

"I mean, you DIED after you stepped through that gate. Full corpse mode. I hoped we'd find a way to fix it, or you knew something we didn't, but... yeah. I wasn't sure you'd come back." I don't want him to see how thoroughly relieved I am, or maybe I do, layer upon layer of emotion peeling off me at once; I'm here, and so is he, and that's *nice*. (Not the most coherent thought, but it'll do.)

Sinas jets to a stop beside us, sporting new bruises. "How was the nap?"

"Not great," Finn says. "Haha." It's less a laugh, more him saying 'haha.'

"I'm really happy to see you. You have, uh... you have no idea."

"I'm happy you decided to drag my body with you for an hour," Finn replies. "It would've been less exciting if I'd woken up alone in a cupboard."

"It was mostly so Sinas could taxidermy you, IF you didn't wake up," I reply, but they're too busy making eyes at each other to hear. Sinas places a hand on Finn's shoulder, then brushes a stray strand of hair out of his eyes – a light, gentle touch, grinning from ear to ear.

"Alex was CONVINCED you were dead," Wake adds. "She was a real snot factory. Mega-depressing."

"*Appropriately* depressing, for my sibling's funeral."

“Okay, but you really were crying your eyes out like a baby—”

I can’t resist a tiny, friendly ‘shut up’ punch to her shoulder.

“Ow!” She reels back, clutching her wrist like I’ve murdered it (which, to be fair, I sort of did).

“...Sorry again, for earlier. Dunno what came over me.”

“It’s okay. I know it wasn’t really you.” She smiles bravely, which almost makes me feel worse.

It’s becoming harder and harder to ignore the ring of fifteen lampires splayed against our PRISM bubbles, sharks probing at a dive cage. As for the empties— their bodies spill out of the entrance hallway, a still-life tableau I’d rather not be part of. I was hoping they’d would regain consciousness, once the resonance fields ejected the lampires from their hosts, but perhaps their minds are too far gone to be recovered (one more grim thought in a sea of ‘em).

“By the way, Finn – we heard there’s still a ship in the cargo dock,” Sinas explains, “That’s where we’re heading. It’s where the hijackers first boarded. First, we need to cut through the recreation district. It’s only a few hundred metres. Then, we take a transit car to the docks.”

“Sounds simple enough.” He cautiously resists touching the device on his stomach. “And you... found these? It’s a shield, of some kind?”

“Yeah, we figured it was worth a shot, and— hey, I guess it was. That’s one good thing, at least. I do need a second to double-check they’ll keep working outside the lab, though.”

“I’ll help,” Wake says, “because the battery life on these guys is NOT good. Like, if you bought one from Amazon, you’d return it.”

I nod. “In that case, I’ll give Finn a check-up. Better make sure he’s under warranty, too.”

“What about my arm?” Wake asks. “It huuuurts.”

“He literally died, Wake. If you want, I’ll do you later.”

She waggles her eyebrows at me. “Not if I do you first.”

“Jesus Christ.”

She flies off with Sinas, and moments later, a new readout appears in my MeshMate: <PRISM battery: 96%.> I guide Finn to ground level so his geckoboos can stick, then make him sit on a railing; those first-aid courses I did for extra credit last year are coming in *clutch* today.

“Does anything actually hurt?” I ask. “Or feel different?”

“Nothing that wasn’t hurting already.” He looks at his hands, curling his fingers, then rubs the back of his head. “Feels lucent, honestly. Normal.”

“No nausea? No sluggishness?”

“Nope.”

“Can you give me access to your MeshMate medical diagnostics?”

“Um, yeah. Here.”

“Focus on my finger.” I move it left, right, back, forth. “Where are we? In general, I mean.”

“Starfish Station.”

“Do you remember what happened? Before you, ah... left?”

“Yeah. I didn’t at first, but now... now I do. Everything, I think.”

As promised, his diagnostics look fine, free of Illumination’s telltale aura.

“You’re right,” he adds. “I was pretty stupid.”

“It could be that we’re *both* a bit stupid. Do you remember what happened, after you went through the gate? Were you conscious?”

He nods.

“What was it like?” I ask.

“I don’t think human minds can completely comprehend it.” He pauses, lost in the lampires’ glow. “It’s not one place. It’s infinite places, overlapping, mixed up in each other, drawn from different scraps of— life. Here, I can see this railing, and look over at the door, and walk between them. There, though, you can’t. Instead, you need to... imagine them. Draw them from the light. Like a forest, or a moon, or a past, or a future. You can imagine *anything*, for better or worse.” He grimaces, then smiles faintly. “It’s not pleasant. It *hurts*, just to exist there. It’s like the universe itself is trying to strip you for parts, so everyone inside is just trying to survive. Easy to imagine what might happen to someone, or... what they might turn into, if they got stuck there for too long.”

“Is it the afterlife, though? Is that part true?”

“There are ghosts, for sure. Plus, I think I met an alien?”

I let my hand fall. “You met a what?”

“I’m not sure, but it FELT alien. A lot was going on. I talked to my mum, too, and it turns out it hasn’t *actually* been her, most of the time, the past couple of years. Like today.” His shoulders slump. “The way she explained it, the first time they opened the gate, a ghost – a bad one – got into her, not completely, but enough to control her. That’s why she tried to bring us back to the project, a few months ago. She was being forced to, by that thing. Her real soul’s still trapped in Illumination with it, because after we talked, she... stayed behind. To save me.” He blinks. “Probably means she’s gone, now. Forever.”

“Oh no, Finn... I’m sorry it went that way.”

“It’s okay,” he says, gilding a lie. “I also met our dad, sort of.”

“Bloody hell, you *were* in there for a while, huh?”

“He was just an echo – not a real person I could talk to. His name’s Javier.”

I don’t know what to make of this.

I’d rather not force Finn to relive it, either. The hint of uncertainty in his eyes is heartbreaking, as if he half-believes this is another of Illumination’s tricks – a film set that’ll vanish between one shallow breath and the next. Maybe it is.

Different scraps of life.

Our lives.

It does hurt, and it’s scary, and I’d rather face the other way. But that isn’t who I want to be.

Starting now.

“We’ll talk more later, about this – about everything – when there’s time. This stuff’s stressful. I want to help you. I promise I’m not an asshole.”

“That, um— that sounds good.”

I cross my arms tightly, trapping my voice near *pianissimo*. “And I’m sorry I didn’t stop you from leaving. I probably should’ve.”

“I’m sorry for running,” he replies. “I probably shouldn’t have.” Then, even quieter: “I won’t, anymore.”

I smile wryly, then pat him on the shoulder. “By the way, congrats on being the first person ever to return from Illumination alive – that’ll be a *glacier* line on your dating profile.”

“I don’t have a dating profile.”

“This is for the future, Finn. I’m thinking of your future! But as far as I can tell, in the present, you’re a regular, healthy human being, so if you’re sure there’s nothing else on your mind...”

Finn considers this. “You said we’ll talk later.”

“I did.”

“Okay.”

We get up. (I assume we’ll talk later.) “Remember, though, you gotta TELL me if you start feeling glitched... bro.” My mouth adds the chaser.

“...Sis?” His face twists.

“I agree, let’s not. Sinas, Wake, we ready to bounce? Like Lieutenant Violet after she pulled off the Muktian heist?”

The answer’s yes, once we clear the exit, and clearing exits is my kind of job. I part the intervening crush of bodies like budget Moses, then float to the distressed blister of emergency foam. I grab the free edge the empties were climbing through and RIP it outward till it detaches with a gooey *squick!* I think I’ve accidentally pulled another shoulder muscle but hey, door’s open.

Sinas taps me on the back, offering his laser knife. “Tools are important.”

“Yeah, well, my body is a tool.”

“I can see that.”

“How’s our battery doing?” Wake asks, spinning her rifle. “Oooh, quite scuffed.”

<PRISM battery: 88%.>

We climb the nearest stairwell and enter the recreation district proper: an open area split by winding paths and PolyGrowth dividers. It’s a multilevel park without the grass, or sky, or other things required to legally be called a ‘park’. The floor’s covered in a spongy fake hillside analogue, each terrace adorned with holoprojections of trees and rocks and cute little water features. That’s nice, in a way, because it means it’s not pitch black. It’s also a nightmare, because every projection is thoroughly hungover, a hot soup of clipping and saturation and bloom as unpleasant as a climate-change summer. The façade of a tennis court floats at a demented angle, criss-crossing a row of stooping banksias. It makes the lampires nearly impossible to follow, sliding between gaps in the colour spectrum, eerily soundless as they investigate our shields. I jump as a big red bastard shoulder-checks my bubble, tentacles flailing with inhuman speed.

Eff off.

“If the lampires want to escape Illumination and survive here SO badly, wouldn’t it be more sensible to NOT attack us?” Wake asks. “And be chill? They always seem so aggressive.”

“It might take them a while to adapt,” Finn says, “and realise they’re no longer in Illumination. The rules to follow might not be clear, from their perspective.”

“Or they’re just evil,” I mutter.

“Or that,” Sinas says.

We float through a cloud of tennis balls, a pair of bodies stuck to the court below. Twin lampires slam into them, twisted comets, and before I can say ‘that’s munted’, their possessed, spring-loaded limbs jerk awake. They launch themselves at us, screeching abstractly, but – as they hit the perimeter of Sinas’ shield – the lampires are ripped from their vessels. The bodies go limp again, soaring past. One misses Sinas by a handspan.

Bodies, rather than ‘people’. I’m getting good at the abstraction.

“Huh,” Finn murmurs. “Effective.”

<PRISM battery: 75%.>

“We’re already a *quarter* down?” I ask.

“Interdimensional ghost armour uses up a ton of energy,” Sinas says.

“Yeah, I suppose. But are we gonna reach the docks in time, or—”

The Mesh flicks my ear.

<—is Farah Oliveira on board the approaching ship, Paradise Scaffold. If there are any survivors still present on Starfish Station, please respond. I repeat, please respond. This is a general broadcast. I am Farah Oliveira, part of a response team on board the—>

We glance at each other. Then everyone scrambles at once.

“Yes! Yes, we’re alive,” Wake replies. “We talked to you earlier? An hour ago? There are four of us! Four survivors!”

<Oh! Yes, yes, I remember. I’m glad you can respond. You were with Haru, and Maritime, correct? Is anyone else still with you?>

“Not right now.”

<I see. That’s unfortunate. We saw a flare of energy, from— never mind. I assume there was an accident.>

“Biiiiig accident. Yup.”

<We’ll be arriving at the station in roughly sixty minutes. If you can reach an airlock in that time, we can pick you up.> Whoever’s behind the voice sounds refreshingly in control.

“We’re heading to Cargo Bay B,” Sinas says. “We’re intending to use one of the ships there to evacuate.”

<Understood. We’ll meet you there, unless we receive another hail. Hopefully the Mesh clears up enough for us to track your signals directly – if not, I’ll keep you updated. Fair warning, it’s going to be close. Starfish is really starting to skim the atmosphere and it’s slowing down fast. It might enter a spin. Get to the dock as soon as you can and hunker down.>

“We’ll be there in twenty,” Sinas says.

Suddenly, the lampires stop. They ripple, almost like they’re listening.

Then, they dart into the ceiling. There’re so many it’s a split-second flame from an amdrive; I’m surprised they didn’t melt a hole in the plastic. In their wake, the Mesh projections settle. Waves of static ripple across the district. But, for whatever reason, the lampires are gone.

<I’ll hop off your cha... —now. Ping us on Relay A-5 if you... —require medical attention? We’ll be prepared and... wait. What is that? Stellarmire, do you see that—> The signal drops, squeezed into bandwidth that’s far too thin.

We keep moving, haunted by ever-ticking batteries. My MeshMate does its best to lead us through a government-mandated barbecue area. Emergency bulbs blink and stutter, attracting us to exits that no longer exist.

<PRISM battery: 68%.>

Cautiously, Sinas deactivates his barrier.

“What are you doing?” Wake whispers.

“Saving resources.”

One by one, we switch off our PRISMS, travelling downward, towards the arm’s point. Stairways rise from the murk like icebergs. Here lie VR suites, behind misted glass: padded churches to digital fakery, full of reconfigurable surfaces. Nowadays, most places wouldn’t bother with the physical aspect in favour of tricking your brain with a MeshSim, but morally, I still feel there’s a difference. Once glance at a sleeper’s physique will tell you that, no matter how many supplements they’re taking.

One problem: an empty’s blocking the stairs to the next level. It scratches at the door to a VR room, thumping its skull uselessly against the plastic.

“So,” Sinas says. “I’ve got a thought.”

“Just one?” I ask.

“It’s clearly trying to enter that room. We do it a favour and lock it inside.”

“Not the worst idea. I tried the same trick back in the resonance lab – they forget how to use Mesh-activated doors, it seems.”

Thump, thump, thump, it goes, a rhythmic duet with its snuffle of cursed breath. Its frame is half-hidden behind a tornado of torn clothes, threads spilling from its arms. It doesn’t notice as we approach, and perhaps we *could* sneak past, but— Sinas counts us down.

“Three. Two. One.”

‘Not the worst idea’ doesn’t mean it’s GOOD, either. Sinas and I take one shoulder each as Finn opens the door, ready to shove it through, but its muscles twist with inhuman strength and instantly I’ve lost my grip, tossed into the wall. As I find my footing, it turns on Sinas. He manages to get one arm around its neck, tumbling mid-air, using his other arm to prevent it from scratching his face off. I stick my boots down, try to grab its legs. Sinas grunts, moving with it, preventing it from getting any leverage, but that means it’s free to attack *me*. It snaps and snarls as we manhandle it through the doorway. Something wet hits my nose – a drop of blood. Not mine. Light flares in its eyes, and it tries to shrug

us off on last time, but Sinas lets go and kicks its side – propelling it into the room, and him out of it – and Finn shuts the door, and it's done.

I catch my breath.

The door rattles. One gloved hand suddenly presses against the glass, then falls away, replaced by a blurred silhouette that stands eerily still. This is the part, in a horror movie, where I'd slowly lean towards that opening to get a better view – camera zooming in, sound fading out – and when my eyelashes are close enough brush the glass— *bam!* Window breaks, arm grabs me, I'm dragged in, everyone starts screaming.

Yeah, nah, we're not doing ANY of that.

"I'm frustrated we can't help these people," Sinas says.

"I'm trying not to think about it too much," I reply.

"Seems like a cop-out."

"I'm not disagreeing."

"Either there's still a person in there, and they're going to die, or there's only a ghost, and we aren't exactly helping *it*, either. Feels a little impotent."

"One question is if it wants to be helped." I stare at the indistinct circles of its eyes. "Come at me, bro," I whisper.

"Everyone wants help," Sinas says, "in one way or another. Even—"

A blue glow flickers at the bottom of the stairwell, a wispy, willowy light.

It has the colour of stormy ocean, nestled around a foaming neon core. It's like it's searching with its tentacles, pushing leaves aside, turning over stones, poking at the fractal underbrush of the universe.

Then it stops.

No eyes, but the lampire sees us all the same, three levels above. It snaps into a new shape – a flat sunburst, tentacles held straight, spokes from a wheel – then begins to spin. Instantly, it accelerates into a blur. Spin-stop. Spin-stop.

Hints of images, floating in its current.

A tree. Waves. A bird. Faces.

It hisses, barely contained, like superheated steam.

"What the yekk is it doing?" Wake whispers.

"It's not attacking, that's for sure," I reply. "Maybe it knows it can't get too close. We're *dangerous* now."

"No, I think..." Finn sticks his hand over the railing, and waves.

Blue light SHOOTs upward, sweeping past us, a dizzying spiral, before splashing back down. Spin-stop. Spin-stop. There's a calm, restrained anger in how the images hold, for a split-second, before they're dissolved by centripetal force. Sinas reaches for his PRISM, then thinks better of it. He glances at Finn.

"I think it's trying to talk," Finn says. "Except it's not sure how to."

"Well, I hate to interrupt this shared moment we're having, but we need to shuffle past our new friend," I say. "It's blocking the way. We do not have TIME."

"I wouldn't say 'friend'..." Finn murmurs.

"Okay, well, if it's not our friend, do you wanna throw a rock at it?"

"It's not NOT our friend, either. It's—"

“Let’s get closer,” Sinas says, “and maybe it’ll move. I’d rather not piss off the first ‘not-not-friend’ we’ve found.” Clearly, he’s bored of our bickering. “Gives me a bit of hope, actually.”

“Hope about what?”

He starts creeping down the stairs instead.

As we approach, the lampire pauses, as if considering a course of action. It bunches up, flashing a few more images in quick succession, hovering in the doorway we’re aiming for.

Then, it sidles away, into the wall. Light clings to the corners of the stairs for a *little* too long before fading completely.

“Bye,” Wake murmurs.

Next on our itinerary is a daycare area, or school – small, but densely packed – and as my suit-jets echo from gloomy panelling, I wonder if that Dippy Ripley used to hang out here. Maybe one of the drawings on these smartboards is hers. The kids who used to play here are brought to life in my head, by the empty chairs, and crudely drawn stickmen, and the shadows of reflections of shadows in the glass. The Mesh chuckles.

Blue light dances along a railing, on the other side of a classroom window. It’s gone when I blink.

“Anyone hear that?” Finn asks.

“What is it?”

“Probably nothing.”

“Don’t ‘probably nothing’ me in this bloody haunted school zone,” I reply.

A sapphire haze gathers on the grass, before it’s chased away by our footsteps.

“The light is following us, right?” Sinas asks. “It’s following us.”

“Oh, oh, oh, idea!” Wake announces. “What if it knows who we are? Like, what if it’s your brother? Or my grandma? That would explain why it’s being so nice. I don’t want to accidentally banish it to the spirit realm if it’s my *grandma*.”

“I wouldn’t bet on it, Wake,” I reply.

Our penultimate stop, after one final staircase (so many staircases), is the transit station. There are two more monorail cars on separate tracks; Finn slinks out to check the car of the left, while Wake checks the one on the right.

<Bad guys here> Finn messages.

<This one’s clear!> Wake replies.

The transit car mirrors the one we rode to the hub, a lifetime ago, a.k.a. a few hours ago – sleek, empty, apart from a smattering of abandoned bags and stains in need of power-washing. Wake wanders to the controls to re-initialise the autopilot. Finn hunkers down next to me as the doors close.

“Empties in the other car?” I ask.

“Empties?”

“Oh, right, you weren’t here. We needed a name for the possessed people, so: ‘empties’. We’re workshopping it.”

“Hmmm.” He thinks for a second. “Revenant’s a good supernatural word.”

<One who returns> my MeshMate informs me. Sort of a double meaning, depending on *who's* doing the returning. "I proposed 'hollows', but the consensus was 'too cheesy'."

Finn shrugs. "I don't mind it. 'Empty' is a bit generic. Many things are empty."

"Lots of things are hollow, too, but yeah, I understand. My copium reserves are empty right now."

The maglev wiggles saucily, making me stumble, as its lights reactivate, mercifully white and boring. Its track spirals spiral down the remainder of the station's arm, before a final exterior leg to shunt us across to the docking bay. I assume it'll be a quick trip, since it's not like anyone's waiting at the intervening stations.

"This is it, then." My sigh conceals an upcoming lifetime of therapy. "We're finally leaving. No more running, or hiding, or dying."

"One last ride," Finn says, leaning against the wall. "Like the Warthog level at the end of every Halo game."

"Never played them."

"You should. They're good."

The transit tunnel's darkness is broken by occasional glowstrips as we accelerate, *flash, flash, flash, flash*. Soon, a vibration starts building in the floor, setting my teeth on edge.

"The station's finally hitting the atmosphere," Finn adds. "I hope the thrusters can keep it stable."

"Do we still HAVE thrusters?"

"I'd like to think so."

"I'd like to think my fanfiction's good, but you should see how aggro my commenters are." That's where my mind jumps to; at the end of the world, I'm thinking about fanfiction. (You'd assume I'd have found a classier comfort zone by now, but nah.) The recreation district disappears behind us, and once more, we're surrounded by boring stuff, to the extent a space station can be boring: dark storefronts, empty autodrone docks, that kind of corpo wasteland vibe.

Bing! goes the Mesh. <Upcoming stop. Retail District 2. Next stop: Visitor Hotel.>

"Uhh— why are we stopping?" I ask.

"There are people waiting at the next station," Wake says. "It's automatic."

"People are WAITING? Who?"

"Dunno, but I'm not receiving good vibes, chat. This station's basically shit vibes only."

"Bad feng shui," Sinas murmurs.

"Can't you override it?" I ask.

"If I had a few minutes, *maaaaybe*, but trains are harder to hack than vending machines because it's slightly more of, like, a public safety issue— duck! Duck!"

"Duck?"

The train whisks into the station, then slows to a stop. I stick with my geckoboots to avoid tumbling forwards, low to the floor, which is unfortunately sticky and stinks of raspberry. Finn lies next to me, staring worriedly at the roof.

The door opens.

I could wait. I *could* just wait.

The silence is too tempting. Instead, I edge forwards, and stick a sliver of face into the gap.

Uh-oh. The platform is utterly *packed* with hollows (if Finn doesn't mind the word, I don't either). They're shoulder-to-shoulder, dozens upon dozens, scientists, civilians, armoured guards, and this must've been one of the hijackers' evac points. Why are they here, though? Why aren't they on a transport, safe? They stand, barely breathing, with dull, milky eyes, and sorry, but there's no more room in this carriage. Nothing I can do.

<We need to GO> I say.

<I can't MAKE it go> Wake says. <It'll take a second.>

<They might be friendly?> Sinas says. <Like blue not-not-friend.>

<Blue not-not-friend noped out two stops ago> I reply. <Probably saw this and got spooked.>

A *THUMP*, from the roof.

Now's a good time to get back into cover, I suspect. I hold my breath, as scrapes and scuffles echo from above. I'm sure none of the hollows saw me; as long as we leave in the next ten seconds, we're golden.

Right on cue, the Mesh announces: <Doors closing. Please stand clear.>

Bing!

An ARM sticks itself through the gap.

The doors close on it. They shudder, then re-open.

<Please stand clear.>

I can't see what the arm's attached to; it's reaching down from the capsule's roof, pawing for grip. My skin crawls.

<Please stand clear.>

Wake flaps her hand at me. <Alex, get rid of it!>

<Do I have to?>

<Yes!>

I swallow. No good options, huh? I settle for standing, trying to stay out of sight – difficult when half the damn train's made of windows – and give the arm a sharp shove. It swings free, fingers twitching in surprise. Blissfully, the doors shut themselves with a vacuum-sealed *hiss*.

<Departing. Next stop: Visitor Hotel.>

Minor issue: all the hollows are looking at me.

Minor issue: they scream in unison, a Renaissance painting that's mouths upon mouths upon mouths. Ice-cold light blooms from a hundred hollow jaws.

I duck back down. "We have a minor issue."

Smack!

A body hits the side of the car. It rocks sideways.

Smack. Smack. Smack.

They're charging the doors, the windows, the opening salvo of a hailstorm. Meat thuds. The monorail shudders. Light solidifies, its colours swiftly mixed into their absence: black. Spiky *black*, frantic with hate. Marionettes burst from the shadows, their expressionless faces – expressionless agony – plastered momentarily against the glass, then lost. The light isn't just spawning from the hollows; it comes from *everywhere*, reaching through walls, vents, racing along the track to our rear, a skyscraper spider spinning its own corpse from shadows.

"It's her ghost," Finn says, the dread in his eyes no good omen. "She called it Wraith."

"What's the Wraith?"

"The entity that stole my mum. It must've escaped, or... followed me out. It's bad."

"That thing took our parents?!"

He doesn't reply. My MeshMate's complaining about radiation, alpha, gamma, beta, the whole Greek alphabet.

"Wake, why aren't we moving?" Sinas yells.

"Too much extra weight! We're overloaded."

Hollows climb onto the nose of the car, searching for a weak point. There must be nearly a hundred. One headbutts the window by my head. Another tears at the door seal. Plastic cracks. They emerge like ghosts from the Wraith's blackened fog, a fog that's now inside the car as well, forming vines around my arms and hands—

"PRISMS! Now!" I shout.

Whummmm...

The Wraith's shoved back. The hollows go limp, flailing in zero-g. Ejected lampires dart across the platform, piercingly bright.

Finally, thankfully, the train starts to move. <Departing.>

The last few hollows slide off as we accelerate, fingers scritch-scratch-scratching down the plastic (and my neck-hairs). Behind us, on the platform, I see balls of light diving into the fallen, reanimating them from far-too-temporary slumber. Stop-motion corpses stagger to their feet.

They disappear around the curve of the track.

ALEX XIV

“There’s no way they could catch up, right?” I ask.

Wake twirls her hair around one finger. “Ummmm...”

“This is a maglev. Those dudes have gotta like, pull themselves along the walls.”

“They’re also *ghosts*, Alex.”

Black haze materialises in the tunnel behind. Light shines from within it, oddly beautiful, like sunlight through a forest canopy on a misty morning, except this forest is made of really *mantis* shit. I can’t see much except that it IS catching up, an occasional glimpse of an arm, a face, a torn uniform. <PRISM battery: 55%.> I clutch at one of the overhead handholds, the station giving us tiny pushes left, right, up, down as it bucks and skips across the cloudtops. The Mesh is already reporting our altitude as a negative number. “Alright, we need to make something happen, ‘cause I can punch one ghost in a sustainable fashion but I can’t punch fifty.”

“Basically, we need a plan, fast,” Sinas says. He’s standing like a bad Han Solo cosplayer.

For her part, Wake’s standing like a goblin. “I’m driving!” she shouts. “Don’t look at me.

“To save the PRISM batteries, we should link their control signal to one person,” Finn says. “That person can activate them temporarily when needed.”

“Sounds fair,” I say. “You volunteering?”

“Um, sure.” He looks remarkably calm. Wishful thinking, perhaps.

I slap the side of the transit car encouragingly. “Okay, so Wake keeps the train going, Finn keeps the ghosts out, and we—”

“—we stop anyone from breaking into this capsule,” Sinas says.

“I’ll take left, you take right?”

He shrugs. “We’ll improvise.”

We spread out, Wake to the front, Finn to the middle, Sinas and I to the rear. I rummage through a few discarded bags as Sinas checks the bathrooms for gear. The first bodies are already latching onto the rear of the car, climbing over

each other like rats. Gnarled hands paw at the glass. For now, the windows are holding, but when one does break it'll make this difficult. I brace myself against the seats as the maglev surges, the track arcing left. Smoky tendrils wrap themselves around us, casting the cabin in eerie, depthless twilight, and—

Whummm...

Finn flashes the PRISMs. A wave of hollows plummets down the tunnel, the black fog shuddering at its boundaries.

"Find anything?" I ask Sinas.

"Emergency gear," he mutters. "Vacuum seals, rebreathers, heat blankets. You?"

"Fuck all, mate." I hold up a bag. "Unless you need new gym clothes. That vacuum seal might come in handy though." We hurry towards the rear of the train, where the fog's thickest. I can feel the lampires probing, their pressure building, a suffocation of anger and grief and envy between PRISM blasts. A woman crashes against the glass, snarling. I kneel before the window, grabbing the tiny 'break glass in case of emergency' hammer beneath it. "Hey, remember when we made out in the bathroom? What if we forget about all this, and just do that again instead."

"So you *did* enjoy it." He smiles roguishly.

"Don't flatter yourself – I'm just sayin' it was more enjoyable than THIS. Low bar. What was that about, anyway?"

"Spur of the moment."

"Sinas, I don't think you're a spur-of-the-moment guy. You're a plotter."

The hollows in the tunnel are a veritable tsunami.

"I was... collecting data," Sinas says.

"See? I knew it. Proving a hypothesis?"

"Something like that."

I heft the hammer. For whatever reason, in this shitty little train at the end of the world, it feels right to put an arm around his shoulder.

His body's tense. So is mine.

I've decided I don't like Sinas, in that way. I still think he's attractive – can't help it – but another makeout sesh isn't on the cards, I reckon. Besides, he's got something else going on. He leans into me, squeezes my arm, and it feels nice, as long as I don't stare at the bloody nightmare tunnel behind us, its single rail spiralling downward into hell.

"Hiiii TwitchTok! Wake here, checking in. As you can see, we've got a real situation on our hands. Basically, it's like whenever I play horde mode on Fortnite—"

"My brother in *Christ*, is this really the time?" I shout.

Wake's got her drone out, smiling beatifically in the cabin. As per usual, she decides not to take my constructive feedback. "That's Alex's voice, she's guarding the back of the train right now – everyone say, 'thanks Alex'! She's doing great! We're doing great."

A window shatters.

It's a big wraparound pane of safety glass, and it's gone, a tumbling mirror reflecting dozens of shrieking faces. The roar is suddenly deafening. I close my visor. The hollows try and push through at once, a blockage of flesh. I hold onto a seat, kicking and kicking at surging bodies who effing LOVE their whole bitey-scratchey-act—

Whummm...

The lampires are shoved back outside, a whirlwind of fireworks.

"Finn, how much battery?" I ask.

"Forty percent!"

"Okay!" Yeah, nah, not okay. One body did manage to make it inside and I manhandle it to the window; it drifts away until it hits the tunnel wall, ricocheting with an awful bounce. Sinas charges forth with the vacuum sealer, blocking the breach with rapid-expansion foam.

Crash!

I whirl around. The front windshield has buckled inward, a hollow hissing as it clammers into the cabin. Wake's not there – where the hell is she? – so I jet towards the intruder like a goddamn Valkyrie, tunnel-visioning my outstretched boot into its face. It's a straight shot, my suit thrusters flaring, seats flashing past, a crunch from my ankles to I eject it from the premises. I almost follow it, too, only stopping myself by abusing my other three limbs and friction, clinging (barely) to the control console. I glance down. Lots of diagrams, lots of Mesh readouts. The tunnel twists and turns through the raging fog.

"Wake?" I call out.

"Here!" She's by the passenger door, half-way down the carriage, digging at a floor panel. "The Mesh is down, so I need to get at this yakking manual switch, but someone spilled freaking *raspberry soda* all over it— don't touch anything in there! Just keep the empties out!"

That'd be fine, except the monorail's slowing. Inertia is subtly trying to chuck me out the window.

The train slows, and slows, until...

It stops. *Full stop.*

Cabin lights turn red.

I peer out the window. There's only PolyGrowth tunnel, with no station to be seen, but a long shadow – a pipe, or support strut? – is wedged across our route. The wall might be cracked from the impact, but as far as I can tell, the rail's okay.

"Wreckage blocking the track!" I shout. "It's wedged pretty tight, but I can try clearing it?" It's more of a question than a suggestion; I'd rather not venture out if I can help it. The hollows are screeching with newfound fury, the back of the carriage *tilting* with their weight. Finn cranks the PRISMs to full blast, tearing through enemies and our batteries. However much vacuum foam Sinas has got, it won't be enough.

"What about this?" Wake says, waving her energy rifle around.

"Shit! Yeah, good idea."

"Catch!"

She throws the rifle at me.

Misjudges completely.

It bounces off the ceiling and sails over my head, then escapes through the broken windshield, spinning end over end. Before I can reconsider, I'm diving after it, and I manage to snatch it with one desperate hand while gecko-ing onto the train's nose with the other. I swing to a stop against the front of the car.

"Sorry!" Wake shouts.

I shake my head, grumbling to myself, then twist around so I can aim. I've gone out shooting on the farm before; that was with an ancient shotgun, not an energy rifle, but it can't be too different. I switch the firing mode to 'cut', set the plasma temperature as high as it'll go, and jam on the trigger.

The rifle *sings*. There's barely any recoil as its sky-blue beam slices the dark, mist swirling angrily around me, the fallen pillar bleeding fiery yellow chunks. I scorch two clean cuts through either end, then switch to 'kinetic', and the next shot's a sonic blast that kicks the centre free. It floats away, creating a gap wide enough for the train to squeeze past, amidst the jagged, melted plastic that remains.

I give the capsule a friendly slap. "C'mon buddy, start moving."

It wobbles, then inches forwards. I'd rather not be stuck to the front of a speeding monorail, so I prepare to slither back inside, slinging the rifle over my shoulder. Wake's still prone by the door, beaver-ing away.

ScreeeEEEEEECH! Debris scrapes along the side of the carriage, digging gouges in the bodywork. The train soldiers on, picking up speed.

Then wreckage catches the left-hand doors and tears them off their hinges. The hollows pile through.

Wake looks up, too late. She's swept up by a tide of grasping hands and is sucked from the train, out of sight. I hear her scream. I'm still holding onto the nose so I scramble up, towards the roof, to where maybe I can spot her, but instead I'm met by half-a-dozen hollows, already crawling along the roof from astern.

Glowstrips go flash-flash-flash. The hollows jerk closer, teeth clicking. The tunnel ceiling whizzes past my head.

<This vehicle will soon enter a non-pressurised area> my MeshMate says.
<Manual stops have been disabled. Secure all apertures for vacuum.>

"Sin-as? What happened to Wake?" I shout.

"Finn's getting her!"

"Is she okay?"

"Noooooot yet!"

I ready my rifle. The PRISM dances to life on my chest. The closest hollow has its leg jammed in the gap between the cabin and passenger car, and as its face tilts vacantly towards me—I recognise it.

It's Khorin.

It *was* Khorin. His eyes have been burned away, and frozen black blood snakes down his cheeks, and his gaping sockets are a stretched, ghoul-ish

caricature of his former resentment, but those pointed, stinging features are seared into my memory.

“What the FUCK!” I shout.

“What’s happening?” Sinas asks.

“Khorin’s here!”

“Alive?”

“Take a wild guess, Sinas! The opposite of alive!”

It’s as if the lampires can sense our PRISMs are limited. They’re pushing harder and harder, urged on by that looming darkness. Wind pulls at me as the train accelerates around a curve. The maglev hums deep in my bones. I grit my teeth as the hollows scale each other, preparing to fight, or run, and—

Time skips. I’m wobbling like a dog on a unicycle, fighting the urge to vomit up my small intestine.

Whuummmmm...

“—need him!” Sinas is saying. “We should bring Khorin’s body with us! It’s the hijackers’ ship – if it’s locked down, we can use his biometrics to get inside!”

Okay. Okay. I can do this.

Khorin’s gone limp, thanks to the PRISM blast, but being this close to him is the definition of unpleasant. I take a few quick breaths to clear my head, then grab his wrist, and try not to look as I drag him free, tugging him behind me, dead weight. I clamber towards the ripped-off door, just in time to see Finn lean out below me, grab an arm – Wake’s arm – and haul her back inside. Sinas’ laser knife blazes in his hand.

Wake brushes herself off. For a second, she looks like she’s going to cry.

She doesn’t, though. She swallows the urge, like it’s the world’s sourest lemon.

I swing myself into the cabin behind her and sit Khorin’s arse down in the nearest priority seat.

<PRISM battery: 25%.>

Ahead of the train, an airlock opens. I’m expecting it to be suddenly bright, or suddenly black, but instead – a wall of faded yellow. There’s the shriek of escaping air, the monorail shaking as if it wants to break free, and then—

We emerge, so low in Saturn’s atmosphere I see only clouds. The station’s skimming the air like a railgun slug at what must be thousands of kilometres per hour, its more distant arms lost in Saturn’s watercolour haze, slight variations in the surrounding brightness as it dives through layers of hydrogen and methane. Streaky contrails whip round docking ports and comms towers. Incredible winds tear at its skin, ripping up tiles, immense friction turning its edges a fiery red. Manoeuvring thrusters fight to keep the entire structure level, firing in all directions, barely preventing an uncontrollable spin.

The monorail protests immediately, slowing down. Wind screeches through shattered windows. Behind us, hollows are plucked from the train, from the rail, sent soaring into the wild abyss. Behind *them*, blooming around Starfish’s hub

are vast, multicoloured curtains of light, ascending higher and higher as I crane my neck, until swallowed by churning clouds.

That's not the portal, is it?

It can't be.

Probably just the Rapture. No big deal.

Before long, the monorail grinds to a stop; the rail's shivering furiously, the car about to transcend to a higher plane of existence (and if it's going to, I'd rather we weren't on it). The sound is incredible, buffeting our voices to oblivion.

<The train> Wake announces, <is confused about its situation.>

<That makes two of us> I reply. <How close are we to the ship?>

Sinas points at a vague silhouette, that's possibly a docking ring. <A couple hundred metres – it's RIGHT THERE. I'd say we fly the rest of the way, but our suit thrusters probably can't handle this kind of wind.>

<They DEFINITELY can't> Finn says.

<Then, can we... walk?> I ask.

<I meeeaaaan...> Wake squints speculatively at the rail, which appears intact as it curves into the fog. <I wouldn't say I WANT to walk out there, but we've got geckogloves, don't we?>

<Wait> Finn says. <I've got something.> He digs around in his suit for a bit, then extracts two rolled-up pieces of plastic. They're flat, matte black, and when slotted together, form a sleek, rigid hoverdeck.

Wake's eyes widen. <Where'd you get that?>

<I've just been... carrying it around.>

<This *WHOLE TIME*?!>

<Um, yes? I did show you guys, way back at the start. It just hadn't seemed particularly useful until now.> Finn shrugs. <I'm pretty sure these shoosters will stick to the rail though.>

<Pretty sure> I mutter. <It's always 'pretty sure' with you.>

<Because I'm never *actually* sure, Alex.>

<Bad guys getting closer, FYI> Sinas says. A few hollows have managed to stick to the rail, lampire light shimmering behind them. One falls, then another, moths in a blizzard.

<Finn, I guess you're our rider> I say. <I'll make sure to hold on EXTRA tight.>

<Um... I don't think that's a good idea. I don't really know how to use these.>

<You BROUGHT them but don't know how to use them? Haven't you ridden shoosters before?>

<I mean, once, but—>

<Then what's the problem?>

<I used them once and almost died! And that was INSIDE my apartment! Not here!> He sweeps his arms at the apocalypse, and I guess I see his point. He holds the hoverdeck for one of us to take.

Sinas sighs, then grudgingly steps forward.

<You *do* seem like the type of person who'd board everywhere> Wake says thoughtfully.

<You say it like it's a turn-off.>

<Depends on the mood.>

He grabs Finn's shoosters and pushes through to the cabin – even inside, the wind's unbearable – then climbs through the broken windshield. As low as he can, he slithers down the transit car's nose, then manages to switch on the hoverdeck and stick it to the rail. Impressively, the repulsors stay firm, holding it a few centimetres clear of the metal (a five-star product review if I've ever seen one). <Okay, everybody come out!> he shouts. <It's not that bad!>

Yeah, nah, it's pretty bad. I'm first, Khorin in tow, and the whip-like currents immediately try to pluck me from the polymer. The station shakes sickeningly, basically in freefall; I somehow edge along the rail and grab onto Sinas. He's got one knee forward like a sprinter, and I put my arms around his shoulders and lock them together. I clip Khorin onto a loop at my hip and shit, this is *terrifying*, my muscles already shaking. I'm less a sprinter, more a balloon animal undergoing medieval torture.

One by one, the others make their way out. The hollows have reached the train again; eerie fireworks, in the clouds, as the ghosts begin to swarm, the first jet-black tendrils spawning from the monorail airlock. The PRISM buzzes on my stomach.

<Ready?> Sinas asks.

<Hell nah.>

<Yep yep yep!>

<...Sure.>

We latch our geckogloves and go. The hoverdeck follows the rail, building up speed; behind it, we're a tangled, fleshy party streamer, dwarfed by Illumination's vast aurora. Faster now, skipping past patches of open air that serve stomach-dropping *infinity* on either side. The rail curves. The deck tilts left. We nearly fall, then nearly fall again. I'm barely staying upright, arms screaming, wind screaming, everything screaming. Finn's a wild pendulum as he clutches my back. We skate under one of the station's spokes, nearly close enough to touch, then past a couple of fuel tanks on the right – huge spheres that momentarily block the gale. I glance over my shoulder, to see Wake firing her rifle into the sun-baked fog, to see Finn squeezing his eyes shut, to see hollows being lifted into the sky, and for once I wish Wake *was* recording a bloody video. Suddenly, a ship emerges from the clouds and shrieks low over our heads, small, slender, with piercing red amdrives. Static punches my eardrums as it sweeps up and out of sight.

<Was that our ship? Was that our ship?!> Wake asks.

<No! I don't think so> Sinas replies.

<Then whose was it?>

The clouds are infused with rainbows, flashing in our periphery. Lightning whips past, a burst of white. Flames lick the station's fingers. The deck steadies under Sinas' feet, angling forward, kicking up sparks, and as the winds try to carry me away – I can't help but laugh. It's ridiculous. *Ridiculous*. Perhaps I'm

losing it? Wouldn't be the first time. Either way, as we hoverboard across a falling space station, above Saturn's gaping maw, assaulted by dozens of Lovecraftian horrors – I'm overtaken by the giggles. Sinas glances at me, horrified, then starts laughing too.

There's nothing else left in me. In any of us.

<PRISM battery: 10%.>

We duck beneath power cables, grinding left-right, finally slowing as a ship emerges from the haze.

It's bulbous, several swimming pools in length, roughly trapezoidal, with an underslung compartment that could carry quite a few hostages (if you were into that kind of thing). Sinas parks us beside its closest airlock, a small platform bordered by safety railings. I vault onto it, clamping boots to metal. My legs are shaky as hell, but after searching for a ship, an escape, a chance to keep on living, for this whole very *un*-clearsky last twelve hours... here it is. That chance. It feels solid enough, as I place my hand against the door.

Finn activates the laser knife, ready to cut our way inside, Jedi-style.

Before he can, light gathers behind us. It's black, ugly, *wraith*-like, and it swirls, expands, into impossible football-field wings. They reach around us, around the ship, eclipsing Saturn's hues in peppery twilight.

Inside it, everything's... dead. Faded. Like plastic, baked by too much sun. The haze is a riot of writhing mist, containing hands, arms, bodies, faces. Figures pull themselves together, then collapse, like foam at the front of a flood. As Saturn boils, they throw themselves uselessly against our resonance shields, raging, forever, against the dying of the light. Our ship, limpeted to the docking ring, is a cliff at our backs; the air a drop to infinity before us.

Sinas freezes. <Marko?> he says.

I can barely hear him; the Mesh is being ground into extinction. He reaches out, over the railing, to a solitary shape amongst thousands.

It looks like him. Slightly younger, perhaps, with broader shoulders, but it bears the same halo, Instagram model face.

The same smile, always hiding a private joke.

And the shape, from its darkness, tries to reach back.

It can't, though. Can't get past the shields.

<PRISM battery: 7%.>

Endless metres lie between their outstretched figures.

<Sinas?> I ask.

I don't think he hears me.

Wake's seen something too, but looks FAR less happy about it. She backs up till she can't, pressed against the airlock, gaze fixed upon a specific spot in the maelstrom. I see flashes of a face, hair edged by gold, growing larger—

<Go AWAY!> she shrieks. <LEAVE ME ALONE!>

The Wraith hisses in response. Its tendrils are worming their way *inside* our shielding, and I wonder if I'm meant to take part in this, too – if I'll be confronted

by a vision of death from my past, or future. I try to find myself in the Wraith's mosaic, but no matter how much it changes, or where I look... nothing.

I'm unsure how long I'm lost in its grief.

<It isn't real> Finn says. <Sinus, look at me, please. It isn't him. I promise it's not him.> He grabs Sinus' arm, forces their eyes to meet. <It wants to trick you into becoming part of it. That's how it beats you.>

I shake myself free, push through the hurricane to Wake. She's curled in a ball in the corner, staring at the ground. <Wake, it's okay. Get up. C'mon.>

She doesn't get up.

<Wake, come on!>

Finn spins towards the Wraith. "Why are you *HERE?!'*" he shouts, into the wind. "Why do you need to follow me! Why do you need— to use my parents?" His voice cracks on the last syllable, but he stands there, facing it down, as if he can defeat Illumination itself. "Are you here 'cause you need us for some stupid plan? Is that it? Because if you do, YOU aren't the one who's winning! We'll beat you, d'you hear me? We'll fix this! We'll fix *everything!*"

Physics threatens to tear his feet out from under him at any moment.

The Wraith smiles.

<PRISM battery: 4%.>

BOOOoooOOOmmMM!

An enormous crack splits the station's hub. Debris spills outward, belted into the clouds, followed by a searing flash – like a nuclear blast, and I hope it isn't, because otherwise we're goners – and the *sound* it makes knocks the air from my lungs. My visor darkens.

Its afterglow is a beautiful, sky-spanning flower.

The flower blooms, into colours I could never name, and the Wraith—the Wraith is *scared*. It struggles, swimming against an otherworldly magnetism. The shadows within it start to swarm and fight, stretching into a mammoth wind-swept tail that's sucked irresistibly towards the portal's remnants, as if Illumination's final wish is to gather up its children before it dies.

Truespace breaks, slightly.

Immense pain in my chest, as a connection I never realised existed is abruptly severed, never to be reborn. I stare at the light, Wake at my feet, Sinus kneeling, my brother defying the end of reality, and I'm... apart, from them. I'm one with the ghosts. I feel strings, tethers, so many, intertwined with every part of my being, trying to return me to where I belong, which is... where, exactly?

Newborn auroras dance beneath us.

Their light's so, so halo.

I step towards the edge of the platform, losing all sense of balance. The tethers stretch, pulling, pulling, pulling, and it would be oh-so-easy to give them the slack they so desperately need, and to fall with the Wraith, into finality. My heart *burns* for it, deep inside. I don't know why I want it so much.

Is this what Finn felt?

Nah. You're BETTER than this, you idiot, you *mango*, you dumb, depressed, cowardly moron—

I slap the side of my helmet. The plastic bangs my skull.

I step back from the edge.

The lampires weep as they're returned to their nation. The Wraith screams, no longer able to reach us. Its dead, timeless twilight fades to dull yellow clouds until, soon enough, only the wind is left.

Wind, us, and a rapidly disintegrating space station.

I check that everyone's okay, or at least breathing, then manhandle Khorin to the airlock. First, the biolock requests an iris scan (problematic, since Khorin no longer has eyes), but fingerprints are the next best thing. The doors slide apart, and the ship comes to life.

We run through its decks, barely paying attention. Lights, heaters, and Mesh readouts shake themselves awake, the decking rattling with every step. The pain nestled in my ribs still wants to be fed, but... it fades.

Slowly, it fades.

With every step, the others seem to be recovering, too, waking with the ship. We reach the cockpit, running on autopilot.

"Soooo, flying this thing—" I begin.

Sinas slides into one of the seats, cutting me off. "Yeah, it's not exactly a TM car, but undocking is mostly automated."

"Alright. Do your thing." I set Khorin down and take one of the seats in the corner, next to a bank of manual controls we hopefully won't need to mess with. Screens project views of the sky above, the station below, the umbilicals attached to the transport ship's belly. A higher-pitched vibration takes centre stage as the engines warm up. Whatever's left of Starfish's traffic management system is trying to warn us about a million different problems, but a fine for 'unauthorised departure' seems a small price to pay.

Safety clamps unhitch. The ship fights to control itself in the unexpected wind. My fingers grip the armrests too tightly as it levels off, then starts to rise. I let out the breath I've been holding.

Thirty seconds later, we enter a hover, a kilometre above Starfish Station.

Together, we watch it get swallowed by the planet.

The manufacturing arm is first to go. It's like ripping cloth, the composite fibres stretching, then twisting apart where the arm's thickest, debris spewing like liquid. The arm opposite resists for a few more seconds, bending, bending—snapping as support struts are dragged far past their strain limits. The attached habitation ring swings wildly, a branch in a gale, then splinters. It's followed by some enormous fuel tanks, bursting into flame as they crash into each other. Hundred-metre flames wrap themselves around each arm, trailing ash, fluid, smoke. Shielding and insulation are torn from underlying scaffolding. The noise

it makes builds to an electrical, mechanical, biological scream, full of anguish and faltering breath.

With two arms gone, the station can no longer control itself. The entire structure starts to flip unsteadily, slow at first, then faster, as drag takes hold. Thrusters fire madly. Its entire surface is buckling, shaking itself apart. It's hard to imagine something so massive moving like that, skipping like a stone across Saturn's depths.

Before long, the station disintegrates.

It becomes a cloud of wreckage, plummeting in unison, for a single breathtaking moment: big chunks, small chunks, all the way from skyscrapers to dust, surrounded by smoke, and fire, and pure white contrails, gradually separating into chaotic, iridescent meteor showers. It won't be long before it burns up completely, becoming part of the planet itself.

We keep watching until there's nothing left.

ALEX XV

“We did it,” Sinas murmurs. “We survived.”

Finn looks down. “We might be the only ones who did.”

A Pyrrhic victory, if I’ve ever seen one.

There were *people*, still trapped on Starfish. Most were probably dead already, or other variations on ‘not alive’, but now? Definitely dead. No changing it. There’s the scientific work, too, and the station itself... I know we couldn’t have done more, under the circumstances, but it’s a lot to lose.

“Let’s just go,” I say. “It feels weird to hang around.”

Sinas nods, and the ship starts to rise. It takes a few minutes for the atmosphere to thin, yellow gradually fading as night takes hold. Veils of light cut across the planet, aftershocks of the portal’s collapse, like ripples from a stone. Occasionally, one passes through the ship; I’m expecting to physically feel it, or suddenly fall into a dream, but I only notice an extra bit of Mesh static.

Until we clear the planet, that is. As the ship climbs, those veils of light don’t stop, or dissipate. Instead, they start to twist together, forming thicker ropes, merging into psychedelic rivers that flow unabated over storm-wracked clouds.

They ARE rivers, I think.

A river of souls.

It arcs into the depths of space, forging a path across Saturn’s rings, across the stars. In these few short hours since the portal’s emergence, it’s already crossed an entirely impossible distance, all the way to Titan.

Saturn’s largest moon is blanketed by an opaque, golden atmosphere, which completely conceals the plains, mountains, and methane seas that dot its frigid surface. Because of that lovely, thick atmosphere, it was the first of Saturn’s companions to be thoroughly explored, and subsequently, the first to possess a permanent human presence.

Now, Illumination’s river has latched itself to the moon like a leech. Its surface is being assaulted by a haze of shifting, unnatural colour; on the radar scans that allow us to peek beneath its atmosphere, the river becomes stems

and vines of interference. They wind their way towards colossal arcologies and spiralling shipping lanes, searching for richer nutrients.

In this case, those ‘nutrients’ are around ten thousand people.

“This,” Sinas says, “wasn’t supposed to happen. The station’s GONE. The portal generator was ATOMISED. I thought the lampires all got sucked back in!”

“Yeah, well, they’ve been hustling alright,” I reply. “As far as I know, this wasn’t meant to be a self-sustaining disaster, but it’s increasingly clear nobody working on this project actually understood the worst-case consequences.”

“Those are entire cities. What happens when they hit a city?”

“Nothing good.” The soul-river shivers: millions of tadpoles, swimming the same current. “We need to warn people, or help, or...”

“*Can* we help?” Wake asks. “Usually I’d say, ‘let’s do it’, but against— that...” She taps her foot nervously. “Okay. Think. Apart from Titan, there’s that one big underwater city on Enceladus—”

“Cassini City, yeah.”

“—plus a bunch of other little stations and outposts around Saturn’s sphere of influence. They’re ALL gonna be wondering what the yekk is going on. Maybe a warning stream *would* be useful.”

“It might be hard to get people to listen,” Finn replies. “Take us seriously, I mean.”

Sinas sighs. “Especially when the station’s dusted. I like the idea of sharing our info, but our only evidence for this ‘science camp’ experience is four PRISMS with empty batteries and a stolen cargo ship.”

“PLUS hours of high-resolution Mymory logs,” Wake adds.

“That’ll take time to sort through, though, and the authentication is so fiddly – unless we want to dump terabytes of raw data, and hope people accept it...” He shakes his head, abandoning the thought. “I’m getting a cup of tea.”

I raise my hand. “If you’re heading over anyway, I could use a drink.”

“Yeah, fine. What do you want?”

“Lemonade would be nice.”

“Finn?” he asks.

“Um... hot chocolate. Thanks.”

“Wake?”

“Tea’s clearsky, but bring as much extra sugar as you can physically carry. I mean it. As much as you can carry.”

We lounge in the cockpit, watching the lights.

Sleep debt must be creeping up on me like a hovertrain, but right *now* I don’t feel particularly tired. If I was eighteen, I could tell my MeshMate to dose me with SleepyTime juice and be done with it, but instead, I’ve gotta get my rest the old-fashioned way.

Eugh. So much running. So much fighting. So much *detective work*. And for what? What did we accomplish? (Other than staying alive, which is significant, I’ll grant you.) Because here I am, in this claustrophobic seat, obsessing over my signed, limited edition, dearly departed *Moon’s Haunted* toothbrush and

how I'm glad I left it behind on Luna, because it at least means it didn't disintegrate with the station, mostly (entirely) to avoid thinking about more existential topics like WHY EVERYONE ELSE IS DEAD. 'Loss can be a positive!' doesn't feel like the most useful moral lesson for this mess. This kerfuffle. This *brouhaha*. My fingers automatically find their way to my notebook, its cover scratched, one corner bent newly inwards.

Didn't lose this guy, at least.

I'm unsure what to write in it. Most of what comes to mind seems trite (not that that's ever stopped me before).

I settle for: 'Keep running. Keep trying.'

Also: 'When you get home, hug mum and dad.'

Also: 'Buy Bagpipes those dog treats he really likes.'

Sinas returns with our refreshments. It's a nice lemonade, almost sour enough to make a small child cry. Steam from Finn's hot chocolate wafts pleasantly past my nose. The ship's *amdrives* are burning steadily, raising us into a higher orbit, and I take the chance to undo my vacsuit's seals, peeling it down to my waist. There's a burnt patch on my back from where I got shot, and a hole in my jeans from where I got stabbed, and my scrappy pink hoodie could use a wash (or three), but fresh air on my skin feels GREAT.

"Are we broadcasting an SOS?" I ask.

"Yeah," Sinas replies. "That person – Farah? – will be able to spot us. I've put us in a parking orbit so we're easy to find."

"Okay, glacier. Is there anything we gotta do *before* she arrives? 'Cause I'm happy to twiddle my thumbs till then – I'm done being a protagonist for a while. It's NPC time. We have been *flat out* like a lizard drinking."

"No tasks I can think of," Sinas says.

"There is one thing," Finn says. "Hypothetically."

"Oh?"

"Hypothetically..." He trails off.

"Finn, traditionally adverbs requiring an accompanying verb."

He shoots me a half-guilty, half-annoyed look. "Hypothetically, what if there was more than one station? More than one... Illumination portal?"

Sinas narrows his eyes. "Weird thing to say for no reason. Which means there must be a reason," he says, followed by "which I'm not going to like."

"This will sound weird, but when I was coming back from Illumination, it felt like there were two gateways I could exit from: one leading to Starfish, and one leading to— a different room. At first, I picked the wrong one first, but I knew it was wrong because it was smaller, and emptier, and... farther away from you guys. That makes me think this wasn't the only experiment."

"How sure are you?" Sinas asks.

"Pretty sure. Eighty percent sure."

"And this portal was also open?"

"Otherwise, I wouldn't have been able to see I through it. Right?" He glances at us, as if we're the experts.

I tilt my head back, staring through the ceiling, cross-eyed. “Oh boy.”

“Did Maritime mention another experiment?” Wake asks. “Or Haru?”

“They might’ve. If they did, we missed it. Although, in the resonance lab...” I rub my eyes, massaging the memory. “I found a room, hidden away. It was called a ‘link node’. Thebe link node. It looked quite a lot like the other portal, but miniature – black ceramic, webs of cables, the whole setup. Super goth. It wasn’t active when I was there, though.”

“So MAYBE there’s another Illumination experiment on Thebe,” Wake says. “Orrrrrr they’re two completely unrelated things.”

I shrug.

Finn shrugs.

“Let me check something,” Sinas says suddenly. He hooks into the ship’s scanners and angles them towards the sun, until they lock onto a small red ship – the mystery vessel that buzzed us during our hoverdeck escape. Its silhouette is aggressively angled, shark-like, the name ‘*Westward Sunrise*’ emblazoned on its underside. Its engines burn fiercely away from Saturn’s equator.

“My first question,” Sinas says, “is who’s on that ship. My second question is where they’re going.”

“You think that’s a third un-unrelated thing?” Wake asks.

“Well, what if they’re flying to Thebe?”

“Ooo, call them!” Wake says. “Just call! What’re they gonna do? If they don’t pick up, it’s sus, and if they do pick up, we can ask. I’ll do it, if you don’t want to.”

We try calling them.

They don’t pick up.

“*Suspicious*,” Wake says.

“They’re on an escape trajectory out of Saturn’s gravity well,” Finn says. “Which isn’t weird, in isolation, but if they WERE going to Jupiter, the phasing matches.” He notices my mystified glance. “It’s like, their departure angle, for a Jupiter intercept – correct phasing saves on fuel.”

“Do we think it could be Maritime?” I ask. “Or Haru, even? It’s gotta be somebody who was on the station till the very last second.”

“I don’t think it’s my mum,” Finn says.

“It could be; YOU came back to life. I’m not ruling anything out.”

“Either way, it’s a potential issue,” Sinas says. “And we shouldn’t...” He trails off, gazing into space. “We shouldn’t ignore it. The risk is too high. If there’s even a *hint* Starfish could be repeated, I don’t want to extrapolate those horrors to Titan, let alone Mars, or Earth.” A magnanimous statement, from the self-confessed Earth-hater.

“If there’s another station, my mum would’ve known about it,” Finn says. “We should assume the Wraith knows about it, too. It’s going to want to open more doorways, here, or on Thebe, any way it can, and... it’s got numbers on its side.” He bites his lip. “For the billions of people alive today, there are billions more dead. Bad ratio.”

“So we get help,” Sinas says.

Wake shakes her head, hair falling free, full of stars. “I *hate* to be a downer, but help from where? The government were trying to keep everything about this a secret. The megacorps’ll just wanna STEAL those secrets. And if we do try and tell the public, who’s going to pay attention, before it’s too late? People are WEIRD about what they choose to believe – trust me, I run a TwitchTok channel, and people are constantly saying the news I chat about is wrong, or that my *life* is faked, or they double-down on supporting the most ridiculous stuff. The worst part is, they’re kinda right! You can fake basically anything with enough MeshCycles and a quantum signature.”

That’s what the Data Quality Agency is supposed to help with, but yeah, fine, nobody pays attention to ‘em, from the TKs down to my ratbag fourth-grade cousin. It’s always relatively innocent to start with, like generated test scores, or viral videos, but before you know it, a creep has the bright idea of simming naked versions of their classmates or slightly rewriting the historical record.

“They’ll have to believe us,” Sinas says, “because this IS happening. It’ll be impossible to hide.”

“But how much time will that take? People are slow. You can’t always wait for them. I’ve learned that lesson too many times.”

I think I’m about to have a bad idea.

My heart, guts and brain all think it’s a bad idea, so what *mantis* part of me is responsible?

“Then we do it ourselves,” I say. “We go to Jupiter, and make sure whatever could happen *doesn’t*. Alright, maybe Starfish didn’t go so well for us, but we had quite a few big starting handicaps and I reckon, with a second go-round, we could do a hell of a lot better.”

“I admire the self-belief,” Sinas says.

“...But?”

“Alex, we’d be throwing ourselves at the same problem in the same way. We’re CLEARLY not equipped to handle it. There’s no point in four of us jetting off to Jupiter if we’ll only end up running for our lives again.”

“There point is to FIX it, Sinas. To make the world better. That’s what any of us should hope to do, right? I’m not disagreeing with you – we *should* have second thoughts, and third thoughts – but what if we’re the ones who’ll make the difference?”

I’m leaning forward in my chair *because* I’m unsure. It’d be far easier to let this go, and head home. This isn’t our fight. If we make it our fight, and it goes wrong again... those are black depths of failure I don’t want to consider. Far safer, to let other people handle it. So many unknowns, so many variables.

At the same time, I want to control those variables.

Part of me, I guess, wants to be special. If I’m special, it means I know who I am, and what I’m doing. I’d be a real, proper person, with a real, proper life.

Let’s be real, though – I’m not that.

Besides, believing in your own importance isn’t reason to do something. Wanting to help *is* a reason, but I’m just afraid I’m faking it.

“We barely made it out,” Finn says, voice distant. “I didn’t, not really. The wraith, the ghosts, Illumination, it’s... a lot.” He looks down at his body, hot chocolate going cold. “I might need time. If we’re going to face it again.”

“I don’t want to force you to do anything,” I reply. “I’ll never know what you went through. But heaps more people are going to be affected by this, and my dad loves telling me that if you want something done right, do it yourself.”

“Sounds like *someone*’s a bad helper,” Wake murmurs.

“That’s not the point.”

“I know, I know, you’re just so easy to annoy. Actually, Alex, whenever I have to write an application essay, I always say I want to change the world.” She stretches her arms, her fingers intertwined. “And people are always so negative about that? They’re always like, you’ve gotta start small, or study super hard, or understand how our political system works. It’s patronising because they think you don’t understand the *practicality* of it, or how much there is to fix. But—why? I understand. Everyone does. I also don’t like listening to people telling me I can’t do things over and over, so I say we go to Thebe. Save what we can.”

“In principle, I’m with you,” Sinas says. “But we’re not scientists. We’re not soldiers. It doesn’t seem too out there to say that hey, let’s relay this to qualified people and let them handle it.”

“Do these ‘qualified people’ exist?” Wake asks.

“We’ll find out, when Farah catches us. Again, I’m not trying to be negative, but let’s say we go in, and we’re forced to make some hardcore decisions. How do we know they’re the right ones?”

“We don’t,” Finn says. “But— I’d trust us, more than I’d trust most people.”

“Staying involved might be our best option,” I add. “Even though I don’t really want to be.” A weird sense of purpose is crystallising around me, out of a saturated solution of my own insecurities, and at this point, I really hope I’m NOT faking it. Can’t escape the sense that— ugh, whatever. “Whatever our choice is, it should be unanimous. Because let’s be lucent, our other option is to fly straight home instead, and that sounds pretty bloody good.”

“Maybe we’ll get lucky,” Sinas says, “and there’s no ‘other station’.”

“Maybe we’ll get lucky,” Finn echoes.

“Let’s vote, then,” I say. “Everyone in favour of helping? If we need?”

I raise my hand.

So does Wake.

Sinas and Finn exchange a glance; then raise their hands too (Sinas’ is the definition of lackadaisical, but it counts).

That was easy. I feel oddly pleased, though should I be? “Hooray.”

A Dutch shrug. “Technically I’m still on holidays. I’m not THAT keen to go back to my parents so soon.”

“Well, sorry. It sounds like your parents should make more of an effort. They’re really missing out on some good stuff with you.” I drum my fingers on the armrest. “Maybe that sounded sarcastic. It wasn’t supposed to be.”

“Yes, I appreciate the... hype.” He places one hand on my fingers, gently stopping them; I didn’t think my rhythm was THAT bad. “If we’re committed – a hundred percent – I’ll plan a route to Jupiter.”

“I can help,” Finn says.

While Finn and Sinas busy themselves in the cockpit, Wake and I decide to check out the rest of the ship (for all we know, there could be a hundred zombies hiding in the cupboards and it would be nice to know, one way or another). The further we fly from Starfish’s grave, the more Mesh signal trickles in, and I browse my news subscriptions absent-mindedly.

‘Third Atlanta Protocol amendment repealed by majority vote’

‘Protests brewing after repeal of anti-AI laws’

‘Vladimir Putin, cyborg, escapes octopi assassins’

‘New Pokémon Turnip + Radish release: play now!’

‘Loss of communications with Australian research station’

‘Loss of communication’ doesn’t quite cover it. Surely the news would’ve noticed Starfish had been attacked, by now... unless the truth is being actively suppressed. But why?

Let’s assume we’re among the few survivors who know the true cause of the disaster, and that knowledge won’t be allowed to become public. Then, there’s a chance we could end up on the wrong side of—

Nah. I’m being paranoid.

While roaming the ship’s corridors, I begin recording a message.

“Hi Dad. Hi Mum. You might’ve heard by now some *stuff* happened at the station I was staying at? Well, it’s true. Heaps of stuff DID happen, and it was pretty hectic, but I’m OK. The station isn’t, but... I made it out on a ship, and... I’m on my way home. Unfortunately, I need to take care of a thing or two first, which might take a little extra time? I hope I’ll be home soon, though. I’ll send another video when there’s more I can say. Sorry.”

I’m not really paying attention to where I’m going. The going’s the important part.

“So, uh, how’d the harvest go? Did you get the potatoes done in time? And how’s Bagpipes? Is he being an absolute menace? *‘Grumble grumble grumble, he’s such a pain, he never helps, he never listens, grumble grumble’*: that’s you, Dad, if you couldn’t tell. Anyway, I was half-way through teaching Bagpipes to sit on the tractor with me, so if you could get him to learn that before I’m back, that’d be cool. Otherwise, he’ll forget, and I’ll have to start over. Also, Mum, that question you asked – I sorta thought about it, and...”

I stop.

The hallways are empty.

“I know you wanted to help me. I wish I could’ve said that at the time, but I guess I’ll say it now. Hope that’s alright. If not, well... I dunno.”

Then it hits me, all at once.

In this dumb hallway, the story catches up.

I crouch down.

The message is still recording, but I can't think of the words.

Instead, I think of people dying. I think of the station, wiped off the face of existence; the helpless puppet-people who kept attacking us and who'll never live again; the Wraith's tendrils invading my head; Finn and my mother, choosing to leave this world behind; Maritime and Khorin, the light burned from their eyes; the families, and the scientists, and the hijackers; Tao, swept helplessly into the void. I think of my parents, waving goodbye at the spaceport. I think of my school friends, so far removed from everything I've done today. I think of all the times we *almost died*. My desperation, fear, anger, righteousness, everything I'm pretending to do and be, all the fucking time— it doesn't make me want to scream. It makes we want to hide. To be nothing. If I'm nothing, it doesn't hurt, and being me really HURTS, sometimes.

It shouldn't. I'm convinced it shouldn't.

But it does. Worse than anything.

I hug my knees and I'm gasping for air. A grey box, closing in around me.

I'm in my bedroom.

I'm on a spaceship.

Can't get up. Can't escape it. And because this pain doesn't mean anything, because it's not *real*, I can't get it to leave. I want to cry. I don't want to be in my bedroom, or on a spaceship, or think about what comes next because for the rest of my life it's gonna be this, and nobody's gonna care because I'm not supposed to BE like this—

Breathe.

Breathe.

I'm shivering.

My MeshMate comes to the rescue, stimulating me to the gills.

It takes a while to unshackle my arms from my body. I sit against the wall, head tilted back, focusing on the glowstrip above me.

Shit.

At least this time, there was a half-good reason for a breakdown. Usually, I don't even get that much.

I need more water.

"Hey. Stop slacking," Wake says. She's in the corridor, hands on hips.

I can't muster up a witty retort. "Wake, I need a second. Please."

"Oh! Okay." She stands there, slightly awkwardly, wondering whether she should smile or not. "Did something happen?"

I exhale, preparing to get back up. It's an effort, my voice foreign in my ears. "Just having a little panic attack. D'you, uh, want anything specific?"

"Could you look at my arm? Pretty please? It still hurts."

"I can look at your arm."

Normal.

I can be normal, right?

I can also be a little peeved Wake isn't more concerned about me, but I guess she's like that, sometimes (or I'm doing TOO good a job at 'normal').

We make our way back past the cockpit, following directions to the medbay. I can hear Finn and Sinas playing a game, I think; Sinas is putting on a ridiculous accent that sounds like Russian Squidward, and Finn laughs. He properly *laughs*, like he can't breathe, and now I know how birdwatchers feel when hearing a rare species for the very first time. I poke my head in to see them leaning over a trajectory visualisation, sharing some grade-A eye contact, and it's all very cute, especially when Finn wiggles his arms like an octopus for some reason and Sinas shoves him aside.

Wake giggles. "Leave them alone," she says, pulling me away.

"Happy to," I reply. "Look, I'll even lock the door for them—"

"Alex, let's go."

We pass a few more empty rooms and saunter into the medbay, and at this point, I'm happy concluding we're the ship's sole occupants.

"Do we know whose ship this is, exactly?" I ask. "Or whom Maritime borrowed it from? I'm struggling to believe she could afford a small flotilla."

"I guess that is glitched," Wake says. "Whatever, it's ours now."

"Legally, I'm not sure that holds up."

"We SAVED this ship. It wouldn't exist if not for us. There's a word, for when you voluntarily rescue property that would otherwise get destroyed, in space. Sal— salvage? Legitimate salvage? In *Moon's Haunted*, there's that bit in Season 2 where Lieutenant Violet takes over the pirate ship—"

"—yeah, yeah, in the asteroid field. She gets to keep it after. Is that a real law?"

"Of course!" Wake wriggles out of her vacsuit, then presents her arm. "Although *Moon's Haunted* makes space look MUCH cooler than it is. Or... easier."

"I keep forgetting this is your first time off-world." I start examining her wrist. "It's tough out here, true, but we've done plenty of orbital stuff today, IMO – between all the polluted parts, like hollow-me almost twisting off your arm."

"YOU were cool. Sinas was cool. I just made things worse."

"Yeah, nah—"

"I'm serious. I made things worse. You would've done better if I wasn't here." It's hard to read Wake, sometimes; it's always the same happy-go-lucky voice, even during this dalliance with self-flagellation. "I'm the one who pressed the button controlling the bombs on the station. I'm the one who helped Haru activate the portal. I never listen to you guys. I'm kind of a problem."

"None of that's on you, Wake. It's not like any of us understood what would happen, either. I think it would've happened *anyway*, sooner or later, without us."

Wake shakes her head. "Nope."

"...You really feel that way?"

“I don’t FEEL that way, Alex, it’s objectively true. It’s like this every time. I try to help, and it never works! I waffle on and on about changing stuff, but I never make it better, because I always *mess up*. I’m the worst. I hate it. I *hate* it.” She breathes out, kicking the wall. “Every time, I’m the problem, because I never THINK. I can’t think about what I’m responsible for, either, otherwise I’ll literally kill myself, so— this?” She points at herself. “Trash. It’ll never amount to much.”

“Well, I think you’re being a bit harsh.” Her wrist’s bruised, but likely isn’t broken. “Even if I haven’t known you very long.”

She smiles sweetly. “Wait a few more months. You might change your mind.”

“Let me say this, then. Wake, in many ways, I want to be... you.”

She snorts. “Lol. Alex, I’m not worth the effort—”

“I’m serious! You’re always so always so bouncy, and determined, and confident – *despite* the shit that’s happened, not just today, but throughout your *life*. You being you means you’re incredibly resilient. You keep TRYING. That’s worth something. Trust me, you’ve been awesome today, and as far as I can tell, you’ve always been awesome. I wish I had half of your force-of-nature vibe. The world would be a better place if we had more people like you.”

I look up.

She’s legit about to cry.

“I didn’t mean to make it worse,” I say, but she launches herself at me and wraps her good arm around my neck. I stagger into the wall.

“You’re so *nice*,” she murmurs, my face full of hair.

“I definitely am not.”

“I’m sorry for being a mango.”

“We are, in many ways, equally mango.”

“I’m sorry for arguing. And not listening. And being annoying.”

“It’s OKAY, Wake, honestly. I don’t agree with everything we did today, but I won’t blame you. Besides, you’re my friend, and I don’t mind if we fight a little. Keeps it spicy.”

“Thank you.” Wake steps back, and I have the slight urge to pat her head. (She’d probably murk me.) “You’re strong too, you know,” she adds. “You’re as determined as.”

My lips form a doubtful twist. “I don’t *feel* determined.”

“OK, but I’ve seen you get... heated? Or angry? Or *passionate*,” she says, finding the more complimentary word.

“Sure, that’s just—I feel more in *control* of stuff, when I’m angry. Things hurt less, y’know? Hmm, saying that out loud, it sounds like a super unhealthy coping mechanism.”

“But that doesn’t make it invalid! You’re not strong because you use anger to power through bad situations, sometimes. You’re strong because you’re strong, and you do what needs to be done, no matter what. AND you’ve got way more muscles than me.”

“Wake, I hate to be pedantic, but we have the same number of muscles. I just do more manual labour.”

“It’s not steroids?”

“Of course it’s not *steroids*, Jesus.” I sigh. “I pretend to be confident in the moment, but that’s it. It doesn’t... build to anything. So, we’re in the same boat.”

“What do you mean?”

Huh. What *do* I mean?

For instance, take the fact I like writing stories. I could extend that to ‘I want to tell stories’, in the future; the idea has a nice heft to it, in my mind, because stories help people figure out what the world is, to them (or provide gratuitous wish fulfilment starring your favourite fictional characters). Stories drive people towards their values, and beliefs. The problem is, *I* can’t tell stories if I don’t know what’s important to *me* – and I don’t. I’d be lying. My entire inspiration is a paper mirage, and me faking confidence to get through each day without any kind of actual drive is yet more evidence I’m bad at this.

And maybe I should forge ahead, and learn on the job, but I’d prefer a prior guarantee or a contract stating, ‘one day, this will all make sense’. Instead, I’m coming to understand I’ll never be able to control much, or understand much, and in the face of that, ‘doing my best’ and ‘figuring it out’ aren’t the comforting thought-blankets I need them to be.

I don’t necessarily FEEL strong, is the point.

Just confused.

Wake flicks my chest. “Hey, yoohoo. Alex?”

“M-hm?”

My Mesh connection drops – not the most alarming thing on its own, but that’s when the ghost appears behind her. It floats past the open door of the medbay, its extremities vanishing into the walls. It’s blue.

“Wake?” I whisper hoarsely. “Does your PRISM have any juice left?”

I hold my breath, then poke my head around the doorway. Wake does the same, a half-metre lower. The lampire isn’t coming closer, thank Christ; light dances on the decking as it moves down the corridor, away from the cockpit.

“Is that the one from the station?” Wake whispers. “It looks the same!”

“You think so? I dunno if I can really... tell.”

“Should we follow it?”

“I’m going to say no, and then you’ll follow it anyway, so— sure.”

For what it’s worth, the intruder does look peaceful enough, settling on a calming shade of blue. Sparks drip from its trembling centre, pulsing regularly, and I suppose it’s *vaguely* similar to before. It makes its way past the crew quarters, then descends through the floor, which is inconvenient because we have to pay more attention to physics. Wake has the bright idea of tracking it through Mesh disruptions, sonar pings of corrupted data.

We exit a lift onto the ship’s lowest level – the cargo bay – which is dotted with transport equipment, shipping containers, and one blue lampire (an extra-

special delivery). It's on the starboard side, next to an airlock, nowhere to go except open space.

For once, I'll trust Wake's intuition. I reveal myself, heart pounding. "...Hello?" I clear my throat for a second, less embarrassing attempt. "Hello?"

It appears to spin, coronal spikes rotating around its core. Its light gathers into a curved shape: one peak in the middle, two valleys above it, a final contour below. It rearranges itself a few times, and... it might be a *face*. A face! A theatre-mask imitation, at least, its features half-submerged in shimmering blue.

I smile.

The face smiles back.

Slowly, I tilt my head to the side.

The lampire tilts too.

Holy *shit*, this is mantis. "Can you... understand me?"

In response, the light pulses again, expanding, then contracting, its mouth opening to echo my own gobsmacked gob.

Pulse.

Pulse pulse.

Pulse pulse pulse.

Pulse pulse pulse pulse pulse.

Every time, a slightly longer set. Then it starts again.

Pulse.

Pulse pulse.

"It's doing prime numbers," Finn says, right fucking behind me.

"Ahhh! Why are you so stealthy?!"

"Sorry. I think it's telling us it's intelligent, though. Prime numbers. Maths."

Sinas is here too, similarly astounded. "But what does it *want*?"

Excellent question.

Its energy surrounds me, probing at my mind, but unlike the other lampires, it's not trying to force its way in. Instead, I get hints of images, foreign, too fast to recognise, accompanied by a sense of—frustration (or, I'm projecting).

Release.

Words, from an unknown faucet.

Dissolve.

They're gaps in the Mesh, in the hum of the ship.

Reborn.

The face frowns.

Anew.

"Release," I say. "Dissolve. Reborn. Anew."

Help her see.

An alarm goes off. It's the proximity alarm, for an incoming ship, and it's LOUD, sirens blasting red light. The lampire dives through the cargo ramp, out of sight, and I wonder where it'll turn up next.

“Actually,” Sinas says, “we came here to warn you that Farah’s ship is here. They’re ready to dock. That’s the reason for all this... ceremony.” He puts his hands over his ears. “Where’d the lampire come from?”

Wake shrugs. “It was just hanging around.”

“Sure. Okay. Fine. Clearsky.”

There’s an earthquake, deep beneath our feet, as the amdrives adjust our velocity for rendezvous. We gather in front of the cargo airlock, while it extends to meet that of the approaching ship, then pressurises, readouts turning green.

I feel I should keep expectations low. We haven’t had the *best* experiences trusting unknown people, and we don’t even know how many people are on this ship, apart from one (apparently friendly) voice on the Mesh. Wake, very politely, tries to scrape the dirt from her boots, as if preparing to enter a friend’s house.

We should be ready for anything.

The door opens. On the other side is...

Hope?

Sure, let's go with hope.

Hope, and – I’ll be honest – a concerning amount of firepower.

PART III

RISE

FINN XIV

When I look at us, then the people filling the airlock, it's like a gag from a comic strip – they're full-on soldiers, with bulky black Australian AstraForce uniforms, and unless we're Superman, or maybe the Muktian cyborg assassin from hit TV series *Moon's Haunted*, I don't think we NEED to be outnumbered five-to-one.

"Hi!" Wake says.

"Stand right there," a female voice replies. "We'll check for contamination. Then you can come aboard." Our welcoming committee maintains a terse separation, their carapace-like armour reminding me of slaters, disturbed from beneath an old paver. Little friendliness is reflected in their gold-plated visors, but no outward hostility, either.

A medical drone floats down the ramp. I T-pose as it scans me with a collection of tubes and pipes that clack-clack-clack like castanets. I'm poked by every corner of the electromagnetic spectrum, then by a curved needle that steals blood from my pinkie finger. Grey plague quarantine checkpoints are still quite common, but I suspect this is to check if I'm a ghost.

On most days, I'm approximately twenty percent ghost.

The drone decides this is acceptable. It moves on to Wake, and I can't help feeling at any moment, the world will start to *hurt*; as if this airlock is stained-glass fakery that'll shatter into a violent rainbow if I tap the cracks *just* right, revealing the hideous maelstrom beneath. Perhaps, if I imagine it, I can make the closest soldier turn their weapon left instead of right (but she doesn't) or make the ocean-blue glowstrips flicker (but they don't), the failed ruler of a lucid dream. That persistent insecurity invades every nerve fibre, battling the relief I want to allow myself to grasp.

I'm safe. This is real.

These soldiers are here to protect us.

This'll all be over soon™.

I catch my head dipping towards my chest and force myself awake. The bot complains when it gets to Alex and the soldiers twitch, but after a few more scans, it apologises and lets her pass.

There's another person at the rear, whom I hadn't noticed – a woman, looking at her feet, back bent, possessing a certain stillness. She's wearing a blue ship's jumpsuit, her tanned skin a similar shade to mine, dark and dense ringlets gathered round her shoulders.

She straightens, slipping between the assembled soldiers, until she's close enough to consider our sweat-lined faces. Despite that, I'm not sure she entirely wants to be here (like me, when I'm stuck in an unfamiliar conversation at a party. Stay? Leave? Awkward either way.)

"I don't believe it," she says uncertainly. "You're real. I wasn't expecting you to be... real."

There's a pause.

"Okay," Alex says. "Well, we are. Is something wrong?"

She abandons her initial thought for a restrained smile. "Just a coincidence – an extraordinary one. I'm Farah, by the way. We spoke, earlier. I'm so, so glad you made it." Suddenly, the smile loses its bonds, beaming across the room.

She has nice eyes.

"I'm assuming the coincidence is a good one," Sinas says.

"Yes, of course. Let's talk on the way. I'm sure you're tired – and in need of treatment." She glances at one of the soldiers. "Let's assign them to the medbay; are there spare medical pods?"

"There are enough, unless we run into another problem."

"Good. That's good."

With that, she leads us through the ship. Soldiers peel off until only two remain, one leading, one trailing. The ship is larger and more organic than the transport we escaped on, beaming so much Mesh data at me it's almost... normal. Root-like structures form skeletons for rooms and corridors, twisted around each other for strength and warmth. We pass scorch-marks on the ceiling, scrubbed at by AutoDrones, then another marine ferried by a hover-stretcher. Everything's cast in pale, undersea light, the walls alive with a rainbow sheen.

"To give you what passes for an introduction," Farah begins, "I happened to work on Illumination, long ago. Nowadays I'm quite low on their list of preferred contacts, but when word of a possible attack on Starfish came through, the Australian government scrambled whoever was nearby. I was the closest thing to an expert consultant within a one-week radius." She gestures to the marines. "*They're* only here because of a drill exercise. We really, really came as fast as we could; we weren't intending to be too late."

"You weren't too late for us," Sinas says.

"You escaped without our help, though. You saved yourselves."

"Barely," Alex mutters.

"The entities attacked us, as well, when we got too close. We didn't have the equipment to deal with it. Nobody does – not at scale." Her words are supported by the state of the medbay: a bubble of faint groans and bustling orderlies, shielded from full view by privacy curtains.

The image of Starfish, pulling itself apart, fills my mind.

Black-hole shadows, rearing above the clouds.

I close my eyes.

“Did anybody else make it?” Wake asks. “Any other ships?”

“Some,” Farah says. “Fewer than we expected. The situation went downhill so quickly that... it became difficult to monitor. Difficult to warn people, or change outcomes, since we were instructed not to break secrecy. Several transports and escape pods *did* retreat to a safe distance early on, but many were damaged during the initial attack. Several more ships – including yours – managed to undock before the end.”

“Then are more ships coming? More help?”

“...Not yet.”

“But we need help,” Sinas says. “People need help. The ghosts got to Titan. It’s not just Starfish anymore.”

“It’s not. But it’s also not that simple.” She chuckles, ninety percent bleakness, ten percent humour. “Originally, this was a preventative mission. Then we received your distress call, and our focus became control. Then, the entities ripped a hole in the universe and ‘focus’ was no longer a relevant concept. Personally, I’m— I’m just a consultant. A scientific expert. Armed conflicts, humanitarian relief, those sorts of activities are above my pay grade. But that also can’t be an excuse. We need to do what we can.”

“You do,” Sinas says.

“The trouble is, our directives state news of this incident cannot become public. Illumination CAN’T become public. That limits our scope. Plus, the speed of light, the speed of space travel – they’re limiting. Even if we asked for help *now*, it’ll be a while before it arrives.”

“You’re saying *secrecy* is still a problem?”

“I’m saying there are limits on what I can do. Of course, I don’t believe information suppression is our most important concern, but—I’m on a leash. A short one.” She can’t quite meet our eyes. “I’m sorry.”

Alex’s ensuing yawn is a bulldozer. “Okay, you’re sorry, we’re grateful for the pickup, blah blah, blah. Problem is, that’s not what WE decided.”

“We’re flying to Thebe,” Sinas says, very casually.

“Thebe? Why?” Farah asks.

“You tell me,” Sinas says. “You’re the ‘expert consultant’, aren’t you?”

Her play at innocence doesn’t *seem* outwardly sus. “I believe there’s an abandoned Australian base on Thebe. A mining base. It was stripped, a while back. In theory, there’s no longer anything useful there.”

“And?”

“And what? You think it something might happen?”

“This doesn’t work if you’re not going to be honest,” Sinas says evenly.

“Tell me what you’re getting at – then I can answer you. Truthfully.”

“There’s another Illumination gate on Thebe,” Wake says. “At least, we think there is.”

“We KNOW there is,” Alex adds.

Farah frowns. “I’m not convinced that— hmm. Are you sure?”

Alex nudges me with her elbow. “...Finn saw it. Right?”

Eugh, here we go.

Farah turns to Alex, then me. “What precisely does that mean?”

“I went into Illumination, on Starfish,” I reply. “When I was coming back out, I could feel two exits. One on Starfish, and the other... it might’ve been on Thebe.” The first words I’ve said to this lady are basically ‘I saw it in a dream’, but she isn’t overly surprised.

“Interesting. Well, here’s me being ‘honest.’” She glances at the floor, thinking. “Decades ago, Thebe was optioned as a site for covert scientific experimentation – including a possible Illumination test. According to the files I have access to, though, that portal was never built. I *remember* the arguments about those budget cancellations.”

“That could’ve changed,” Sinas says.

“It could have. I can ask. The powers that be might not be willing to give me answers, though.” She sighs. “You were *seriously* intending to head there?”

“We were intending to RACE there,” Wake says. “Now this portal’s gone, we’re pretty sure the people who wanted to open it – and maybe the people who wanted to close it, too? – are heading to Jupiter, to mess with this other site. We were gonna follow them, to make sure things can’t get like— worse. It was bad, on Starfish. It would be terrible if that happened to more people.”

“You’re telling me.” She stands very still for a moment, then clasps her hands. “Several ships escaping from Starfish Station were observed starting burns towards the inner planets.”

“Evidence!”

“I’ll ask nav for access to observation satellites to point at Thebe. If we spot anything suspicious, I’ll take it seriously – you have my word. God knows, we’ve been punished for not taking things seriously ENOUGH till now. Either way, I appreciate the warning. You’re very brave, wanting to go back into the fray.”

“And if we’re right?” Alex asks, ignoring the compliment. “What then?”

“It’s hard to say. We might be kept here, to help with cleanup, while other resources handle the Thebe issue – it’s a long week’s travel to Jupiter. We’re trying to keep people safe. It’s an evolving situation.”

“Does ‘keeping people safe’ involve telling them the truth?”

She provides a gaunt, awkward smile. “I told you, it’s not my decision. But I’ve a feeling the truth will be harder to hide, from now on. In your view, would ‘safety’ involve stopping Illumination research altogether? Forever?”

“I... dunno,” Wake says. “Maybe.”

“Maybe not,” Sinas replies.

An unrelated issue is that my knees are about to buckle, from holding me up in the ship’s thrust gravity (along with everyone else’s). Alex is taking on the sheen of one of those mummies that are discovered buried beneath a glacier.

“This is a discussion for tomorrow,” Farah says. “You should get some rest. *Plenty* of rest. I’ll make sure to consult you before we make any irreversible choices; after all, perhaps you’re the experts now, not me. I can probably justify that reasoning to the military side, as long as we maintain discretion.”

“Oh good,” Alex says glumly. “WE’RE the experts. Comforting.”

“Sorry,” Farah says. “Part of the deal with ‘evolving situations’, et cetera. I promise you’re safe, though. Sleep well.”

‘Sleep well’. We’ve come so far from ‘don’t shoot’.

Two soldiers remain by the medbay entrance, but otherwise, we’re left to our own devices.

“She seems nice,” Sinas says.

“Better than Haru. And Maritime. And Pendant. And Khorin,” Wake says.

“High bar,” I murmur.

“But she HAS cleared it,” Sinas says. “So far.”

“So far,” Alex echoes.

“I’m giving optimism a shot.”

The medical pods are shaped like wombats, and empty ones in the medbay are equally as rare, but Alex and I locate a pair in the corner.

In the bathroom, I strip off my vacsuit, rubbery origami pooling by my feet. My hair is an unruly savannah in the mirror, hiding dried-blood creeks and a mountain range of bruises. The water’s refreshing, though, as I wash my face. It runs down my neck, into my crumpled t-shirt.

Behind the glass, insistent Mesh alerts glint, as if I could fall straight through into endlessly reflected fractal chaos. The colours swim, making my body feel weightless. I lean over the sink, focusing on the suit’s texture at my feet; not the dull barbs of pain inside me, as if Illumination still does have hooks in my heart.

This is *my* nation. My territory. It does what I want.

The Mesh flickers. It’s only an authorisation request, allowing the medical staff to examine me overnight.

<Authorised.> I trust Ferdinand to wake me up if anybody tries to steal my organs. (Or maybe he’d join in. He is a lizard, after all.)

The medpod shifts to cradle me as I lie down, and its sense of security – as I wait, silent, searching for calm – feels oddly foreign or undeserved. Ferdinand curls up beside me, his simulated warmth expanding into that emptiness.

The lights dim.

Alex slips into her pod nearby.

I stare at the ceiling, arms crossed, vampire in a coffin.

Doesn’t this feel... similar?

Too similar. Me, once again lying awake in a hospital pod, recovering after a catastrophe that nearly killed us.

Me, figuring out how much I can reasonably lie, to “keep everyone safe”, just like last time.

Exactly like last time. The air’s cold on my skin.

Three years ago, it was my choice to make. It's not that what happened was my fault – it mostly wasn't. I was simply the privileged individual who got to remember the full, grisly details of what tore us apart, which *should've* driven the Illumination project into the ground. I was thirteen, naïve, scared, haunted, and in hindsight, hiding the truth was a huge mistake because it propped up a tower of lies that should've just... toppled, like one of those metaphorical trees in a metaphorical forest. Now, too many people are around to hear it.

If I lie here, thinking these same old lies, it'll end up being the same old story: an ouroboros, or a Mobius strip.

A fractal.

My mum's gone. Countless people are dead. It's the same, but also *worse*, like every time they try to reboot Star Wars. For things to be different, I'll have to tell the truth.

Tell them what happened, the first time we met. What we did.

I'll do it. I'll do it tomorrow.

I will.

I could also... not.

Is that selfish? Maybe it doesn't matter anymore. We're okay now. Once we set foot on Earth again—

I should tell them.

I don't want to.

But... I will. Right?

Perfect darkness, soothing breaths, more brain-numbing exhaustion than I've ever felt, and yet, I'm not doing a very good job at sleeping.

"Can you believe this?" Alex whispers, at classic 'are you awake' volume.

I could say nothing; wait until we both drift off.

"What part?" I murmur.

She shifts under the covers. "Us. Them. Your mum. MY mum, technically. Running from bad guys. Running from ghosts – sorry, 'higher-dimensional entities'. Running back *towards* the ghosts. Weirdly, I'm primarily hung up on the 'mum' thing, it's fu— bloody unbelievable. How do you feel about it, though? About Haru? Since... yeah. Y'know."

"I *don't* know," I say. "It doesn't hurt as much as I thought it might. I might feel different once I've..."

"Processed it?"

"I suppose." I'm quite good at compartmentalising, then chucking the compartment down a mineshaft.

"You suppose, huh. You *reckon*." She sucks air through her teeth. "It's so ash that there wasn't time. In an ideal world – even a mildly non-shitty one – there would've been more time, for us, and her. Maybe I would've **LIKED** getting to know her, and you, because you do seem nice, and maybe it would've been... 'nice'. Now it's glitched, because my parents **ARE** nice, and I don't want that to change even if I'm genuinely from a different family, and— okay, the last thing you wanna hear is my self-pity. You've got it worse. A hundred times worse."

"It's okay. I don't mind."

"You never do, huh."

She sounds frustrated. Half-convinced.

I stare at the ceiling.

Faint shadows, ghosts of colour, the blinking lights of medical monitors.

"It's just that things were *great* before this! My existence was like, an orbital little bubble! And fine, bubbles are temporary, but I was properly, properly happy. Now it's a mess. It's limbo. It's whatever's left after a mudslide." She sighs forcefully, out of sync with my own shallow breathing. "Not a unique problem, but I love moaning, and then pointing out how effing *self-aware* I am."

I wonder if the others can hear us; probably not, thanks to the privacy screens around each set of pods.

Perhaps, then, this could be good practice. For tomorrow.

"Part of me... likes the mess," I say.

"Oh yeah? Never picked you for being a messy bitch."

"I have definitely never been called that before."

"Glad I could bring you this new experience. Sorry, keep going. I'll shut up."

"I just meant— my bubble was nice, too. And when I was inside it, I never minded, but... it was also lonely." I swallow, which takes a while to work its way down my throat. By the time it has, I've worked out what to say. "You keep calling yourself happy, and saying you were happy, but maybe you aren't. Or weren't."

"Wow. Big assumption."

"People who're genuinely stoked with their lives aren't constantly trying to prove it." I imagine a flash of anger in the dark, which stays imagined, for now. "It reminds me of parts of... me, being confused, wanting a handhold to latch onto, except instead, you're... suffocating. It's OK if you are, or if you don't know why. It happens." I can't believe my mouth's still moving.

"Which part, then?"

"Hmm?"

"Which part of YOU are we talking about, specifically?"

That's the problem with sharing. People love follow-up questions.

"Sometimes, I don't understand... people," I say. "Or, I'm afraid of them. Afraid of hurting them. Afraid of being friends because then I *could* hurt them, or they could hurt me. It can become this all-consuming feeling, which I realise doesn't make much sense, but I've never— never been able to understand it. That's why I can be quiet, sometimes. A lot of the time. That's why it's good I'm mostly okay, being on my own. It limits, the, uh... scope, of the issue."

"You don't seem like the type to pollute other people. Are you?"

"No."

"Then is there a reason you feel that way?"

Technically, there is, but it's not great. "It's just the way my brain works."

"So this is hard, for you."

"...It's rare."

“Huh.” She thinks for a moment. “Personally, I reckon you shouldn’t be scared, but that’s not a fix for ‘the way your brain works’. Are you always this chatty when you’re mega-tired?”

Drawing attention to the fact I don’t talk much is a great way to make me not want to talk much. To her credit, Alex appears to figure this out.

“So, back to the thing,” she mutters.

“The thing,” I reply.

“Yeah, the thing – about me not being happy. You’re not right... but you’re not wrong, either.

“Am I allowed to ask why?”

“I’ll allow it, sure, but dredging up an answer is another puzzle entirely. An enigma. A conundrum. It’s not as if I’m sad, or depressed, or one of those null-life bogans who show up crying at Maccas at 2AM hoping they’ll get a box of nuggets out of sympathy. No judgement – nuggets are *great*. Bogan status would only ENHANCE the nuggets. But that part’s not what I struggle with. It’s after.” She sniffs. “Before you ask, ‘after what?’, that’s kinda the crux of the issue.”

“I’m not sure I understand...”

“Yeah, let me back up. The thing is, I WAS happy. Our farm, the town, my school – none of it was perfect, of course not – but it was *nice*. Early mornings on the bus, hanging out late on Friday nights, so far, so glacier. Every now and then, though, I’d feel this— this overwhelming pressure of *not fine*, about next week, or next year, or ten years from now, and then I’d be the opposite of okay. The source of it wouldn’t necessarily be me, but it’d be things that usually made me happy, making me sad instead, and the real spiral was that I’d never be good enough to find a way through it, like this meaningless inescapable black hole of anxiety projected forwards until the fucking heat death of the universe. It’s *ash*.” The word punctuates the dark like a bullet. “It means I can’t believe in... life. I can TRY, but the best I can do is ‘sort of’. You can’t build a future on ‘sort of’.”

I wonder if she’ll say more.

“It’s okay to be anxious,” I say. “Or depressed.”

“It’s okay to be scared, too.” She sighs again. “That doesn’t make it *less* ash, though.”

“True.”

“Maybe one day, you won’t have to be.”

“Scared?”

I hear her turn, onto her side, and for the first time, I glance towards her in the gloom. She’s already looking at me, her pinprick eyes gently sharp. Even if we aren’t *identical* twins, the resemblance is obvious once you know it’s there.

“I thought I knew what I wanted,” she murmurs, “or where I’m headed, but clearly, there was a reason I came all this way to bloody woop-woop.”

“To find out?”

“Yeah, nah. Who knows.”

“Either way, it’s alright not to.”

“But I feel like everyone does. People *know*. Life’s just... happening so fast.”

“Like, today?”

“Like the future. Like growing up.”

She falls silent, her eyes flicking down. I can sense the machinery turning in her head.

The past eats away at me, making me want to gather the unspoken words littering the floor between us, but I choose to be a ghost once more; a shade of the underworld.

“Not a fan of that look,” Alex says.

I wasn’t aware I had a ‘look’. “I can explain.”

“Sure. What’s up?”

“There’s something I’ve been meaning to say... something I want to say. Tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow, huh?”

“It’ll be better to talk then.” I promise.

“Sounds good. I mean, I haven’t got any plans.” She smiles.

It doesn’t take me long to fall asleep.

Hours later, my eyes snap open.

Bright light. White walls. Face in a surgical mask, leaning over me.

“Hi,” it says. “How’re we doing today?”

The face – now attached to a body – removes a drip from my forearm. I’m told it’s 3PM, ship time, which means I’ve been sleeping for... thirteen hours?

“Alright,” I say, in the grand scheme of things. “Nothing hurts. Just a bit fuzzy.”

“That’ll be the painkillers,” the orderly says. “You guys were basically being held together by painkillers and *spite*.” He fusses over a datapad. “We stitched up that nasty cut on your head, and treated an internal muscle tear. We ALSO noticed some light cell-level radiation damage, so my advice is you should all stay away from fusion reactors for the next few weeks.”

“Um... okay.”

“I was a little worried when you first came in, since your healbots thought you’d stopped breathing for an hour or two there – I’ve never seen that before, at least in someone who’s still alive. I gave your circulatory system a once-over, though, and it looks fine.”

“Huh.” I do my best to sound surprised.

“Anyway, you’re free to leave, if you like. Your friends left already. We’ll ping you this evening for a checkup.” He smiles under his mask, then moves to the next bed, sliding the privacy screen aside. There’s a marine there, shoulder covered in slimy HealGel. “*How’re we doing today? Still memory loss issues?*”

“*Yep. After we barricaded ourselves in the bridge, it’s blank.*”

I’m not usually a breakfast person, but today, I’ll make an exception.

The nearby foodsynth station provides me its best attempt at eggs, bacon and a croissant (I’m feeling fancy), plus mushrooms to avoid any diet-related

guilt. None of it's real, obviously, but this stuff? Totally passable. It's WAY higher quality than what we'd get at school, anyway, or what the city hands out for universal rations. Real biological ingredients are a luxury.

I eat.

I brush my teeth.

Ferdinand spits out a drizzle of curated MeshFeeds: social media pings, dumb memes from my friends, artwork from a few artists I follow. Easy content. *Comforting* content. I activate a subtle shader for my clothes, giving them anime-style outlines, then add a privacy filter to my outgoing data which the ship's AI *does not* like. It's basically my regular school morning routine.

In the bathroom mirror, though, my face is tired.

Some people just have tired-looking eyes.

I'm stubbornly avoiding thinking about my mother, about any waves of feeling that could crest inside me, spinning like a loading icon stuck at 98%.

In the end, I decide to reply to my friends in the group chat.

combfoot#8606: <yo you ok finn? heard some nasty stuff is going on around saturn>

poxei#1479: <yeah what's up?>

poxei#1479: <got kinda worried>

timberhearth#4013: <hey>

timberhearth #4013: <so>

timberhearth #4013: <it's been hectic, but i'm alive>

timberhearth #4013: <can't talk much right now>

timberhearth #4013: <but thanks>

With the light delay, it'll be a few hours before any response.

I step outside, and find myself wandering the ship.

The *Paradise Scaffold*, it's called – oddly poetic, for a military patrol cruiser, in an ominous sort of way. It's not particularly large, with a crew of around fifty. Still, seeing a new *Thorny Devil*-class cruiser from the inside is much more fun than skimming its Wikipedia article. Sometimes, I can't help being a ship nerd – eight decades ago, we'd only sent a few unmanned probes to Saturn, so having colonies and shipping lanes out here is incredible when you think about it. I try visiting the reactor room but am politely-but-firmly rebuffed, and for the sake of picking a direction, I start towards the bow instead. Pretty soon, I'm turning around again. As I said, not a big ship.

I'm not really thinking about much. Just walking.

I'll do it today. I'll figure it out today. My mum. Alex. Sinas. Everything.

So much I SHOULD be thinking about, yet I can't bring myself to focus, or message the others quite yet. Instead, I put on a podcast, zoning out. "*Hello, and welcome to Friends at the Table, an actual play podcast focused on—*"

This is, of course, when Farah pings us. <Meeting on Public MeshChannel 3. Join as soon as you can. We're assessing our next course of action.>

I find a seat, strap myself in, and open the link, my consciousness sliding into a virtual conference room. It's disorienting at first, but only takes a second

to get my bearings. My brain's gotten used to being in several places at once. Everybody beams in around an oaken conference table: Wake, Alex, Sinas, Farah, plus two officers my MeshMate introduces as N'golo (he/him, shaved head) and Stellarmire (they/them, pointy nose). I'm not sure if I should salute.

"Hi Finnstagram," Alex says brightly.

"Hi... Falexbook." I take a seat, Mesh legs matching the positions of my truespace ones.

We get right to it.

"The situation near Jupiter has become— complicated," N'golo says. His broad shoulders are barely contained by a grey-green uniform, partnered with an unexpectedly boyish voice. "After your comments yesterday were relayed to us, we focused our sensor arrays on Thebe. Overnight, we detected a spike in strangelet emissions from the moon – not extremely noticeable if we hadn't known where to look, but unlikely to be a statistically random occurrence."

A hologram of Thebe appears above the table.

"The moon itself is on the order of hundred kilometres in diameter, and orbits 150,000 kilometres from Jupiter's outer atmosphere. It's home to several minor stakeholder interests, including a dismantled Australian/American research station; an resource exploration site and databank owned by the Gemini Conglomerate; and a pirate drone-dock, with apparently null status."

The hologram spins to each location in turn, crossing the harsh boundary between lightside and darkside. Thebe isn't the prettiest moon I've laid eyes on; its enormous impact craters and polar mountains are nearly as large as the central body itself, making it lumpy, asymmetrical, and altogether half-finished. Glittering ice patterns its reddish surface. It's odd, but not *interestingly* odd.

"Several hours ago," N'golo says, "GemCon launched four additional ships into Thebe orbit. It's unclear if they have confirmation of unusual activity on the moon's surface. Attempts to communicate have been... unproductive."

"GemCon owns a significant corporate stake in Titan," Stellarmire adds, "as part of their Earth-3 terraforming project. Given what's happening on Titan right now, their Thebe response could be an abundance of caution." They clench their jaw, scraping fingers across a thin ginger beard. "AstraForce has launched a scoutship for close-range monitoring, which will arrive on station tomorrow. The trouble is, there's *also* a Chinese battlegroup doing exercises in Jupiter orbit and plonking a scoutship right in the middle of the pack isn't a good look, diplomatically. So, yes – the situation's complex."

"And that's before putting Titan in the equation," N'golo says. "Either way, the existence of a dormant research station on Thebe isn't public knowledge." He glances at Farah. "However, if anybody starts looking, there's a good chance it'll be found. That it isn't as dormant as it *should* be is a significant concern."

"The risk assessments are unfavourable," Stellarmire agrees.

"As for the extremist group that caused the Starfish incident: two of their vessels appear to be supporting humanitarian efforts on Titan, whilst two others departed Saturnian orbit immediately, on a hyperbolic transfer towards Jupiter.

Clearly, there are ongoing intelligence operations, and we'd rather it doesn't become an open conflict."

Stellarmire frees up one hand to count with. "In summary, there are five parties proximal to Thebe, or due to be proximal within a week. Additionally—"

"Don't forget the ghosts," Wake says. "That makes six."

"Beg your pardon?"

"The lampires. Entities. Disco monsters."

"We're confident we can control the situation to prevent that eventuality," Stellarmire replies. "Motivated by the advance warning you've given us."

"You don't KNOW though, right? Because you can't ask for help. Because you're not allowed to tell people about Illumination—"

"We'll keep Illumination off the board," N'golo says. "We have no reason to believe the situation on Thebe is uncontained. Although Ms. Oliveira believes the Thebe portal may already be open, because one of you... entered it? And came back?" He glances at Farah again. "Is that possible?"

"It's supposed to be," Farah says, shrugging. "It's why these kids are here. Anyway, you can ask them. It'd be an odd thing to lie about."

"Mr. Hanamura – you saw an open exit on Thebe station, correct?" Stellarmire asks. "How sure are you?"

"It— y-yes, it felt like there was one," I stutter. "I didn't stick around."

To their credit, the officers mostly hide their scepticism.

"How far is it to Jupiter from here?" Wake asks.

"A week or so," Sinas says. "Only because Jupiter's on the same side on the Sun."

"Closer to ten days," Stellarmire adds, "if we burn hard."

"Fast ship," Sinas replies.

"She is." A slight smile.

"What I'm hearing is that reaaaaalllly, we should've followed Finn, and jumped through the portal to Thebe," Wake says. "Then it would've taken, like, ten minutes to travel there."

"Regardless, we're presented with a difficult choice," N'golo says. "Option one: stay here, and support containment-slash-cleanup efforts throughout the Saturnian sector. Option two: exfiltrate immediately and chart a course for Thebe intercept. In both cases, we won't be the only players in the area – it depends on where you think we'll be most useful, given your experiences. We'd like to take your input into consideration."

The hologram swaps to an image of Saturn.

Iridescent aurora twist and turn, digging up planet-cracking storms. Searing lightning bolts illuminate kaiju-shaped clouds, their curling, gaseous tendrils leaking into space, fuelled by a scarlet glow, deep within. Titan isn't faring any better, with hints of fire, smoke, and emergency flares blended into its methane haze. Whatever mess the portal's death created, it doesn't look like it'll die out as swiftly as we'd hoped.

"What does containment involve?" Sinas asks.

“We’re not sure,” Stellarmire replies.

“Is there a casualty count?”

“Again, nothing confirmed. It depends on what ‘casualty’ means in this context. Our response is being formulated. Recovery tools for this type of event aren’t exactly commonplace.”

“There’s gonna be *heaps* of hollows down there,” Alex murmurs.

The placid opacity of Titan’s atmosphere makes it easier to imagine the worst. As if reading my mind, the hologram switches to radar data, revealing the flower-like arcologies dotting the stricken moon’s surface.

“Hollows’?” Sinas asks. “You mean the empties?”

Alex nods. “Yeah, so I was thinking about this a few hours ago—”

“You were *awake* a few hours ago?”

“Early riser. It’s a farm thing. I was chatting with Farah, explaining what went down on Starfish – the important bits – when it popped into my head again: hollows. Finn says it’s not too medieval. It’s better than ‘empties’, I reckon.”

“Yes, because you suggested it.” Easier to debate etymology than a course of action.

Saturn pulses, a glacial heartbeat.

“I hate to think we’re abandoning people,” Wake says, “and it totally, **TOTALLY** sucks if we do. But my vote’s Thebe. That’s where we – the four of us – can make the most difference.”

Alex nods. “If we can prevent a repeat, it’s worth it. Besides, we’re not soldiers, or medics. We’re not *priests*. Looking at Titan right now, I wouldn’t know where to start. We *could* give advice on how to not die, maybe, but would it be good advice? No clue.”

“Thebe was our original decision,” Sinas murmurs. “My vote’s unchanged.”

“Same,” I say.

“Then we’ll take that under advisement,” N’golo replies. “I’ll contact the sector chief, who has the final decision. If we **DO** end up leaving the system, we’ll notify you shortly. The journey will likely be under cryosleep.”

“Thanks for your input,” Stellarmire adds. “This isn’t... a typical scenario.”

“If it was typical, you wouldn’t be listening to us, right?” Sinas asks dryly.

Before an answer, they dissolve out of the sim. The lack of army uniforms immediately makes the conference room less tense.

“They seem nice,” Sinas murmurs.

“Tell you what, it’s lovely to be listened to,” Alex replies. “A real novelty.”

“Did you see the way that Stellarmire guy was checking me out?” Wake asks. “Trying to be, like, subtle?”

“Nope,” Alex replies.

“I **SWEAR** he recognised me from my TwitchToks—”

“Oh, come off it. A forty-year-old military guy isn’t watching your goddamn *TwitchToks*. Besides, you use a MeshSkin, don’t you?”

“He might’ve recognised my voice! I have a distinctive voice!”

“Distinctively annoying, like a galah that won’t—”

Farah sits at the far end of the table, watching us. There's a Coffee² bulb in her hands, gently steaming, and she peers at it, smiling a private sort of smile. It's the opposite of my mother: instead of commanding the room, she's part of the atmosphere, hunched forward, slightly separate from the world as it passes by. A rock, worn smooth by the current. I remember that about her.

When I met the others, three years ago, she was there.

As Farah said – it's an extraordinary coincidence. There must be a deeper reason we're here, a reason my mother arranged it, a reason the Wraith wants us, a reason the same old pieces keep being moved to the same old places.

"It's nice to see you together again," Farah says.

"Again'?" Wake asks.

"I would've thought you'd need more of a recovery, after what happened on Starfish, and... beforehand. I don't even know the details, but I'm sure it— well, I don't want to force you to relive it."

"Oh, I NEED more recovery," Alex says. "I didn't think I'd have to watch so many people die yesterday."

No real way to lighten that sentence.

"Yep," Wake says. "That's trauma." She stares across the conference table.

Sinas settles for, "We tried."

"To do what?" Farah asks.

"Help."

"You four can't carry such outcomes on your shoulders, in this situation. It's good you had each other. You helped each other make it. That's a miracle." She sips her Coffee², followed by a breath. "I realise I don't mean anything to you – that I'm just one person, in a room, telling you things you might not want to hear. But I want you to know I... exist, that's all. I'm here to help. I'd like to." She smiles nervously.

I remember how it felt, as the light squirmed and forced its way inside me.

"Thank you," Alex says.

"I've got more to tell you, actually." Her gaze flicks over us. "But it can wait. A break, first?"

There's still this weight on my back. I've been carrying it, for SO long.

Almost long enough to convince myself it's no weight at all.

Hell's real, and it's coming for everyone, and despite that, what's turned me into a nervous, fuzzy husk is... this.

"I've got something to say, too, before everyone leaves," I stammer. "I remember what happened, the first time we stayed on Starfish. I remember everything. I should – I *want* – to tell you the whole story, about how we met, and how it almost went the same way." I'm light, barely there, the air pressing down on me. I can't move. They're looking at me, these people I've come to rely on, and what worries me most is if they won't appreciate the truth.

"You... remember?" Farah asks. "How?"

"I always did. I just lied."

“Before, ‘everything’ isn’t what you said,” Alex says suspiciously, leaning on the table. “Before, you said you didn’t have *details*.”

“Because I didn’t feel, um... good. About how it ended.”

Alex narrows her eyes. “Keep talking.”

“I never wanted to say this because I never wanted to hurt anybody. I didn’t want the same stuff to happen a second time, but then it did.” I wince helplessly. “It did. Then, when we made it out alive, I realised I had to tell you, because it still hurts, and you’re my—you’re my friends. You’ll... understand why.”

I can’t meet their eyes. It takes too much energy to simply sit, and resist pressing the button that’ll whisk me from the sim.

I have—

—to let—

—GO.

“Jesus Christ,” Alex says.

“I assume you had a good reason,” Sinas says, ever the peacemaker.

“It can’t be THAT awful,” Wake says, ever the optimist.

“Pretending you had no idea who we are?” Alex says. “Real sociopath move. I just wanna make sure you realise that.”

“I do,” I say.

“And?”

“Sorry.”

“Ugh, don’t APOLOGISE. Say the damn thing you wanna say.”

“It might, um, take a little while.” I’m trying to stall my racing heartbeat, so fast and numb I can barely feel it. I hate how I can’t control how I’m feeling, how it isn’t logical, how it’s such a stupid FUCKING thing. It’s fine, Finn.

Room’s too small. Sinas drums his fingers on the table.

It’s fine.

“Finn, let’s get the exposition dump over with,” Alex says. “Either this’ll be the worst thing ever and we’ll gonna hate each other for life—”

“—or somebody’s gonna get chucked in JAIL for life—” Wake says.

“—or maybe we hoverboarded off a space station together and that’s gotta count for something in this messed-up universe. Do your worst. I dare you.”

I do my worst.

FINN XV

I try to pay attention during speeches. It's good manners, after all. But if this speaker's supposed to make us feel welcome, she's not doing a very good job.

Sort of typical, for my mother.

She addresses us from the lectern, 'us' being twenty students in scattered groups. Deserts of empty seats sprawl between each human oasis, partly because we only arrived an hour ago, with no time to make friends. The lecture hall is far too large for us, its circular tiers rising around a central stage, an academic coliseum.

There are twenty-four of us, now.

In a few days, there will be twelve.

Six, by the end.

This is what my mother explains – no sugar-coating. *"The evaluation will be intensive, and you will compete against each other. It will be hard. It may not always be 'fun'. However, for those who make it to the final hurdle, your participation will be a one-of-a-kind opportunity."*

I feel like an outsider. (If I feel that, the others must have it worse.)

Perhaps they're excited? From the faces I can see, I can't tell, as usual.

"There is a designated MeshChannel for all group activities, and you are expected to know when and where activities are scheduled. We will not babysit you, or chase you down if you are late. The first group—"

Another woman approaches from behind and taps her on the shoulder. After a short, whispered conversation, the newcomer speaks. (There's a third person on the stage, farther back, and when her stony gaze skims past me, I instinctively shrink into my seat.)

"Hi! Hello everyone. I... wanted to add a few words, before we're overwhelmed by admin. I'm Farah – I'm sure I'll spend some time with most of you over the next few weeks, during this wonderful experience. Is everyone adjusting to Mars time already? Eager to get started? Great. But it's important to stay safe, too, which is why I'm here."

There's a girl sitting a few seats away from me. She's gripping her armrests EXTRA tightly, a lot of energy in her wound-up muscles. Dark brown hair twists around her shoulders, partly lost in a burgundy jumper.

I've never visited this space station before.

Don't know anyone here, besides my mum.

(I *have* been to Mars, but we aren't landing on its surface; we're staying on the station throughout this generic 'leadership program' I've been signed up for. Weird number of health and safety waivers, though.)

"Looking for something?" the girl whispers.

I blush. It probably seemed like I was staring right at her. "No. Sorry."

"If you're gonna zone out, do it *THAT* way." She points to the stage.

I take her advice.

"That was me, right?" Alex asks, elbows propped on our virtual table.

"I wonder what gave it away," Sinas murmurs, grinning.

"What can I say – if you're already writing fanfic at thirteen years old, you're *incredibly* cool. A big dog." She spreads her hands. "So, we all came to Starfish for this... leadership thing?... With your mum, and Maritime, and Farah?"

"The station orbited Mars, then," I reply. "They moved it after things went down."

"A plan so nice they tried it twice," Wake says brightly. "Was it a similar setup to the science camp we were supposed to attend this time? To, like, con our families into letting us come?"

"Um. Not exactly."

My back's pressed against the side of a squat stone tower, a wooden door to my left. The tower is the only building for miles, endless grass stretching to the horizon, and yet here we are, sneaking around on its second-storey balcony. Sinas listens at the door. He frowns, then shrugs.

I prep a shield from my spell list. Eagles circle lazily.

"*Now!*" A shout from below.

Sinas steps back, connecting his wrists in front of him, palms out, like a flower— and takes down the door with a rippling force-blast. Wood splinters inwards. Aquamarine energy runs sinuously down my arm, solidifying into a shield I can hold in front of me as I dart into the dark interior. I'm immediately surrounded by thick smoke, *TOO* thick, basically solid. Instinctively I raise my shield as a spray of fireballs *thwack-thwack-thwacks* into my shield, dripping lava onto the flagstones. One of my ears is ringing like a bell, but with the other I hear a full-blown riot. The situation must be *busy* on the floor below us. I reach out with my other hand until I find the wall.

Sinas appears beside me. "We sticking to the plan?" he asks breathlessly, firing off another force blast. Smoke gusts, refusing to clear.

“I guess,” I say. The plan assumed we’d be able to see. “If we keep going up, maybe someone’ll figure out how to cancel this smoke.” More fireballs. I flinch.

“Or we’ll find the VIP and win.”

Sure. Let’s go with that.

I head left while Sinas goes right, circumnavigating the tower’s second floor. I’m half-way up when the smoke is replaced by light: a pulsing, fierce glow, fiercer with every step. Then it starts to HURT, a permanent camera flash stabbing the backs of my eye sockets. I take cover something – a pillar? – the tower replaced by strange figures, swimming in my imagination, my brain lost in a fog of impossibility. This must be a trap, an UNFAIR trap. My skin feels like I’ve been hit by one of those fireballs after all, and—

I slam my fist against the floor.

I’m still here. Maybe I could use a blink spell to climb to the next level. I’m about to try when a vine explodes out of the flagstones by my foot, curling tightly around my leg. I try the blink spell and it just yanks my leg painfully; I’m pinned down. Someone must REALLY want me dead, but then a shadow materialises from the light, sword in hand, slicing off the vines at their roots.

“You doing okay?” Sinas asks.

“No. Yes. Not really.”

“I made it all the way around. No stairs, we’ll have to—”

“Blink?”

“That’s the one.” He pulls me up. It’s hard to recall the tower’s floorplan, but if this pillar’s the one I’m thinking of, there’s a trapdoor in the ceiling *slightly* to our right. I aim the blink, hoping for the best, and the world blacks out, replaced by sense of sickening motion.

When it reappears – I’m in a new room.

Third floor? Must be.

And the enemy VIP is here, looking very surprised to be seen without her bodyguards.

She turns to run. I raise my shield to block another vine trap. Plant-growth explodes against the closest wall. I can feel more light being summoned, and I stumble, switching to an offensive spell, just as Sinas appears behind me and snipes her with a lightning bolt.

“Crap!” Alex mutters.

The MeshSim crumbles. In truespace – a bright, austere, VR playroom – the tower is a pre-detail approximation, sculpted from memory foam padding and reconfigurable PolyGrowths. Alex kicks the foam sullenly, more out of theatrics than genuine anger.

I catch my breath, wiping real sweat from my forehead.

“Did we win?” asks a voice from downstairs.

“Nah,” Alex replies. She glares at us. “Two of ‘em snuck up here.”

“Dammit, really? Who was meant to be guarding you?”

“Does it matter?”

“Yes! It’s their fault we just lost.”

“It’s the second day,” Alex replies, “and this is a random teambuilding game. Who cares.”

“Are you joking? I care! They’re watching us constantly. I’m not getting sent home because someone ELSE messed up. Neither should you.”

“Jeez, alright, alright. We’ll win the next one.” She rolls her eyes, then says, more quietly: “My team is taking this WAY too seriously.”

“If they wanted to assess our suitability for surviving in Illumination,” Sinas says, “role-playing as tactical breach wizards is an odd way to do it.”

“Makes sense to me,” Alex says.

“I’m not complaining,” Sinas says. “It sounds fun.”
I swallow. “Yeah, well...”

Am I hungry?

Not really. If I don’t eat, though, I’ll be hungry later, and I don’t have enough pocket money to keep splurging on vending machines. The canteen’s right here, anyway. The plague checkpoint scans for rogue nanobots, then lets me through.

Inside, it’s bustling with workers, and students, and I’m already regretting my upcoming need to awkwardly join a random table; perhaps my mum’s around, though she hasn’t said a word to me since arriving. After being stranded for several minutes, tray of spaghetti in hand, I decide to harass the nearest group that’s approximately my age. There’s technically half an open seat at the end of their bench – well, more of a quarter – and I perch on it, as unobtrusively as possible. There’s delayed shuffling and shifting, once they realise I’ve joined.

“Hey,” a guy says. “You’re Finn, right?”

“And you’re... Tao?”

“Goal! Six points. I’m pretty sure we haven’t been on the same team yet.” Tao’s tall, with a terminal case of shrimp-posture when he rests his elbows on the bench. An AFL jersey hangs loosely from his frame. “What’s the best spot you’ve found on the station so far?”

“Um— what do you mean, ‘best’?”

“I dunno. Anything cool.” He smiles, then shoves his thumb at the kid beside him. “Harrow said there’s a fake beach in the recreation arm.”

Harrow, for their part, has definite aristocratic vampire vibes (assisted by an all-black getup). “It was technically a pool. But there was sand. And waves.”

“Wow. Sand,” says Person Three – another guy – and I realise we’ve fulfilled the age-old prophecy where the male-presenting and female-presenting students cluster at separate tables. “Love sand. Love it when it gets under my fingernails, and all through my undies, and into my d—”

“Woah.” Tao elbows him. “Maybe we can wander around after dinner and check it out; apparently there’s also a suuuper clearsky stealthship in the dock right now, with like, railguns ‘n’ shit.”

“As if they’d let us look at it. What’s on the schedule tomorrow? Did anyone check?”

“I believe tomorrow is more academic exercises,” Harrow replies.

“Uggghh.”

“Ewww.”

“Boring. What’s the yekk is the point?”

“Does anybody ACTUALLY understand what this is for?”

“I bet it’s AI research,” Person Four interjects, from the far end. “Remember that story recently about how corps were like, injecting traits from people into AI learning models, to make metahuman consciousnesses for AutoDrones? They find a bunch of students they can train, figure out which ones are best, and then steal their—”

“My guy, this is a scholarship program,” Tao says. “Not a secret AI trial.”

“I’m just saying.”

“Saying *what*? What are you saying?”

“Level-5 AI was forbidden, after the plague,” Harrow says, placing one stray strand of hair behind one rather pointy ear. “

“If one corp’s doing it, then others are, for sure. What’s stopping them?”

“...Morality? Laws?”

“As if, dude.”

“I don’t understand why we stopped *all* AI research,” murmurs Person Five. “The plague wasn’t that bad.”

A pause of disbelief from the table.

“Excuse me? An ongoing nanobot pandemic *isn’t that bad*?”

“Half of Germany is sludge!”

“People died, dude.”

“Not THAT many people—”

“Don’t be a dumbass.”

“I’m not! Besides, if you’re gonna die, being swallowed by a freaky zombie robot wave isn’t the worst way for it to happen. It’s *pretty* metal.”

“Knock it off. You’re being shitty.”

Tao stays quiet, gazing at his food. In the ensuing silence, the canteen’s background music is awfully upbeat.

I fork up some spaghetti.

“Mind if I sit here?” Sinas asks, standing beside me.

There’s plainly no room, but dutifully, we squeeze inward, clearing nearly enough space. I can’t move my arms anymore, but I guess I’ll manage. Besides, it’s not unpleasant. He gifts me with an apologetic smile, mouths ‘*hey*’, then turns to Tao, who’s apparently friends with everyone. “What’s up?”

“Just, um...” He gathers himself. “Talking about tomorrow.”

“Who were these people?” Alex asks. “If twenty-four applicants got invited, did you ever see them again? Or I dunno, add them as MeshFriends? What am I saying – of course you didn’t.”

“I wrote their names down,” I say, not *too* defensively.

“We should follow up with them,” Wake says. “To like, double-check they weren’t mysteriously kidnapped. Or murked.”

“Usually, the Australian Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation doesn’t make a habit of *murdering* children. That’s for places like the Emmerich Institute.” Alex says. “But you’re right. We should make sure. What’s next?”

I’m minding my own business, trying (mostly failing) to finish a 3D navigation puzzle, when our threads start to fray.

“Did YOU come here to do maths?” Liandri mutters, her braids floating in an agitated cloud. “*I* didn’t come here to do maths.”

“I didn’t come here to listen to you whinge, yet here we are,” Harrow sighs.

“WAY too much sass for somebody who can’t do their job.”

“My *job* is not your business. Your business is the maths, so *do* them, because otherwise we’re coming last. Again.”

Liandri gives them the finger, then springs to the other side of the chamber. Like every other activity we’ve done, I’m not sure what this escape room is supposed to teach us; I understand it’s assessing us in some way (the camera drone spying surreptitiously from the corner makes that far too apparent), but the goal of these games and competitions remains a mystery. ‘Training for future leaders’, fine, ‘scholarship selection’, fine, but why will only a quarter of us pass? What does ‘passing’ even mean? Why can’t we learn what this is all building to?

“Several participants will be selected for a developmental trial,” my mother explained. *“For those who are successful, I cannot understate the reward. Therefore, we encourage you to fully demonstrate your abilities. Opportunities are limited. Although you will be placed in teams and we expect you to work together, outcomes will always be individually assessed.”*

Four of us are stuck inside a cylindrical room, and my specific task is... hard to explain. Imagine there are dozens of tunnels, to be connected into a 3D web, except the only way to make them fit properly is to rotate, zoom and mess with perspective, in unintuitive ways. That part’s not so bad, actually; the problem is it requires far more finger dexterity than my uncoordinated hands can provide. I keep wondering if we should try swapping jobs, but—

“What on Earth are you *doing*?” Harrow asks, in the style of a 18th-century child baron.

“We’re on Mars, not Earth,” Liandri retorts, in the style of someone about to be the subject of their very own true crime documentary.

“Do you want me to take over?”

“No. I don’t.”

I decide to keep any suggestions to myself.

There's another girl in here – Wake, her name is – but she looks so stressed she's about to cry, so that's not an option either. The drone's eyes blink red as it focuses on her.

We soldier on until it's game over.

An alarm sounds, and the walls unfold, revealing five other groups, each in their own puzzle-box. I suppose this means one group's won. In the aftermath, there's more arguing – a LOT more. On the first day, everyone was friendly, but now, on day four, it's already bad. Harrow and Liandri are on the more civilised end of the scale, and Wake's already left to hang out with the winning team.

"We were all waiting for you to finish it! Everyone was waiting!"

"I am SO done with this."

"You should've asked for help!"

A woman named 'Maritime' surveys us with steely eyes. Occasionally, she jots a note on her dataglass, expression unreadable. Another supervisor stands behind her, thick glasses, arms folded, just... watching. Always watching.

"Escape rooms? Hell yes, that's so fun," Alex says. "The way you're describing it sounds a bit lame, but I reckon I must've been stoked."

"It was less fun than you'd think," I reply. "Cause of the, uh— atmosphere."

"They turned it into a competition," Sinas says.

I nod. "The organisers probably thought it would help? Or it'd make us more independent? I don't think they had bad intentions, but..."

"It was a lot of pressure."

"Yeah."

I'm lying on my bed, playing a MeshSim, when Sinas walks out of the shower: chest bare, towel slung over one shoulder, wearing navy tracksuit bottoms. Damp hair sticks to his forehead, which he dries half-heartedly. Suddenly, my game seems much less interesting.

"Where's Anh?" he asks.

"He went to hang out at the observation deck."

"With who?"

"Not sure."

I should thank whichever impartial selection algorithm assigned us to the same cabin, along with a third guy, Anh. I should also thank Anh for not being around much. Honestly, it's been like this since Day 4: a switch flipped inside me, and I started noticing... Sinas. His eternal slouch. His quiet jokes. The way he gels with every group. His dishevelled hair when he comes out of the – ahem – shower. Forget Asta, who I was half-crushing on at school. This is *far* worse.

Play it cool.

Play it cool, as he sits next to me, glancing at my game. "Hey, I finished that sim last year," he says. "It's fun. Not a great ending though. Sorry, spoilers."

“What’s bad about it?” This one’s a strategy game, where you command squads of chunky space marines against armies of menacing aliens, and I’ll be honest, I’m mostly in it for the cool animations. It’s very satisfying to watch tanks roll in and start blasting their lascannons across the battlefield.

“FAR too hard. It feels like they want you to pay extra to make it easier.”

“Ah, one of those.”

“I can give you a few tips if you need.” He grins. “The price is one Curly-Wurly.”

I glance at him. “Seriously? Curly-Wurlys are NOT good chocolate.”

“So you’ll accept my help, but insult my choice of chocolate?”

“Curly-Wurlys are too thin. And the toffee part’s too hard. It either hurts your jaw or gets stuck in your teeth, and the chocolate crumbles everywhere—”

“That’s why they’re good, it takes *work*. It’s satisfying. If your teeth can’t handle it, that’s a ‘you’ problem. Wait – I have a video to show you.” He shuffles closer, and I’m sure there’s no meaning to it, but now we’re in the same mattress divot, forced to lean slightly against each other, and I can feel every electron of electricity that sparks from his bare shoulder. I’m helpless. No, *hopeless*. Ugh.

“Whatever this is, it’s not going to... convince me to join the Curly-Wurly cult.” I regret the lameness as it leaves my mouth, but he laughs anyway.

“Do what you want – I’m happier if I don’t have to share. But no, I saw this on TwitchTok and it’s maybe the best thing I’ve ever seen. Chocolate-related.”

I’m usually annoyed when people get the urge to show me random videos, because it’s never quite as funny as they think, and then I feel bad for not reacting properly.

I can make an exception.

Is this something? Am I... desperately wishing this is something? It’s only been a week, eight days to be exact, and I’d never be that lucky—

“Hey,” he says, and the way he says it makes look at him. I can only meet his eyes for a second, and behind their surface-level twinkle, there’s a deeper cave of... *something*... that makes his arm at my back even more of a distraction. “You in there?”

“Sorry, I— do that. Zone out.”

There’s a knock on the door.

Sinas slithers to his feet. He opens it, and it’s Alex. She’s surprised he hasn’t got a shirt on, but not unpleasantly.

“So, ah... hi,” she says, leaning on one foot, then the other. “Good evening.”

“Hi,” he replies.

“This is your room, huh?” she asks.

“Yup. Similar to yours, I’m guessing?”

“Totally. Yes. Very similar.”

An expectant pause.

“Sorry for the stalking,” she adds, “but I asked Anh where your room was, since you forgot this at the pool.” From behind her back, she hands him a pale blue sweater, rolled up, still damp.

“Huh. I extremely did.”

“Couldn’t find anything else to wear, I guess?”

“It turns out I’ve already lost all my other clothes, except this one pair of track pants.”

“Heh.” Alex looks left, then right, down the corridor, then back at Sinas.

He smiles, waiting.

I sit, waiting.

“Things going okay in your room?” she asks.

“Sure, it’s good. Why?”

“My roomies are... honestly, they’re arseholes. I’m pretty sure one of us is gonna end up dead. Have you been on a team with Liandri yet?”

“I have. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay, just I’m jealous of your setup. I wish I could hang with you instead, y’know? And— oh, hey Finn.” She spots me inside.

“Hey,” I say.

Something strange is occurring here.

“Well, I’ll... leave you guys to it.” She waves, arm half-raised. “Night.”

“Goodnight,” Sinas says. “Thanks for the sweater.”

“No dramas.”

The door closes.

Sinas stands there, facing the plastic, then glances over his shoulder. “We were playing a game at the beach today,” he says, “and I got dared to kiss her.”

“Oh.” I missed some important developments by staying in the room. “Did you?”

“Those were the rules.”

“...Huh.”

“Obviously, it wasn’t real,” he says. “Except, I think she...” An odd look on his face, as he walks towards me. “It’s fine. It wasn’t real.”

Say what you will about Wake, but she’s an expert fisher. “I’ve noticed,” she begins, “there’s a lot of Sinas in this story. A big role for Sinas! A starring role. But the *people* – they’re all saying there isn’t enough *Wake*.”

“I WAS his roommate,” Sinas says.

“Yep!” Wake replies. “Yep, you were.”

My cheeks are going red.

“That was my first kiss, you ass,” Alex says. “Seriously, I cannot *believe* we have what passes for a romantic history. I kissed you? Then gave you the whole puppy-dog act? AGAIN??? Next time I think about doing that, just slap me in the face. Slap me out of it. I’m too far gone.”

“Can’t fix good taste,” Sinas says.

They all turn to look at me. No blushing. “So, um, the next day— wait, again? What does ‘again’ mean?”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Alex grumbles.

That means— I was dangerously close to being in a love triangle *with my sister*.

Bad. Awful. Nobody wants that hanging over their head.

She's realised, too, from her wince.

Let's move on.

<What picture am I holding up?> Pendant asks me.

I have no idea. Zero. Surely we're being pranked.

<First thing that comes to mind> Pendant says.

The problem is I can't SEE the picture; Alex can, but I can't.

<Um... a car?>

<Not a car! It's – drumrolllll – a mountain! A rather lovely one, actually, I wonder where it— never mind.>

Alex and I are standing beneath an arch. It's made of boxes, humming with mysterious, electric secrets, and is encircled by a featureless white enclosure, two arm-spans wide. A divider blocks our respective views of one another, so the enclosure is all I'm able to look at. Earplugs block any ambient noise.

<Finn, next picture. Guess what it is. Really try to concentrate.>

I AM concentrating. <I don't know.>

<Okay, I'll open the link a little further.>

They've connected our MeshMates with the barest trickle of data, as if to set up an artificial telepathic connection – but the link's encrypted, so I'm unsure how that helps. I sense Alex shifting, one foot to another, the lining under my feet shifting with her. She's getting increasingly irritated, I think. This whole charade would end if we could get a single question right – just one – and my own level-headedness is also tilting sideways.

I try to empty my mind. Empty, empty, empty.

Visualise the picture.

<Anything?> Pendant asks encouragingly.

<No.>

<Darn it. Can you hold hands?>

<What?>

<Hold hands, please. A physical connection might help.>

Moments later, Alex's hand appears around the barrier. If a hand could display scorn, this one's doing it. I grab her fingers, a bit too much clamminess involved to make it pleasant.

<Okay, Finn. Your turn.>

A rectangle is cut out of the enclosure in front of me, the exact size of the datapad that appears there. Displayed on it is a photo of an emu, looking generally annoyed, with beady little eyes and scraggly neck-feathers.

I close my eyes.

I think of the emu for endless seconds.

The indigenous Australians had an emu constellation, didn't they? Or not a constellation, but dust clouds, dark sectors, sketched across the Milky Way in negative space.

Light suddenly leaks around the edges of the enclosure: *bright* light, slicing through the gaps between panels.

Alex's hand contracts around mine. <What is that?> she asks.

<Just some, ah, external stimulus.> Pendant's one of the friendlier staff and even *they* can't avoid sounding shift. As the light intensifies, I feel a tickle, like another's fingers, brushing across my mind.

It's *glitched*.

<Alex?>

The tickle becomes a trickle becomes a flood, kneading at the folds of my grey matter: images, sensations, freeze-framed between strobing flashes. Alex's hand is still there, behind the waterfall, and I can't tell if this is coming from her, or— elsewhere. I can't move, can't blink, my body asleep where it stands, my mind wide awake.

There's a voice, calling to me.

It's diluted, a signal stretched far too thin, but it has direction nonetheless. I follow it, or try to, by mental instinct. The illumination grows stronger, a fire, a web, which connects me to... everything. Everywhere. All at once. Within each flash, when I focus, I sense a million Finns in a million places at a million times and some are ME, standing in this same enclosure. I can sense them, see them, and their individual versions of my datapad picture: a car, a mountain, a table, an apple, a family, a tea towel, an argument, an—

Emu.

It's *there*, sketched in the web. The emu. The datapad. The enclosure. Me.

Floating beside us is a patch of darkness. The signal's LOUD, now.

<Come closer> it says.

A chill runs down my spine.

<Come *closer*>, an urge, a plasma cutter to my soul.

I can't, though.

No matter how much the darkness swells, and vibrates, a chasm lies between us. It's as if we're from different worlds – two sides of reality's coin.

The coin falls. Pendant pulls me back to my own version of truespace with a dry mouth and heaving lungs and an awe-inspiring migraine.

"We weren't IN Illumination, right?" Alex asks. "But the signal – the ghost, I guess – it could talk to you. There was communication."

"Somehow."

"Who was it?"

I shrug. "It could've been anything. But it felt similar, somehow, to... hmm." I want to say 'the Wraith', or 'my dad', but it was a long time ago. "Not sure."

"Either way, I can't remember ANY of this crap."

Wake raises her hand. “If you got paired with Alex, what about me?”

“You worked with Harrow. Sinas worked with Tao.”

“That fits a pattern, potentially,” Sinas murmurs. “Tao and I lost siblings. Alex and Finn lost their dad. Wake and Harrow might’ve lost a grandparent.”

Unfortunately, I can’t recall Harrow’s specific ‘issue’, to confirm or deny that hypothesis. Twenty-four kids, each bearing a particular brand of sadness; it’s not as if I asked for everyone’s sordid details. “Anyway,” I continue, “the next day was when they told us properly, about why we were invited – about the prize.”

For this next speech, it’s easier to pay attention.

“As you can see, we’ve selected half of you to continue,” my mother says. “Anyone who is NOT in this room right now will take part in an ‘alternate’ program for the remainder of their time here. Your objective, on the other hand, remains the same – and given that we have only ten more days of testing, it is time to reveal what you are truly working towards.” No recognition as her gaze flicks past me. More unreadable expressions on Maritime, Farah, and another, older man, watching from the doorway.

There are twelve, sitting in this conference room.

“Some of you may have already theorised a pattern,” she continues, “which is that many of you have family members, close friends, or others who have recently passed away. You are here because we want to... bring them back, so to speak. We want to make it possible for you to talk to them again. You are here because we have discovered the afterlife – a higher dimension, hiding in the space between universes – and we believe you are the best-equipped among us to be able to go there, and explore, and come back breathing. We intend to find the six of you who can best make that trip.”

In the ensuing silence, you could hear a spider spinning their web.

Until Wake opens her mouth and says, “What the *f—*”

You know how this goes. They tell us some things; not everything.

Just enough to make the web stick.

“They revealed the reason just like that?” Alex asks.

“Pretty much,” I reply. “They were under a bit of time pressure, so things moved fast – too fast for us to do anything about it.”

“That’s mantis behaviour, though. What if we hadn’t reacted well? / would’ve spread that shit across the Mesh immediately.”

“But we couldn’t. They made sure we couldn’t. We were isolated.”

It starts going downhill – or careening down a mountainside on a rusty unicycle – when Harrow knocks over Liandri’s Milo one evening. It spills pale brown across the table, dripping onto her lap.

“Oh, come ON,” she says, rolling her eyes.

“Sorry,” Harrow mutters. “Didn’t mean to.”

Wake jumps up to get some towels, but the argument can’t wait.

“Nobody’s on your side,” Liandri says. “Nobody’s leaving just ‘cause you think we have to, sleeper.”

“Liandri, it’s strange we *can’t* leave,” Harrow says tiredly. “It’s suspicious we aren’t allowed to talk to anybody outside.”

“It’s a *secret project*, Harrow. Secret.”

“It’s insane, is what it is. None of what Dr. Hanamura is saying makes sense. It’s *wrong*. And if we all stop participating, they won’t be able to continue—”

“Do you ever stop to consider anybody else’s opinion? Do you?” Her braids are a conduit for her frustration. “I WANT to talk to my mum again! If this lets me do that, then yeah, I’m happy being their lab rat. Who was yours?”

“Who was who?” Harrow asks.

“Your person who died.”

“Nobody.”

“Bull-*shit*. Was it a friend? Your dad? Your cat? Who?”

“I don’t have to tell YOU anything,” he hisses. “Plus, if nobody has to listen to me, nobody has to listen to YOU, either. Not everybody agrees with you. Not everyone likes you. Keep that in mind before you start giving commands.”

I’m just trying not to draw attention to myself.

Wake has cleaned up most of the spill, making friendly little humming noises. “I’m definitely staying,” she says casually. “It’d be nice if I could see my grandparents. I hope the scientists are telling the truth about what they can do.”

“Same,” Sinas says, suddenly behind me. He leans forward and puts his arms around my shoulders – not quite a hug, but not *not-a-hug* – and rests his chin atop my head. (Welp, I guess I’m never moving again.)

<Let me know if you’re uncomfortable> he says. Then, aloud: “I think we can go along with it, for at least a few more days.”

“Until they cut the rest of us,” Alex says darkly. “They *will* keep cutting us, in case you forgot, until they’re left with six ‘optimal products’. Woohoo, I love being a product, don’t you? At least they’re giving us scholarship funding, to butter us up before we get cooked.”

“You could volunteer to leave,” Liandri says, “if you don’t want to be here.”

“As Harrow said, we don’t GET to leave.”

“You also shouldn’t steal spots from people who want them,” Weilin says, another girl.

“I’m not *stealing* anything,” Alex replies. “Besides, I haven’t got any dead people hanging around! I don’t even know who I’ll see! I’m in this for the *money*.”

That sets Harrow and Liandri off again, while Alex and Weilin bottle up the pressure. (If you put spare carbon between their teeth, it’d come out as diamonds.) Even Tao starts sniping at everyone because frankly I think he’s tired and wants to go to sleep.

In the room, it’s a fifty-fifty split: two for, two against.

Tao and I are undecided.

“Do YOU want this?” Tao asks me.

“Not... really. I mean, I agree with Harrow. It’s sus.”

But – here’s the thing.

I’d also rather *not lose*. The games we’ve been playing, the competitions, the tests... I enjoy winning, y’know? I’m *good* at winning, as long as it involves puzzles, or academics, and not kicking a ball around. I’m quiet, yes, but that doesn’t mean I’m a robot. To be the first to visit another dimension? To explore what lies between different universes?

Maybe it’s stupid, or I’m superficial, but...

“I’m also curious,” I say. “About how this ends.”

“With everybody bloody dying, probably,” Alex says.

“We’re visiting the afterlife,” Sinas retorts. “Dying’s part of the job.”

“Not what I meant.”

“This Liandri chick sounds like S-tier entertainment,” Alex says.

“She wasn’t like that the entire time,” I reply. “And I mean... her mum...”

“Most school camps are less stressful,” Sinas says, “or have adults around whose job is to be more supportive. I can imagine it getting heated without proper supervision. It sounds rough.”

“It *sounds* like people should’ve been put on trial,” Wake says. “Sending a team of Year 8’s into a hell portal? That has to be illegal.”

“You WANTED to go,” Alex replies.

“Yes, but—”

“You’d still go! Right now!”

“Hmph. I’d *consider* it.”

“Either way,” I say, “even if we argued, or started hating each other, the people in charge wanted us to keep going. They *needed* progress. They had to convince us it was worth it.”

I’m searching for my mother when I stumble across the experiment.

It’s an octagonal chamber, made of chilly, slate-grey metal. The lower portion of each wall is solid, the upper partially transparent thanks to angled shutters. Thick cables, tightly twisted, stretch from eye-like spheres in the ceiling, to a pitch-black sarcophagus standing tall in the centre. The only glowstrips are outside, casting slats of deep shadow.

The front of the sarcophagus is open. Strapped down inside is Tao.

I’m about to approach when I hear voices: my mother, and Pendant. Something about their low, secretive tones makes me duck below the shutters.

“Let’s begin,” my mother says.

The glowstrips turn off.

In the darkness, I hear a buzzing electric hum. It dances across the back of my neck, like a transformer about to spark. Then, *clack* – light shoots from an emitter at one end of the room, drawing a perfect vertical slice from Tao’s toes to his forehead, as thin and concentrated as a laser.

“Form the connection,” Pendant urges. “Narrow your focus, as much as you can. Details. *Details*. Find your image of her.”

The light burns in Tao’s eyes. It’s blue, bright blue, and it shimmers bewitchingly, as if something inside is fighting surface tension, trying to push through. It’s filled with geometric patterns that soon decay into ripples, but gradually, the patterns are holding for longer—

“That’s it!”

The shutters start to move. They flip-flip-flip in syncopated rhythms, a blur, like dragonfly wings. The noise builds to a resonant *thrum*.

Should I be here? Probably not.

Definitely not, as the light starts to hiss.

Tao screams. He struggles against the restraints.

I can’t see what’s hurting him.

The hiss distorts around itself, a stop-start screech of static. Between each screech the light blinks out entirely, leaving perfect, concealing darkness – and whenever it returns, in blinding flashes, I see—

I’m not sure.

There’s *something* there, in the room, with him: a jagged genesis of repressed memories and flickering fury.

He screams again. It hurts *me*.

The thing darts forward.

“Close it!” Pendant shouts.

“No, don’t!” Tao’s voice. “Don’t! Let me try. I can help her.”

Movement, behind the far-side shutters, between the waves of dark. There stands my mother, holding Pendant back. The straps holding Tao retract and he stumbles forward, kneeling. I can’t focus on the shape in front of him, the way it looms wrapped around a stellar core of pain; the way it remains trapped between dream and nightmare while the shutters hum and the light lashes out.

“I’m here,” Tao says. “It’s me.”

Meaning, in the static.

“I know it hurts, but I can help. Do you remember me?” He reaches out and it engulfs his arm, his chest, and I’d swear it’s devouring him due to his resulting grimace, his choking gulps of air, but his voice remains calm, and insistent, and comforting. “It’s alright, Yixian. You can stay.”

A wall of corpses.

“I’ll take it all,” he says. “It’s not your fault.”

Abruptly, the assault stops, like ending a call mid-sentence.

It’s dark, silent, apart from the still-whirring shutters, and it takes my senses a moment to recover. Tao pauses, breathing hard, then sits. He looks towards a corner of the chamber, where – according to my own two eyes – there’s *nothing*.

“Hi,” he says.

I’m staring at a patch of empty air. A shiver runs through me.

Tao smiles. “I know. I didn’t think I’d get to see you again, either.”

No other voice in the room.

I don’t like this.

“Haru? Haru!” Maritime comes striding down the hallway, enters the antechamber, and I flatten myself against the wall to stay hidden. “What the HELL is this! You had no authorisation!”

“The conditions were right,” my mother says. “It wasn’t prudent to wait.”

“But the subject didn’t—”

“The *subject* signed off on it – and it worked.”

A pregnant pause.

“Excuse me?” Maritime asks.

“I missed you too,” Tao says, “more than... anything.” He’s happier than I’ve ever seen him, bearing a delirious grin; all I can make out are grainy shadows, refusing to resolve into a world that makes sense.

“He... surrendered,” Pendant says, full of wonder. “He let her in. Gave her a chance.”

“Rehabilitation? That’s incredibly dangerous,” Maritime says.

“But it worked,” my mother says, determined. “This time, it worked.”

“OK OK OK,” Wake says. “What?”

“It sounds like it was his sister,” Sinas says.

“Yes, but how?”

“Maybe they could—”

“But who-what-where-*why*?”

“She attacked him first,” Alex says slowly, “like the other lampires attacked us. And then he— stopped her? Or she understood him?”

“He kept saying he wanted to help her,” I reply. “I guess he managed to. But I had questions, too, so I decided to keep snooping around.”

I’m talking with my mother in her office, except we aren’t – not really. I’m saying stuff, she’s saying stuff, and none of it’s on target.

“Finn, your failures are nothing to do with me. I can’t help you.” She grabs an encrypted databank from her desk and snatches up her coat, with the restless energy of someone already late.

“I don’t want help. I only need to ask you something.”

“Does it look like I have time?”

“The program isn’t going well. Everyone hates each other, or they’re arguing, and nobody knows what to—”

“Need I remind you: I cannot show favouritism for the purposes of this experiment, which very much includes this personal conversation.” She sighs;

then bestows me with eye contact for two whole seconds. “I realise it’s difficult. Can you bear with it for three more days?”

“|—”

“I really am late.”

She bustles out of the office.

My turn to sigh.

I’m not sure how long I wait, alone, in the cubicle. Too long. I should head back to my room, or check the schedule for what’s next, but honestly, I’d rather sit and hang out on my own. It’s not... *nice*... to be around the others right now, after how heated it got this morning. I also can’t help thinking about what happened to Tao, yesterday, and how he didn’t mention it to anybody.

Her workstation’s unlocked.

Hmm.

I glance into the hallway to make sure I’m alone, then sidle to the computer and connect my MeshMate. It’ll notify her about the unauthorised access but, with luck, she’s too busy to notice. The first thing I see is an open folder, named:

CANDIDATE PROFILES

Fascinating.

For example, here’s Sinas’ background data, and while I do want to snoop, that’s an unquestionable invasion of privacy. I don’t even know what’s included in these files. I wonder, though... do they know about me, and Sinas? Is that relevant enough to track? There are cameras everywhere, including our rooms, so if anybody had the clearance or desire to go digging through those recordings, they would’ve seen... yeah. Let’s not think about that. My heart beats a little faster, partly because I don’t want to get caught, partly for other, blush-inducing reasons. I bite the inside of my cheek, to divert all that blood to somewhere else.

I find my own profile, which should be safe enough to check. Most of it isn’t revelatory: basic medical data, family history, assessment results, et cetera. However, under a section called ‘candidate relationships’ is—

Biological siblings: Alex Hawthorne, b. 2076

It takes a second to form words from those disconnected letters, and another to comprehend their meaning, dripping through me like liquid nitrogen. I click, and it brings me to Alex’s profile, and I’m sure you can guess what it says under ‘candidate relationships’:

Biological siblings: Finn Hanamura, b. 2076

I’m not sure how to react, other than to walk, as fast as I can, after my mother, who has apparently neglected to tell me quite a lot about my life. I walk, and walk, not quite a run since I need time to think—

I round the corner and there she is, in the corridor.

Farah's there, too – and *Wake*, of all people.

I slowly back away, till I'm out of sight.

I give myself a moment to calm down. The polymer's smooth, warm, shifting slightly as I lean against it.

"It's either you, or him," my mother says. "Which makes it quite important that you give him this data."

"Can't you, like... send it to him?" Wake asks.

"We'd rather not," Farah murmurs. "To avoid having it on record."

"So you're giving it to *me*."

"Correct," my mother says.

"Is this a test? It's totally a test."

"I assure you, it isn't."

"But we do need Tao's response," Farah interrupts, "preferably by tonight."

"OK, OK, me or him. If I was you, though, I'd pick the person who *WANTS* to be here. Just saying." Wake leaves, and it'd be awkward if she picked my direction to walk past, but she doesn't.

"We're going to be shut down," Farah says, after a beat.

"I realise that," my mother replies.

"There isn't time for a full prep schedule. We'll have to move faster, if we want a chance to make this work, and perhaps— perhaps that means we shouldn't."

A pause.

"It's too late for that," my mother says. "Far too late."

"Even if it won't be safe? Yes, perhaps caution sounds hypocritical, coming from me, but I *learned* from my mistakes. I appreciate you involving me in this, I do, pulling strings, asking me to come back – and of course I want to see him again, of *course* I want our work to succeed. But... what if it's time for it to end?"

"You want to end Illumination before we understand why? You're a scientist, Farah. Falling on our swords when we're this close is wasteful."

"You're talking about the nations," Farah says flatly.

"Yes."

"Resisting the inevitable decay of the cosmos."

"Yes."

"Or are you talking about opening a portal at ANY cost to prove you were right all along? They won't survive it, Haru, not without more time. Don't try and convince yourself otherwise."

"I didn't end up talking to Mum about the sister part," I say. "It just, uh... festered."

"I'm a festerer," Alex says. "It's my best quality."

Wake nods in agreement. “The science team must’ve been under HEAPS of pressure to make Illumination work. They probably made a few polluted choices because of that. I totally get it; story of my life.”

“To be fair, Haru might not have had entirely good intentions to begin with,” Sinas says. “Since Finn thinks she was half-possessed, by the Wraith.”

“A regular-degular demonic possession incident,” Alex says. “If only we could blame ALL shitty parenting on supernatural malice. Instead, it’s mostly...”

“Natural malice?”

“Yep.”

Sinas is lying on a couch in the common room, peering at a notebook – a real one, with real paper, and spidery cursive script – when Liandri slithers over.

“You’ve been reading that for ages,” she says. “What is it?”

“Nothing.”

She grabs his hand, and he half-heartedly pulls away, but he’s not in any position to escape. Her eyes flick back and forth, with growing incredulity. “*Lieutenant Violet took off her shirt,*” she reads aloud. “*Orchid watched, his eyes stuck to her like glue. She was more nervous facing him right now than when she’d faced his entire battlegroup, but she couldn’t help continuing, and neither could he. He stepped out of his pants and went to kiss her, feeling the blood rush to his—*”

Sinas sighs. “Give that back.”

“Is it yours? Wait, is this Alex’s?” The name inside the cover doesn’t lie.

“She asked me to proofread a story. That’s all.”

“She asked you to proofread her *Moon’s Haunted* smut.”

Sinas can’t decide how to respond. “...I wasn’t supposed to read that part.”

“Yeah, I bet. You sure about that?” Liandri snorts, turning the page. “Thanks for the serotonin. Funniest shit I’ve seen since my mum died.”

Alex is here, too, on the other side of the room, listening to music, half asleep. She glances up, then jolts awake as she puts two and two together. “That’s private,” she hisses.

“Is it, though? I thought you wanted Sinas’ opinion?” Liandri raises her voice. “I don’t know why HE’S so special. We should get constructive feedback – EVERYONE’S feedback.”

“Don’t.” An edge of panic, beneath her anger. Suddenly, everyone’s watching, switching focus from whatever they were occupied with.

“Bet you wouldn’t mind if it wasn’t terrible,” Liandri says.

“Fuck off, Liandri—”

“It’s terrible, right Sinas? In a way that’s actually funny.”

He sits up, looking back and forth between them.

Harrow chuckles awkwardly.

Then Sinas laughs too, as if it’s nothing. “Sure.”

“Fuck you too, Sinas,” Alex says. “Fuck ALL of you.”

“You guys need to stop this stupid *sabotage*,” Tao mutters.

“Excuse me?” Harrow asks.

“It’s the same, EVERY time! Is arguing and bullying each other supposed to help?” He glares at us, and at me, annoyance exploding from clenched fists. “Like yesterday – what WAS that? Nobody’s trying during the tests anymore. Weilin and Finn didn’t even show! Maybe no one else cares, but I still want the chance to see my sister. We’re supposed to work together.”

“You GOT your chance,” Wake says. “Unlike the rest of us.”

“Huh?”

“I know you already talked to your sister. You’re such a hyp— what’s the word? *Hypocrite*.”

“I never... that’s supposed to be—”

“Secret? You keep complaining, being so self— self—” She groans in frustration, voice turning ultrasonic.

“Selfish?” Harrow suggests. “Self-righteous?”

“That’s the one! They took you into Illumination! Only you, Tao! Why do you get special treatment? Your scores aren’t even good compared to mine!”

“Yes, Tao. Why *do* you get special treatment?” Weilin asks, eyes narrowed.

Liandri holds Alex’s notebook up high with one arm as the other girl stalks towards her, and we’re ten seconds away from throwing some punches, crying, or both. “If we could get back to reviewing Alex’s fanfic for a second—”

“If you guys are obsessed with ‘special treatment’, maybe you should start chucking shit at him, too,” Alex says, pointing at me.

I freeze.

“Why, exactly?” Harrow asks.

“He’s related to one of the supervisors. She’s his mum, a hundred percent – which, hey, is probably why he can decide not to attend and still get picked. It’s pointless for us to compete.”

“Which supervisor?”

“The nice one. Doctor Oliveira.”

Alex looks so satisfied with her detective work – so pleased with this detour around her prior embarrassment – that I can’t help but laugh. because like Tao, and Alex, and everyone else, this experience is driving me insane. “You’re SO wrong,” I reply.

“About what?”

“If you’d actually bothered to look up my last name, which is EASY to do, you’d notice it’s the same as Doctor Hanamura’s. I wasn’t exactly hiding it either, because trust me, I do *not* get extra privileges.”

“That’s not what I— well, same diff.” She shakes her head. “You’re related, and it isn’t fair.”

Now I’m the centre of attention, which I’m not a fan of.

“That’s a pretty big thing to ‘not mention’, Finn,” Sinas says, with maddening neutrality.

“Aren’t you supposed to be his boyfriend?” Weilin asks.

He blanches. “That’s not—”

I’m getting angry. Doesn’t happen often, but it’s happening now. “Do you know what else isn’t fair?” I say. There’s a sudden viciousness in my voice which I barely recognise but is *awfully* intoxicating. “You know who else is being a hypocrite?”

“Yeah? Hit me,” Alex says.

“Mostly you. Because you’re my sister. And here’s the stupid file to prove it.” I throw the folder at her and I wish it was made of paper instead of data so it’d hit her in the fucking face. “I wish you weren’t.”

I storm off.

Don’t know how to deal with how my head feels, or her reaction, so the last I hear is Harrow, gleefully pretending to be above the drama and wondering aloud why we’re all so desperate. I’m wondering that, too, considering what I overheard.

‘They won’t survive it, Haru, not without more time. Don’t try and convince yourself otherwise.’

If they care to, they can find that out themselves.

No looking back.

They don’t deserve it.

“Wow,” Alex says.

“...yeah.” I wince.

“It gets worse?”

“M-hm.”

There used to be twelve. Now there are six: me, Alex, Wake, Sinas, Tao, Harrow. No chance to say goodbye to the others (even if I’d wanted to), who were separated from us two days ahead of schedule. Instead, we’re hemmed in ever more tightly by staff who outnumber us five-to-one.

Then they start leaving too.

“Pick someone,” Maritime says.

We’re in a lecture room, with too much space between each other’s seats for students who’ve supposedly spent two weeks ‘bonding’. I’m in the back left corner, beside the window, elbows propped on a fold-out desk. Alex is about as far away as possible, by the door. She hasn’t said a word to me since yesterday.

“To do what?” Harrow asks.

“To enter Illumination.”

“I thought the whole point was YOU were gonna pick,” Alex says.

Maritime clenches her jaw. “Equally, the intention was for you to cooperate, throughout this process. Clearly, you can’t be trusted to do that. This childishness, this infighting, this disobedience – it’s no longer sustainable in the scant time remaining.”

“That’s a bit harsh—”

“No. It isn’t. So, to avoid any friction about choices we might make, we have decided to turn this responsibility over to you. Pick a representative; one *everyone* is happy with. They will take part in the experiment this afternoon.”

“It sounds to me,” Harrow says, “like you’re avoiding responsibility, as the adults, in the room.”

“Perhaps we thought better of you. You have ten minutes.” Maritime glares at him, then sweeps out the door, and her exhausted sigh fades down the hallway. It’s weird to see her show an emotion outside her usual stony glances.

“So,” Sinas says. “Who wants to go?”

“The better question might be who *doesn’t*,” Tao says. “The people who want it are just gonna fight about it, but if we pick the person who’s not that keen, it’s... fairer, right? We can all agree on it.”

“The ‘nobody wins’ gambit,” Harrow murmurs.

By this point, it’s clear where we stand.

Harrow is on the ‘don’t want’ side, for reasons known only to Harrow.

Alex is, too, for reasons of flat-out denial.

The rest of us are in, with varying degrees of enthusiasm.

“Don’t look at me,” Alex says. “I’m not going.”

“What if it was like, to save the world,” Wake says. “*Then* would you do it?”

“Nope.”

“Wow. We are SO different.”

For now, everyone’s accepted Tao’s proposal because *not* accepting it sounds like a fight (I guess, finally, we’ve had enough of fights). We twist in our chairs, facing Harrow, who – today, and every other day – looks like they haven’t slept for weeks, but in a classy ‘creature of the night’ sort of way. I realise I’ve come to quite like them.

“Really,” they say. “You’re sending *me*.”

“Do you *want* to go?” Tao asks.

“It has been made perfectly evident that I do not.”

“Then... would you? If we voted for you?”

Harrow sighs. “I’m not sure. I can’t avoid having too many misgivings, about the scientists, the station, the program... This isn’t how you’d run an experiment that’s fully above board.”

“They haven’t hurt us, though,” Wake says cautiously. “Obviously they haven’t been super nice all the time, but we’re OK – aren’t we?”

I wonder how I’d handle it, if the group picked me.

I’d be nervous, I think. Very nervous.

If Harrow goes first... it’s less exciting, for me, but probably safer in the long run. From Harrow’s less-than-eager expression, I think they’re on the other side of the same thought process. They tap a pattern on their armrest, one, two, three, five, seven, a numerical tic, the rest of their body poised and calm.

“Let’s vote, then,” Tao says. “For the next Neil Armstrong. The next Danielle Poole.”

Harrow rolls his eyes. “Don’t make this worse than it already is. Let me remind you, I haven’t agreed to it yet.”

They will, though, if we vote for them.

And we do. Unanimously.

“What happened to them?” Alex asks.

“I’m not really sure,” I reply. “I never saw them again.”

“Okay. What’re the odds on them being dead?”

“...good?” Sinas says, then winces. “It’s tragic if—”

“—if we basically sentenced them to die,” Alex says. “With a vote.”

“We didn’t know,” Wake says.

“Well, we should have been a bit more careful, even if we were mango thirteen-year-olds.” She sighs. They would’ve been alone. We had each other, but they would’ve been alone, and that’s...” She looks down, blinking rapidly. “Sad.”

It’s not a burden I enjoy thinking about; that we, so casually, might’ve cut Harrow’s life so short. Then again, if we hadn’t picked Harrow, perhaps Alex wouldn’t be here. Any one of us could’ve vanished as part of a ‘tragic accident’.

Wraith or no, it’s bad. It’s just bad.

So *this* is the legendary beach I’ve heard so much about.

Holoprojectors bless an average-sized pool area with illusory waves, distant dunes, bands of wispy cirrus, but can’t hide the enclosed echo of our voices (a little loud for comfort at this time of night, though the area is otherwise deserted). Starlight bounces from the water’s surface, rippling faintly on the walls. The sloping sand at the water’s edge is chilly beneath our feet.

“We’re being abandoned,” Wake whispers. “Something must’ve gone wrong with the experiment. It’s ending early.”

“You are SUCH a backstabber,” Tao says calmly.

“Ummm... where’s *that* coming from?”

“You tried to get me sent home. You TOLD them I didn’t want to continue, that I wanted to give up my spot. Dr. Hanamura said you—”

“Tao, that was ages ago. That’s sleeper news. OK, I *might* have said some stuff in that general area but don’t blame me for trying to—”

“I don’t know why anyone trusts you. Ever.”

“Wow, okay. You can thank me later.”

“For *what*?”

Things are tense. Tao’s annoyed, for good reason.

Alex is wallowing in a pit of gloom; she can’t even look at me.

Sinas is on autopilot.

Wake’s forced happiness isn’t improving the mood.

As for me? I going to sit, quietly, and pretend the ice isn't cracking beneath us.

"Why are we still here?" Alex asks. "We CAN say no to them. We've always been able to say no."

"You wouldn't understand," Sinas replies. "You couldn't."

"Then help me out here, 'cause I don't get the vibe we're the 'winners' of this competition. This isn't what I signed up for, or what my *parents* signed me up for—"

"Guys guys guys, we're fine," Wake says. "Deep breaths. Just, like, forget yesterday. Focus on tomorrow."

"You said it yourself, we're being abandoned," Sinas murmurs. "Nobody's talking to us. The schedule's empty. Harrow's nowhere to be found. Why will tomorrow be different?"

"Because..." She starts a drumroll with her fingers. "I fixed it!"

"You, *fixing* shit?" Tao grunts. "As if."

"Don't be like that—I'm sorry, Tao, OK? I'm sorry. But I talked to Dr. Hanamura, and Dr. Gursiv, and they've agreed to move things forward. Dr. Hanamura was super interested actually, she agreed straight away. We're going into Illumination tomorrow. All of us."

Alex blinks. "Wait, what?"

"That," Sinas says, "is called playing right into their hands."

"Oops," Wake says. "I'll take the L."

Alex draws one in the Mesh and hands it to her.

We're getting down to it – the last day. My palms are sweaty.

Then Sinas reaches towards me across the table, his fingers resting on virtual wood. "It's okay," he says. "Whatever you're going to say... it's okay." He's listening so intently I can't help but believe him, his shoulders bearing all the trust in the world. It helps, I think; or I hope.

I must be a mess in comparison, but my voice is calm.

Sip of water. Here we go.

In my memories, I'm an impartial, disembodied camera. It's the only way I can stand it.

"You aren't going – not today," my mother says. She takes the sensor pads off Wake's forehead and gestures for her to stand, while the rest of us wait to enter the experiment chamber.

"Wait, *WHY*?! I can't NOT go, I'm the one who organised this!" She grabs my mother's arm. Haru brushes her off irritably.

"Your connection isn't strong enough to be usable; not without Harrow."

"Where is he, then?"

"Recovering. For now, you'll wait outside."

“That isn’t fair!”

“*Don’t*. You will wait outside, with me, and *watch*.”

The experiment chamber’s dead quiet, apart from Wake’s whining – expected, since it’s the middle of the night, the glowstrips dimmed to gentle twilight. It’s so simple, compared to the grandeur of present-day Starfish: a rectangular room, with control consoles at one end and a portal emitter at the other. Banks of PRISM shutters on the walls are linked by daisy-chained cables, dangling above cramped workstations and cupboards. My mother ushers us through the security gate at the entrance, its lights blinking inquisitively. The emitter looms like a jet-black alien artifact.

She tells Alex and me we’re going first. “Otherwise, we cannot proceed.”

I don’t want to go first. I’m realising I don’t want to go at *all*.

We gather in the corner as my mother calibrates equipment, concentrating, with an occasional glance to confirm we’re still here. The air’s slightly misty with condensation, full of watercolour shadows. Batteries hum, waking one by one.

“Where are the other staff?” Alex whispers. “Why are we alone?”

“Because we have to do this now,” Sinas replies. “It’s our last chance.”

“Is it, though?” She shrugs worriedly. “Finn, tell me this doesn’t feel off.”

I’m trapped, pulled in three different directions. “I did... overhear... Dr. Oliveira mention it might not be safe, a few days ago...”

“It’s *your* mum over there,” Wake says. “If you’re so concerned, why not ask her?”

“Because—” She won’t listen. Because over the past few months my instincts have been telling me, over and over, there’s a barrier between us now, even when we’re walking side by side. I don’t know where it came from, or how to bring it down, without being afraid I’ll mess it up more.

“I’d rather not go through with this,” Alex says, “to be totally lucent.”

“Come ON, this is what we’re here for!” Wake says. “Not second thoughts.”

“I’d take your place, if it’d make you feel better,” Tao says, “but it seems she really wants you to go first, and I...” He gazes at the forest of cables. “I really want to see Mei, again. I want that chance, for us. I’m sorry.”

“I’m sure it’ll be okay,” Sinas adds.

I swallow. Reluctance anchors my lower intestine. Alex’s eyes are allergic to mine, as if ignoring the future might make it leave.

Then Sinas grabs my wrist. “Please, Finn,” he says. “Please.” He spins me towards him, drags me one step closer. “I promise we’ll be okay. I’ll make sure you’re safe. I’ll be right behind you.”

“I want— I want to believe you.” The words barely climb out of my throat. I don’t want the others to hear, or Sinas either, his warm fingers clasped around my too-thin wrist. “I wish I could help, but... I’m scared this isn’t what we think it is. For me. For you. For Marko. Nothing fits together properly. It isn’t happening like it should. Can’t you feel that?” *Can’t you trust me?*

The problem is, in this bubble – in this speck of time – he’s not actually seeing me. He’s seeing a future, with his brother in it.

Against that, I'll always lose.

"I'm scared too," he says. "After this, though, I think I won't be anymore."

"I'm sorry," I say, "I'm really sorry—"

He hugs me, so quickly, so naturally, I'm lost and simultaneously found. He isn't *consciously* manipulating me, and yet, nowhere during this process was I allowed to say 'no'. "Thank you," he murmurs. "For doing this."

Twenty-one days.

I've only known him for twenty-one days.

"Hurry UP," Wake says, unable to conceal her disdain any longer.

My mother makes us don our protective suits. Mine's a thin, skintight layer both slippery and refractive; light collects in its creases, producing an oily sheen. There's an awkward, bulky backpack, too, its forest of cables binding me to a ceiling port. Alex gets a different version with thicker material, akin to a wetsuit, its surface so utterly black and light-absorbing it looks like a graphical bug. She considers it curiously, poking at her stomach.

"Stand here," Haru says. She gestures to a raised torus on the floor.

"Only me?" Alex asks doubtfully.

"Extra precautions are required in your case."

"...Why, exactly?"

"Classified." No trace of humour in her voice. "I'm going to strap you in."

"Is that totally necessary?"

Apparently so. I'm tied to a slab of polymer material, tilted forwards, mirroring Tao's position a few days previously. As I test the restraints around my wrists, I feel this is progressing far too swiftly. Alex is positioned closer to the portal, a few metres away. She's half-way to a crucifixion, boots clamped, hands affixed to supports on either side, forcing her to strain in place.

"I don't want to do this," I tell my mother.

She powers up the experiment.

The shutters around its perimeter start moving, faster and faster. The slab beneath me vibrates too, curiously warm, a heart beating deep inside. My teeth chatter. The shutters blur. Then, searing light bursts from the portal, slicing to either side like wings. Its bewitching aurora fills my vision, heralded by a gong-like resonance that tastes of chili and ginger. Alex is a mere silhouette before it, as if she'll burn away, until— hidden particle emitters at her feet enclose her body in bars of blinding light. It's a cage, of sorts, bent around her; it crackles, briefly outshining all else. Tears fill my eyes in protest. The gate apparatus is suspended from rails on the ceiling, and it begins to advance, a gaping mouth, prepared to swallow us whole. Somewhere, in this confusion of sensation... I can feel the others watching.

Tao's awe. Sinas' longing. Wake's envy. My mother's joy.

Caustic light plays across their faces.

I didn't imagine it like this. I'm not sure *what* I imagined, when we were told we'd visit heaven. Perhaps this is how ancient Greek sailors felt, when they heard sirens singing, across the waves; my body wants to move, to leap into the

light and its infinite realms within, but for the straps around my limbs, though my mind— my mind's wishing I was *anywhere* but here.

"Screw this," Alex mutters. Then, louder: "Screw this!"

She pulls one foot free. The cage warps.

"Stay there!" my mother shouts. "It needs both of you to work!"

Alex glances through the bars, at me, then my mother, and the way her gaze completely sidesteps my panic makes me panic even more. "He said I'm his brother – is that true?"

"This is NOT the time!"

"Tell me!"

"He'll die if he goes in alone! The connection is critical, that's why I—"

Alex twists her arms, pulling at her restraints like a cornered dog at its chain. The plastic *cracks*. Plasma emitters falter. She half-runs, half trips, backing away.

"If you want him to survive – if you BOTH want to – you need to be with him as he goes through!" my mother urges.

"I don't CARE!"

Alex is gone.

Oil shimmers across my vision.

"Mum?" My voice is lost in the medley of noise.

I tug at my shackles as the light curls towards me. The portal's close, now: sickening tunnels of naked infinity, parading their glittering plumage. I can't see the others anymore; can't feel them. Static brushes at my skin. I twist my neck, trying to see behind me, to pull away another few centimetres... and instead of my mother, I see a black, acrylic shadow. Where she stood, there's a void that wants to devour the stars. Sinas is urging me to stay, *begging* me, his voice speaking of 'just a few more seconds', until he can help me and join me and follow me into the abyss.

But he's not the one strapped to this machine.

Alex isn't, either.

I'm alone, with my fear, and a promise I never wanted.

They don't care. None of us care. Sinas wants his brother, Alex wants me gone, and all I want is to NOT be alone.

Am I... going to die, here?

The light starts to hiss. It comes *alive*.

The light chooses to fulfil my wish.

It spews from the portal and worms its way inside me, enveloping me in a cloak of pain and ice. My conscious mind retreats to a distant corner, only able to watch. I scream as this avalanche of colour tumbles down my throat, wraps itself around my bones with sea-anemone tendrils, rearranging me in a thousand different ways and all of them are wrong. It's irresistible, searching for something; but what? My body floats, only held in place by the restraints. I'm buried in light, *consumed* by it, and the consummation *hurts*.

Alex and Sinas are fighting about whether to let me go. Wake's shouting at them both, incoherent.

Drool trickles down my chain, mixed with blood.

Alex stamps on Sinas' foot and escapes his hold. She stumbles towards me as my mother's darkness takes root.

The light examines me. It seems to find me useful.

But it's also... foreign. Unsure.

It retreats, just a little.

And I snap.

Twig in a blizzard, on an alien planet.

My body wrenches itself free from the slab, my muscle fibres tearing slightly less than my bindings. The portal's close, inches from my feet, retching radiation like cosmic spaghetti; I twist away. One part of me IS here, now, puppeteering this fragile, four-dimensional body, while the other part (the only part that can save me from my loneliness, and terror, and rage) remains trapped on the wrong side of a ten-dimensional snowstorm. The disappointment I feel is so easy to give in to.

Because in the end, those emotions are mine.

I want this to stop.

I want them to GO. If they were gone, I'd still be free, and happy—

Sinas is here.

I grab his shoulders and shove him into the wall. His head smacks against the shutters, jamming them, their mechanisms shrieking. His jaw goes slack. Body slithers down the plastic.

Hand on my arm. Shocked voice.

I turn. Alex's face.

I listen, briefly, to her irritating pleading. She says she's trying to help me, but I can tell what she's really doing. I punch her in the stomach, hard as I can. She flies back, bounces off the side of the portal, a bony thump. She's coughing, choking on the ground.

Her spit flecks my cheek. Her blood flecks the floor.

She wants me gone? Wish granted.

I walk towards her, and kneel, and hold her down. As she struggles, my right hand tightens around her neck. It pulses with warmth. Light sings in my ears.

Yes. That's it. Nice to be alone.

I look up, to see Tao take a single step towards me, his eyes wide, my eyes empty, and he freezes. He thinks better of his choice. He won't interfere; he's too much a coward. Sinas isn't, though. (Wish he was.) Instead, he tries dragging me off Alex, still seeing stars, and I hate how he's doing this, how he pretends to *care*, to get his way. My left hand searches for a weapon.

It finds one of the cables in my back.

I yank it out, twist around, and stab the protruding connector into Sinas' chest. It's not particularly sharp – just a metal probe – but with enough force, it punches deep.

Blood appears around the wound. Too much.

Sinas sits down. He looks... shocked.

He touches the cable; isn't sure what to do with it. It's not the kind of thing that should be sticking out of somebody's ribcage. Red streaks his suit's cracked chestplate. Hopefully, he'll think twice about using me again.

"Wake!" Alex screams, underneath me. "Run! Get help!"

I watch, as Wake leaves. As she locks the door. As she stands there, watching this chaos through the shutters for slightly too long.

As she walks away, too slowly.

Some problems solve themselves, given enough time.

Then Tao, too, is wrenched from his trance, by a long-dead voice only he can hear. He darts to the gate, reaches for it blindly, reaches *through* to the shrieking crescendo within, only for his fingertips to be burned away. He cries out. The gate cries with him. Shadows strain at the barrier – flickering myths, lurking between realities – lured into the daylight by human ingenuity and my mother. Alex turns away. She struggles less and less.

I want to help.

We're only hurting each other.

I see myself, from my impartial camera, kneeling beside Illumination.

I see my mother, her service almost complete.

I see Alex, wheezing '*how pathetic*' as she gazes up at me, with a bitter blend of vitriol and defeat.

I see Sinas, his lifeblood dripping through his fingers.

They're weak, now. I could drag them into the light myself.

I see Wake, done, trudging along the corridor. The only sign of chaos is a faint, grainy data-corruption, drizzled across the Mesh. She hums as Farah skids around the corner and nearly runs into her, wearing dishevelled pyjamas, her thongs slapping on the polymer.

"What's going on?!" Farah asks. "I saw an alarm, a power surge – what happened?"

Wake shrugs neutrally. "I don't know."

"Are they in the Illumination chamber? Who's in there?!"

"Don't ask me. It was their idea."

I yell at both of them to stop me, to save me, but it would take a miracle for my voice to cross a footy oval, let alone heaven's door.

Perhaps there is a miracle.

"Finn?" Farah asks.

The chamber explodes.

Energy shockwaves outwards.

Containment circuits overload.

The portal shatters.

Before it does, ghostly arms wrap themselves around me, dragging me out of the light and into a world on fire, and everything goes dark for a very long time.

Silence, around the table.
Deep enough to drown in.

When I wake up, days later, I'm in a hospital pod.

My arm's in a sling. My head's jackhammering away; though not so intensely that disgust and shame at past events can't come flooding back. The last thing I remember is... a wave of energy, expanding across the station as the floor kicked up, everyone collapsing, me being pulled back to reality, and then...

Here.

I roll my shoulders, feeling the ache, then turn my head to one side.

Alex is there, in the next bed over, fiddling with a neck brace. Her eyes brighten when she notices I'm awake. "Hi," she says. "I'm Alex. Did you just wake up?"

"Uh-huh," I reply.

She stares at me expectantly. "The doctors said there was an accident – a malfunction in the station reactor. Nobody died, but a few people got messed up. Including us, I guess. Heh."

"Oh. Okay." My face burns. Why is she chatting to me like this? Like we're friends, after what I did, or tried to do. There's an overpowering urge to scour the dried blood from beneath my fingernails. It makes me want to vomit.

Alex is still staring at me, awfully persistent. Then, she frowns a small frown. "My name's Alex," she says again. "What's yours?"

What's... mine?

A million thoughts tackle my head at once.

I shiver. I hold my breath.

Then, slowly, I exhale.

"My name?" I ask.

"Yeah, duh. I mean, I get it – my head's pretty scrambled, too."

"Oh. Sure."

This might be fixable after all. And if I *can* fix it—

"I'm Finn," I say. "Nice to meet you."

FINN XVI

“And that was the last time I talked to you,” I murmur. “Until this camp.”

I’m staring at my hands, clasped in my lap.

“Huh,” Alex says.

There’s a lot, hiding in that syllable.

“Why didn’t you tell us?” she asks.

“Why didn’t I tell you I tried to kill you?”

“You could’ve explained Illumination to us, at least – what it was for, why it was dangerous.”

“All I had was a jumble of memories, and misunderstandings. I didn’t have details, not like we do now, and I thought... once I started with one thing, you’d keep asking questions about everything else. It was easier not to explain because I wasn’t *sure*, and I didn’t want—” I swallow. “I didn’t want us to be enemies from the beginning. I didn’t want to repeat the past.”

“But we sorta did, huh? Because you kept it secret.”

I shrug weakly.

Alex shakes her head.

“It musta been difficult,” Wake says, “being the only one who remembered. That’s heaps of trauma to carry around. Especially if you don’t let yourself yap about it.” She props her chin on her hands, therapist-style.

I pause. They’re less irate than I thought they’d be.

Would it have been better if they were mad? Nah, of course not, but the idea I might’ve lived my life in fear of something I never should’ve feared is... hard, to come to grips with.

There are worse things to be wrong about, though.

“The past was always there, affecting me,” I reply. “I just couldn’t really face it. I didn’t want to believe Illumination could happen again, so I convinced myself I had to live with it, so other people wouldn’t. There’s probably a better way to explain it... but at this point, I don’t think it matters.”

“I understand,” Wake says softly. “I really do.”

I close my eyes. “I should apologise.”

“You can, if you want! I’ll accept an apology. Although it sounds like it’s kinda *everyone’s* fault.”

“Yes,” Sinas says. “We’re all sorry. And we’re all assholes.”

“I stabbed you,” I say.

“You did, but you weren’t totally in control of the car. Or it’s as if you were drugged, right? I don’t exactly know how that translates to an attempted murder charge, but in this case, I guess I’m okay with it.” He smiles grimly. “I put you in that situation, Finn. I was prepared to sacrifice *everyone*, without a second thought, because— of course, I would’ve done anything for my brother.”

“I suppose I didn’t want to help you guys out because past me was a jealous little biiiiitch,” Wake says. “Current me still is. Oops.”

“And I abandoned you,” Alex says, “because as we’ve established, I couldn’t have you waltzing around in a way that might’ve mucked up my precious little life. Now, it’s different, just so we’re clear.” She rests her hands on the table. “Now I’m cool with it. Muck all you want.”

“Okay,” I say. And... it is okay. It’s not ‘good’ – it might never be that – but I can handle ‘okay’. My vision blurs, ever so slightly, and I blink the moisture away. (This prolonged stress release is making me lightheaded.)

“Being incredibly generous with the definition of ‘happy’, for a sec,” Alex adds, “I’m happy the truth is finally out.” She frowns at me. “The truth IS out, right?”

“That’s all I’ve got.”

“No more secrets. Say it.”

“...No more secrets.”

“Good.” She nods. “Because the shit we waded through today is FAR more pressing than whatever random transgressions we pulled as Year 8’s. As far as I’m concerned, those mangos were entirely different people, so let’s feel awful for the appropriate amount of time—

“Thirty more seconds,” Sinas murmurs.

“—and move on.”

“Yep! Happy to move on,” Wake singsongs, “and put it aaaaaallll behind us.”

“I do want it to be over,” Sinas says, “one way or another.”

“Jeez, no need to be so ominous about it,” Alex says.

“That was in *no* way ominous.”

“Then don’t look so gloomy when you say it!”

Sinas cracks his fingers, briefly mustering as much depression as the entire My Chemical Romance discography. “Call it being realistic. This isn’t a choose-your-own-adventure story, where we can cheat and rewind if things go wrong – there are fifty bad endings here, and two good ones if we’re *lucky*. I’ll take a bad ending, if it means more family time with my brother, but for you guys—”

“We ARE choosing our own adventure, though,” Wake says thoughtfully. “It’s true we can’t reload our old save files, but we’re using what we learn to choose different paths.”

“That’s life, Wake,” Alex says. “You’ve just described ‘life.’”

“Okay, Alex, no need to be a dick about it. Speaking of learning, and paths, why don’t WE remember the past, when Finn does? What’s the difference?”

I’ve thought about this a lot. “We’ve seen Illumination affect people’s memories when its energy becomes too concentrated, or if they get possessed. My soul was split between truespace and Illumination when the containment field failed, which meant... something protected me, whereas you took the full force of the blast. That’s my best guess.”

“Sure!” Wake says. “How convenient for your mum, though – that memory wipe is the only thing that let her get away with it. If nobody remembered what went down, and enough Mesh data got corrupted, she could say *anything*. She could even blame us, say we tried to enter Illumination ourselves, and... then she could try again, three years later.”

“Yeah,” I reply. “It would’ve been her word against mine.”

Farah nods. I almost forgot she was here. “In reality, I was the preferred scapegoat, compared to Maritime, or Haru, or Dr. Gursiv... I had the perfect amount of authority *and* lack of it. Your mum, and Maritime – they’d been on the project from the start. Maritime left voluntarily, after the incident. Haru stayed, as you know. I’d already been removed much earlier, for separate reasons, but they were so desperate they invited me back specially, for that attempt. We were all so eager for our work to bear fruit, I didn’t think to question—” She stops herself, mustering a smile. “It’s not important. What matters is your truth, Finn. I’m proud of you.”

Why? This isn’t a moment to be proud of. It’s barely a passing grade.

Suddenly, Alex yawns like a scramjet; for too long I can see her tonsils.

“Probably a sign for us to leave it here,” Farah says. “Let’s take the chance to freshen up before dinner. We’ll eat in an hour or two.”

“Then more sleep?” Wake asks.

“Whatever you like.”

Wake sighs contentedly. “More sleep.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be on that TwitchTok video grind?” Sinas asks. “Now that we *aren’t* in an inappropriately life-threatening situation, I’m sensing a distinct lack of hustle from you.”

“I’ll shove my camera down your neck. How’s that for content?”

He leans back, palms raised. “Forget I asked.”

“Or I’ll stream myself chatting in a hot tub, if you prefer.” She smiles sweetly.

“To be honest, I’m not sure I would prefer.”

“Sinas, you are EXACTLY the type of dude to be into seedy hot tub streams,” Alex replies. “Don’t deny it.”

“I *will* deny it—”

“Anyway,” Farah says, a little more loudly, “we do have a couple of empty cabins for you. Work out amongst yourselves how you’d like to share them.”

I follow Sinas to our cabin.

It isn't big. There's a bunk bed, a tiny desk, enough floor space for sit-ups (barely), plus a fold-out couch which isn't comfortable. There's also a bathroom for which the term 'cramped' is generous, though it contains the necessary trappings.

"Snack?" I ask, once I've finished poking around (this takes about twenty seconds).

"Yeah, why not."

I duck out to find the nearest vending machine, grabbing a Killer Python for myself and a Caramello Koala for Sinas. He gazes at its purple-yellow wrapper for a second, spiritually communing with the grinning koala mascot.

"Thanks," he murmurs. "I guess you already knew I liked these."

"Is that, uh... creepy?"

He chuckles. "Let's say it's mildly flattering you remembered."

I blush, slipping my shoosters into a storage locker as Sinas perches lightly on the couch, surveying our vast, untapped kingdom.

"How are you feeling?" he asks.

"Fine," which isn't much of an answer. "Better."

"I'm happy you got the chance to— make things 'right'. Not the best way to put it, but you know what I mean."

"Sure."

"It feels weird to be sitting here without anything to do, or stress about – at least not in the immediate future." He bites the head off his koala, pausing to let it melt in his mouth. "My brother loved the version of this with strawberry filling, and I could NEVER understand why. It tasted like dead bees."

"Maybe you can ask him about it, one day."

"Maybe. Although that's the kind of thinking which got us into this mess." He pats the couch next to him. "Wanna watch something? Or play a game?"

We settle on *Wipeout: Burnout*, partly because 1) it's a racing game we both like, 2) it doesn't require too much brainpower, and 3) it's co-op, so I can help, instead of getting thrashed in three minutes.

The sim winds up.

We materialise into a sleek antigrav racer, its nose pointed at the starting line. The tundra around us is a land of grim, still white; a lack of colour, huddled beneath a blanket of snow, except for our car's bright yellow speed-stripes and glades of dark green pine. It's warm in the cockpit, at least, as a map unfolds in front of me, a lopsided hexagon marked with contours and checkpoints. This is a freeform plot-your-own-course event, so I'll navigate while Sinas drives. Our AI racer opponents rev their engines, twelve arrowheads built for speed, thrusters crackling in frozen air.

The race begins. I'm thrown back into my seat. Cars veer towards their chosen routes, jostling for position, as their repulsors cut like knives across the tundra, kicking up hypersonic snow-flurries.

For a while, it's enough to be silent. I plot zigzags across the Arctic, on autopilot.

If Sinas' chocolate reminds him of his brother, my python lolly makes me think of mum. She wasn't the type to buy me treats, but by virtue of rarity, those she *did* buy tasted of heaven.

One more brick, in a path I've always walked, suddenly wobbly or crumbling underfoot. It hurts, that my friends will remember her as the villain of this story. It hurts that *I* do, when there was so much else.

Our car weaves between stark black trunks, spindly branches reaching for overcast sky. My stomach flips as we arc over a fallen log, then whip leftward beneath a cliffside overhang. The engine noise bounces off granite.

"Who do you think I am?" Sinas asks, focused on driving. Part of me wonders if I imagined his voice.

"That's very open-ended," I say. "As a question."

"And that's not an answer."

"Then I'm wondering if you've got an answer in mind... that you might specifically want to hear?"

"Any answer. I'm not fussy."

Mum liked asking probing questions too, but about science, or philosophy, and *she* always had talking points prepared. It makes me wary. We cross paths with another car, skipping across a frozen lake.

"I need to think about it," I say.

"The reason I'm asking is you know more about me than almost anyone else on Earth. I'm not talking about surface-level details, about where I grew up, or what my favourite colour is. I'm talking about me, as a person – and that's *weird*, because you barely know me." He queries my next waypoint, relaxed in his seat. "You could say that's justifiable, because my parents transfer jobs every year, so I've never had a long-term home, or a place to go back to. It makes it difficult to build relationships that aren't superficial. Obviously, there's the Mesh, which lets people stay in touch, but... the Mesh is anonymous usernames, changing every other week. It's not a foundation. Truespace has *timezones*."

I recall the echoes of Sinas' life, in Illumination.

I wonder why he's mentioning this now.

"I always hid parts of myself deep inside," he continues, "because it was easier that way. I learned that early on. People could like the parts of me they liked, or their *idea* of me, but not 'me'. Then, when I left, it wouldn't hurt as much. I could follow my parents' orders, and it wouldn't hurt. That was the rule, with one exception."

"...Your brother?"

"Through every change, I had that one person, one constant. Until I didn't." We hurtle across the ice, a shadow in the polar sunlight. "I knew Marko more than I knew myself. He was always more resourceful, more prepared – like in racing, for example. I was the faster driver for raw pace, but he'd spend days fiddling with upgrades and tuning profiles, researching the course. He'd get creative. That made him better. 'Pace' only counts for so much when your cars are Frankensteined hand-me-downs. It also let him adapt to the type of life we

had. He could move with it, find parts to hold on to, without having to reject every genuine feeling to survive. It wasn't because he was older; he was just... built different." He smiles faintly. "He always tried to share that with me. He was the most amazing brother anyone could ask for, even when I insisted on being a pretty rubbish one. He was better at most things, except— not dying."

His voice, though soft, fills the cockpit, with the half-detached tone of drafting an essay. "During our last race, a time-attack qualifier, we were pushing each other hard. His reactor flared when he was coming out of a loop. It slammed his car into the road, hard. I was half a lap behind, and I remember driving towards it, hearing the sound it made; smoke, rising above the barriers; the car, split apart, like a sunflower. It was so sharp... Marko would've died in the impact. He wouldn't have suffered. And it wasn't anybody's fault. The safety systems did what they were supposed to. It just wasn't enough."

"I'm sorry it was so sudden," I say. "Not that there's ever a good way for it to happen, but..."

"Yeah," Sinas says.

We dive into a canyon, banking left, then right. Scraggly bushes whip past, clinging to walls rarely touched by the sun.

"The day before he died, we promised we'd help each other," he continues. "To escape, from our parents. To find the lives we wanted for ourselves. It was the first time I'd committed to... becoming more, than I was. First time I'd been honest about my life. It's funny. Marko stuck with me through every annoyance, every fight, every day more painful than the last, and the one time I took the chance to reach for something – the *only* time – it got snatched away." He hunches forwards. "I didn't want it to hurt, so I pretended it didn't. Besides, people treat you differently, if they know things like that about you, so I made myself 'normal'. Which is all I'd ever wanted, in a way; the freedom of normality."

The word leaves a bad taste in his mouth. We exit the canyon, grabbing its checkpoint on the way out. Then, abruptly, he pauses the game.

"So, who do you think I am?" he asks.

The racecourse map swims before my eyes.

The problem is, there are many Sinases. There's the one here, next to me. There's Sinas, three years ago. There are those from every moment in between.

"I think you're a good person," I say. "Who's a bit too hard on themselves."

"That's very generous."

"And also... not hard enough?" I wince. "What I mean is—"

"—if I'm going to change, and get the life I want, I need to be able to do it on my own. Finn, I'm not killing the mood for no reason. I'm telling you how I feel because I *WANT* to figure it out. Hearing you explain what happened between us, before – it makes me want to try harder, to not hold onto Marko as much, and stop 'pretending'. Whatever that means." He smiles privately. "Mostly so Wake stops calling me a cardboard cutout."

"Wake calls people lots of things."

"Yeah, and she's mostly right."

"I tried not to share too much about us being friends back then," I add.

"Friends. Yes."

"It must feel weird, hearing about it second-hand."

"That's the thing." He turns to me. "To me it sounds... natural. I latched onto you hard at the time, because you were the closest available life raft and I really, really needed the help. It makes sense. Now, though, the motivation is different. I *feel* differently, about..."

"About what?"

"You."

I swallow. "As in, us being friends?"

"Really? You thought 'friends' was where I was going with this?" He grins.

"Um," I say.

"Friends' isn't the word I'd use."

"It's not the word Wake used either, when she found out, the first time."

"And which word was that?"

I can't bring myself to say it.

"Don't run away," he murmurs, "but there's one part of me who's convinced I only met you a few weeks ago, and for the majority of those weeks we were in stasis. On the other hand, there's an instinctive, subconscious, deeper part of me whom I think has been obsessing over you for approximately three years without realising."

"Three years, two months and sixteen days?"

"Give or take."

"I... have a question," I say. "Are you still pretending?"

Sinas quits the sim. The cockpit vanishes. "Right now, I'm pretending not to care about you. I'd prefer to stop."

"Stop caring? Or stop pretending?"

"I think you know."

There's very little room, in this cramped cabin; so few places to hide (maybe under the desk, if you've got a hyper-flexible spine).

Sinas twists to face me properly, one elbow propped against the wall. His eyes, despite our tiredness, swim blue, and green, and yellow, and luminous, as his other hand comes to rest on mine, on the couch, and it's cold, but mine's *warm*, my body revving way too high. I stop myself from melting into the gaps between the cushions.

"My question," he adds, "is if you're okay with that— if you're okay with *me*. I can guess, but I can't see inside your head. Not yet, anyway."

"Not... yet?"

"I said I was taking control of my life, didn't I? Seems like that might involve controlling *you*, a little."

I'm sitting next to the devil. "Oh, yeah. Maybe."

"Think about it," he says casually, his eyes so, so bright.

"Okay. I... will."

"And while you do— I'm going to have a shower."

He gets up.

Slips into the bathroom.

Shuts the door behind him, and thank god for the barrier. I wasn't sure where this conversation was headed, but it *definitely* wasn't here, which is a confusing puddle of feelings to be sitting in. My throat's raucously dry, but I find my voice, eventually.

"I... care about you too," I whisper, to vacated air.

Why?

Come on, Finn. It doesn't matter why.

What matters is the hairs on the back of my hand are still buzzing, and through the door, there's the rustle of clothes, a shirt, then shoes, and the sharp *click* of a heater circuit followed by dull white noise of the shower. Every tiny sound's a cacophony in my ears, an invitation to obsess. I shift, closing my eyes, which only makes the hyper-awareness worse—

"Finn? This isn't working." Muffled voice.

I freeze. "What isn't?"

"The shower. Can you come in here?"

"Ummm..."

"Come in. It's fine."

My legs stand up, carrying me to the door, and my fingers rest on the button. It's nothing I haven't seen a hundred times before in the school changerooms, right? No big deal. Calm down.

I open it.

Sinas is there – *obviously* – standing in the shower cubicle, wearing nought but a pair of light blue trunks; not naked, but as close as you can reasonably get. The blue's a nice colour on him, even if the fabric is a bit clingy around— nope, I'm not gonna be weird about it, as he peers at the control panel.

"The water shuts off after a few seconds," he says. "Do you know why?"

I squint from the doorway. "Does it require a waiver?"

"A what?"

"Ships often have separate waivers to sign, if you want to use specific items. It's in case we suddenly accelerate, or decelerate, or... space stuff. Basically, it means it's your fault if you die in the shower."

I query it with my MeshMate, and sure enough, the shower's pinging for authorisation. Sinas sends his passkey, and voila: water, hot. There's a good amount of pressure in its star-shaped spray.

What a turn of events, huh? (Look at me, not being weird about this.)

Nevertheless, I'm suspicious. These kinds of waivers are incredibly commonplace, even for appliances that *aren't* in space; if its owner isn't trying to avoid liability, they're going to want to sell your data instead, so they have to at least *pretend* to ask.

Then Sinas turns, facing me, and an awful lot of pale skin fills my vision, from neck to toes and most of what's in between. I try not to gawp at his distressingly nice stomach with its hints of abs, or distressingly nice shoulders

speckled with water drops, or his distressingly nice everything else, which parts of ME have been obsessing over for roughly three years. I was almost over it. I swear I was almost over it. I especially try not to stare at the inch-sized, star-shaped scar lying just above his heart.

“Guess I’ll get started,” he says.

“Sounds good.” An autopilot smile. I grab the doorframe, about to retreat—

“Or,” he adds, “you could, you know... stay.”

No thoughts, head empty. “What was that?”

“The shower’s big enough for both of us. If we shared, it would, um – save water.”

Even HE can’t sell that reasoning. But he’s standing there, getting increasingly damp about two metres away, and I feel something stir inside me.

“It would save water,” I reply.

Is this happening?

Don’t be weird about it. *Don’t be weird.*

I take off my shirt, awkwardly, because it is quite cramped, then wriggle out of my jeans, banging my elbow on the sink. I don’t take off my underwear, for a few different reasons, but he’s got his on and I’m not brave enough to be the first one naked.

I’ve never been too confident about my body. I don’t hate it, but I mostly avoid walking around with my shirt off.

It feels alright, though, as Sinas catches my eye. He grins as I close the door.

I step into the cubicle and now it really IS just us.

The water’s nice.

He’s nice.

Sinas has told a lie, because the shower isn’t big enough for both of us, and unavoidably, his side’s pressing lightly against mine. I look down. I’m trying not to think too much as water drips down my face, down our slippery skin, in this tiny cubicle where steam isn’t the only thing that’s rising. He *must* be able to feel my heartbeat through my ribs. Then I feel his finger, on my chin, tilting my face towards his, and yes, he is quite close, and we don’t have many clothes on.

You don’t get to see this part.

I plop myself down on the side of the bed, doing my best to use the room’s liquid vacuum to suck the last remnants of water off my body. Its nozzle is a combo attack of rubber, grit and slime, though allegedly, it’ll disinfect a bioweapons lab, no problem.

Sinas exits the bathroom, ready for his turn, when Alex requests an ‘urgent!!!’ group videocall. He skips over to me, half-way to a Looney-Tunes tumble, then recovers into a stylish lean against the top bunk. It’s bewildering how he manages to make bad posture attractive.

“Let’s not accept a videocall right now,” he says.

“What happened to ‘not pretending’?” I ask. (Clearly, I’ve let this get to my head, which took all of ten minutes.)

“No, don’t get me wrong, I have zero issue with the others knowing about us.” He searches for answers, in featureless plastic. “I need to apologise, first.”

“Why?”

“I need to apologise to Alex. I... well, you know. I kissed her. I was figuring myself out. Shouldn’t have done it.”

The call goes unanswered, filed to my messages: *“Don’t ignore us, dickheads! Wake and I are hanging out in the common room. We’re grabbing food. Hurry up and come over. Anyway, bye... Hmm, reckon that’s too pushy? I can re-record—”*

<Message ends.>

“What do you think?” Sinas asks. “Wanna go?”

“I mostly feel like sleeping, but— I am hungry, a bit.”

“Hungry, huh?” Then, his eyes narrow, and there’s a *glint* to them, like a cat discovering a new source of mischief. “You look really cute right now, you know that?” he murmurs.

“I didn’t,” I say, extremely un-self-consciously, resisting the urge to neaten my hair. “I didn’t know that.”

He bends down, fingers resting on my shoulder; then they tighten. I’m the mouse in his paws, a helpless, blushing mouse, and for a second, I swear he’s going to—

His lips twist into a smile. He stands up straight.

“We should go,” he says. “They’re waiting.”

I lie back, catching my breath.

If Sinas is hunting me, he’s not having to put in much effort. Every time he asks, I’ll hop right into his jaws.

About time I found my shirt.

FINN XVII

I grab my clothes from the laundry unit, doing my best to make them presentable via the medium of slightly too much deodorant. I can't do much to cover up the assorted rips or burn-marks, but at this point, perhaps we should lean into the aesthetic. Sinas does have an eye-catching MeshSkin, though: inky brushstrokes that swirl around him like a subtle, painterly breeze, fading in and out. My translucent anime shading is rote by comparison.

Once we leave, it doesn't take long to find Alex and Wake.

"You two look... peppy," she says, as we saunter into the common room.

"Because we're coming to see you," Sinas says.

"Nice. Well, the feeling's not mutual."

The common room is pleasant enough, its low ceiling and lighting recalling an aquarium, with cosy collections of seats which the Mesh intersperses with swaying strands of kelp. There's a food prep area at the far end, where Wake is rooting through a cupboard, raccoon-mode.

"There's a proper stocked kitchen here," Alex explains, "not that anybody knows how to cook—"

I raise my hand slightly.

"YOU do?" Alex frowns. "How many weird skills do you have?"

"Three."

"Elaborate."

"Cooking, drawing, squeezing into tiny spaces."

"Okay, correction, nobody can be BOTHERED cooking, so what we're working with is a curated selection of the finest pre-prepared mealpacks."

Wake holds one up and waves it around. "Wooo! This one's garlic bread!"

We spend a few minutes scouring options, then heating up the appetising ones. I assume Farah will join us at some point, but until then, we've got free reign. Perhaps there are fewer people on board than I thought; our deck's basically deserted otherwise.

"Tikka masala?" Wake asks. "It says it's spicy."

“Spicy’s good,” I say. My MeshMate offers to choose an option for me, spouting nutritional info, but I’ll take Wake’s recs. Subconsciously, I’m looking for any hesitance in how she or Alex are treating me, after my confession, but perhaps everyone’s simply... relieved.

Suddenly, Wake stops. “I *knew* her,” she says.

She’s watching a MeshFeed, projected on the wall.

“Who?” Alex asks.

“That girl! On the news.”

She’s dead, as it turns out. <*A young journalist has been killed during protests against unregulated food prices in—*>

“You knew her?” Sinas asks.

“Yes! We talked online. She made videos, like me.”

<—*Berlin. Protests became violent after the third consecutive day of police retaliation, and refusal of MeshBank to increase basic allowances—*>

“I’m sorry, Wake. That’s terrible,” Alex says.

“We weren’t super close, but she helped me out a few times.” She bites her lip.

<—*above pre-plague levels originally set in 2075. Similar protests have broken out in Mumbai, Los Angeles, and other cities, while Coffee² Futures has offered to—*>

“Do you want to turn it off?” Alex asks.

“No. No, I don’t.” Wake’s friend looks a few years older than us, but not by much; Khorin’s age, maybe. She smiles in a photo, wearing a headscarf. “I sometimes wonder if I’m wrong, wanting to change things,” Wake says softly. “Because it’s not like we need to. Most people don’t. They live regular lives, supporting their families, and their communities, and that’s important. We need those people.” She stares at the screen. “But that story, up there? It’s about Tao, too. It’s about my parents. It’s about millions of people, who don’t *get* a regular life. Which means life needs to change, doesn’t it? And we’re alive, right now, so... we’re the ones who’ll have to do it. Little by little, we’re the ones.”

The microwave pings. It’s my tikka masala.

“I’m frustrated the world ISN’T changing, as fast as we want it to,” Wake says. “Or maybe it’s better one day, then worse the next. I know it’s selfish, or unkind, but I hate that most people don’t seem to care as much. They live their lives, and that’s it, while other people die, fighting to make us better.”

“That’s humanity, though,” Alex replies. “I mean, you can’t convince me being a doctor is pointless because doctors don’t enact societal change. Doctors keep people healthy, which helps their patients lead more productive lives, and that’s impactful. Society needs to operate before it can improve, so yeah – *somebody* needs to work at Maccas, or repair the Maccas serve-bots when they break, or repair the factory that repairs the serve-bots – you know what I mean. Most people *care*. They just have different values to you, or aren’t in a position to do much about it. Overall, it balances out.”

“You really believe that?” Wake asks. “How about you, then? What are you planning to do with your life? You obviously like writing – if you spent your life on that, you might ENJOY it, but nobody sits around writing *books* anymore. You can’t survive like that. What makes you think you can create a better story than whatever an ArtGen pack spits out in thirty seconds?”

Alex narrows her eyes. “Great question.”

“Is supporting human art versus generated art a topic you care about, then?”

“Yes.”

“Are you doing something about it yet?”

“Not yet, no.”

“Or Finn,” Wake continues, shoving another meal into the oven. “What do you wanna do in the future?”

“Build spaceships,” I say. “Space engineering. That kind of stuff.”

“Clearsky. Why?”

“...because it’s clearsky. Star Wars is clearsky.” I hate how juvenile that always sounds.

“Aren’t you ignoring all the problems we have on Earth, then? Compared to scientists studying agricultural engineering, or climate engineering.”

“Well, if there were two of me—”

Alex raises her hand. “I’m right here.”

“—I might devote my life to reversing ecological catastrophes, or cultural genocide, but I suppose I’m optimistic other people will solve ‘not dying’, as a species. Space is important, too.” I’m trying not to be too defensive, although Wake isn’t being overly aggressive – more putting forward some hypotheticals.

“And Sinas,” she says. “What’s your goal? If you have one.”

“Escape my family. After that...” He shrugs. “We’ll see. I’ve never let myself plan for ‘after’. Don’t wanna jinx it.” He picks up his mealpack, then drops it, to let it cool off more. “What about you? Isn’t this when you outline your foolproof ‘become queen of the world’ plan?”

“Being me and being head of the world government are truly two extremely-far-apart things.” She requests garlic bread, which Alex hands to her. “I don’t have answers; I’m also frustrated. Like, I participate in youth government, and volunteer work, and *debate club*, but what for? A million people watch my TwitchTok streams, but what FOR? I enjoy making videos, talking about social justice, having a ‘platform’, but I dunno why people follow me in the first place and what I do doesn’t fix actual problems.” She deflates like a balloon. “It feels fake, like faking an impact – or being popular when I don’t deserve it. One more ‘influencer’, adding to the noise.”

We consider the garlic bread in silence, spinning slowly as it defrosts. The news moves on from Wake’s friend, cycling through overpopulation crises, TK speeches, human augmentation breakthroughs, finishing with a heartwarming story about a rescued intellocatopus.

“You’re not making it worse either,” Sinas says, “which is important. I’m no expert on what your goals are, but you’re trying to change people’s minds, right? Mobilise them to do good things? Outreach is HARD when the public are already so disillusioned. Some aspects of life are better than they were fifty years ago, but some are worse, as well, and inheriting the problems of older generations who didn’t care about ‘afterwards’ gets old.”

“It’s not one problem,” Alex adds. “Because we’ve got the Mesh, and freedom to use it, ostensibly, which is life changing. However, there’s so *much* Mesh you’ve gotta spend ages filtering out what’s not worth listening to, or who’s actively trying to manipulate you, to find what’s lucent, and honestly, it’s easier to ignore everything as noise. I shouldn’t do that, but I do. Like, remember in *Moon’s Haunted*, there was that monologue, last season, about how when so much bad shit happens every day, it’s easier for the bad guys to hide behind the sheer weight of reality... so we feel what we do as individuals could never combat megacorps, or governments, or toxic ideologies. Obviously, that sucks.”

I use the ensuing silence to speak up. “It’s hard to move eleven billion people in a consistent direction... Some will never be implanted with MeshMates, or healbots, or biokeys. Others spend their entire lives in the Mesh and barely have physical bodies anymore. Those are very different lives.” Ferdinand stares at me balefully, which is monitor lizard for ‘do your best’.

“Circling back, the point is, Wake, if millions of randos are simping over your MeshSkin? That’s power. Maybe a crummy kind of power, but it’s real.” Alex frowns. “After all, people need inspiration from somewhere. I’m not good at that part. I can’t even inspire myself out of bed, half the time.”

“It also comes down to practicality,” Sinas says. “People have big ideas but get bogged down or shot down when it’s time to implement them. It happens all the time. You need to be *incredibly* good about getting support. Unfortunately, my parents were fantastic at it.” He shrugs. “Or start small, like fixing problems in your apartment building, or at school. Making life better for ten people still means something to those ten, doesn’t it? My brother’s help meant a lot to me, and I’m *one* person. I realise you said the scaling was frustrating, but it’s a start. Also, we should eat,” Sinas adds, “before I need to re-re-re-reheat my pasta.”

We gather around a long couch bent haphazardly into a circle. I print some utensils and hand them out.

“Sorry for the downer convo,” Wake says. “Anyone mind if I put on music?”

“It was an *adult* and *mature* conversation,” Alex says. “But go for it.”

“OK OK, there’s a new T-pop group called Transitory Dalliance. Have you heard of them? They’re as glacier as.”

“I thought you were a Miku girl.”

“I am, but their music slaps and I’ve been marathoning it for weeks. LISTEN to this.”

Wake’s right; it does kinda slap. I’m not sure my dinner’s strictly improved by this much bass, but hey, if I could dance, this is a song I’d dance to. (I can’t dance.)

“Adding this to my ‘exorcism bangers’ playlist,” Alex says, bopping her head. “For next time we murk some ghosts.”

“Hey,” Sinas says, “*hey*, you might be onto something. Music would at least block out the hissing and screaming.”

Wake jumps to her feet. “Then how about this? I’ve got tons of stuff queued on Spotify—”

Suddenly, three different songs are overlapping in our shared MeshChannel. I nearly never listen to music on my own (when I’m studying, or travelling) but I also don’t *mind* music, as a communal concept. Sinas is streaming a song with city-at-night vibes – wintry, but cosy.

“This is nice,” Alex says. “Chill lo-fi beats to save the world to. Love to be chill when I’m running from zombies.”

“The other option is going for mantis BPM to maximise adrenaline,” he says.

“BPM?” Wake asks.

“Beats per minute.”

“Oh, OK! If we’re BPM-maxxing, Transitory Dalliance has *options*. By the way, their main singer is so halo, and comfy, and sexy— Finn, you’re gay, right? Or bi? Or pan?”

“Bi. You can say pan, if you want.”

“It’s 2092,” Sinas says, “everyone’s a *little* pan.”

Wake rolls her eyes. “Don’t be problematic. What I wanted to ask is: when did you figure it out? Because when I look at this girl, the singer, and stalk her videos... oh *maaaaaan*.” Her eyes are suddenly wistful (so much wist they’re dripping). “It makes me feel things.”

“What kind of things?” Alex asks. “Tell me more.”

“Things! Maybe I just admire her, or want to BE her...” She sighs. “Yeah. When did you know?”

Unexpected line of questioning, but sure. “There wasn’t really a single moment. In hindsight, though, there were a couple of things. Like, there was – or ‘is’, technically – a guy on my class I’d sit next to on the bus home, and whenever I did, I got nervous, because— I guess I had a crush on him? And at the same time, I was watching an anime about a swimming club, and the boys in it were... quite well-drawn...”

“Huh,” Wake says. “Maybe I should watch more anime.”

“Woah, this Transitory girl is BUFF,” Alex says. “Great voice control, AND she plays guitar? Complete package.” True to Wake’s word, the song’s so fast it’s almost tripping over itself. “Wake, why’s she singing about exams?”

“She’s not singing about exams. It’s about how society places too much value on social scores, and credit scores, and sorting people into categories – which exams ARE a part of.”

“I don’t want to hear about exams.”

“We do have exams coming up,” I murmur.

Alex turns on me. “What did I JUST say?”

“They’re important exams.”

“Jesus Christ.”

I take another bite of my tikka masala. It’s good.

“What if we’re coming at this from the wrong angle?” Sinas asks. “I wonder if we should be picking music the lampires might *hate*.”

“Troll tactics!” Wake says.

“Then we should go for opera,” Alex says.

“Why?”

“I mean, do you like opera? I don’t like opera.”

“You’re not a ghost, though”

She waves her hands spookily. “Maybe it’s time to admit I’ve been dead *this entire time!*”

“In MY opinion,” Wake says, “a song ghosts would really hate is—”

She freezes abruptly, raising one hand.

She scrunches her nose, mouth half-open.

“...Is?” Sinas asks.

She shushes him with her finger.

I’ve never seen her concentrate this intensely. The finger wobbles, and her nose scrunches further, into a crumpled, anguished singularity.

She’s carved from stone for about thirty seconds.

Then she exhales, shoulders slumped in defeat. “It’s gone.”

“Aww,” Alex pouts. “I was looking forward to you sneezing your brains out.”

Farah chooses that moment to enter, knocking – with endearing politeness – on the side of the open door.

“Am I interrupting something?” she asks, as she enters.

“Do you have a favourite song?” Wake asks.

“...Huh?”

“I was wondering if you had a favourite song. For our exorcism playlist.”

“Should I ask? I probably shouldn’t ask,” she mutters. “*Boulevard of Broken Dreams* is a good one – it’s old, though. You might not like it. Anyway, I wanted to inform you I received a reply, from back home. It’s been agreed. We’ll enter stasis tomorrow.”

We glance at each other. “...We’re going to Jupiter?” Alex asks.

“We are. We need to be ready. In an ideal world, this is a symptom of caution, but if it isn’t, and the worst comes to pass... we’ll need your experience. Especially if we need to send a team into Illumination. You’re quite possibly the only ones with a chance of surviving.”

The ship hums, a husk of living composites.

“Question,” Sinas says. “If we were younger – thirteen, for example – would that chance be higher?”

“I’m not... convinced. Yes, there are factors which support that: younger lives brimming with possibility, which Illumination seems to prefer; perhaps connections to the past are rawer; perhaps imaginations are more vibrant. Equally, with age comes experience, wisdom, logic, and endurance. I suspect it’s a balance.”

“Sounds like a guess.”

“It is. That’s why, one last time, I’m seriously asking if you want to do this. We’ll be undermanned, facing the unexpected, and we’re apparently doomed to underestimate the consequences.”

“Yeah, we’re definitely going,” Alex says.

“Out of academic interest,” Sinas asks, “is there a plan besides ‘show up’?”

“Like launching a flock of missiles at Thebe and blowing it up yesterday?” Wake says.

“Not unless we want to start a war,” Farah replies. “I’d rather be hopeful a violent solution isn’t necessary.” Pre-emptively, she raises a hand. “We’ll deal with it, one way or another. Preventing another Titan incident is the top priority. We’ll have time to make plans during our approach, and by then we’ll have much more information.”

“We’ll prepare ahead of time?” Sinas murmurs. “That’s new.”

“I might actually miss running around and just reacting to shit,” Alex replies. “There was a simplicity to it, y’know? Lots of screaming, but it was simple. On the other hand, our very own heist movie planning montage? That’s rare. That’s special.”

Wake clenches her fist.

“We should talk,” I add, “to understand what we know. And what we don’t.”

Farah nods. “Good idea. For now, though, I’ll say goodnight.”

“Already?” Wake asks.

“Sorry. Places to be – specifically, the command deck.” She rubs absently at an old scar, hiding behind her hair. “I’ll explain later, but I really, really thought I was done with all this. I wasn’t expecting to be involved again and it’s... surreal. It’s an adjustment.” She turns to leave, with a tiny wave that could be a tic.

“Farah?” Alex asks. “Why Australia?”

The question confuses her. “Why did I move there, or...?”

“Yeah, nah, I meant why is the government devoting so much effort towards Illumination? Australia doesn’t spend billions of dollars on physics research. Australia grows food and digs metal out of the ground. It’s cool, I guess, but it doesn’t fit, historically, at least from what I’ve learned at school. Makes me wonder if a corp is pulling the strings.”

It’s one more way to ask ‘why us’.

“That’s just it,” Farah says. “Agriculture took a hit, after open-air farming became difficult. That metal in the ground won’t to last forever. The reasoning, then, was to invest in diversification, with Illumination being an attractive lottery ticket. It wasn’t *only* Illumination, to be clear; ASIRO facilitates plenty of other research in medicine and quantum tech. Eventually, though, the people upstairs realised we could dig metal out of *space* instead, which is when our project finances began to dry up, and deliverables became more of a concern.”

“Oh, okay. Makes sense, I s’pose. Thanks.”

“Of course. Chat more tomorrow.”

Farah smiles a strained smile, then takes her leave.

We finish dinner, dump our rubbish into the recycling chute, then sit back down. Wake drapes herself over the couch like an Egyptian queen, taking up far more space than her diminutive frame would suggest. Alex, instead, draws her legs up to her chest, chin resting on her knees, idly swiping through recorded footage of our escape.

“I tried to find some birthday cake, I really did,” Wake says. “But this dumb ship doesn’t have any.”

“Wake, it’s *fine*,” Alex says. “Finn, say it’s fine.”

“It’s fine.” Honestly, after dying, I’d forgotten today’s my birthday. (Conveniently, it’s now my death-day, too.)

“Thanks heaps for trying, though,” Alex adds.

I’ve wedged myself into the corner of the armrest, one leg outstretched, the other crossed beneath it, perfect for inducing severe pins-and-needles in roughly twenty minutes. Sinas leans forwards, hands clasped between his knees. He rolls his shoulders tiredly.

“So,” he begins. “What DO we know?”

I can only manage so much talking in one day, but I start by describing what I learned in Illumination, as best I can (i.e., poorly).

Sinas attempts to summarise. “There’s a barrier, between our dimension and Illumination, but it’s slightly permeable – enough for a big, evil entity to slip part of itself through, and hitch a ride with your mother. Ever since, the Wraith has been trying to force us – specifically us – into Illumination, so it can do ‘something’, *maybe* related to trapping us inside, or opening a permanent tunnel connecting Illumination to our universe. Does that sum it up?”

“Approximately,” I reply.

“Next question: why shouldn’t we reverse our plan, then, and flee as far away as possible? If the Wraith wants to use us, let’s make ourselves difficult to use.”

Alex nods. “If things go badly, though, and others need our help, us BEING in the area is important. We just need to be careful we’re not taken advantage of. It’s like— when a hero hands themselves in to the villain, as a ploy to infiltrate their secret base.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Don’t ‘uh-huh’ me.”

“There are details that bug me, though, from Finn’s story,” Wake says. “One is Tao’s sister: she got summoned as a normal, angry, *mean* lampire, and then he made her calm, somehow. Can WE do that?” She counts on her fingers. “Two: when Finn and Alex had their glitched telepathy experiment, they like, *communicated* with Illumination, somehow. That might be super useful, if one of us has to go in, again.”

“Wow, you *were* paying attention,” Alex says.

“Obviously. Three: Dr. Hanamura made Alex wear a special suit when she was being thrown into the portal. Why?”

“Maybe Farah can hook us up with a research paper,” Sinas says. “If the scientists gained a mathematical understanding of how Illumination works, we could try linking that with our practical experiences. Come at it from two sides.”

Woah, don’t tell me we’re actually going to do *science* at this science camp.

“I like the initiative,” Alex mutters, “but I’m kinda zonked – aren’t you? My head’s not up to parsing hardcore physics right now.” She grimaces. “We know FAR more than we used to, about how Illumination’s structured, and how to get around inside, but there are lots of unknowns remaining. Like, why are some souls friendly, like Finn’s purple calculator buddy? Are there more of them? Can we team up? Plus, how did we all avoid getting ghost-murdered before finding the PRISMS? Dumb luck? SMART luck?”

“Good questions,” Sinas says, “without good answers.”

“Even if there isn’t birthday cake, I might have a birthday *present*,” Wake pipes up excitedly. “Remember when we found those videos of us, during the previous experiment? And how I downloaded loads of data from that server? What if that INCLUDED a huge batch of research docs! Wow, great job Wake!”

I’m blasted by a hail of files from her MeshMate, and as promised, it’s far more than we could read in a night, or a week, or possibly a year, especially without the relevant scientific background (even if Ferdinand will do his best to translate). I decide to start skimming anyway, searching for interesting titles while we talk.

That’s how I find myself studying Dirichlet membranes and cosmic strings at 2AM. Apologies in advance for the following paragraphs, but— string theory, essentially, is a semi-proven ruleset allowing physicists to model how reality fundamentally operates. If I’m understanding correctly (huuuge ‘if’), ‘strings’ are the simplest one-dimensional objects making up our universe. As they vibrate, twist, and fold, they produce tiny dimensions which get interpreted as physical phenomena.

Dirichlet membranes, or ‘D-branes’, on the other hand, are the boundaries strings attach to. D-branes can move around, and have different numbers of dimensions, depending on the dimensionality of the spacetime they exist in. However, if you’re stuck in, say, a two-dimensional D-brane, you can’t move at right angles to that reality to explore the three-dimensional universe *outside* that brane; and when D-branes approach each other, there can be lots of funky rule-based interactions between strings. Our own universe can be considered a D-brane, whereas Illumination is a manifestation of *many* D-branes.

Is any of that useful? Does it match what I felt in Illumination, with its tethers, and membranes, and fractal scaffolding? I’m not sure.

But it suggests a few interesting thought experiments. For example, if you’re on a higher-dimensional membrane, and a bad guy’s looking for you on a lower-dimensional brane, you could see *it*, but it wouldn’t be able to see *you* – a perfect hiding spot. Other equations suggest that if you bring one membrane

close to another with the same dimensionality, it might create an identical copy, like a reflection.

My eyes have glazed over. I close the file.

Alex leans over. "Watcha doin'?" she asks.

"...Research."

"Want help?"

I lie back, stretching my arms. "If you're bored."

"I do need a job to help me fall asleep." She plonks herself down. Sinas is chatting to Wake, in low murmurs, and the glowstrips are dimmed nightlights. The ship's bleeps and bloops are soothing white noise. Mesh-glow illuminates my hands as I pass her a folder of virtual documents.

"Have fun."

She pokes my shoulder. "The people who write these should consider adding jokes occasionally."

I'm onto wormholes next: tunnels, linking unique points in space and/or time. As with any space-warping concept, creating a practical wormhole was thought to require huge, arguably infeasible amounts of energy, or loads of exotic matter with 'negative' energy (which behaves in opposite ways to boring you-and-me matter). In any case, mathematically at least, you can draw a tube connecting two exterior regions in a coordinate system, and the maths... works? One end's a black hole which sucks stuff in, and the other end's a white hole that spits stuff out, and the intervening interior space is crossed faster than light. What's more interesting here is the material about *moving* wormholes, which might explain how a small, secret science project fulfilled the crazy energy requirement. Instead of creating a wormhole themselves, it looks like they might've... found one? And moved it?

No, not quite right; what they found is a cosmic string, a topological crack in the fabric of the universe, and a leftover from the extreme phase changes that occurred moments after the Big Bang (like those tiny cracks that form when water freezes into ice). By forcing the string to resonate in a specific harmonic pattern, it *became* a wormhole – one that could slide through spacetime like a superconductor.

Fun, huh?

I'm tired, though. I think I'm done for the night.

At some point, I fall asleep on Sinas' chest, lulled by his gentle, slow breaths.

Vaguely, I remember being woken up.

I'm led through the ship, in a sleep-starved daze I'm in no hurry to rouse myself from.

We're taken to the stasis chamber, under Farah's guidance. Most of the soldiers and other personnel are already there, apart from the skeleton crew who'll keep the *Paradise Scaffold* in order through the ten-day journey to Jupiter.

I settle into the sleeping pod, its lid scything towards my face, then sealing with a hiss of oxygen-rich air. Soon, it'll sedate me, then fill with cryogenic liquid, and then it's oblivion and Ferdinand for company. In a way, it's time travel: a short, dreamless hop into the future, which happens to extend my life by ten days at the other end.

I accept it, calmly, as Ferdinand curls up beside me.

I'm woken, rudely, by blaring alarms.

My eyes are blurry, my nose clogged with viscous liquid that's flushing into drainage holes at the bottom of the stasis pod. Clothes stick damply to my skin; their hydrophobic coating has seen better days. I try moving, can't, my sluggish muscles slowly coming online.

Where am I? I'm on— a space station? Starfish?

Thoughts crawling at a snail's pace.

I sit up, smacking my forehead on the pod lid, which takes it as an invitation to open fully. Alarms grow louder, burrowing into my eardrums, Mesh alerts cycling in bright green text. *<Battle stations! Battle stations! Set Condition One throughout the ship.>*

More pods unfurl to reveal disoriented faces. Lights flicker. Smoke in the air. My head pounds, stomach lurches, and I slide my legs out of the pod. The floor bucks amid a cacophony of shrieking PolyGrowth. I clutch the pod supports, breathing hard. Ferdinand flicks his tail anxiously.

Why was I in stasis?

Wait. We're on a ship – Farah's ship – we were racing to Thebe—

"Finn! Finn-Finn-Finn!" Wake's voice. She grabs my shoulder, eyes wide. "What's happening? Are we under attack?"

I shake my head, which doesn't help my nausea. I try pinging Farah, to no avail. I try pinging Sinas, but the Mesh is *howling* at me, overloaded. We stumble out of the cryo chamber into a corridor as a line of marines tramples past, an avalanche of protective gear and barked orders.

"Hey. Hey! What's going on?" Wake calls out. "HEY!"

One stops, flicking open their visor. "We were ambushed during our decel burn – there's a battle underway in orbit—"

<Beginning attack run. Brace for maneuver. Two gees, left, ten seconds.>

We flatten ourselves against the starboard wall, grabbing regularly-placed safety straps as gravity tilts sideways, the hull vibrations reaching a crescendo. There are subsonic *thumps* from deep in the ship's bowels as railguns spew a couple of defensive volleys. The marine sticks fast with her geckogloves.

<Warning. Damage in Deck 3 Aft. Apply protective equipment before entering.>

"Battle against WHO?" Wake squeaks.

"Unclear. Too much interference from the moon." The marine jogs to catch up to her squad, heading towards the lower deployment tubes.

“Interference? Wait, is the portal already open?”

“Just get to your cabin! You’ll be safe there till we’re out of firing range.”

I suppose we don’t have a choice. We hurry through the ship’s winding warrens, chased by ever-more-worrying damage reports.

When we get to the cabin, Alex and Sinas aren’t there. “Where the *yekk* are those mangos?” Wake asks, glancing around our very empty room.

“I don’t know.” I try calling again. Still no luck.

“Let’s put vacsuits on.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

We raid the emergency locker. These suits are heavier-duty than those on Starfish, with active-assist joints and a far longer independent survival period. They could also double as body armour, in a pinch: rigid white plates cover my torso and shoulders, my flesh kept snug beneath rubbery blue nanofibers. Our sleek helmets are almost entirely visor, with triangular antennae that look like cat-ears. Between each breath are far-off shouts and sirens, underscored by the tooth-grinding buzz of point defence cannons. I check the suit’s seals and make sure my batteries are charged.

<Brace for maneuver. Axial spin, one rotation, ten seconds.>

I stick my feet to the floor as the room spins around us, a theme park ride I’d rather not be on. We’re upside down for a brief, lurching, moment before the main amdrive re-lights and gravity returns.

“I,” Wake says calmly, “am going to the bathroom.”

She sidles over to it and closes the door.

I query the Mesh for a sensor-map of the nearby orbital region; it’s an incomprehensible mess of predictive, intersecting trajectories, dozens of orange streaks flickering in and out of existence. One is us. Another might be Thebe. A trio of lines arc towards our ship from above, then vanish. *<Warning: reduced connection quality. Sensor lock unavailable.>*

I keep hoping the others will suddenly enter our cabin, but no luck. I guess I’m not sure how grim our situation is, but people are shooting at us, and we’re shooting back, so my professional assessment is ‘not ideal’.

Why did we wake up in the middle of the fight? Weren’t we supposed be careful? Plan in advance?

<Incoming ordinance. Urgent: please vacate the uppermost decks.>

A bone-churning rumble sends me to the ceiling. I catch myself on the upper bunk. My suit notes a sudden drop in air pressure, activating its internal O2 supply. Emergency seals lock around the door as Wake reappears on shaky knees.

“Biiiiig yikes,” she says. “This is like, a *Moon’s Haunted* season finale – they always do an expensive battle scene at the end. TV shows use better camera angles, though.” She glances around, tapping her foot. “Or any camera angle.”

“Can you access any external feeds?”

“I’m locked out. Ugh, just because I LIKE *Moon’s Haunted* doesn’t mean I wanna be IN it. Are we even USEFUL anymore?! Who’s fighting who?”

Not sure how long I can stay here, pacing back and forth.

“What if we found out?” I ask.

“How?” Wake asks. “Without the Mesh, or a viewscreen—”

“We could go and look,” I say.

Wake seems confused.

“With our eyes,” I say.

“Does this ship even have windows? It’s mantis enough to not have windows. It doesn’t even have CAKE!”

“The airlock where we came aboard had a viewport.”

“It did! You’re right, it did. Can we go there?”

“I don’t see why not. It’s not like they ordered us to stay here.”

“Okay.” Wake takes a breath. “Let’s leave a message for the others, though. The ONE TIME Alex’s notebook would be useful...” She settles for scrawling ‘went 2 airlock 3A’ on the bathroom mirror in toothpaste.

A minute later, we’re hurrying along a hallway. At regular intervals, the ship serenely announces more manoeuvres, giving us time to stick ourselves down.

<Assault Squadron 2 to lower launch tubes.>

<Repair team dispatched to Deck 3 Aft.>

The closer we get to the airlock, the more damage there is, including a series of arrow-straight, basketball-sized holes crossing our corridor at chest height – the path of a kinetic slug that’s burrowed through half the ship. The shredded fibres are tended to by spidery AutoDrones, re-weaving the damaged strands, their mandibles a blur.

There’s also an arm here, lying on the floor, within a severed flight suit. Another bot comes skidding along the floor and snags it with a gripper, presumably to deliver it to its original owner.

Worrying.

Even more worrying, the next manoeuvre *doesn’t* elicit a warning; we’re left to fend for ourselves as the ship slews hard to port. We slide down the corridor, pursued by a *thunk-thunk-thunk* from the missile tubes above. My heart skips a beat, as if another railgun slug might suddenly punch through the wall. This is why they tell you to stay put during a fight. This is why.

<—damage # \$aa#&~2—area of engagem%% R#@@21a—>

We round the corner, and Wake cannonballs straight into a blue-white vacsuit.

“What the hell!” Alex says.

Sinas, behind her, manages to dodge. I give him a quick ‘hi there’ nod.

“You guys took your time,” Alex mutters, dusting herself off. “Where were you?”

“Where were YOU?!” Wake retorts. “Are you OK?”

“Nah, yeah, we’re fine, although the situation’s pretty effing marginal. We went to find Farah actually, but I wasn’t allowed onto the bridge. Turns out she’s already left.”

“Already left? To go where?”

She squeezes her gloved fist. “The base on Thebe.”

“Thebe? We’re at Thebe? Already???”

“Well, I don’t bloody know, do I? The Mesh is down, the ship’s sensors are rubbish, we might be orbiting Mars for all I—”

“Why did Farah leave without us? She said she needed us!” Wake retorts.

“Perhaps there wasn’t time,” Sinas says.

“Or she isn’t trustworthy, like literally EVERYONE we talk to! Ugh!”

The ship shudders.

“Regarding our information problem,” I say, “we were planning to head to the airlock.”

“Why – to have a squiz out the window?” Alex asks.

“Yes.”

“Oh.”

“Sounds reasonable,” Sinas says. “Here’s a present.” He chucks us a couple of PRISMs.

“Where’d you get these?” I ask.

“Stole ‘em.”

“Gimme that,” Wake says, grabbing the PRISMs. “I’ll be back.” She jogs around the corner, towards the area I’ll call ‘severed arm zone’. Eventually, she returns, carrying an armful of cables.

“Where’d you get those?” Alex asks.

“Stole ‘em.” She starts stripping wires, swapping out the connectors on either end, then she flips over one PRISM and connects its charging port to a hip port in her suit. “Done! Now it’ll run off suit batteries. They’ll last way longer.”

“Smart thinking.”

“*Thank* you, Alex.”

We come upon an intersection of paths, like a clump of blood vessels, and one of them is our airlock— or used to be. The inner door’s there, but the outer door... isn’t. A twenty-metre trench is gouged in the ship’s armour, exposing vital machinery, trailing flash-frozen fluids and spurts of escaping plasma.

Alex grips the manual inner door release with both hands, wrenching it open. I feel the door’s weight as it swings up, and air escapes, and emergency shutters close. Inside, the torched floor panels extend for a few metres, and then... they don’t.

Alex edges along the remains of the tunnel, skirting the relatively intact left-hand wall. Reluctantly, I follow her. There’s another repair bot hovering around, trying and failing the plug the hole with sealant, and I suppose the *good* thing is we’ve now got a very big window to work with, because there, below our feet, lies the surface of Thebe (far enough away that, thankfully, my uneasiness about heights doesn’t kick in). From this altitude, the entire moon is visible, a misshapen gumdrop free-floating in space. Its lone, colossal, moon-spanning mountain throws a harsh shadow across red-tinged plains, the other half dominated by a rounded impact crater, forty clicks across and ten deep. Thebe

Base clings to its rim, situated near a vein of ice deposits, barely perceptible as a smear of grey habitats.

We are where we're meant to be, then.

However, the situation has deteriorated.

A thick, colourful haze spews upward and outward from the habitats, an otherworldly geyser, its spray settling into a kaleidoscope nebula. The haze doesn't flow, exactly, but wavers, like cloth rippling in wind; it billows chaotically in the ship turbulence, hiding the stars from view.

What's worse is the chunk of rock NEXT to Thebe: it's big, bigger than the moon, as if a giant stuck their hand into Play-Doh and dug out a continent to hurl into space. Fog writhes around its jagged underside, pulsing with colour, chaining it to the speck-sized habitats below. Its surface is instead concealed by an opaque yellow atmosphere, so *familiar*, so mysterious, so perfectly uniform, but for the pale blue tint at its edges.

<Is that... Titan?> I ask.

<I think it might be> Sinas breathes. <Ten percent of Titan, anyway.>

<What the hell's it doing here then?> Alex asks. <Where's the rest of it?>

Thump, go the railguns. Four contrails cut instantly across the haze, towards a shadow on Thebe's horizon. We're moving fast, banking around the moon, and I make sure my geckogloves are stuck extra tight. A flurry of explosions lights up Titan's underside, spiralling crazily, and I think it's a flock of torpedo drones; can't tell if they're ours.

<Are we late?> Wake asks. <Did they see us coming? Because that portal on the surface looks WAY more than 'open'. It's super-open. It's 'I've got food poisoning and just sat down on the toilet' open.>

<It's a proper gaping devil sphincter alright> Alex says.

<What now?> Sinas asks.

<Well, we can't have another Titan situation, whatever a fucking 'Titan situation' is. I also don't wanna stand here listing moons of Jupiter, but Callisto, Ganymede, Europa— that's heaps of people. Even if we ARE late, we need to sew up that sphincter.>

<Which we can't do from up here> I murmur.

<So step one is get to the surface> Wake says. <Alive. And fast.>

The portal's spawn-point is obviously Thebe Base, although its true source could be hidden underground. As long as we REACH the base complex, though, finding it sounds like a reasonable ask.

<*Laser defence grid active. Drop pods away in ten seconds.*>

Energy turrets unfold around the ship, and an umbrella of tracer beams starts to scythe in all directions. Then— *WHAM! WHAM! WHAM!* A salvo of hexagonal drop pods spews from the hangar deck, arcing towards the moon. Each hunk of metal probably carries a squad of marines, or combat drones; thrusters stabilise them as they punch through the aurora. The laser grid draws s-shaped patterns around their trajectory.

<Shit> Alex says. <We're SO late. That might've been our ride to the base.>

<We could steal a shuttle instead> Sinas says.

<Could we do *that*?> Wake asks, peering at the pods.

<What, use drop pods?>

<Welllll, I was thinking about the ‘drop’ part, not the ‘pod’ part.>

<Drop? As in *jump*?!>

<Sure!> Wake replies.

<Without protection? Into the middle of a space battle?> Alex grimaces. Another ship spears from the fog to starboard, zooming past, all angled plates and flaring engines. <The ONLY way to make that plan dumber is to somehow involve Finn’s shoosters.>

<OK, but either we stay here, with zero information, totally powerless, or we go down there, get SOME information, and DO stuff.>

<Ordinarily I’d be extremely against that idea> Sinas says. <However, these suits could get us down in one piece. They’ve got enough armour, enough manoeuvrability... provided we aren’t splattered by the bow of a battlecruiser.>

This decision-making process is moving a little fast. <And then what?> I ask. Alex shrugs. <We improvise?>

<I was keen to plan our epic Illumination heist> Wake says. <But thinking about it, those kinds of super complex plans never go well, anyway. They always end in ‘improvising’.>

The drop pods have reached the surface, impacting amid swirls of dust and ice. Zooming in, I can *barely* recover ant-like shapes sprinting across dirt to the base perimeter. Our ship rolls again to avoid a particle beam from the rear, launching more AutoDrones to handle whatever’s behind us. Lighting flashes in the haze, as a sheer, icy mountain range suddenly blocks our view, Titan’s stolen chunk passing between us and Thebe, warping my sense of scale.

<The marines entered from the south side> Alex says thoughtfully. <If we go in from the north... the bad guys might be distracted. OK, team huddle.> She beckons us closer. There’s not much room, in this ruined airlock, our helmets touching, Sinas’ arm round my shoulder, will-o’-the-wisps partying beneath my stress-curved toes.

<This is it> Alex says. <One last fight.> I can partially hear her voice, her real one, its resolve, its anxiety, transmitted through our connected suits. <Last time, it wasn’t our choice. The time before that, it wasn’t our choice either. This time, though – right now – it’s on OUR terms. We survived before. We can do it again. So let’s get down there, change the world, then go back home. Agreed?>

<Don’t you mean ‘save’ the world?> Wake asks.

<Yeah, nah, saving humanity sounds tricky. But changing it?> She grins. <I reckon we can do that. Nobody else I’d rather do it with, either.> She straightens, punching the air a few times, quick jabs: one-two-three, one-two-three.

Sinas looks down, then shakes his head, a private smile on his face. <Our terms> he echoes.

I *think* Wake’s taking a sneaky selfie, but hey, it is a once-in-a-lifetime view. As for me...

I take a deep breath. Close my eyes. The deepest breath I've ever taken.
I don't like heights very much, and this is one heck of a height.
'Nobody else I'd rather do it with.' I suppose that's true.
<Ready?> Sinas asks.
<Hell yeah.>
<Aaaaa-affirmative.>
<...ready as I'll ever be.>
I swallow.
Bend my knees.
Suit thrusters activated.
Together, we leap out into space.

ALEX XVI

Have you ever fallen into a space battle before?

Yeah, me neither. Technically, I fuckin' jumped – and that's worse. That implies INTENT. (If you have fallen into a space battle before, I'm sorry for presuming otherwise, and I hope the circumstances leading up to that choice were at least more normal than mine.)

We fall, forever, into a suffocating nebula. Around us is a patchwork quilt of deep purples, cold blues, midnight blacks, billowing in ocean-wave rhythms. Tendrils whip past us like cirrus, driven by a heartbeat deep within Thebe's core. Ships are rendered tiny against this painted background; its half-light bathes our faces, and slicks the surface of the approaching moon, and makes the scale of the world feel too big, too small, too *fluid*, as if we're water drops, racing through a storm, about to hit the side of a MetroDome. No domes out here, though, just run-on sentences, barrelling through my brain. Let's focus on details instead:

- shadows of ships, slicing through space—
- ghosts, pouring out of Titan's atmosphere—
- the mists curling around Thebe station—
- my MeshMate, desperately trying to lock on to reference points—
- the *Paradise Scaffold*, arrowing away—
- my stomach. My stomach—

I swallow most of my vomit back down, which is (barely) more pleasant than the alternative. Our suit thrusters are firing constantly, lowering our orbit. Finn twists his head left, right, up, down, a puppy with too much to chase. Sinas hums a half-familiar tune, which isn't enough of a distraction to help. Wake is farther ahead, and screeches—

“Shit!”

—as a spent bomber drone rifles past, almost pancaking her into a closed-casket funeral. More debris trails it in a tumbling cloud – hulking metal plates, shorn-off engine nacelles – that roughly matches our trajectory. Out here, that basically counts as cover.

“Need a plan,” I mutter.

“What?!” Sinas shouts.

“NEED A PLAN! What’s our strategy once we get down there? Can we get, like— a map of Thebe?” I pinwheel my arms for balance, making my suit’s job trickier, but doing wonders for my emotional security. “We’re flirting with disaster here! Marrying it, even!”

A sky-blue trident of particle beams spawns from a slender ship to our west. I’ve seen those beams used to excavate rock, and they made a noise like a turbine full of aggro bees; for now, the bees are only in my head, as three perfect lines scrape across space and hit the flank of another cruiser, whose shielding ignites. The cruiser *screams* in buckshot data packets, a mixture of electrical and biological terror. (PolyGrowth ships aren’t truly ‘alive’, in the traditional sense, but warships with inbuilt survival instincts make for better fighters.)

Another “Shit!” from Wake.

“That’s a Dragon-class destroyer,” Finn says.

“Which means?” I ask.

“Chinese ship.”

“PRC?” Wake asks. “Do THEY know what’s going on? Are they also on our side? What if they’ve also sent squads to the base?”

“Let’s hope they’re as confused as we are,” Sinas says.

More beams slice the battle like paper cutters (a distance away, but not far enough for comfort). It’s a question of probabilities, right? We’re small, space isn’t, we won’t get hit unless we draw MASSIVE attention to ourselves. Is Thebe getting closer? It feels like it isn’t.

Breathe. Breathe. You’ve survived worse. Let’s keep that win streak going.

“First things first,” I manage. “We need to know where to go, after we land. Station blueprints are off the table, but we have a good aerial view of the base.” (Too good; my feet have the gall to tingle as I look past them.) “Wake, can you tag any important-looking buildings, entrances, that kind of thing?”

“Yep!”

“Finn – if you recognise more of these ships, how ‘bout noting down who’s fighting who, and who we might have to avoid?”

“Okay.”

“And Sinas, it’d be nice if we landed safely. Can you make that happen?”

“I’ll lead the EVA, if that’s what you’re asking.” He salutes, which I could get used to.

“In the meantime, I’ll catalogue our equipment,” I say. “Always prudent to know what tools you’re working with.”

“You sound really old sometimes,” Wake says. “You say old person things.”

“They’re GOOD things!”

“Let’s deactivate our suit transponders,” Sinas says. “It’ll make us look more like debris, and not...”

“...a super unco special forces team?” Finn replies.

We’re slowly diverging from the debris cloud’s path when an X-formation of missile drones attempts a run at the Chinese destroyer. The ship puts up a flak

screen – a dense cloud of explosions that takes out one missile, then another – but one warhead hits. The resulting shockwave’s a haymaker, though not quite a knockout; as wreckage drifts apart like fish food, I can’t help wondering who exactly will get stuck with cleaning up this mess.

“Oooo, I felt that one,” Wake says. “Right in the boob!”

“Which boob?” Sinas asks.

“If you *must* know—”

“Incoming!”

Finn marks a smaller ship accelerating towards us – a menacing triangle, dotted with spiky sensor booms – getting very close VERY fast. My hackles insist it’s attacking us directly, even though that’s dumb (and probably a war crime). “Should we move?” I ask.

“No,” Sinas says. “We’re debris.”

“It’s gonna hit—”

“It won’t.”

It closes the intervening distance too quick and my body tenses, ready for the *splat*— but it passes barely a swimming pool to starboard. I swear I can count the shocked faces in its cockpit windows. My suit blasts ten different alarms as we’re shoved by its amdrive wash.

“Jesus CHRIST,” I mutter.

“OK, I snapped a pic of the base,” Wake says, trying to sound calm. “People are moving on the surface. Bots, too. They have this glitched symbol on them.”



“That’s GemCon’s,” Finn explains. “Gemini Conglomerate.”

“Friendly?” I ask.

“Eh... probably. Maybe.”

“That’s a no, then.”

“Either way, I say we bust in from here,” Wake announces, circling the southern side of the complex. “Illumination needs power – LOTS of power. This building is where most of the power cables lead to. Plus, I did a radar ping, and it goes at least four levels deep.”

“They could be hiding a lot in there,” I reply.

“That’s what I was thinking! Also, this side entrance? There aren’t any footprints near it, so it’s probably safe.”

The *Paradise Scaffold* – apparently possessing a love of the dramatic – chooses that moment to come screaming out of the arse-end of Titan, pursued by a yellow, boomerang-shaped vessel. It’s hard to tell if the lightning jumping between them is weapon discharges, or the storm. Then, the atmosphere below them bulges, like water above a breaching whale, and a *spike* of light stabs from Titan, clean through the boomerang. The ship – a.k.a. a hunk of mass travelling at multiple kilometres per second that would quite like to keep being that, thank you very much – shreds itself into superheated molecules. The *Scaffold* gallops

towards a higher orbit after a brief ‘what the heck was that?’ delay. Titan’s new appendage stands tall in the fog, a space elevator of glittering quartz-light.

Thebe’s closer, now, and I haven’t yet started the task I assigned myself. I query my suit for an inventory of survival tools, which includes a cutting torch, a hardcore sensor suite, emergency beacons, batteries, climbing tethers, foam sealant, ration packs, quantum-slip hacker routines, plus the proverbial ‘and more!’

“Course adjustment,” Sinas says. “Get ready.”

The moon’s grey surface is resolving into smooth dunes, scattered boulders, patches of ice. We accelerate sideways to match its rotation, our path a decaying arc. The complex is centred on a flat circular habitat, connected by spokes to surrounding sub-shelters. Webs of utility lines mar the regolith.

“Could we knock out the base power?” I ask. “Would that kill this fog?”

“Someone’s *gotta* have tried already,” Sinas says.

“If it was me, I’d do an orbital strike,” Finn says. “Glass the area. It’s the only way to be sure.”

“Remind me again— WHY are we doing this?” I ask.

Suspiciously, no one answers.

My view is suddenly more horizon than sky as Sinas pilots us towards Wake’s chosen landing site. By this point we’re approaching like planes, a ton of horizontal velocity but not much vertical. Suit thrusters fire. My teeth rattle as we decelerate, flying low over the complex’s roof, coming to a stop above an empty dustpatch. Descending, now, buffeted by streaks of dust, and—

My boots sink into pale grey sand (it’s *almost* graceful).

How odd, to be on proper dirt again. *Alien* dirt.

Harsh sunlight glints from decades-old habs and half-buried supply tanks. Dust has collected in crevices where electrostatic coatings have decayed. The main crater’s rim casts deep shadows to the west, the slopes beyond the base’s perimeter quickly turning black, paths marked by lights that’ve long burnt out. There’s no atmosphere, according to my sensors; low gravity, lots of radiation. It feels... artificial, like a movie set, complete with a CGI battle above.

The central structure is an emitter – a garden bed? – for the thickest pillars of aurora. They pulse and shimmer, nearly opaque, hiding slivers of movement inside. Streams of glowing particles connect them, falling faster than Thebe’s gravity should allow, and yet, it feels less... illusive? More solid, than before.

“Moon’s haunted,” Sinas says tonelessly.

“More on the way,” Finn says. “We should hurry.” He points at another shoal of drop-pods, descending fast.

Wake scans the nearest service hatch. “This one,” she says. “It’s empty.”

I whip out my suit’s cutting torch and go wild. It makes fast work of the aging PolyGrowth, any self-repair capabilities long expended. Plastic rivulets sizzle onto the dirt. I cut a neat square, kick it inwards, and—

A blur of blue.

The lampire circles us once before I can react, then two times, three times, five, then shrieks geometrically before diving into the building itself.

“Shit,” I murmur, catching my breath. “Prime numbers.”

“Is that... a good omen?” Sinas asks.

“Fuck it. Why not.”

I step inside.

The hallway, deserted, leads north into the substrate. Aging LEDs flicker to life, a breadcrumb trail between patches of dead composite. Frost clings to the bare rock like ivy. As we switch on our PRISMs, tendrils of Illumination vibrate nearby, as if sensing the intrusion.

“Let’s head downwards?” I propose. “Unless anyone has a better idea...”

Sinas shrugs.

“Okay then.” I start jogging, eyes peeled, ears open, asshole clenched. The corridor slopes to a four-way junction, protected by a pressure door. There’s air on the other side, which brings sound: gunfire, muffled by layers of rock, and distant screaming.

We continue – towards the screaming, obviously. Thick power cables hang from ceiling brackets, and mist flutters around our feet. Then, we enter a cylindrical chamber lined with service lifts, and in its centre sits a glittering pink shard, like a mineral formation you’d find in a cave. Coloured fog pulses nearby, collecting around it. The shard isn’t just light, though; its core is made of bricks, OLD bricks, protruding from the floor, as if a pyramid got involved in a teleportation accident (I’m no expert, but I know a brick when I see one).

“That’s new,” Finn says.

“New, except— old,” I say.

“Speaking of old,” Wake says, “this base’s Mesh is as dead as. We can’t use it to scout ahead. There ARE enough people around for packets to leapfrog, but all I’m receiving is like, three frames-per-second of unencrypted video from a helmet-cam in a stairwell. The rest is distress beacons.”

The exit is jammed, so out comes my cutting touch. Beyond, the corridor slopes ever-further into the earth, lined with doorways, ominously dark. Night-vision reveals the spectres of unused rooms, divided by temporary construction panels. The floor is covered in rubber mats for grip.

Farah was right. If this place was ever inhabited, it wasn’t for long.

Boots squeak on the mats. *Squeak, squeak, squeak—*

Not us.

A vacsuited figure emerges from around the next sharp corner, followed by another, then a team of six. I’m torn between running, staying, flailing my arms in panic, but those seconds of indecision is all it takes for them to notice us.

<Friendlies?> Sinas wonders.

They’re carrying weapons. They also have different, more beetle-y armour compared to the AstraForce marines, but I’m not jumping to conclusions.

I raise my hands.

They spread out, taking cover in nearby doorways.

The leader opens a comms channel. In this environment, it's worse than a piece of string with a can on each end; after a few failed tries, they activate their suit's loudspeakers instead. The booming voice speaks clipped Mandarin.

"IDENTIFY YOURSELVES," my MeshMate translates. "WHAT'S YOUR OPERATIONS CODE?"

Shit, I can't speak Mandarin. Hard to bluff in a different language. Can Wake speak Mandarin? I don't want to be racist, but if anyone can, it's probably her—

"CODE. NOW."

"零四五一脆空洞的," Sinas answers, with flawless pronunciation.

"...REPEAT, PLEASE?"

"零四五一脆空洞的."

They're not buying it.

<Run!> I shout.

It's Finn who makes the first move, diving into an abandoned lab. We cross it in big, bounding leaps, too fast for the floor LEDs to activate. I switch on my suit lamps. Mantis shadows dance across the walls. More bursts of Mandarin behind us, pursuers close behind as I glance over my shoulder, and then there's another sound, a furious snarl that builds and—

Metal construction panels scatter sideways as a flood of hollows *crashes* into the lab. The PRC squad is buried beneath bouncing bodies, just limbs and blood-red irises between the *crak-crak-crak* of panicked muzzle flashes. Shrieking metal, sharp gunshots, data-limited screams, each tracking us around the next corner.

"Left!" Finn hisses. "In here!"

He slides into a waist-high service tunnel and we cram ourselves into it on hands and knees. I'm last, doing my best to not shove my nose up Sinas' arse. I reach out and drag a tarp across the entrance as the death rattle of approaching hollows reaches fever pitch.

We hold our breath.

Footsteps drum the mats outside.

Scarlet light peers around the edges of the tarp.

We're home free, or so I think, until a long, discordant hiss worms its way through the seals of my suit and wraps around my bones.

<Where — are — you?>

It's not the subtle ping of a Mesh connection. It's a bell, rung from the station's heart. The LEDs in the hallway darken, then return to full strength. (It's here; of *course* it's here. Who else could be responsible for this polluted, bamboozling, anti-lucent insanity? No, DEFINITELY not the huge fuckoff ghost.)

"The Wraith knows WORDS now?" Wake asks. "Since when?"

"Maybe," Finn says, "we should be more careful."

“By staying inside this tunnel?”

“Yes.”

The service tunnel is part of a network, snaking between walls, under the regolith. We keep working our way northward and downward, following clumps of power cables. Then, the tunnel roof turns into metal grates, and we sneak past a crew of centipede-like security drones. They’re fighting *something* across the other side of the chamber, and Wake uses her suit’s own drone to distract them. It bobs and weaves and flashes, being as much of a nuisance as possible, while we set a new crawl-speed record. The centipedes scatter, as one goes down in a shower of sparks and electrons. The others aren’t pleased.

We make it to the next area unscathed, on the safe side of an intervening wall, where – regrettably – the tunnel ends. We hop out into the kind of office that suits an abandoned Jovian moon: sparse, frosty, and incomplete. My heart skips a beat at the dried blood smearing the walls, but a second glance transforms it into twenty years of rust.

All things considered, our infiltration’s been reasonably smooth.

Is this character growth? It *feels* like growth. (Don’t jinx it.)

Illumination’s thicker here, like silt at the bottom of a lake. Then it starts to ripple, and resonate, and foggy tentacles writhe into the room from the doorways, the walls, the air vents, and I duck as one twists over my head. They wrap around each other in the middle of the office, solidifying into a new pillar of aurora. It stretches from floor to ceiling, pulsing with intent, possessing the same glitched solidity as the pyramid-shard from earlier.

<Are you—looking—for me?>

On the other side of the wall, somebody screams, and is cut off.

Illumination calms.

“I liked it better when it didn’t want to chat,” Sinas mutters.

The pillar holds a slice of colourful wall, which could belong to a gallery, or a church? It’s as if someone’s taken a hacksaw to two separate realities and is sticking the splinters in places they shouldn’t. Very inconsiderate.

“We need to know who opened the portal here,” I say aloud. “Did the Wraith manage to get here first? Was it a corp, like GemCon? Another country being an opportunist? *Maritime*’s people?” I check my PRISM battery out of habit.

“It might not matter,” Finn says. “All we need to do is close it. That’s the job.”

“I think,” Sinas says, “closing the hell portal won’t be the last chapter of this story. But yeah, for now, that’s the—”

“Hey, I got a ping!” Wake interrupts. “From friends, I think. Yep, this way!”

We skitter around the corner, into a cavernous loading dock, and nearly bowl ourselves into a group of marines who’re crouched by a security gate.

“Woah! Woahwoahwoah!”

“STOP RIGHT THERE! HANDS!”

“Friendly! We’re friendly!”

A lot of confusion’s crammed into the next ten seconds, but eventually, we figure out we’re from the same ship. There are eight marines, which isn’t many to assault an entire moon with, but compared to us four? VAST improvement. The gate they’re examining looks thick and locked, but is labelled ‘experiment chamber’, which is promising.

“Ah,” Captain Brakka says gruffly. “You’re the survivors from Starfish.” Her visor can’t hide her look of disbelief and/or dissatisfaction at suddenly having to deal with four teenagers. “Why are you here?”

“We thought we’d... help,” I say. “Using our experience. That’s why we’re here – to help. We don’t need babysitting, if you’re concerned about that part.”

“Uh-huh. Still, my team may feel obliged to ‘babysit’, if things get hairy, which means I’d rather you stayed out of our way once we get this door open. Komi, how’s that splice coming?”

<Two minutes!>

“Have any teams made it further inside?” Sinas asks, stepping forwards.

“One, but we can’t contact them through the storm. Our equipment can’t defend against the tendies.” She notes our confusion. “The ten-dimensionals—ghosts, light monsters, whatever you call the bastards. Anyway, past this entrance is our main approach to the Illumination chamber. The portal itself should be fifty metres downstream. If we can push through, we’re golden.”

“So, we’re close.”

“Yes, we’re close. The problem is, so’s everyone else. Splice, Komi?”

<Getting there!>

The captain sighs and checks her chunky smart rifle. “There could be half a battalion of moon Nazis on the other side for all we know, since apparently, half the fuckin’ solar system decided to show up today, so— what I’m getting at is, STAY BACK. Unless you have some incredibly valuable intelligence to share.”

“Have you tried shutting off the power?” Wake asks.

“Have we tried shutting off the power.” Brakka grits her teeth. “Have we tried shu—”

The lights flicker.

<I never—wanted—this...>

The words press down on me, on the loading dock, making the fog come together into temporary shapes: angels, demons, forlorn souls, existing for a breath before Illumination re-settles. Ugh, this is the worst time for a migraine.

“They have an independent power source,” the captain grumbles.

<Splice done!> Komi announces. <Door’s ready.>

“Good.” The captain turns to us. “What we’ll do is blast an EMP down the entry corridor, then TRY to link up with the rest of our team inside. You four wait here and – I can’t believe I’m saying this – watch our backs. Alright?”

“Sure,” I say. “Clearsky. If something does go glitched, though... is there, like, a signal we can send—”

<I FOUND YOU!!>

The fog rolls over us like a tsunami. Thebe’s surface shakes, and within is a piercing joy, the *furious* joy of a malicious child. It makes me clutch my helmet and my MeshMate takes a sleeping pill. Bursts of light go off like firecrackers, revealing slices of sand, reeds, a busy street. It must only last a few seconds.

<Now we can be—alone...>

The marines aren’t moving.

The captain’s mouth is open mid-sentence; Komi’s half-way to standing up. The rest are frozen in various stages of preparation.

“Hello?” Sinas asks. He waves a hand in front of their faces.

“What the yekk,” Wake whispers. Cautiously, she pushes the captain’s shoulder. Brakka’s body resists, a slight muscle-quiver, but otherwise doesn’t react. I lean in, looking at her face. One eye twitches, struggling to swivel towards me.

“Have we seen this before?” Wake asks.

“No,” Finn says.

“Is it the Wraith?”

“Has to be.”

I back away, before the inevitable jump-scare. Eight people, in perfect physical condition, in the highest of high-tech body armour, unable to move. “How, though?” I ask. “They’ve gotta have their own PRISMs too, right?”

“It could’ve figured out how to bypass them,” Sinas says.

“Then why aren’t WE frozen?”

“Perhaps it doesn’t want to. Perhaps... it needs us intact.”

“Intact for *what*?”

He shrugs.

I don’t like this. Don’t like it one bit, as I try not to stare at the trapped marines, or the drizzling motes of Illumination, or the deepening shadows (any of which could hold a Wraith), or the distant ceiling (past which I’m pretty sure a space battle’s still happening) which, truth be told, leaves very little to look at.

<Come closer.>

The security door opens.

On the other side is a *crowd*. Two parallel lines of silent figures face each other across a wide, descending tunnel, with the careful regularity of pre-battle toy soldiers. Some have Chinese flags on their suits. Some Australian. Some GemCon. Others have scrappy pirate tags.

Some are wounded. I think others might be dead.

My breath's wet, inside my helmet.

Suddenly, one marine takes a jerking, shuffling step towards me. As one, they close ranks, barring our escape via a wall of body armour. I back up, joining Sinas in the doorway. Their slack faces stare past us, into the tunnel.

Our honour guard awaits.

<C l o s e r.>

"Hypothetically... this is what we wanted, isn't it?" Sinas says. "A path to the portal."

"Hypothetically, this is the biggest obvious trap in the history of traps," I reply. "But yeah. We're not here to fuck spiders." I take an experimental step, past the first pair of figures (too close for comfort). Their arms are rigid by their sides. The fog shivers approvingly, and through it, I can see a door, fifty metres away. "If the Wrath wants to roll out the red carpet, is that so bad?"

"Yes," Finn says quietly. "Almost definitely yes."

"It might be underestimating us," Wake says. "It might think it's already won. But if we're IN there, with it... we can probably do some damage."

"Well, let's not scheme to loudly," I reply.

Another step.

We pass the second pair, then the third. It's a procession, I've decided, a *funeral* procession, and no matter how much I want to sound brave, my nerves say otherwise. Our footsteps are accompanied by the gentle, soft shuffle of rearranging bodies, funnelling us forwards. They Wraith's puppets are faster than I expect, especially when we aren't watching. One on the left has a broken arm, holding a multi-tool in the other hand. His eyes are unblinking, drained of defiance. One on the right has no eyes at all. Burns scar the empty sockets.

<S o c l o s e...>

For a millisecond, I'm not in a cold, dead hallway on a cold, dead moon. I'm walking along a sun-baked street, with mudbrick houses on either side, flanked by guards carrying tall, glinting spears, unknown words flooding my ears in waves.

I'm whisked back to the present. My stomach lurches.

We're running out of steps. There are more figures behind than ahead, now, crammed shoulder-to-shoulder, a step or two slower. Ribbons of light swim around their legs. The door to the experiment chamber looms: wide enough to drive a bus through, barred by melted BioLocks.

"Maybe waltzing in through the front gate is a bad idea?" I whisper. "In terms of the, ah— element of surprise."

"I think we're dealing with a pretty limited menu," Sinas whispers back.

I start speaking faster. “On Starfish, there was an experiment containment system, wasn’t there? It broke, but it existed. Could we turn that on? The marines said there was an independent power source – could we turn that *off*?”

“I’m not sure I’d place bets on a containment system,” Sinas murmurs. “We’re trying to defeat an entity that’s already dead. Our backup’s gone. We don’t know what we’re facing past that door.”

“We hack into a suit camera, on the inside,” Finn says.

“That’s optimistic,” Wake says. “But I can do my best. Also, I have this?” She opens her hand, revealing a flower-shaped grenade.

My eyes widen. “Woah, where the hell did—”

“Stole it.”

“Okay, well, don’t kill anybody. Not unless we REALLY need to.”

With that, our steps run out. (Shit.)

What are our options, here? Apart from ‘third time’s the charm’, because this is technically the third time we’re facing down an Illumination portal and perhaps there’s a relevant Einstein quote about the definition of insanity, but actually... *no*. We’re NOT doing the same thing over and over, expecting different results. We’re trying DIFFERENT things. We’re learning! Besides, half the point of quantum mechanics is that repeating the same crap *does* produce varying outcomes. Maybe Einstein was wrong, sometimes, huh?

We got this.

“Wake,” I say, out of the corner of my mouth. “About that grenade—”

<N O.>

Time blinks.

I’m falling backwards, though not far, and not fast. My back hits the floor, then my helmet, stars in my eyes, and my brain insists I’m in a church. That’s the vibe I get from the ceiling, sloping inwards and upwards; the large, empty space, perfect for rows of pews; the polymer buttresses and shadows between them, alternately ‘contemplative’ and ‘gloomy’; the way the chamber narrows at the far end to shallow steps and a dais.

That dais is hiding the portal, I think. I can’t see it directly, thanks to a waist-high barrier, but a waterfall (waterclimb?) of light flows upwards from behind it, passing through the ceiling. It’s slow. Heavy. *Inevitable*. Rivulets of Illumination trickle along the floor, collecting in pools, searching for escape.

The church’s congregation have gathered before the waterfall: a few dozen thralls, frozen in place, rapturous witnesses to this miracle (or sacrifice). Some are clad in military armour, but others wear simple vacsuits or even scrappier jumpsuits. (During our briefing, Stellarmire mentioned pirates, or squatters – maybe this is what’s left of them.) Now, they’re all just part of the same cult.

The cult has a leader, freshly resurrected.

Haru.

She floats in the waterfall, silhouetted, with a face that no longer seems quite human. Black fog embraces her, suspends her, rising from the gate below, and it spreads from the space between her shoulders to form grand, spectral wings. The way she hangs – arms and legs slightly askew – is like a puppet at rest before its performance, and her shadow falls across those who wait.

It falls across us.

It falls across Farah. She cowers within a shield emitted from a turbine-like device, which creates a half-dozen metres of normalcy. It's enough to support four still-living humans (or three, given that one lab tech has collapsed against the side of the shield generator, while another marine performs first aid). The shield hums, shifting in pitch, over the telltale whine of a fusion core.

As Finn, Sinas, Wake and I come to, it's a lot to take in – but I need to, in roughly three seconds, because then, Haru speaks. “Back straight, F-F-F-Finn.” He freezes. “What?”

“Back straaaaaaight. Chest out. Don't be like your grandmo-mother.”

Instinctively, he corrects his posture. Haru smiles.

I KNEW I recognised that tone, in the Wraith's words. I knew it.

“You shouldn't have come here,” Farah says desperately. “What were you thinking?!”

“Then you shouldn't have left us behind!” Wake retorts. “Why'd you leave?”

“I... I didn't want you to get hurt—”

“It is n-n-not your turn to speeeeaak,” Haru interrupts, a skipping, corrupted file; her mouth struggles to form unfamiliar syllables. “You cannot stop this.”

“Stop what?” I ask, to give myself time.

She tilts her head. “The true order of things. The salvation we are OWED—” Suddenly, her body vibrates, muscles spasming so fast it's a blur. A low *hiss* emerges from her throat. “I don't want to die. I don't want to die. I don't want to die.” She spasms again. “I wish there w-w-was a better way to go about this, but— Kill them, take them, BURN their souls for—”

The chamber fades, polymer and dust replaced by *stone* and dust, and Illumination swirls to become a hot blue sky and the congregation are priests wearing pure white robes. They carry Haru in a litter upon their backs. “There is no meaning,” she says childishly. “I can't even remember which soul came first! But maybeeeeeee, if we are free, free, free...”

She goes slack, and Thebe returns.

“Don't do this to her,” Farah says sadly. “You don't need to violate her.”

“I'm not *violating* her,” Haru replies. “I am g-g-giving her a gift. One which we have been denied, for far too long— Finn, please, I want— No! It is not your turn to speak!” Her eyes gleam. “I have waaaanted this for far too long. You do not understand. But per-h-h-haps you will. I am glad you came to see meeeee.”

“You might've misinterpreted the situation,” Sinas says calmly. “We didn't come here for you. We came here to close THAT.” He points at the waterfall.

“You cannot.”

“Are you sure about that?”

Haru floats forwards, her wings spread like an infection. "Come and see."
"I'd rather not."

Her tiptoes drag along the ground as she approaches, and her face is skeletal, marred by burns. Finn shrinks back, and I put myself in front of him, standing my ground. "Come and see," Haru echoes.

"If you need us to visit your fake little paradise that badly, then FORCE us," I reply. "Like you've forced everyone else. Or is there a reason why you can't?"

Haru stops.

"There IS, huh?" I smile grimly. "You need us."

"And we don't need YOU, fuckface!" Wake shouts, too loud. The last word's Thai, but it translates.

"D-d-d-don't be so haaasty," it whispers. "Can't you feel it? The... connection, between you..."

<Guys?> I broadcast. <It's that time again. It's plan time. While the fuckface keeps talking.> It's comforting that the Wraith won't *immediately* turn us into sightless zombies, but there are plenty of other ways it could make this go terribly and my heart's still twanging like a guitar string. Farah beckons for us to join her inside the shield, but I shake my head. Not yet.

The Wraith turns its palms towards us. Slowly, it raises its arms, and motes of Illumination rise from the floor, gathering at our chests. Strings of light stretch from us to the gate, and they dance, and wave, like the ancient power lines on the hill behind our farm when the easterly wind blows through each evening; perhaps it's only my imagination, but I FEEL it. It's taut, and true, and draws me forwards, tugging insistently at my body.

No, at my *heart*. It makes me want to cry.

"Such beauty," the Wraith breathes. "So... u-u-u-useful. A saying... how loooong is a piece of string?" It chuckles. "Quite long indeed. But would you not enjoy discooooooovering where a string leads?"

"It might help if you could explain ahead of time, in the interests of, uh, a good faith discussion," I say aloud. "Which is what this is. A nice discussion."

<Guys? Plan?> I ask.

<I can yeet my grenade into the gate spawner> Wake says. <If you guys are okay with that.>

<Just make sure to get it IN the gate. I'd rather not die from a sucky throw.>

<Trust me, Alex.>

<I *mostly* do.>

<Let's take out its power source at the same time> Sinas says. <The marines said there was a generator in this room. It has to be behind those panels.> Huge spools of cable lead from the dais to orange cabinets to our left and right, surrounded by puddles of melted ice. Each has a set of switches behind a transparent cover. <I can get one.>

<I'll do the other> Finn says.

<Alright.> I nod. <I can be the distraction.>

<What kind of distraction?> Sinas asks.

<I'll improvise. I'll pull out some Shakespeare.>

<That would be the opposite of improvising.>

<Jesus Christ, Sinas, I'm trying my best. Bloody hell!> I try touching the tether in my chest, but as usual, it's incorporeal bullshit.

"The string leads to happiness," the Wraith is saying. "For us, and for you."

"No offence, but you don't seem super happy yourself," I reply.

"And you?"

"Uhhh... sure. I'm usually happy."

"I don't think you are being truthful." Her lips peel back into a stiff grin. "You are confused. I can see everything, in your past, in your future, in your heart, and you are confused. You are *saaaaad*. You will exist, you will die, and it will mean *nothing*, and y-y-your humanity is too small and ashamed to comprehend this fact, so it sinks into its depths. It looks away. It despises your cowardly nature, your infinite envy of those who are no better, and this is your curse. Your *contradiction*. Perhaps you envision a way out, but it cannot be your own. It is the one I present n-now. Enter the light, so we can... understaaaand each other."

I'm gritting my teeth. "Mate, this is a lot of effort for us to *understand* one another."

"But as you suffer, I suffer also. My entirety is... a suffering. The separation between us is unnatural, and you could r-r-remove it – the barrier between our existences. Illumination, as you call it, could be... yours."

"Really? That's all? Nothing bad involved?"

"Come and see," the Wraith rasps.

"I thought Illumination was the space *between* universes, so if it's no longer that... what does it mean for us?"

"What does it mean for US!" Wings flicker, casting impossible shadows. "You remain alive by our pleasure. You are blessed to meet our conditions, but you are not the only ones who do. We do not REQUIRE you. It is simply a matter of c-c-onvenience."

"Okay, okay, I get it. Illumination's bad, you want out, that's fine, but how you've gone about it is sus as hell. Can't we just coexist? Do we have to go through all the murdering, and the possessing, and the trauma—"

"Consumption is survival. It is the order of things. Trades must be made."

"What does that mean?"

"Dead, alive: we exist. We remain. If we do not consume, we do not remain."

Sinas starts pacing in a casual circle which, conveniently, wanders closer to the generator. Wake politely clasps her hands behind her back. Haru spasms again, closer still, the cords in her neck almost bursting out of her skin, flesh nearing breaking point.

If it was my own mum up there, I don't know what I'd do, or how I'd react.

I'd probably be very mad.

"Let me talk to her," Finn says, staring right at her, and perhaps there's a slight stammer in his voice, or perhaps not.

The Wraith narrows its eyes. "It is not her turn to speak."

“So you ARE still keeping her here.”

“She is part of us, like many others. We share a goal.”

“Let her talk. Please. And I’ll consider what you’re asking.”

It thinks. “...A gesture of goodwill, then. A t-t-taste of your wish.”

Haru’s body collapses, dropping to the floor. She draws a hacking, wet breath, glancing around with unseeing eyes. “Finn?” she asks. “Finn? You shouldn’t be here, you mustn’t.” She tries to get up. “Finn, I can’t help you while it has me— please let—”

“A taste,” the Wraith says. It picks her up again and she goes limp, hanging from its wings.

<Alex, when should we charge?> Sinas asks.

<I’m waiting for the right moment...> My bloody Mesh signal can’t reach Farah, at the edge of her shield bubble. Is she forming a plan, too? I don’t have time to wait. <Alright, I’m queuing up a song. Once it hits the chorus, go feral.> I can’t think of anything better; and, like it or not, everyone knows this one.

‘Some-body once told me, the wooorld is gonna roll me, I ain’t the sharpest tool in the sheeeed...’

“I want to see my brother, too,” Sinas says. “If you’re telling the truth.”

“He awaiiitssss,” the Wraith hisses. “As do those others you cannot help your longing for; those whose love will remain undiminished, and unfulfilled. That connection is powerful, and precious. A shame, to waste it so.” Haru’s hand plucks the string connecting Sinas to the portal, and he shivers.

‘She was looking kind of dumb with her fiiiin-ger and her thumb, in the shape of an L, on her fore-head...’

“Let me show you,” the Wraith says.

It beckons, and the light births our ghosts.

‘Well, the years start coming and they don’t stop coming, fed to the rules and I hit the ground running—’

This man, this vision, can only be my mysterious, absent, biological father: an outline of dust and fog, a hint of broad shoulders, a suggestion of a smile, and yet – in those glittering glimpses – there is fullness, love, and sacrifice.

‘Didn’t make sense not to live for fun, your brain gets smart but your head gets dumb—’

I’m jealous. I’m jealous because I don’t have a connection to this person. I mean, I literally do, via the tether, but it’s one-sided. It’s academic. It’s not like

Sinas' brother, or Wake's grandparents, or a secret that'll help me find my place in the world. It's an answer to a question I never wanted asked.

How odd, to be unmoved by a miracle.

'So much to do, so much to see, so what's wrong with ta-king the back streets?'

Wake readies her grenade, as one final knot weaves itself to life: a tall boy in an AFL jumper, slightly dopey, slightly confident, leaning on the railing before the portal. He looks... confused. The same, but confused.

Tao.

'You'll never know if you don't go; you'll never shine if you don't glow...'

"Guys? What happened? Where am I?" he asks, his voice so clear. I wish I could touch him, or comfort him, or—

He starts to choke. Webs of ice spread across his face.

I'm sorry.

'HEY NOW, YOU'RE AN ALL-STAR—'

Sinas goes for the power. He sprints left. Finn sprints right.

Wake pitches her grenade towards the waterfall's base.

"Get away from them you BITCH!" I shout, at Finn's mother's body.

'GET YOUR GAME ON, GO PLAAAAAY—'

The Wraith turns to me. I gallop right at it (this is what us professionals call 'improvising'.) It's not the biggest distraction, to be fair... but it gives Sinas and Finn three whole seconds before the gathered thralls jerk and flood towards them. It lets Wake's grenade sail clean through the Wraith's wings, blessed with an arrow-straight path. It gives me the chance to prepare for the most crucial footy tackle of my short, irrelevant life.

'HEY NOW, YOU'RE A ROCK STAR—'

I *whump* into Haru's suspended corpse and tackle it to the ground. We slide along the polymer. Black fog explodes across the room. I'd hoped my PRISM might be enough to eject the Wraith for good, but not quite, as it steams and writhes around me.

Sinas is at his generator panel. He yanks a big red lever.

Clunk. A mechanism hitches.

The grenade disappears behind the gate barrier, and falls out of sight.

‘GET THE SHOW ON, GET PAAIIID—’

Finn reaches his panel too and *clunk* goes the lever. He barely manages to hold on as the wave of thralls breaks over him, but it’s done. An alarm sounds. I hear the generator power down, and the remaining lights go out.

‘AND ALL THAT GLITTERS IS GOOOLD—’

The portal emitter doesn’t go out. Thralls tumble over the barrier, towards the grenade.

I hold Haru tightly. Her body tenses beneath me.

‘ONLY SHOOTING STAAARS BREAK THE MO-OULD—’

BANG! A burst of light from the pit and the floor shakes and thralls go flying, along with twisted metal and evaporating coolant. Wake’s leaping towards Finn now, and Sinas is running towards Farah, and I’m trapped between two unreasonably strong arms as Haru lifts me into the air like a Doberman’s rubber toy. She crushes the wind from my lungs. I punch at her, again, again, again.

Whoosh! I’m tossed at the ceiling.

Plenty of time before impact.

Enough to wonder if, maybe, this plan hasn’t worked.

My MeshMate decides that’s enough *All Star* for one day, but I’m not sure silence is better. From this soaring vantage point, I can see the gate apparatus proper: it’s nestled in a *pit*, behind the barrier, a shaft inlaid with spinning onyx rings. The grenade’s done work; flames flicker inside it. Nevertheless, a bright, searing window of Illumination stubbornly spills from its gullet.

The Wraith screams. My suit rattles.

Should I be panicking? Probably prudent.

That’s when the ceiling explodes, too, and you won’t effing *guess* who drops through it.

“Maritime?” It escapes my lips as a strangled gasp as I sail upward and she flies downward, the fury of a thousand angels at her back (or at least, four surviving minions). She looks *PISSED*, ready to fight, and best of all, not dead, blasting a kinetic wave ahead of her with a crowd suppressor. Her squadmates are manhandling a hefty shield generator of their own and my head feels like it’s about to be screwed off as I pass through its field.

“Haru!” Maritime shouts. “How did—” Then she stops, mid-air, thrusters firing. “Get OUT! Leave her be!”

The Wraith shrieks, its shadows lashing at Maritime’s throat. She signals for her shield carriers to descend and the monster actually backs off, retreating towards the portal.

BAM!

Ow. That was the ceiling. I bounce off hard, but my armour protects me from the worst of it. (Honestly? Quite pleasant. Five stars.) Then I realise I'm being sucked towards Maritime's hole (phrasing!) and oh boy, we're venting air through the breach, precious molecules whipping by in a gale. I catch myself on the lip of the opening, peek through it, and – huh – there's several holes, through several levels, with open space at the far end. Clearly, Maritime was in a hurry because she blasted through the whole damn station to get here.

Efficient! Five stars. Alex-approved.

Maritime lands, and the aurora sparkles with rage; if Maritime's pissed, the Wraith is *maggotted*. It gathers light around itself, wielding the fog like fists. I use my suit's foam reserves to seal the breach and expanding grey sludge shoots from my wrist, holding the vacuum at bay. The air-shriek lessens to a whimper. I'm hanging from the plastic by one measly gecko-glove when space vibrates.

It *resonates*.

My vision blurs. It's as if every particle in the vicinity is in a thousand places at once, being stretched, shifted, becoming something else.

<I can save this place.>

I've said this before, but I really want to go home... and I wonder if that has anything to do with what happens next. My shivering atoms are forced into a new configuration, as the Wraith bats at its surroundings, our minds, itself, and finally – with a bright, musical sensation, like tapping the side of an expensive wine glass – reality locks into perfect clarity.

I'm somewhere else.

Blue sky.

Falling?

Falling!

I'm tumbling through the air, looking at sky, ground, sky, ground. Illumination howls. Its expanse stretches into new surroundings, delighted at the prospect of *so much more*.

My suit stabilises. I glimpse Thebe, a few kilometres to my left, dropping like a big fucking rock into atmosphere. My friends are also falling nearby, a collection of tiny, panicked shapes. Below is a calm, cloud-wreathed landmass, its surface a familiar dusty red.

That's Australia – isn't it?

Is this a dream? It doesn't FEEL like a dream. My eyes pick out details I'd struggle to invent: the acute bend of the East-Coast space elevator, the twinkle of sunlight on algae-covered dams, the flow of ships from parking orbits to Perth's spaceport. An ugly storm whispers to the west, stretching across a line of low hills. Suddenly, my MeshMate receives a flood of pings, overwhelmed with signals from local network nodes.

I can see my house from up here.

The agri-domes. The transport rails. The line of gum trees that marks our backyard. Even bloody Tomato Tower.

Did we teleport? What the HELL is happening? I'm still plummeting at terminal velocity, Thebe making an almighty racket as its shadow on the ground grows larger, and whoever's looking up right now has gotta be perplexed by the appearance of an entirely new moon (freshly haunted, for your convenience).

If this isn't a dream, this is very bad.

<Wormhole!> Finn shouts.

<What?> I ask.

<I read about these! Illumination, cosmic strings, when they resonate— it's what happened to Titan! The Wraith must know how to shift— it travelled here along the string! To home! Those flashes we keep seeing of other places must be ITS home—> I've never heard him talk so fast.

The world's still vibrating. The change can't quite settle. Particles separate, splitting apart. Illumination sings, and curses, trying to maintain whatever magic caused this, but—

I'm falling again, MUCH more slowly, towards the floor of the experiment chamber. We're back to our previous orbits, before the Wraith so rudely whisked us across half the solar system.

I land next to Maritime.

The Wraith sighs, wrapped in overlapping shadow.

It's... quiet. The portal emitters are dead.

The portal, though, has other ideas. If anything, the waterfall's grown stronger, its currents possessing a mildly Satanic red tint. Four bright tendons of Illumination remain, connecting each of us to its depths.

Mine is a spring, a bungee cord, stretched tighter and tighter, brighter and brighter, and its scarlet thread persists when I close my eyes. Glowing afterimages race along its length. They're me, I think; or versions of me, a conga-line of Alexes, running, walking, being dragged, being carried, hopping over the barrier and into the swirling gate.

Their motion is hard to resist.

"A neat trick," Maritime says, gun pointed at Haru's body.

"It has many tricks," Farah says. "That one didn't *quite* work, though."

The Wraith smiles.

"What a shame," Maritime says. "Close the gate."

"So stubborn," Haru replies, too calmly. "Why not close it yourself?"

"Oh, we will. We have the technology."

"You... do?" It faces the light. "No, you do not understand. These gates have *power*. You always opened them so c-c-carelessly, when instead, if you simply prepare the right... geometryyyyyy, the reward is infinite. A fractal." It extends Haru's hand past the barrier, over the pit, casting a giant's shadow on the wall.

“This moon no longer matters. The conditions have been met. You can try, in your primitive fashion, to dump water on a burning star, or...”

“Or WHAT?” Maritime growls in frustration.

The Wraith turns back to us. Unpleasantly, its eyes meet mine. “YOU know of what I speak. You are... a burning star.” It tugs the string connecting me to the gate, and I stumble forwards. The burst of pain is hard to think around.

“You want to end this, yes?” it asks me.

“I’m pretty sure we’ve made that clear,” I grunt.

“Then follow us.”

Haru’s body collapses. The Wraith rises, an absence of light. It thralls sink to their knees.

Then, it dives into the pit – core first, followed by masses of tentacles, trailed by wisps of midnight – until all of it is gone.

Maritime rushes forwards with one of her minions, and together, they inflate a portable shelter. Haru’s body is carried inside, as is Farah’s injured lab tech. The pair of shield generators is dragged closer together to create one wall of safety around the steps to the dais.

In the meantime, I check out the pit. It’s a cylindrical hole five metres deep, three across, filled with an orrery’s worth of spinning, metallic rings. Half-way down is a thicker circle of stony black material, and inside THAT is our culprit: a shivering, multicoloured error in truespace. I’m guessing there’s a platform so objects can be lowered through the portal, but it’s so bright I can’t see what’s beneath. Before I’m pulled in, I retreat behind the barrier.

So. What now?

The Wraith’s gone. (I’d like to say it ran away, but we’d never be that lucky.)

We’re here. The portal’s here.

I assume outside is still an active warzone—

“Hawthorne. Over here.” Maritime beckons from the shelter airlock.

Inside, there’s a delightful frisson of interpersonal tension. The four of us wait in one corner while other personnel fuss over the casualties. Maritime and Farah stand by the door. Despite how things ended on Starfish, Maritime has retained her imperious ‘Roman general driving out the barbarians’ attitude. Farah, her hands clasped demurely before her, is nearly invisible in the gloom.

“Farah,” Maritime murmurs, accompanied by a curt nod.

“Maritime.” She smiles, unsure about eye contact. “It’s nice to see you.”

“It’s surprising to see *you*. I thought you were done.”

“I was done ten years ago. Then again, so were you.” She shakes her head.

“They told me you died, on Starfish.”

“I’m harder to kill than that, but it was... close.” An intake of breath is the only crack in her demeanour. “I’d ask what you’ve been up to, for the past chunk of time—”

“Most of a decade.”

“—but that’s a conversation for when our concerns are less immediate – as long as we’re on the same side, to be crystal clear.”

“Yes, Maritime, we’re on the same damn side. You’re not supposed to have that shield generator, by the way.”

“Yes. Well. I decided we needed it more than the people it belonged to.”

“And who did it belong to, exactly?”

“It’s better you don’t know.”

“Ha. Nothing ever changes, does it.” Farah shrugs. “If we’re talking about dodecagons, maybe we’re on *neighbouring* sides, but simplify that shape down to the philosophical triangle and our worldviews become a lot less nuanced.”

“Problem solving requires making simplifying assumptions. Linearise the problem, make it convex...”

Farah rolls her eyes.

Maritime coughs. “Fine. Onto other business.” She surveys us briefly. “I admit I might’ve underestimated you.”

“Well,” I say. “No hard feelings.”

Wake narrows her eyes. “They’re not *soft* feelings, either.”

“They’re marinating,” Sinas says.

“You did underestimate us,” I say, “but Starfish was a bigger mess than anyone anticipated. No dramas, as long as we can help each other, from now on.” I’m fairly sure I believe what I’m saying. “How’d you manage to escape? We were pretty sure we saw you, um— die. Painfully.”

“I survived. Painfully. Let’s leave it at that,” Maritime replies. “I appreciate your willingness to cooperate.”

“Thank you.”

“However, this a bigger mess than Starfish, and unfortunately, we’ve been backed into a corner. I think there remains one obvious way out.”

“Which is?”

“Do as it suggested: follow it into Illumination.”

The idea is as attractive as a poo nugget in a sandpit. It also doesn’t sound like the most scientific approach.

“Farah, you must’ve discussed the options with your team,” Maritime says. “I wonder if you came to the same conclusions as I have.”

“I’m flattered you think they’re MY team,” she replies, “but yes.” She begins listing options on her fingers. “One: use a controlled explosion to vaporise the local sector. That could de-stabilise the opening, and cause a collapse, but we also never anticipated it *staying* open in a self-sustaining fashion, without the emitter running. Who knows what might happen.”

“Who knows,” Alex says glumly. “Not me...”

“Two: close it the proper way, using the emitter to reverse the process. That was my intention, but as you can see, it hasn’t worked either. It’s as if space here is infected, and can’t heal... I need more time than we have. Finally, option three.” She glances at us. “Those connections you have, the strings; they’re the reason we thought you’d survive, in Illumination. I can’t help but think, though,

because the Wraith reacted SO strongly, perhaps they're *tying* this portal open, somehow. Which, naturally, makes me wonder..."

"...if they could be used to stitch it closed," Maritime says.

"Feels like you ran out of ideas a little fast there," Sinas replies.

"Oh, we're desperate," Maritime says. "You think I'd propose this lightly?"

"If that's true, and the Wraith wants to escape Illumination permanently, it might need us," Finn says. "As in, it might leave us unharmed. We'll have, umm—leverage. One of us could visit Illumination, and find out what it's doing, and why."

"One of us has already done that and returned in one piece," Sinas says.

"It wasn't easy. I want to make that clear – whoever goes, it'd be a huge risk. There's no... guarantee, of finding your way back."

"Which is why," Farah says, "I won't encourage you to do this. I don't think Maritime will, either. Nevertheless, if one of you volunteers..." She exhales. "It's a better chance than zero."

Are our tethers to Illumination truly its main fuel? Do our connections to people mean THAT much? The scale of energy doesn't seem to match up, and it's hard to relate spiritual feelings of grief, love, awe, or whatever else to this extremely *physical* tear in reality. Then again, one teenager can put on a pretty fearsome emotional rampage, and love—love's just an evolutionary instinct, isn't it? But love also makes people change the world. Perhaps the writer in me doesn't subscribe to such literal manifestations of metaphor.

"There's one aspect that makes we worry," I say aloud, "which is the Wraith WANTS us to follow it. It knows we're thinking about doing exactly that. Clearly, it's cooking something. And let's not beat around the bush – that's scary."

"Yes," Wake replies, "but we're ALSO cooking. We're Michelin starred."

"Still mantis. So, if we do this, who's going?"

Finn raises his hand. "Logically, I think I should. I know what to expect."

"Thanks." I rub my eyes. "Look, you don't HAVE to, even if it's, I dunno—'logical'. I appreciate you taking one for the team." Jeez, my eyes really don't want to to focus. "Hey, what if I also go? To help?" (Uh, Alex? What's this you're saying?)

"You don't have to come—" he says.

"No, I want to! OK, that's a lie, but I'd feel pretty ash if I let you go all that way alone. Again." (Alex, Alex, Alex Alex Alex—)

"Well, um..." He looks down. "Alright. Thanks."

"Don't mention it. Wake, Sinas, I'll trust you to lock things down out here."

"We'll handle it," Sinas says. "Thanks for volunteering. I have *total* faith in your ability to accomplish the mission."

"Dude, I've spent enough time around you to know when you're lying, now."

"And? Am I?"

Crap. Bluff called.

"I'll protect you guys with my life," Wake says. "With – my – life!"

“I love it,” I reply. “I love *you*. I do. Well, if we don’t come back... it was a good attempt. Or maybe it’ll be a bad one. There was an attempt, at least.”

“Put that on our tombstones,” Finn murmurs.

“No more polluted faces!” Wake says. “Halo vibes only.”

I try to be a halo vibe as I rest a hand on Finn’s shoulder. He smiles at me, though it doesn’t reach his eyes; more ‘if we’re in this, at least we’re in it together’. I’m unsure how I feel, except that yeah, nah, there’s no WAY I could’ve let him do this on his own – which is odd, because I’m not supposed to like him much, am I? I reckon I’ve been inspired, by that glitched amorphous twig of humanity I call my twin. Little bastard’s snuck up on me.

“Fuck it,” Sinas says. “What if we all go?”

“Yep!” Wake says. “That’s a better idea. We’ve come this far as a team.”

“I’m not sure that’s necessary—” Farah says.

“It gives us a better chance,” Sinas says. “And we need better chances.”

I don’t want to argue. We exchange a grim glance, and just like that, it’s decided: we’re all going to hell, as a *team*. (Not gonna lie, it makes me slightly emotional.)

“Fair enough,” Maritime says. I’ll assume the ‘thank you’ is implied.

“We’ll do whatever we can to keep you safe,” Farah says. “I’ll monitor your progress, and health, and our teams will protect the experiment chamber from outside attacks. So much has happened to you already, and this isn’t your fight, and it isn’t fair, but— your willingness to help is... moving. I’m sorry we can’t do more.”

“Yes,” Maritime says. “I suppose we should’ve always done more; or less, FAR less, but that’s done. We’re free, now, to make new choices.”

“For that,” Farah replies. “I’m grateful.”

Then, another voice pierces the murk – or rather, brushes it feebly aside. “Finn?”

“Hey, Mum.”

He walks to where she lies on a stretcher. Her eyes are closed; her chest barely moves. I don’t think she’s entirely present, or conscious, though there’s enough left inside to recognise her son’s voice. “You’re still here,” she says.

“So are you,” he says quietly.

“I’m not so... sure.” She coughs. “For now.”

“I’m sorry I have to leave again.”

“You must, though. You will. Whenever you accept responsibility, you always... see it through, to the end. *Always*.” She clasps his wrist with bruised fingers, before falling back. “Be careful. I know you can do it, though. I... ahh, Finn. Never lose sight of... that dedication. Never lose sight of who you are.”

“It’s alright, Mum.” I can’t see much of his face, in the gloom. “I’ll be back.”

“Yes, I’m sure. I’ll... see you then...”

He steps away, and watches her for a long moment, as if fixing her in his memory. I spend a while, watching them both, and take a sneaky snapshot with my MeshMate. Then, I step outside.

“You all have PRISMs, yes?” Farah asks. “We can use them.”

“For what?”

“Maintaining your souls’ integrity. We’ll link their frequency to our shield generators; it’s not ideal, but it’s been done before.” Clearly, Farah knows what’s up, despite her hemming and hawing about ‘being out the loop’ for so long (and Maritime’s there to fill any gaps).

“Holding up okay?” Farah asks, plugging a cable into my suit.

“Yep, although...” I shift my weight from foot to foot. “Do you think anyone would notice if I pissed in the corner?”

“Alex, just go in the suit. They’re built for it.”

“But it’s gross. It’s *wet*.”

“That’s your biggest concern, huh?” She smiles, checking the connection. “Understandable.” Then she puts something in my glove, closing my fingers around its shape, gently. “In case you need a way back.”

It’s my notebook. “What? Where did you—”

“Promise me you’ll stay safe. There are parts of history I’d rather not revisit.”

“Sure. I promise.”

Her eyes glue themselves to mine.

I could really use a bathroom right now. Or a sausage roll. Or time.

We make our way to the dais, and the steps, over the railings, until it’s us, the pit, and the portal, half-way down. Maritime takes a seat at a console, wiping the layer of frost from its screens. She gives us another curt nod, which must be code for ‘I really appreciate what you’re doing but I’m far too :-/ to express it properly’. Sinas nods in return. The Wraith’s invitation looms in my mind, and I wonder if we’ll discover where it was inviting us *to*.

“How bad was it inside?” I ask Finn.

He peers into the pit. “Quite bad.” The portal grows, then shrinks, as reality decays. Its pull strengthens, centimetre by centimetre, heartbeat by heartbeat, blurring truespace, like we’re standing over a volcano.

“Once, when I was— thirteen? I had this bright idea of making a bonfire on the farm,” I say. “I’d learned about toasting marshmallows from an old book, and I really wanted to toast some marshmallows. I also just wanted to, like... burn shit? But although I’d made campfires before, my dad said no, since it ‘wasn’t safe’, blah blah blah, and he didn’t have time to supervise. I suppose I was feeling rebellious, so I did it anyway. And hey, it turns out I *WAS* an idiot, because I started this fire, right in the backyard – I looked away for a second – and it got big. Too big.” The light flickers, licking at my hands. “The first thing I did wasn’t ‘put it out’. Nah, what I did was *watch*. Because inside me, there was this feeling of, okay, if I leave this for a minute, or two, maybe it burns the whole place down: the house, the farm. And all my anxiety just... goes away.”

“And then you put the fire out?” Wake asks.

“Guess so.”

No point in delaying. We edge forwards, extending our toes over the edge. Wake does a couple of test jumps on the precipice. “Let’s do it together.”

“On three, then,” I reply. “ON three, not after three.”

“You’re such a mum. A big mother duck looking after her little baby ducks.”

I snort. “Wake, nothing could be LESS true. One. Two—”

“I appreciate it! It’s great!”

“Okay, fine, now shut up. One. Two—”

“Wait! Wait,” Sinas says. “Finn, open your visor.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“It’s cold!”

“It’ll only take a sec. C’mon. Please.”

Finn, confused, opens his helmet. So does Sinas.

He leans in to give Finn a kiss. Their lips meet, and it’s slightly clumsy given all the geometry they’re dealing with, and my only glimpse is Finn’s wide eyes before Sinas’ head swoops in for the kill; true to his word, it only lasts a second. Then he withdraws, and they reseal their suits, and it must’ve been a pretty good second because finn.exe needs a reboot.

Sinas grins his irritating self-satisfied grin. “In case we don’t make it,” he says.

“Or in case we do?” Finn ventures.

Jesus Christ, it’s cute, but I’m also going to vomit.

“Okay. We are GOING,” I say. “One.”

The portal yawns.

“Two.”

I bend my knees.

“Three.”

We jump.

We fall.

As the light becomes real, I wonder if this dumb hole is the last thing I’ll ever see, like all those people that get murdered in the Queensland AutoWastes.

Not if I can help it, I tell myself.

Not if I can—

ALEX XVII

It's dark. I wasn't expecting it to be dark.

Hm. What *was* I expecting?

I'm not sure.

'Dark' might not be the right word. I see nothing. I feel nothing. I am empty space inside more empty space, and I interpret 'empty space' as 'dark'.

'I'?

A nagging, pinprick feeling, that darts away from comprehension.

There's no direction, no variation to my surroundings. I'm the universe before the Big Bang. I'm a cave, deep underground, that's never seen the light of day. I *am* that, but I'm also inside that, a purity of nothing that spreads as far as I can sense.

I try to move.

I can't. I'm trapped.

My awareness shifts to a part of the void beside me. If I had a body, or a reference point, you might say it's to my left. If I had hands, I'd try to swipe at the dark, or reach for solid ground. The dark cares little for stupid ideas like that.

I wonder if I'm the only thing here, in this space.

I stare at the dark for a long, long time.

The darkness is staring back.

With every passing moment, my conviction grows. There *IS* a shadow, deeper than the others: a gap that's slightly less empty.

I'm lying on my bed, trapped between wakefulness and sleep, convinced the dappled grey and black beneath my window is the hunch of an intruder, dripping with malevolence – and I know if I could simply shift my head, or sit up, the illusion would collapse, and the shadow would become just that.

The fear won't let me.

It freezes me in place. There is *something there*.

I mustn't let the darkness realise I'm awake. Perhaps my own emptiness is growing less empty, and more noticeable. I wait, and wait, torn between running and playing dead, between calling out and staying silent, and my thoughts are so LOUD it must be able to hear me. It's toying with me. The sense of dread rises until I'm drowning completely, struggling to stay quiet. I can't stand it.

It takes every ounce of desperation, but— I shift myself a millimetre.

The shadow smiles, in the dark. It smiles *wide*.

I flee, blindly, into eternal night.

I falter, and stumble, but steps are steps. There's no sound, no sight, no choice, the shadow always a half-step behind, ready to smother me in depravity. At every instant I'm convinced the ground will drop away beneath me, or I'll smash into an invisible wall, or I'll feel its hands on my neck, its fingers on my cheek, its gaping maw my final memory. The urge to run fights the urge to know what I'm running INTO, but one proves more terrifying than the other. That urge is the only direction I've got.

I run for a long, long time.

You can get used to nearly anything, if it lasts for long enough.

I slow to a walk. The feeling of being chased doesn't fade.

Eventually, I convince myself I'm alone.

Part of me's sure I've spiralled in circles, my nerves sawed dull. I know I should be looking for... answers, a way out, but this doesn't feel like a place with edges, y'know? It feels like a place to exist in forever. A prison, for things who don't know they're things. A cage, for shadows who smile too much.

I take another step. I'm punched by rushing water. It throws me sideways, a nuclear blast of sensation, a wave of force that sends me spinning downwards. The water is sandpaper, deathly cold, and my thoughts are seaweed on a raging sea. I try to swim away but the current grips me, has me, wave after wave, and if there was no direction before, there's less now. I'm naked, dissolving, with nary a breath left.

This is when I choose to remember who I am. My name is Alex.

"Help me!"

A voice, in the water, muffled.

"Over here!"

The current slows. I swim against it.

"...Dad?"

I urge myself onwards, but the tides are powerful, eroding my strength, every stroke shorter than the last. When I reach out my hand, I can barely see it. He's holding onto the edge, his fingers slipping, and I just need to swim a little further, but I'm too SLOW—

He falls, into the abyss.

He's gone.

'Alex' is a ghost's name.

“What do you think Illumination is FOR?”

“It’s not ‘for’ anything, Maritime – it’s a scientific phenomenon.”

“Don’t be obtuse.”

“Then don’t assume we can define its purpose!”

“I’m not that naïve. But I’d rather we didn’t wipe our hands of responsibility, like others have done. We can’t turn around in twenty years’ time and say ‘oh, sorry, I didn’t realise these were the horrors it would cause’...”

Drifting.

The darkness itself – the absence of feeling – is its own form of suffocation.

I curl up, in the void: girl, crouched in the corner of her bedroom, and nothing she does matters. I can sense the shadow, my chaser, watching over me, but there’s no running left.

I wonder how long we’ll haunt this place together.

After a while, I stop counting.

I almost don’t notice, at first, but shapes begin forming in the dark, stitched together from black thread (and even black stands out when your only other option is ‘nothing’). Thread into wood, wood into trees, trees into forest, and remarkably – *light*.

I shrink away. “No, no, no, no, *no*.” I struggle as I’m dragged towards it, an arm wrapped around my chest, my feet kicking up swirls of dried leaves.

“Alex! It’s me. Stop.” A grunt of effort in my ear.

“Let me go!” I try to wrench myself free. The noises I’m making are barely words. “No!”

“Alex, it’s Sinas! You’re safe here.”

I’m in the bush. Gum trees. Rough bark. Dry undergrowth. Spiky grass trees stand guard outside a clearing, a small, hungry campfire at its heart. Dry air hints at the oncoming night-time chill.

The mere feeling of being *me* again is enough to overload me.

“Is this... Illumination?” I ask.

“Yep!” Wake says. “Yippee.”

I’ll be the judge of any ‘yippee-ing’, I want to say, as Sinas lays me down against a fallen log. This alarmingly normal forest is weaving itself in and out of existence, its details only staying solid, for a second, or five, until the void pushes back, as if one person’s painting the picture while another tries to white it out. My legs sink through seemingly solid ground, ever so slightly, and I feel the water again, tugging at my feet.

“Is this what it’s supposed to look like?” I mutter, holding the log a little tighter.

“Finn’s making it look... nicer,” Sinas explains.

I shake one foot experimentally. “This IS nicer, but can you fix the ground? It’ll suck if I fall through the floor.”

“Oh,” Finn says. “Huh.” He glances at me, then to the ground, then at his hands. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but— you’re hard to hold onto.”

“Okay.”

“Wake and Sinas are *here*,” he says, gesturing at the bushland. “They’re solid inside this bubble. You’re not. You’re mixed with everything else.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know.” He blushes slightly. “It’s why we took so long to find you.”

“Fine. I’m sure it’s fine.” I rub my temples. “Was it dark when you guys got here?”

“Oh no,” Wake replies. “It was like being on the surface of the sun.”

“While being siphoned through a shark’s mouth,” Sinas says. “Dipped in acid.”

“Fun,” I reply. “I cannot over-emphasise how dark and empty it was, for me.”

Finn seems more confuzzled by the second. “...Are you good, though? To get moving?”

“I can manage.” A critter hoots mournfully, and I stop myself from querying my MeshMate on instinct. The water is numbing my thoughts, threatening to sweep me off my feet the second I over-extend myself. “It’s a nice superpower, making a world like this.”

“It’s just a memory,” Finn says. “Or a possible memory. You’ll figure out how. Honestly, I think you’ll be better at it than I am.”

There’s no trail to follow, but the undergrowth isn’t too thick. Trees draw themselves out of the dark, slightly warped, like distortion at the edge of a fish-eye lens. I get the sense if we skipped ahead too far, we’d be catching a video game level before it loads. Beneath this reality I can feel my footsteps sinking into the water, and each single step takes me down rushing rivers and winding shorelines and tunnels I can’t see, while at the same time, I step over bushes and dry grass. In the distance, orange firelights glimmer: other campfires, in other clearings, comforting their own lost souls in the forest.

Finn explains things, as best he can.

He talks about tethers, connecting people’s existences, in order to navigate Illumination’s layers. He talks about souls, the echoes of a life, reverberating around tiny, hidden kingdoms. He talks about how making something here feels like painting. Partly, I think it’s to keep us distracted, but I do start to feel what he’s nattering about: the gentle pull of the tether, into the darkness ahead of me. Infinite eyes, watching us, from shadows in the branches. Hands in the water, reaching out, then pulling away. I try to focus on them and fall *through* a tree trunk, biting my tongue even though it’s not a real tongue.

The branches take on a plastic sheen, twisting, doubling back into trellises and gangways. The leaves become reticulation lines, the dirt turning moist, dark, *perfect*. The next breath fills me with humidity. I pick my way between

clusters of precious seedlings. It's Tomato Tower, and a forest, and an ocean, and the void, and the chilly corridors of Thebe, twinkling with ice crystals.

"Their biological signs are more normal than I'd have ever expected," Farah says. *"One's fuzzy, but... it might be the hardware."*

"Are they the right signals? It's not that I don't trust you. I'd rather quadruple check." Maritime's ghost waits between the trees as Farah confirms the datastream.

"It's understandable," Haru says. *"I wouldn't trust us either. Is the commlink active?"*

"In theory. I'll give it a shot. Hello, anyone? Can you hear me?"

She stares right at me, and I shiver, but then Illumination folds again and she's suddenly behind me. No matter how I turn, I can't catch her.

"Hello?" I reply. "Hey!"

"Who're you talking to?" Wake asks.

"Farah! Don't you hear them?" The water roars louder in my ears.

"The energy's being reflected," Farah says. *"Too much interference."*

"Try a higher frequency band," Maritime says.

"Planning to."

Their voices fade. Wake pushes me forwards, against my will. It's hard to keep steady when every step takes me through three overlapping worlds and skips a dozen more. The water keeps trying to drag me down to its level, willing me to *let this go, wouldn't that be easier, wouldn't it be nice to come back* and climbing out again is getting harder and harder. If I could simply close my eyes and rest—

"Uh-oh," Finn says.

One by one, the fires are blinking out. The trees are wreathed in twisting shadows, turning them black, forming thirsty pockets of silence like the void I just escaped.

"The Wraith?" Wake whispers. "Is it here?"

Finn nods. "It's looking for us. Did any of you read the paper on D-branes?"

Blank stares.

"After dinner, on the Scaffold," he adds. "The night we went into cryo."

"Oh, that," Wake whispers. "I promise I tried."

"That's fine. I was thinking of ways to hide, and— let's say you're tracking a spaceship. You need the state of the ship, along with a reference point, to define the target's location. You need measurements of it, to actually determine where it is. Finally, you need a model to predict where it goes *between* measurements. The Wraith needs those things, too, in order to track us."

"...And you want to throw a wrench into that?" Sinas asks.

"That's what the paper talked about. Illumination is made up of connected membranes, and those membranes can condense into copies – mirror images – which're mathematically separated. If you're in one copy, you can't see what's happening in the other copy. I think that's how people, or things, figured out how to hide in Illumination. They make copies, and copies, and copies—it might not

be effective for long, but if the Wraith doesn't know WE know how to do that... perhaps we can hide?" He grimaces.

"But OUR job is to find the portal, right?" Wake asks. "If I was the Wraith, I'd just park myself there and wait. It's a predictable model."

"Maybe it's not that smart," I reply. "I mean, it's searching for us right now."

Finn concentrates, and energy whispers at the edges of my perception; words I can't comprehend.

We reappear in the original clearing, beneath a night-time sky. Now there are two campfires, separated by millimetres, only differentiated by the slightest flicker of chaos. It's the same for the logs, the trees, the patterns in the dirt, as if someone copy-pasted a MeshSim but couldn't quite be bothered lining it up.

Wake kicks some leaves with her shoes. Ours move. The copies don't.

The darkness between the trees deepens. The mirror-fire flickers, a candle about to be smothered. Finn grits his teeth, and the gap 'twixt the membranes stretches, which something in me really *detests* the feeling of.

"Is it working?" Sinas mouths.

The Wraith prowls, on the far side of the glass.

Voices from Thebe sing in my mind, frustratingly close.

"Give me a memory," Finn whispers.

"We were like them, once," Farah says. "Young. Innocent. Wanting to change the world."

"I suspect that's projection on your part," Maritime replies dryly.

"No, they want to – or they'll find out they want to. The determination those kids have doesn't come easy, and it doesn't like being ignored, either."

"Their world, now," Haru manages. She closes her eyes.

"I'm not letting you die today," Maritime says. "Unfortunately for you."

"Maritime, I've been a ghost for too long. I'm unsure how those years are counted, but the exchange rate must be worse than dogs."

Farah smiles, though says nothing.

"What?" Haru asks irritably.

"I can't help thinking of the beginning... the three of us, sitting in a lab—"

"Oh, we deserve better than your futile nostalgia."

"—drawing up plans to quantum-slip the universe. I still think about those days, more than I'll admit to most people, or a senate inquiry."

"Perhaps because it ended poorly," Maritime replies. "Are you getting duplicate pings?"

Farah busies herself at the console. "Confirmed. Tachyon echo. What's our estimate for their survival time? I'm thinking an hour or two."

"Appropriate. Our own shielding won't last much longer."

"Let me help," Haru says, "let me do *something*—"

"You can help once you can stand without complaining," Maritime retorts.

“I’ve spent the majority of my career sitting down. Standing has nothing to contribute to string theory.”

“You’re so *stubborn* – it’s genuinely astounding.”

“And you’ve surely figured out by now it’s simpler to give in.”

Farah thinks for a moment, then drags her workstation to where Haru sits, propped against the shield generator. Maritime spends a minute quintuple-checking the portal equipment, then joins the circle. She stares at the ceiling, then Haru, brows furrowed.

“You made me help you build a sofa,” she says. “I was hired, and on my first day in the lab, we assembled a sofa for the office. From IKEA.”

“It needed two people to bolt the slats in,” Haru replies. “I bought you lunch afterwards. From that Greek place across the street.”

“That’s right.”

“It’s closed down, now,” Haru says.

“Sofa’s still there though.”

“Is it?” Farah asks.

“I can’t imagine why anybody would throw it out. It was a nice sofa, for the price. You slept on it the most, Farah – you’re the expert.”

“Only because my apartment was farthest from the lab. With the train schedules, it was easiest to— oh, I’m not getting into this again. I don’t need to justify it.” She sighs. “We had so much *optimism*. It’s remarkable how long we maintained it. Almost to the end.”

“Illumination made us important,” Haru says. “We had every reason to be full of ourselves. It takes years of failure to beat that out of you.”

“Being rained on alone is miserable,” Maritime says. “Being rained on in good company is an adventure.”

“The word ‘friend’ isn’t forbidden, Maritime,” Haru grunts. “Use it. Is that how you felt about your little activist group, then? ‘Good company’?”

Maritime spends a moment analysing the bait. “Relationships born from desperation can be unyielding, and brittle – that’s the price. But now most of them are dead, and I am reminded that hindsight is rarely kind.” She focuses on her holographic readouts, a universe within each pupil. “Do you remember when you first met Javier?”

“Of course,” Farah says. “I was sleeping on the sofa, in the office, and he accidentally woke me up, because we kept our lunch in that awful fridge where if you didn’t close the door slowly enough, it—”

“Sounded like a goose dying, yes,” Haru says.

“Since he was new, we went to eat lunch together. We had a good chat about birds; crows, ibises, how different species were adapting to life under the domes. I thought he was nice, but a little intense. TOO eager to fit in.”

“He did like birds, that man.”

“Then I married him.”

“That you did,” Haru murmurs.

“We had children.”

“That you did.”

“Thank you,” Farah says. “For being there for them.” Her eyes glisten.

Haru’s face reveals little, except exhaustion. “If you asked me again, now, knowing everything... I’m not sure I’d accept. But I never regretted it, not once.”

“That’s... good,” Farah says. “That’s good. Sometimes, when I look at her, I wonder if I made a mistake. Then— I look at her again, and I’m glad I didn’t.”

“Give me a memory!” Finn urges. “Something unimportant.”

“When you say that, everything feels important,” Sinas says.

“Please hurry.”

Sinas scavenges a dried-up root, and Finn starts pulling us towards it. There’s this sensation of going... not deeper, but *inner*, into the web of vibrating connections that makes up the person called Sinas and their trajectory through the universe.

Suddenly, my knees are crammed against my chest, a hard surface at my back. My face is pressed against something warm and Wake-like which I realise is, in fact, Wake. I struggle to extricate myself but there’s nowhere to extricate to.

“What the yekk, Sinas,” Wake says, voice muffled.

“Sorry! I didn’t realise you’d all be here!” He’s wrapped around the back of a chair like a banana, looking mildly panicked. I find a spot to place my hand – a steering wheel? – and twist to see glass – a cockpit! – and blue tarmac whizzing by at ungodly speeds outside. It’s not a good sight. I turn back round.

“This is your RACING CAR?!” I ask.

“I didn’t realise it could fit more than one person.”

“Well, it can’t!” Finn’s stretched out beside me and I’m not exactly sure where his legs and arms are. The car tilts to follow a banked turn and my elbow hits his chest; he takes it like a champ. The racetrack ahead of us flickers. Close by, it’s real enough, but soon it splits into repeated, mirage-like trees of impossible geometry. The car shudders and I wonder if whoever’s driving could slow down a *tiiny* bit so imaginary Alex can keep her imaginary lunch down.

But – amidst the confusion – the memory looks normal. Wraith-less.

I’d call that a net positive.

Or maybe I spoke too soon. The sky behind us darkens, and a siren blares in the distance: *take shelter*.

“Better keep moving,” Finn says. “Wake? Got something for me?”

“How close are we to the portal?” I ask.

“Not close, but... not far. I think we’ll make it.” It’s odd, listening to him be the leader, every sentence more a suggestion than an order. He’s managing, even though he might not like it much.

We enter Wake’s dream.

I’m on top a skyscraper, or a star-scraper, so tall I can see the curvature of the Earth, the tops of stormclouds, the atmosphere’s blue shimmer where it

meets the black of space. There are three towers here, huddled together: thin, constructions of glass and concrete. We stand on the roof of the southernmost tower in an open area that might be a landing pad. A forest of comms antennas rises to our rear, beside a very unsafe ramp to the lower levels. It doesn't look like a real place. It looks like—

“This an Unreal Tournament level,” Finn says.

“I've played a lot of UT,” Wake says, slightly defensively. “I'm *good* at UT.”

“Not hating, just... I didn't realise you could make something completely fictional here. I mean, it IS a real level, but I'd expect the memory to be of you *playing* Unreal Tournament, and not to be inside... Unreal Tournament...” He trails off, looking around in wonder. “Wow, it's just like the MeshSim. What's this map called?”

“DM-Morpheus.” Wake points at the northwest tower. “There's a rocket launcher hidden up the top.”

“Good to know.”

The air's thin and cold and tastes of pollution, and I shiver as the concrete sways, slightly. It's *dead*, up here – no plants, no bacteria, only rocket fuel and stray cosmic rays.

Sinas walks to the edge of the landing pad and makes the foolish choice to look down. He twitches like he's touched an electric fence. “It's down there,” he says. “Climbing the tower.”

“The Wraith?”

“Yeah.”

I take a few cautious steps forward, enough to see its shadowy tentacles snaking upwards.

“How is it finding us so quickly?” Wake asks.

“I'm not sure,” Finn says. “Sorry.”

The Wraith angles closer.

“Should we go?” Sinas asks.

“Maybe, if we stay really, *really* quiet...” Finn murmurs.

As it rises above the tower's summit, it's hard not to worry about how thin the barrier separating us really is. It coils itself around concrete supports on the other side of the mirror. Can it sense our ripples, somehow? Our flickers of light, sound, barely any fury, signifying the slightest absence of nothing?

It swims back and forth, a killer whale. Fingers of shadow *tap-tap-tap* the walls of our aquarium which I FEEL, in my chest.

The Wraith pauses. It taps the glass again, slightly harder.

The mirror *shatters*.

It's hard to explain what happens next (but I realise that's my ONE job, so I'll do my best). I fly, out of the world, out of everything. I'm fuel for Illumination's engine. Pain wallops me and I'm flat as a pancake, flying towards a shard, a foreign nation, a cacophony, as the membrane rips itself to pieces.

“The tether!” comes a shout. “Follow the tether!”

I don’t know what that means. The others vanish in an instant, scattered to the winds. I’m pummelled in three directions as I tumble back to the ocean.

You know how they say if you jump into water, from high enough, you’ll be going so fast the impact is like hitting concrete? I’ve heard of suicide jumpers drowning that way because of broken arms, or broken legs, which sounds like giving yourself a lot of time to regret your own choices.

Anyway, this is pretty much that. I SLAM the water, my bones snapped in two, except they’re not bones but something more fundamental. Illumination rushes down my throat. It takes me, drags me deeper, so fast I can’t keep up, let alone resist: an endless tunnel, clockwise, anticlockwise, inside, outside, insanity, complexity. Every step is one I’ll have to retrace and I know deep down I won’t be able to.

It’s cold. Black. Odd, how Illumination in our universe was characterised by so many colours.

Pieces of me are scraped away, lost in my wake. Were they important?

I can’t swim out. Everything’s broken.

I need to breathe. I need to know which way’s up. Primal instincts I can’t fulfil.

An object bobs past me, intensely smooth, intensely cold, and I latch on with all my might. It hurts to touch but it’s floating somewhere, *elsewhere*, and all I can do is hold on and pray to gods I don’t believe in, hoping this is the ONE time Quetzalcoatl will do me a solid.

The currents are rushing with slightly less intensity.

The world grows brighter, until I can see grey.

My head breaks the surface.

It hurts. It hurts to breathe.

And this thing I’m holding – this block of dumb, colourless ice, which chills me to the bone – has worlds inside it.

“I’m glad,” Maritime says, “you feel justified, in the choices you’ve made.” Her tone makes it clear that any perceived gladness is strictly sarcastic.

Farah looks hurt.

“It’s not her fault,” Haru says. “It’s self-centred to believe one rash decision could impact the project, in that way.”

“But we aren’t blameless,” Maritime replies.

“Of course not. We were responsible, along with hundreds of others. This doesn’t absolve us, nor does it condemn us. Our mistakes are the reason we’re here, but they were – nonetheless – mistakes.”

Silence, as Maritime stares at nothing, and Haru closes her eyes and inhales shallowly, and the survivors guard the portal chamber’s doors. Colour swells against the shield bubbles, surf against a reef.

“Illumination was supposed to help people,” Farah says. “That’s what it comes down to. It can still do that, I think. Limitless energy. New frontiers to explore. Breaking down the tyranny of time and space and causality.”

“A beautiful dream,” Haru says.

“A *competitive advantage*,” Maritime adds, “if one were to develop it in secret. It should’ve have been or open-source, right from the start.”

“Contradictory, from someone who’d erase every hint of its existence.”

“Yes, because I’ve seen how people act around it. It *warps* them, Haru. It makes them naïve. It dangles a carrot to make us forget the stick. For years – decades! – we believed in an ideal we should’ve been far more critical of, when as scientists we are *meant* to be critical. Instead, we sacrificed children to the altar of progress whilst ignoring every other problem in the solar system, because given just one more year, one more breakthrough—”

“It’s not that simple,” Farah interrupts. “The problems, the incidents, they’re on us, I agree, and I will endlessly wonder what could’ve been if only we’d been more open, or someone had leaked.” She looks down. “The thing is... I still believe our attempt was the best shot anyone had.”

“At what?”

“Doing the right thing, with this— no, don’t laugh! If any of the megacorps had gotten their hands on it, do you truly think they would’ve been more *ethical*?”

“God no,” Maritime grunts.

“Then what do you WANT? Yes, the government decided to develop Illumination in secret, to attempt relevancy for the first time in fifty years. Yes, we got defence funding to pursue our shiny new toy. But we intended to control, and catalogue, for the public good; it was just more difficult than we realised.”

Maritime folds her arms, leaning forwards. “You thought we were *scientists* – not corporate drones, not military grunts, not chess pieces wielded by a doomsday AI – what you don’t see is THAT’S how we got here, by thinking we had the answers. I’ve been trying to atone for that arrogance ever since.”

Haru sighs. “We’re them. The children. They were our chess pieces, in the name of progress, as we’re another’s, in the name of... well, I’m not sure. Didn’t you ever stop, though, to think about who set this up? Who built this station? Who keeps these secrets?” She coughs, holding out an imaginary bishop. “I can feel myself being moved. Tap, tap, tap, knight to E5, bishop to D3...”

“You were possessed, Haru,” Maritime says.

“Yes, and I was the only one. This catastrophe can’t be blamed on one ghost. There’s too much smoke for there not to be a fire, or at least a damn big smoke machine.”

“You know,” Maritime says slowly, “on those late nights, alone in the lab...” She frowns. “To be clear, there was never lucent evidence of manipulation, or an ulterior motive.”

“But you had suspicions,” Farah says.

“I always have those.” It’s an idea to be considered as it cooks, like a frozen meat pie in the microwave.

“Then why not take the chance to make a move on our terms?” Farah asks. “Until the secret-keepers stop us.”

The waves crash. I’m helplessly tossed up, around, upside-down, clinging to the ice between facefuls of spray. The fiery sky assaults me with radiation and pain: white-hot light amid whiter, hotter light, the bubbling surface of an x-ray pulsar, and here’s me, one of those see-through fish that evolved at the bottom of a cave. It’s almost enough to make me wish I was back in the depths (almost).

As seconds pass, then minutes, I start to see structure, between the pain: patterns, repetition, as the currents push me further.

Each wave is a dictionary.

A sheaf of shredded pages.

They’re fragmentary ideas, jostling together. Even if I can’t understand their grammar, words have meaning. Maybe that’s it: the water *flows*, like sentences.

My ice-raft is melting, and its words are alive.

I watch my parents get taken away.

Tiny hands, balled in fury.

Usually I’d scream, but that day, I was quiet. Everything I felt was in those fists. My nails made painful imprints in my palms – eight sharp cuts.

The flyer lands at the end of the street. It’s a sleek stingray that makes the mango trees shake and showers them in drought-dust. Enforcers charge out, sporting the best optical camo that corpo-cash can buy. I wonder if they’re aliens: that’s how far they are from me and my scummy yellow dress, my distraught grandparents, our frightened neighbours, our run-down house on aging stilts. The dust swirls. Dogs pant. Last year’s floods are a distant memory. A peacekeeper patrol looks on disinterestedly, chatting amongst themselves, stun batons loose on their hips, the foreign flags stitched onto their chests counting for less than dirt.

My parents don’t fight. They’re just... swallowed, by the alien ship. Mum tries to argue but the engines drown her out. My dad’s eyes are sad, and brave, I think, but I can’t see very well as my grandparents hold me back.

I watch them shutter my parents’ shop. The corp repossesses it and turns it into a Mesh café, with more processing power and bandwidth than the entire suburb put together. I hate the irony, but the bandwidth is nice.

I watch my grandparents try to make things work. Their universal income isn’t enough to send me to a good school, so they go back to work, and they’re old, and tired, and lovely, and kind, and tired.

I watch my hometown die, slowly. People leave, when they can. They don’t come back. It’s not a change you notice immediately, but one day, you realise

it's become a town of old people, of fading traditions – of things that *used* to happen. My grandparents try to explain it. It's worse for them, obviously. The kids born a few years after me, though? They won't know any better. They'll be the keepers of another's peace.

I want to leave, too. Is that wrong?

I argue it's for 'noble' reasons (a new word we learned at school). I want to change things, to get my parents back, to force the corps to pay. I want the world to be fair. I want people to be free. I want lots of things that are hard to get if I stay home.

But I'm still *leaving*, and if I fail...

I CAN'T fail. Every day, every minute, I'm bound to my parents' sacrifice, and the sacrifices of my grandparents, my hometown, my country. I know it's bad to think that way – it's psychologically terrible – but when the monsoons come, guess which thought is powerful enough to keep me swimming?

My grandparents die, one by one.

I need them back, for one more life.

I step onto a bridge, which stretches into the night. It's a tether of energy, vibrating with people, streetlights, six lanes of traffic, and I've walked across it a thousand times on the way home from school. A railing protects me from a long drop on my right into mucky, stagnant river water. Delivery drones and peacekeeper flyers are metallic insects, accompanied by plenty of real ones.

This feels familiar, but— not. The water's too black. The traffic's too bright.

Oh, duh! You *mango*.

The memory of where I am and what I'm doing bubbles up inside me, which Illumination – sneaky, sneaky! – keeps trying to steal away. I switch my clothes to my favourite MeshSkin and change my view to third person, as if I'm editing a video. Watching myself like this keeps me grounded. It gives me a language to speak. It lets me hold onto the purpose that brought me here. I'm not doing this for my parents, after all – I'm here for my grandparents.

To talk to them. To thank them. To tell them that...

"You're delusional," the girl says. She's perched on the railing, feet dangling over the void.

"I didn't ask you," I reply.

"C'mon, Wake, don't be so cold. I'm just saying you shouldn't make promises you can't keep."

I narrow my eyes, turning to face her. In the streetlights' glow, and the breeze, she's almost an angel. Her details, though, are hard to pick out. "And you know what those are?"

"Saving your grandparents, saving your parents, changing the *yakking* world – you're stuck a loop. Someone needs to debug you."

"I'm just trying to get home. What are YOU doing?"

"Look closer." She grabs my arm. "Look at my face. You remember."

Her face could belong to a million girls. Her uniform could be from any of the high schools nearby. “Am I meant to? It also might help if you stopped calling me *delusional*.”

“Okay, *Taeng-Mo*!” She grins, which for some reason really pisses me off. “It doesn’t change anything I said, though – or how *you* feel.”

“You don’t know anything about my life!”

“Because your ‘life’ isn’t worth the trouble. You really believe you’ll get what you want? That you can excuse anything for your mantis ambitious? That’s tunnel vision worthy of a textbook.” She shrugs. “Honestly, you should talk to someone about that.”

“Shut up. Shut UP!”

I envision stepping forwards, and giving her the smallest of shoves... the camera swooping in on her shocked face as she falls into the void.

I don’t, obviously.

But she lets my arm go, and leans back, and before I can react, she’s gone. No splash.

“This is a bridge,” I mutter, balling my fists. “Not a tunnel.”

I walk.

I forget about her. It’s easy to forget about her.

Time is passing, times are changing, and yet, I’m the one who’s powerless to change them. Everything’s flying in the opposite direction: the people, the traffic, the satellites in orbit, irresistible currents of a world that doesn’t care, and as much as I rage against it and try to forge my own destiny, and make grand statements of purpose into the lens of a video drone, I can’t escape feeling more and more... frightened, of the flowers I’ve trampled to come this far.

I almost don’t notice the fire at the far end of the bridge.

It looks like a car crash. Lots of smoke.

None of the ghosts pay attention, except one, who runs towards the wreck. He’s wearing a racing jumpsuit, holding a helmet, and there’s only one guy I know who looks so much like a sad golden retriever in human form.

I run to him. Illumination doesn’t want me to. The bridge lengthens, starting to sway, and the crowd shoves me back – but I’m *getting* to the other end of this bridge. I’ve done it a thousand times. I’ve done ‘never give up’ a thousand more.

That’s who I am, no matter the cost.

The last of the ice melts in my fingers, disappearing into the ocean.

“Wake!” I shout. “Where’d you go?!”

My voice can’t break free of this searing light, or the towering waves ambushing me from every direction. The water tastes of burnt paper. It laps at my neck. My legs burn.

“Wake!”

She isn’t here.

I focus instead on the sentences spiralling around me, but they're out of order. One references a point from three chapters ago. Others jump to different themes or are cut off entirely. There are pieces I could grasp – a link, a lead, a superposition of meaning – if only my mind was running on better hardware. Islands perch on the horizon, too far to swim to.

The next wave pushes me under with a mouthful of water.

Maritime shakes her head. “You really believe we can find the single, perfect solution that makes this all... disappear.”

“Yes,” Farah says.

“Hmmm.” She grinds her jaw. *Here we go again.*

“Either the children succeed, and we survive,” Haru says. “Or the children fail, and we do not. Or somebody unpleasant breaks down that door and makes our choices irrelevant.”

“Let’s be optimistic,” Farah says. “The kids succeed. What then?”

“What then,” Maritime echoes. “You must understand by now, we’ve put a species-level extinction event on the table. Destroying this facility is the only surefire way to prevent that outcome.”

“The genie is already out of the bottle, though,” Haru replies. “It can’ be put back – not entirely. Why even *try* when—”

“I disagree. This knowledge exists in a finite number of places. Each can be dealt with, with sufficient planning. That’s the advantage of secrecy.”

“Others would develop the technology. They may be already.” She sighs. “Knowledge does not possess an inherent villainy. Humanity is advancing and must make its own choices. There must be intellectual freedom, as we see fit.”

“Don’t ‘Oppenheimer’ me, Haru.”

“Too late. Antimatter bombs are an ingenious source of destructive power, yet antimatter is also responsible for most of our off-world energy production. Each day, we interact with hundreds of artificial intelligences which are narrow, and specialised, because they are not *allowed* to be otherwise. As a species, we have restricted AI to make it a tool we can control – not without mistakes, I’ll grant you, but we persist. Humanity adapts to its consequences.”

“Then why not share Illumination publicly?” Farah asks.

“Because a half-cooked meal does nobody any good. Eugh, I apologise – death appears to have made me fonder of analogy.”

“I don’t think we’re disagreeing,” Farah says. “We *should* be asking what it means for any corporation, or government, or university, or individual, to have access to Illumination. We should consider its impact on life, death, religion, and philosophy. For me, though, those questions don’t mean we shouldn’t share it. They mean we can’t *not*. It’s not extinction, it’s evolution.” The roof shudders, raining dust. “Not just us. For the dead, too. If we can relieve one jot, one iota of their suffering, shouldn’t we do so without hesitation?”

“Now *that* is a perilous question,” Haru says.

“Once more, I disagree,” Maritime says. “You’ve seen how they react, coming here. This universe is FAR from their natural state.”

“But it’s unfair to make that choice *for* them! If there’s a chance to help—”

“Before attacking my choices, consider your own. Where have you been for the last fifteen years, Farah? You ran. You did nothing.”

“Harsh,” she murmurs.

Three people is less a circle, and more a knot (hard to resist picking at).

“Those revolutionaries are rubbing off on you, Maritime,” Haru says. “You sound like Khorin.”

“That is something you DON’T get to say. He was better than—”

“No, I don’t mean it negatively. I’ve seen how the world picks on those in its margins, and squeezes them until...” She trails off. Shades of grey, Maritime. Shades of grey. But anger is only productive when properly directed.”

“YOU sound like Pendant. Intelligence should be paired with a conscience.”

Farah raises her palms. “Alright, let’s not do too much talking—”

“I’ll admit I’m afraid of Illumination, which colours how I see it,” Maritime retorts. “The only reason you *aren’t*, though, is Javier.” Her voice softens. “I understand you want to see him; that if there was *any* chance of bringing him back, you’d take it. That’s why it’s so dangerous. The promises Illumination dangles before us – they’re wishes, nothing more. And this genie isn’t honest.”

Farah meets her gaze. “You ‘understand’, do you?” she asks.

“I *empathise*. We’ve lost people – all of us – but we keep going.”

“Maritime, my feelings will always be mine. The losses I’ve experienced are mine. Yours are yours. But it doesn’t have to stay that way.”

“You don’t know if he’s still in there. Or if he’s still sane—”

Haru takes a hoarse breath, coughing loudly, and doesn’t stop.

Farah crouches down and helps her through it. “You should rest.”

“No, no,” she mutters, “I wanted to say something... Did you ever wonder why I stayed behind, for so long? Why I kept trying, for so many years? It was for you, I think. For Javier, too, but mostly for you.” She smiles. “Such a fool.”

There can’t be much dust, inside Farah’s helmet, but some finds her eye nonetheless. “What choice is there, but to believe a better world is possible?”

“Quite,” Maritime says. “As hard as that is to remember, some days. And, to show you how *much* I believe it – I have a proposal.”

I don’t know where I am, or how long I’ve been under, but on top of straight-up drowning, I’m also *starving*. The currents twist and turn between huge slabs of water that punch me deeper, deeper, a maze, a labyrinth. I alternate between pockets of icy calm and ragtag violence, leaving me lost, sapping my strength. I’m a broken branch in the rapids, waiting for a waterfall that never comes.

My cries for help are clouds of bubbles. There are lights in the distance that never to get closer (they know I’ll drag them down, with me).

Otherwise, it’s black.

Perhaps I'm *meant* to be here. It's a comforting thought, because it means I can give up, and discard the self-preservation screaming at me to SURVIVE.

When I collide with more ice, I almost don't notice.

Almost.

I'm chasing after my brother.

His mangled car lies at the exit of the loop, upside down. Its reactor jets spark, making it twitch, a dying animal. The ground's littered with shattered glass, and metal, and streaks of cooling fluid.

I slip and stumble as my feet carry me into the fire.

It's hot. It's crazy hot. The track is melting. I can see his helmet, and he's still strapped into his seat. He isn't moving.

His neck isn't supposed to look like that.

"Marko." I reach into the cockpit, undoing the seatbelts, stretching awkwardly. "Marko, come on." Where is everyone? Why is nobody helping? He's so damn heavy as he flops into my arms. One of his boots gets caught on the steering column and I spend endless seconds untangling it, dragging him free. The world is so clear: the sirens of incoming firefighter drones, the sound of my own breath inside my helmet, the way sweat plasters his hair to his forehead, the way his eyes don't blink.

I pull him away from the loop's shadow, and the wreck, to the grass beside the track. I sit, breathing heavily. "Please, Marko, *please*..."

Blue fire dissolves into the sky.

It's all so clear.

I don't want to look at him, or at the way his body lolls in my arms. Then I'd realise that probably, he isn't okay. Here, though, as I wait for the approaching medical team, I can believe he might be.

For one last time.

Time passes. It has a way of doing that.

When I open the door to my new apartment, I'm reminded of that moment (clarification: the apartment is new to me, but old in every other sense). I stack my meagre moving boxes by the living room window, unpack my suitcase in the most half-arsed way, and even now, hours later, as the yellow glow of the evening city spills onto these bare walls, my mind dwells on the minutes I spent waiting on the grass, hoping my brother would move. *Please, Marko. Please*

And now, here I am.

Eventually, these walls won't be so bare. (Let's give it a week or two, since uni starts soon, and I'd rather focus on meeting people and finding my feet instead of picking out kitchen appliances.) It's nice, though, to have a place that's mine, away from my parents and the rest of that baggage. We'll see how long it takes them to find me.

The toilet flushes, and Marko steps out of the bathroom. "Nice place, bro," he says, wiping his hands on his shirt.

“Is there soap in there?”

“No. But I tested the bidet for you.” He waggles his eyebrows, then limps to the window. “This building looks totally derelict from outside, but inside? Not terrible. Not *great*, but not terrible. I’m legit shocked you can afford the rent.”

“I can’t, unless I find actual income. The family college fund is off limits right now.”

“Yeah, sorry. I think that’s off limits forever.” He surveys a forest of grimy rooftops. “You think you can pull this off? I admit you could hide for a month or two, but last I checked, it takes YEARS to get a degree.”

“I’ve done what I can. I scrubbed my MeshPrints, made fresh accounts, I’m staying away from big events. I’m also trying not to think about it too hard. I’ll just... enjoy this, while I have the chance.”

“Probably the right attitude, to be fair. When’s your roommate arrive?”

“Tomorrow.”

“Nice! Well, if he’s happy with me sleeping over for a couple nights...” He throws himself onto the couch. “...I can help you get settled.”

“You really don’t have to. But if you WANT to... it’d be nice to hang, y’know?”

“Trust me, I want to. It’s not like I get much time to myself, these days.” He closes his eyes, his voice fading into the ambience of the city. Windowpanes rattle as a maglev speeds past. (It’s a nice couch; the price was so low that a guy probably died on it, but it IS comfy.) “I’m jealous,” he adds. “You’ll have so much fun here.”

“Are *you* doing okay?” I ask, as his breaths quieten.

“Yeah, yeah. Just... sleepy.”

I remember it so vividly. The crash. Pulling him from the wreck. The ride to the hospital.

Months of gene therapy and reconstructive surgery.

The first time he woke up. The first time he walked on his own.

The heat of the fire, beside the track. The way his chest wasn’t moving. The damage to his helmet.

I remember it so *vividly*.

“It didn’t happen like this, did it,” I mutter.

“No,” Marko replies.

Time un-passes.

My suitcases and moving boxes are swapped out for mass-produced furniture: minimalist chairs, printed cutlery, a standard-blueprint workstation, freshly disinfected. The polymer walls of my apartment shine minty, toothpaste white. Instead of a city, the window overlooks a vast, winding valley. There’s a river at its feet, bordered by carefully tended greenhouses. Paths lead to dozens of hexagonal structures, each built from a stone-mimicking composite, each presenting their own windows, and apartments, and clockwork inhabitants.

The sky’s fake – it’s a Mesh-made Illusion. Quite hard to tell if you don’t already know, but if you’ve stared at it day after day, like I have...

“It’s time,” Marko says, suddenly behind me.

“For what?”

“C’mon, little brother. You’re better than that.”

My legs buckle, as gravity doubles, or triples. The security cameras in the corners are impartial and unflinching. “No, I’m leaving. This isn’t—”

“You’re leaving? All by yourself? As if you’d ever have the courage, without me.” Marko tilts his head, placing a hand on my shoulder. It takes all my strength to not sit down. My parents’ presence is palpable in every square centimetre of this place. Every spotless surface is caked with their filth.

The sky’s fake. This is ALL fake – even moreso than usual.

“Wait,” I say.

Then I charge through the wall.

It disintegrates, in immensely satisfying fashion, and I expect to find myself thrown into Illumination’s cauldron once more, but instead, I’m falling in a sky of faces: infinite *mes*, every version of me from every lie I’ve ever told, and it turns out that’s lots of lies and lots of faces. As I tumble past, they turn to me, in unending waves, their attention a threat.

I’m okay with it, though. No matter how afraid, or misguided, or pathetic these lies are, they’re me. People knew them. People liked them – often more than the real thing, which does make it hard to be myself.

I close my eyes, and they close theirs, and every one of us listens.

Illumination, in my heart, is an orchestra, a cacophony, sounds, melodies, chords, rhythms, discordant and operatic and heart-wrenching and addictive. If you’re here, you’re playing every single Spotify playlist simultaneously while replacing half the notes with sound effects, and yet – and yet – you WANT to hear more. You want to pick at its notes, to see what you find.

There’s a particular song I’m searching for, in this chaos. I heard it when I first dropped through the portal, and a version of it played inside my chest the last time I made Finn blush (and pretended I wasn’t fucking *stoked*). If I could only feel out its notes on the piano, I’ll find the bravery to set myself free.

Ah! I hear it.

Let’s listen.

The vision is so STRONG that for one blissful moment I’m inside Sinas’ head, and Illumination’s words are music. I hear its strains so clearly:

The chimes tinkling in Sinas’ wake.

The Wraith’s crashing drumbeats.

The portal, borne on swelling crescendos of sound.

Illumination whispering against distant shores.

It HATES that I’m here. It loves me, and hates me, and above all it’s *confused* by me, and I’m being turned into one of those round flat stones you find on a riverbed – smooth, featureless, the same as every other – a temporary stop on my inevitable journey towards sand and muck. I wonder if it hurts those stones as much as it’s hurting me.

There's a path here, though, a note, a threat, a word—I need to find it before my ice-raft melts completely. Finn told me something, before the Wraith found us; we talked about it on the ship, too. If only I could remember...

"You're saying we let the *kids* choose what happens?" Farah asks.

Maritime nods. "I'm not saying it's a good idea. But they're the ones who'll live in this world we created."

"I like it," Farah replies, smiling.

Haru isn't. "What if they ask for more time? More information? What if they don't WANT to? Do we have the wherewithal to—"

"We make the offer," Maritime says, "and see what they say. The intention isn't to put pressure on them. They understand the facets of the problem."

"It's poetic, I'll grant you," Haru replies. "Nevertheless, 'poetry' isn't a reason for us to abdicate our responsibilities. The choice must be optimal."

"I don't think there's a single optimum," Farah says. "It's non-convex."

"You're sidestepping the problem."

"Perhaps, but aren't you curious about what they'll choose?"

Haru chuckles softly, then more loudly. "I suppose I am."

She gazes calmly at the dappled light, as ice crystals spiderweb across her suit. Farah sits cross-legged, looking down, a half-smile half-hidden behind her hair. Maritime kneels, hands in her lap, a coiled spring amid aging electronics.

"I've missed these... patterns," Haru murmurs.

"If we make it out of here, perhaps we can steal that old couch, from the lab," Farah says.

"Then we have to decide who gets to keep it," Maritime replies. "You make one choice, then up pops another." She checks the portal emitter, more time. "If the program does go public—"

"I suspect the words 'mixed bag' will be uttered," Haru replies. "Perhaps you're right; perhaps it's the time to hand things over. In fact, with every passing second, it seems a better and better idea."

"Thinking of retiring?"

"Oh, no. But a position with more free time could be... agreeable."

"Those four kids will inherit the monster we unleashed," Farah says. "We can guide them, and protect them, and help them find their way, but it's theirs, now. And they deserve *their* shot, at that better world. Agreed?"

Maritime nods.

"Agreed," Haru murmurs.

"O-kay." Farah exhales. "Which means we need to do everything in our power to make sure they come back in one piece."

Tether! That's it. The word was 'tether'.

As soon as it pops into my head it's THERE, a cord – no, a pipe – of swirling energy, rushing from an indescribable source within me to an indescribable destination. Suddenly I'm aware more tethers, on either side, in every direction, forming a complex web: knots, upon knots, upon knots.

No clue how I missed them until now.

No clue how long I have left.

I grab the first tether – the biggest – and lug myself forwards. The sea lurches. There's a feeling, a *story* this tether wants to share. It's so much more coherent than anything else nearby. I cut through a spray of half-formed ideas and let the rush pull me into the fractal.

It's like a lifeline, thrown from a boat in a storm: I'm still in the water, and the job's not done, but if I can just *hold on* I've got a chance. It's hard to understand what the tether is showing me when Illumination insists on putting me through repeated washing machine spin cycles, but I can skim read frickin' *fast* when I want to.

The train slows, which is my signal to get off.

I'm the only one in this carriage, but the empty seats are occupied, I think, by stories that're invisible to me. The windows frame a black-and-white sky, full of crystalline clouds and abstract geometry, sketched from chaos.

Next stop: eight years old.

I'm sitting in the apartment, reading. It's quiet, insulated from the city noise outside. The blinds are drawn, apart from one, allowing a sliver of light to enter from the balcony.

"I'll see you in three days," mum says, from the doorway.

"Okay," I reply.

"Food's in the fridge. Talk to Bramble if you need anything."

"Okay."

Her silhouette steps into the hallway. "Are you sure this is what you—"

"I'm fine," I say.

I turn the page. The door closes.

This is the first time she'll leave me behind, on a work trip. I don't mind it, so it's not the last. The apartment seems to cool, and grow dimmer, as if it realises it's caring for one less person. Bramble raises her head, in her charging cradle in the corner, then dips into standby mode. In this silence, I can read for hours.

The train arrives.

I hop on.

Next stop.

I'm fifteen years old and feeling freaking awkward about it.

In other words: I'm at a birthday party standing in the corner, because I've got nobody to talk to. Well, that's not true. There are thirty people to talk to, but I only know five, and those five are engaged in lively conversation with people who aren't me. So, I'm stuck, waiting for strangers to take pity on me. Which they don't. Why should they?

The music's too loud. I can't hear what people are saying. Everyone's standing too close.

Half the guests are already drunk; a blessing AND a curse.

I'm running out of things to look at on my MeshMate.

I *could* leave, but I don't want to ghost and I'm too awkward to say goodbye this early. Wow. Such a functional member of society.

Guess I'll stand in this corner, then.

Next stop.

I'm sixteen years old.

I'm in Illumination, and a Wraith is hunting me.

I'm starting to figure out it's not that smart. It's vicious, and strong, and very scary, but smart? Not really. I leave drips of paint at every station and it tracks them well enough, but it hasn't realised I *want* it to. If it's chasing me, it's not chasing the others. Now, if I can shake it not too far from the portal, I can double-back and meet up with Alex and Wake and Sinas and we'll have some time to ourselves to get this done – not *much* time, but some.

I just have to trust they'll each make it on their own.

Next stop.

I'm twenty-two years old. Twenty-two.

This intersection is crowded with hundreds of people, following blinking crosswalk signals: office workers in suits, construction workers in PPE, dripped-out teenagers trying to impress their friends, cosplayers attending a nearby anime convention. The crowd jostles me, and it's hot, hard to breathe, which triggers a sudden urge to *get out*. I push towards the side of the road, and—

"Mum?" I swear it's her who bumps my elbow, head down, striding in the opposite direction.

It can't be.

Wherever I look, there are groups of people – talking, hanging out, going places – as the convention draws unexpected activity out of the city. I suppose I'm an exception.

But that's fine. I don't need distractions.

Next stop.

I'm fifteen again, lying in bed. It's almost midnight.

"Hey, man. Are you okay? Where'd you go?" Quali's voice is loud, trying to be heard over the noise of the party.

"Sorry man, I left early. Wasn't feeling good."

"But you're fine, though, yeah?"

"Yeah. You have fun. I'll be okay."

"Good. But hey— tomorrow, me 'n' Yash were maybe gonna do an escape room. You in?"

"Um..." I swallow. "I wish I could, but I— have plans. Some people asked me to... sorry."

"Nah, it's all good. See you at school, then, hey?"

"Yeah yeah, see you at school. Monday. Thanks for checking."

"No worries." He hangs up.

Sometimes, I wonder why they still make the effort.

Next station: three years old.

Nobody's gotten off at this station in a long, long time.

I'm standing on a hot dirt path. The dirt is red. The sky is blue. It smells of farm animals.

"Bye," my sister says. She holds my hand for a second, then lets it go.

"Bye," I say, standing next to my mother.

Two giants come forward. They take my sister away. Not unkindly, but – they take her away.

I wait there under the burning sun.

"We'll be okay," my mother says.

I nod.

My sister turns, and waves, and a sullen instinct in my heart makes me look away. After all, I'm three. I just want to go home. The two giants exchange words, then disappear.

So do I.

Next station: end of the line.

I'm floating in the dark.

Floating, in intergalactic space.

I'm the only person who'll ever exist in this soulless void. One day, the universe will end, and the void will expand and grow colder and less alive, until 'existence' is a soup of dormant atoms too distant from one another to ever interact. To be connected to another conscious mind – even for the most fleeting of moments – is impossible here.

In one sense, it's kind of sad.

But I'll be okay. Relatively.

Even so, I can't help a nagging sense that perhaps, sort of, it might be nice to have that option of connection— for variety's sake.

I say I don't like people much, but that's not true. Really, I don't like that I can't *handle* people. I hate feeling as if I skipped the 'how do people work???' class every other human passed when they were five.

I say I like being alone but that's not strictly true, either, because I don't want to build spaceships only I can fly. Being alone *alone* is less fun than being alone together.

Am I hypocritical? Selfish? Maybe, maybe not. Humans aren't consistent. We're not computers. We're our own worst enemies. I just find people... hard.

Wish I didn't.

I'll have to be okay with that, because I think it's time I doubled back.

This tether must be leading me to Finn. It's the only way this makes sense.

...unless it's a trick?

Nah, don't think like that.

The tether bends the seas around it, forcing a semblance of order upon them. Words coalesce into sentences, into paragraphs, into pages. If I concentrate hard, I can read them. If there are pages, I can *turn* them. Physics thinks I shouldn't be doing that, but I'll risk some cosmic irritation if it keeps my head above the water.

A headlong rush, towards the stars, my destination.

"I've had time," Haru says, "to plan how to end things."

"You're particularly dramatic today," Maritime mutters.

"I mean 'end' in the most practical sense. The portal emitters, for instance... the signal probes..." She glances at the scorched edges of the pit. "They bounce energy off whatever's in Illumination and read structure from the reflections. Quite a *lot* of energy."

"...Where are you going with this?"

"We could focus the beam," Farah murmurs. "Weaponise it. Point it at the Wraith and see what happens."

"If we're going down this road, let's kill something bigger," Maritime replies.

"Point it at the *portal* and see what happens." Farah frowns. "In theory, the design should allow it, right? Destructive interference?"

Haru nods. "The portal is simply a membrane, a wave, with a certain resonance. Project a wave with exact and opposite properties, and everything cancels. Portal loses coherence. Cosmic string separates. Dimensional tunnel collapses. Resonance cascade." She stares for a moment at the piles of crumpled bodies. "If Pendant were here, they'd have a better feel for it."

"It's possible, though," Farah says.

"Anything's possible if you throw enough energy at the problem – that, however, is the crux of it. We'd need an antimatter reactor. Or several."

Maritime points at the ceiling. “Those ships up there, who’ve been making themselves a nuisance... plenty of amdrive reactors to go round.”

“If only they were our ships, and our amdrives. If you can find one close enough to use” – she spreads her hands – “be my guest.”

“Um,” Farah says. “One of them is my ship. Well, mostly.”

“One’ is an order magnitude too small. As I said, we need several.”

“Um.” Farah winces.

“Ah, the ‘I’ve had a wonderful idea’ face,” Haru mutters. “Out with it.”

“We could get that order of magnitude,” she says uncertainly, “if we force to the amdrive to go critical. Bypass the limit switches, spike the energy output, a split second before—”

“—it ignites,” Maritime says.

“Yes.” Her wince deepens.

“That ship – YOUR ship – is our best way out of here, as I understand it,” Haru says. “Unless you’ve a wormhole in your pocket, Maritime.”

“I do not.”

“Which leaves us two... mediocre options?” Farah says. “Option A: the kids close the portal in the next half hour. We commandeer a drop pod to get back to the *Scaffold*, IF it’s intact, IF our shielding lasts till then, IF the enemy squads don’t catch us first, IF we aren’t shot down...” She stops counting catastrophes on her fingers. “Option B: the kids run into trouble, and we’re forced into ‘throw an anti-bomb at the portal’ contingency mode. Which sounds even less survivable, frankly.”

“Survivability is no longer our biggest concern,” Haru says.

“I know, I know, but surviving would be NICE, wouldn’t it?”

“I’m somewhat confident that if you do crash that ship into this station, we can direct the blast well enough to make it effective,” Haru says.

“You’re somewhat confident, are you?” Maritime asks.

“Experiments never work the first time – but we’ll try very hard, won’t we.”

Farah sighs. “I’ll need to ask permission,” she says eventually. “The crew needs to evacuate, first. And timing will be important.”

“Of the UTMOST importance,” Haru adds. “Down to the nanosecond.”

Farah closes her eyes, rubbing her temples. The fog pulses in slow, regular waves, interspersed with a lightning ballet. “I don’t know how I’m supposed to communicate this – our MeshLinks are barely functional.”

“Better start trying, then,” Maritime grunts. “I’d hate for some idiot to barge in and ruin this perfect plan we’ve made.” She gestures towards her remaining guards, setting up sentry drones around the barricaded entryway. “I’ll work on defence. Haru can work on attack. And you’ll—”

“I’ll make the call.” Farah stares at her feet, swallowing any emotion she might feel. The fog shivers, then settles. “T-minus sixty minutes.”

I turn the page.

Am I getting better at this? Sure, but each page is another lifetime to get lost in, another blast of light and dark that threatens to dissolve my subconscious. I don't know how anyone can STAND it, it's so vivid, so all-consuming, this sense of constantly being stretched past breaking point and having to scribble your own pages before they simply... run out.

The tether's getting older. I'm going from electronic bits 'n' bytes, to typewritten pages, to a quill and parchment covered in inkblots. The words whisper about portals.

They whisper about me.

"What was the inspiration for your book?"

The interviewer waits expectantly for an answer. She leans forwards, angling her body towards me.

"Sorry. What?"

"Your story ties together many disparate elements," the interviewer prompts. "Were there specific themes you wanted to tackle, based upon your experiences? Why tell this particular story?"

"Oh! Okay. Thanks for the question." I chuckle awkwardly, glancing around. We're sitting on stools in the corner of a library, an orderly mess of workstations and outdated physical collections. A small audience of schoolkids is gathered before us, supervised by a couple of teachers who look like the more interested party.

Say something, Alex. Say something! "As authors, we draw a lot from our past and present. That's what writing is – you take what you've experienced, throw it in a blender, and see how it reflects on yourself or the world around you. The ideas you can create from those ingredients are..." I swallow. "Um, for example..." My eyes flick left, right, looking for something I can use. Beside me, a holoprojector throws up an image of a book cover. '*A Sky of Starlight*' is its title. An abstract ship cuts across a purple background dotted with pale yellow stars.

'Alex Hawthorne', it says along the bottom.

"We could always start from the beginning," the interviewer says.

"Yes! Let's." Another awkward chuckle. I can't bring myself to focus on her face, and the audience is also faces, so I end up staring at a patch of grey carpet.

"You've led a fortunate life up to this point, wouldn't you agree? Your parents are well-off. You never had any serious medical or psychological issues, or social conflicts at school. You grew up comfortably, in a first-world country, as protected as one can reasonably be from the consequences of war and environmental collapse. You're loved by your family. Respected by your peers."

"I'm not sure I'd summarise it exactly like THAT—"

"What makes you interesting? What makes your stories worthwhile? Why should these readers" – she gestures at the audience – "pay attention?"

"Because books are fun?" I swallow. "I'm not trying to change the world."

The walls are closing in. I can't really breathe.

“What have you accomplished?”

“Not a whole lot, but I’m also sixteen.”

“Then what gives you the belief you can accomplish ANYTHING?”

“Uh— hope? Like most people? Some of us make small impacts, some make big impacts, but *trying* is what ultimately matters to people around you.”

“You don’t believe that, though.” The interviewer leans back, legs crossed.

Bad liar. “I guess not.”

“You’re afraid to admit to any desire at all, because if you don’t *admit* it, you don’t have to try.”

“That’s a little harsh—”

“You really aren’t setting a very good example.”

The students are taking notes. They’re watching me squirm.

“Let’s change tack,” the interviewer says. “Have you considered what your parents sacrificed to adopt you? Do you wonder if they ever regret it?”

“I didn’t know I was adopted, so no, I don’t wonder.” Can I just leave? I kind of want to leave. “Ask me about the book.”

“Oh, Alex, as if you’d ever get that far. Have you wondered WHY your parents never told you?”

“No. Ask about the book.”

“If they loved you, why did your dad think of killing himself?”

My eyes unfocus, slightly. “Because he was depressed,” I say quietly. “It was nobody’s fault.”

“And are you depressed?”

“No.”

“Really?”

“I *like* my life!”

“Then why are you SAD?” the interviewer asks. “Why do you RUN? Why does your future feel like such an inevitable suffocation?”

I’m lost for words. The room falls silent. I try desperately to hide my blushing cheeks, my shaking fingers. ‘*Calm your farm*’. Never works, though. For a moment, anger feels like the right way out, and I look up at her, ready to snap—

The person sitting across from me is me.

“There’s no reason for it, is there?” she murmurs. “Feeling the way you do.” I shake my head.

“Your life is easy. You have every advantage. You have *everything you need*.” The walls swim, reflecting the Wraith, and its nations. “It’s pathetic.”

“Yes. It’s pathetic,” I say listlessly.

“You’re nothing. And you’ll never know what could’ve been, because you’ll never stop running from ghosts that *never existed*.” She takes a step towards me, and so does the audience, and the library fades until I’m floating in a sea of darkness – a lobster that realises it’s being boiled, too late. She reaches out, trying to take the tethers bound to the depths of my soul.

They spasm, and curl, passing through her fingers. “Why can’t I— *oh*.” Shadow-Alex gives me a quizzical look. Then she smiles. “Oh.”

I don't wait to hear what she means.

I run.

Without gravity and friction to weigh me down, I'm *fast*. I'm a bullet. I'm super-relativistic. The pages turn, and turn, and turn, and—

I stumble into Finn's arms.

He catches me, and we fall together onto the floor of a train carriage.

That floor is everything I need. I lie there, breathing heavily, staring for too long at the backs of my hands, and the callouses on my fingers. They're MY hands. Mine. Not Sinas', or Wake's—

—who are here already, it turns out, with Finn.

"This place one of yours?" I ask him.

He nods.

Outside the windows are patterns of light and dark, insanity inducing, a spiral sky I can't stare at too long. The tether in my chest stretches down the carriage, disappearing through the door at the far end. I'm half-convinced this'll turn out to be another of Illumination's tricks, but it feels... safe. Or *safer*.

"How long have you guys been here?" My voice sounds like part of it's been stolen. "You know what? Doesn't matter. How much farther to the portal?"

"Look out the window," Sinas says.

I peer ahead, towards the train's destination.

It's spirals, all the way down. Spirals of light, spirals of dark, intertwined, pressed together without space between, each the body of a sky-spanning serpent, slithering around its neighbours. Within each spiral lies dozens of smaller spirals, smaller, smaller, until the fractal noise makes my eyes tear up. It's hard to distinguish the scale of anything, but if I take a step back, and don't focus too hard, the spirals form the shape of an inverted pyramid. It's imperfect – as if giant hands are pouring the snakes into that shape, while the snakes, bless their hearts, have minds of their own – but the pyramid itself is immense. It flexes as currents of energy race around it. Towards its tip, the spirals grow finer, more monotonous, flowing towards a single, locked reference point that doesn't move: a dark heart, at the centre of everything.

"That's the portal, then," I say.

"Yup," Sinas replies. "Can you feel it?"

What interests me is those hands, giving the pyramid its structure. They feel like MY hands, an extension of the singular tether that even now, shines brightly in my chest. That tether, and its offshoots, are mixed with Wake's, and Sinas', and Finn's. Together, they form the tracks for this train.

Together, they're also knotted around the pyramid. They dip in and out of the spiralling chaos, preventing it from tearing itself to pieces. Illumination's horror weighs heavy on my soul and the tethers burn in answer, fierce and eternal.

"We're the ones keeping it together," I murmur. "Our tethers are the stitches. The roots."

“Yeah,” Finn replies. “I think that’s what the Wraith figured out.”

The train slows. We’re arriving.

“I’ve been thinking about what the tethers actually mean,” he continues. “Because they’re connections to people, in this place. People who lived, people who died... Those connections are what the Illumination Project needed. The strongest ones, those tied to the gate, are what ultimately led us here. They’re strong enough to keep us alive. Strong enough pin the most energetic wormhole in the universe to the Wraith’s bedroom door.”

“That’s why it wants us?” Wake asks. “To keep the portal open? Forever?”

Finn stares at the singularity. “The trouble is, we’re only one end of the string. It’s already trapped the other.”

“You think it’s imprisoned my brother,” Sinas says. “Inside the pyramid.”

“And my grandparents,” Wake says. “Dick move.”

I sigh. “At the end of this rope, we’ll find our dead dad. Is that it?”

“Yes,” Finn says.

“And to destabilise the portal, we’ll have to cut the rope.”

“Yes.”

“Which means... what, exactly?”

Finn shrugs. “You’ve felt how hard it is to navigate here, without tethers. If we didn’t have them anymore— well, we might not even survive Illumination. And if we *did*, good luck finding the person who was on the other end.” He avoids looking at Wake and Sinas as he says this. “We shouldn’t hang around too long.”

The carriage doors open to reveal a vast expanse of SPIIIIRRAAALL. The pyramid towers over us, around us, self-preservation urging me to get right back on the train before it falls. The tethers pulse, more, closer, *more, closer*, a guide-star of old grief and older love.

The snakes writhe. They want to be free, I think. As for Wake, or Sinas, or Finn, I’m less sure; when you’re face-to-face with the promise that brought you to the space between universes, what then?

I step off the train. As my foot descends towards ground that isn’t there—

I’m in a chair, in the unassuming conference room on the *Paradise Scaffold* where Finn told us the truth. Finn’s next to me. Farah sits across from us.

“I’d like to tell you something,” Farah says. “It won’t take long.” She shrinks slightly, a sudden seriousness to her expression. Her hands nurse a Coffee² bulb, steam rising towards downturned cheeks. “You can decide if it matters.”

There’s a tightness in my chest.

It’s been a long day, for all of us. A long sixteen years.

“As you know,” she begins, “your father was a man named Javier Oliveira. You were born in a hospital in Tunis, in 2076. That much is true.”

“Is it?” Instinct turns me combative.

“However,” she says, “Haru Hanamura is not your mother.” She looks up, steadily, at the pair of us.

I wait for her to say something more – a name.

But perhaps she doesn't need to. She just stares, friendly, exhausted, more uncertain than ever, willing us to take one final leap.

She opens her mouth. "I—"

"No," I reply. "You can't be serious."

"I'm serious."

"This is a trick."

"It's not a trick."

The floor feels terrifyingly solid.

I laugh. "Ha!"

"I know it's a lot to take in."

"Hahahaha! Nah, I'm *fine*. I already dealt with this ordeal once this week."

"I'm sorry for not telling you straightaway. I'm sorry for everything—"

"Sorry for *what*? What's wrong with doing the same twist twice? It's double the value! Bargain!" I can't stop cackling, and it's very inappropriate, but it's the only way I'll avoid a full breakdown. My head hurts. Farah's starting to look properly concerned.

Finn's reaction is more restrained. "Why?" he asks, in a strangled tone.

"Because I made a mistake – one your father died for. I had to give you up."

"Care to be a SMIDGE more specific?" I ask. "Or explain why Haru told us she's our real mum? Repeatedly?"

"It was a messy situation," Farah says. "She wasn't in her right mind—"

"Okay, but for *sixteen years*?" Now the self-pity's creeping in, which starts to piss me off. "Weird shit happened to us, I'll accept that, but what's the bloody goal of this bloody charade? I was happy, leaving this all in the past, and from what I gather Finn was at least *not sad*, but now I'm supposed to accept YOU'RE the original problem? How do YOU feel about this, Finn? Are you sad *now*?"

"...Ask me in a week," he mumbles.

My fingers grasp at nothing. "WHY did any of this happen?!"

"You've a right to be angry," Farah says. "Of course it's your right. But before I start, none of this is your adopted family's fault—"

"Obviously."

"It's my fault. It happened because we – your father and I – had to hide what we'd done. We had to hide it from you, and the world, and history. You were the first, Alex." She stares at me. (Folks have been doing a lot of that recently, and I swear I'm about to flip this fucking table.)

"The first WHAT?"

"The first to come back." She sips her Coffee², then shakes her head. "You aren't supposed to be here. Although, from another point of view?" She gestures at the walls, *beyond* the walls, at the shifting contours of Illumination outside. "The better way to put it is you weren't supposed to leave."

My foot lands. The vision dissolves.

I'm losing myself, in the portal's inexorable flow. It distorts everything around it. I'm seaweed carried on a stormy sea. I'm driftwood on a foreign, white-hot shore. I'm one more fish, reeled in for the slaughter.

'Nation' isn't the right word – not quite – but I get it. Amidst the light, and the turmoil, there exists order, boundaries, *rules*. Illumination's a prison, with little cells, big guards, endless routines, and psychologically aggressive architecture with an aversion to colour. I'm not sure if that realistically resembles a 'social or political organization whereupon collective identity has emerged from shared features', but perhaps the moniker 'Illumiverse' was a bridge too far.

Words chase me.

They're tense. Soft. Sad.

"Alex?" Finn asks.

"...Yeah?"

"Thought I'd lost you for a second."

"Ha, nearly. I'm being stretched kinda thin here." It's hard to tell if we've entered the pyramid yet, as the fractal keeps on fractalling. With every step, the tethers are harder to ignore. "Did you see that dream back there? With Farah?"

"Bits and pieces."

"It was one really important piece, Finn."

"We don't— there isn't time to talk about that."

"Suit yourself."

It feels like the others, next to me, are having an easier time. They aren't slipping away. *I* am. Even with the tether, my candle's running down.

I thought Illumination would be more *dead*: a realm of past glories, faded echoes, plus a sprinkling of eternal torture. Hades, Hell, Valhalla, and the rest? They tend to be quite static places. Illumination, on the other hand, wants to grow. To change. That impulse is everywhere in its intertwining sentences, struggling to string themselves together, into— what?

As for me, I want to do more than turn pages. I need to write my own stories, like Finn's being doing here. I want my house, and my parents, and my dog, and the farm. I want them to appear out of the light. I want to feel the grass between my toes. I want to write about them, to find the words, which are HERE, on the tip of my tongue, but ghosts can't speak. Being a ghost shouldn't be this painful.

"This is it," Finn says, from a long way away. "It's the edge of... whatever's holding the portal together."

"A barrier?" Sinas asks.

"Something like that."

Right. Tethers. Portal. Places to be.

"Why are we waiting?" Wake asks. "This is what we came for. Isn't it?" She can't tear her eyes away from the lightshow. Finn, for his part, would rather not look.

For all this talk of hurrying, nobody wants to take the first step.

So I do.

ALEX XVIII

My feet touch down on red dirt.

I crouch, gathering a handful. I let it run through my fingers. The finest grains stick to my skin, while the rest falls, forming new anthills, new ant-valleys. The ants don't mind my sudden landscaping; they simply scurry back and forth, burdened with purpose.

I could stare at them for hours.

Hours we don't have. I wipe my hands on my shirt, then adjust my hat for the sun (steps in a ritual I've always known) sweat already gathering between my shoulder blades. Bastard flies swarm incessantly around my ears, *bzz, bzz, bzzz*. I never thought I'd be glad to see flies, but here we are – it delights me to see Sinas recoil as a plump one dive-bombs his ear. "Aarrgh!"

"Just let 'em land on you," I say. "They'll lose interest."

He doesn't listen.

We're situated at a messy junction between several dirt tracks. Eucalyptus trees pepper the horizon, sky so blue you can barely see the dome. A few brave magpies perch on sagging wire fences. Behind me, I know I'll see Tomato Tower. To the left, the reservoir. The right, Broccoli Bounty. Ahead lies the farmhouse.

It's perfect, but—the shade of the trees, the sharp edges of the fenceposts, the layers of the sky... they're cracked like my hands after too much work, and through them, Illumination bleeds.

For now, though, I've got my dirt. The sun's hot. The flies are bastards.

The dirt track turns into gravel, then to dusty brickwork driveway. AutoDrone rails sparkle between the trees, one of which holds a treehouse I used to spend too much time in. It's quiet, as we walk. I hear cicadas, flies, the barest breath of wind, but it's hushed, like a museum, the world holding its breath.

Not far, my tether whispers.

I close my eyes, counting steps. When I re-open them, the house is there. It sits upon a slight rise, a single storey, bordered by veranda on all sides. Sloped tin roofing curves gently at each corner. The walls are pale yellow brick, and the wooden front door is wobbly on its hinges. Rusty vintage farm equipment lazes

under windowsills, half-decoration, half ‘forgot-to-throw-that-out’. Spiderwebs – too many – nestle in their crevices. It’s about time for my dog to come racing around the corner to greet me, full pelt, kicking up dust as he tries to stop.

Instead, Wake’s the runner. She breaks away, sprinting towards the house.
“Grandma! Grandpa!”

Her calls float through open windows. Sinas watches her, a coiled spring, but doesn’t let his anticipation break him, not yet. Each step I take is easy, hard, natural, unnatural, my expectations building even as I grow afraid of them.

I’m only curious, I tell myself: about my father, and this place, and whether this is worth it. The others will be feeling more.

I reach the door, and usher Finn and Sinas inside. The tether calms as I cross the threshold, finally belaying me some slack. *Stay*, it whispers. *Stay*.

The entrance hallway is always too dim after time outside in the sun. There’s a shelf, bearing a collection of old books and slightly less-old holographs, and a cold slate floor that’s a shock to bare feet. I close the door, carefully, before its spring makes it slam. The hallway makes an L-shape to the right. To the left is the living room.

Somewhere, in here, is where the tethers end.

“You wanna look around?” I ask Sinas.

He swallows. “Why not?”

“Don’t sound TOO excited, jeez.”

He trots around the corner, chasing Wake’s footsteps.

Finn peers at the holos on the shelf. “Did you do this?” he asks.

“You mean, ‘did I make the portal look like this’?”

“Yeah.”

“Mate, I’ve got no clue. The situation’s munted. All I know is there are people here we’re supposed to locate.”

“Should we... go look, too?” He gives me a glance.

My bedroom’s just down the hall. I kind of wanna go there first, to see if it looks the same, and make sure there isn’t another *me* here, napping in my bed. I force myself to relax my fingers, before they form a fist.

Suddenly Wake re-emerges, frazzled and breathless. “Alex, help! My grandparents aren’t here. I can’t find anyone – nice house, by the way.”

“She’s right,” Sinas says, ambling round the corner, but a nervous amble.
“Nobody’s home.”

“They’re *here*, though... I can feel it, I swear.”

What can I feel?

A tangle of vines. Tiny clusters of roots where we walk. Thicker stems wound around the walls and ceilings, forming branches and pillars, holding the house together in a tight, squirming grip. Pulses of energy zip back and forth, an ecosystem on the brink of collapse.

I feel my body, on Thebe, crumpled awkwardly over the gate. I feel the portal *shift*. It ping-pongs, from Mars to Jupiter to Earth to interstellar space, and Thebe is briefly the moon of a dozen different planets, until it re-settles to its natural

order. It's as if Illumination is a set of dice in our hands, and every damned soul wants a different number as they shake it.

Amid this chaos, however, certain phrases stay put: anchor points, or Rosetta stones, etched in the fabric of reality. I lead the others down the hallway to the right, past the laundry, past bedrooms, to a flyscreen door at the far end.

"Marko's here, Sinas," I say.

"Marko's *here*?"

"Yes."

"...Here?"

"Yes! In the garage." I leave the '*you should have more faith in me*' unsaid.

I watch Sinas try to make sense of this – to *believe* it, and let himself take that last step. He hesitates, hand on the doorknob, a million possibilities about to collapse into one. For each possibility there's a corresponding Sinas, each tremor on his face, in his fingers, each breaking the surface before going back under. Any one of them could open the door and be the first to greet his brother.

"Big moment," I say, unnecessarily.

"Yeah," he says. "I wish it wasn't."

He walks through.

I lose him, in the gloom. My eyes instead find familiar silhouettes: shelves, toolboxes, our one 'non-farm' car for appearing presentable when going places, Dad's kayak hanging from the ceiling. Amid this familiarity is one unfamiliar person, resting, sitting against the car's bonnet, as if clinging to the engine's dying warmth.

I feel along the wall for where I know the light switch to be.

Click! The brightness is startling.

A boy looks up at us.

He scrambles backwards, a blur of limbs, until he reaches the back corner and can't go further. It's odd, because I was expecting Marko to be a bigger version of Sinas... but these days, I guess Sinas has an extra year or two on him. I need to recalibrate that, in my head, and think about why. Hard to say what's happened to him, during his time here, but he hugs his knees to his chest, mouth clamped shut. I try to imagine him the way Sinas talks about him, so much larger than life, and... I can't. He's just scrawny, and dazed, with eyes of glass. A panicked animal.

Instead, I look at Sinas' back, and wonder what's going through his mind.

Then Sinas rushes forwards, scattering every piece of restraint across the surface of my dream. He pins his brother to the wall in a hug, arms round his shoulders, head down, kneeling also. "You're here," he says. "You're really *here*." Each syllable sounds so full of life and I tell myself there's still something there, inside, for Sinas to hold onto.

For a while, Marko doesn't move.

Then, slowly, he leans into Sinas' shoulder, and allows himself to be comforted.

“You’re here,” Sinas says again, softly. “I’m so happy.” His fingers turn white with their never-letting-go.

I let out the breath I’ve been holding.

Do I let myself smile?

Sinas does. I’m not sure how this will end, but I’m happy – *stoked* – Sinas, at least, has reached the end of this line. The tether coils around them both.

“We should probably leave them alone,” Finn murmurs.

“How ‘bout we meet at the dining table? In a few minutes,” I suggest.

I don’t know if Sinas hears me. We leave them be.

Out in the hallway, I squeeze Wake’s shoulder. “You wanna go next?”

“Yes.” I hear her snuffle. “Please.”

Her anchor leads us outside.

The backyard is a diorama of neat green grass and flurries of red banksias. A Hills hoist perches in the middle, another of my dad’s concessions to the old ways. Between the flies buzzing, there’s another, louder sound: fists, pounding on metal.

It’s coming from the shed. I say ‘the’ shed but there are of course many sheds; this one’s the garden shed, which isn’t used much, but does contain tools and materials for tasks my parents won’t trust the bots for. (Mum’s especially touchy about the roses, after a bot pruned them too harshly once.

Whoever’s in there is **PISSED**.)

I flip up the latch.

A girl barges out.

A girl!

The door bangs into me and I stagger backwards. She collides with Wake, bowling her clean over. I’m upright, barely, and I reach out and catch the intruder’s arm. Pretty sure I don’t recognise her, but Wake’s tether is as mad as a cut snake. The girl’s wearing a school uniform, a knee-length navy skirt and white button-up shirt.

“No,” Wake breathes. She looks at the girl, then into the darkness of the shed. “It can’t be you...”

I grunt as the new arrival elbows me in the stomach. “Wake, please tell me who—”

“No! This is wrong!” Wake gets up. “Where are my GRANDPARENTS?!”

“Calm down,” I say, almost spitting into new-girl’s ear. She doesn’t listen. (However determined she might be, though, she hasn’t spent five years tackling youths on the local AFL team. I’m not letting go.)

Wake looks up, down, left, right – anywhere except at the girl I’m holding. “Don’t you dare leave,” I bark. “This is YOUR tether!”

“This isn’t what it’s meant to be! It’s not what I... wanted...” She trails off.

“Then please tell me you know who this is.”

She glances at her hands, stained green. She looks *betrayed*. “I thought this was about love.”

“That’s not an answer—”

“I know it’s not an ANSWER!” She nearly falls to her knees right there. “I thought this was about love, not... guilt! I think about them every day, Alex! I think about my grandparents *every day*.” Finally, she turns to the intruder. “When do I ever think about you?”

No reply, of course – just a cornered snarl.

Soon, though, I feel her calming in my grip, as Wake calms, too. Her look softens, as she considers the other end of her tether.

She wipes her eyes. Neatens her hair. Directs one last glance to the empty shed. “OK,” Wake says. “Truce.”

The girl nods.

I let her go, cautiously.

“Will you be okay?” I ask.

She nods. “I’ll be OK.”

We leave them be.

Three anchors remain: my tether, Finn’s, and a third party, not connected to either of us. I’m not sure *whose* it is, exactly, so I check it out first.

It ends in the living room. One side is windows, looking out onto the deck. The far end holds a climate control unit, encircled by a couple of armchairs (the holoprojector can fake a decent fireplace from it). The polymer floor is shiny, smooth, in a way that makes it fun to slide across it in your socks.

One armchair supports a sleeping figure. Their clothes and skin are coated in grey wax, which has partly melted into the chair and floor, forming an incomplete sculptor’s tableau. Beneath, the figure is slightly misshapen, with mounds and divots where you’d expect smooth skin, and in a few spots the wax has dried and crumbled, forming fist-sized clusters of spikes (a bit like flakes of iron, sticking stubbornly to a magnet).

Even if the grey plague can’t hurt me here, it’s hard to ignore the instincts drilled into me by endless public safety campaigns. Instead of immediately decontaminating myself, I step closer – I want to get a good look at her face.

It’s hard to tell *what* this person looked like, but I get impressions of ‘athletic’ and ‘flat chest’ and ‘big ears’ (no judgement).

Then she opens one eye.

“Aaaeughh!” approximates the sound I make.

She turns her head towards me and the wax cracks and warps, and I nearly pick up a coffee mug and throw it at her. Instead, though, something makes me pause: hints of a blue and yellow AFL jersey, beneath the flakes.

“You’re Tao’s sister,” I say.

Maybe she nods imperceptibly. Maybe I just want her to.

“Do you know where he is? Is he close?”

Her fingers curl, slightly. The dust trembles as she tries to raise her arm.

Suppressing my inner ‘stay away’ voice, I take her hand. I’m sure she was loved; she doesn’t deserve to be imprisoned like this. It pisses me off, a little.

“We’re gonna solve this mess,” I say. “I’ll be back soon. I promise.”

Her one eye blinks.

We leave her be.

The next tether belongs to me. I open the door to the veranda, and the house shakes, and the sky whimpers, and instead of lightning, there's a planet – black, featureless, perfectly in shadow – hanging in the sky. It's quite big (worryingly big). It looks like it doesn't belong in this light.

Let's file that under 'someone else's problem' for now.

The veranda overlooks a scrappy paddock where we used to keep a horse, once upon a time (food production laws put an end to old Brian). A hundred metres further lie parallel lines of fruit trees. A couple of birdfeeders hang from the eaves, as a gesture to a future where there might be more birds. There's also a deckchair, for contemplating the vagaries of existence, as the day cools.

This is where dads sit, according to my subconscious.

And someone IS sitting here, sort of. They're a Bokeh blur, hard to pin down. It reminds of the Wraith, lurking on the other side of the mirror-membrane, and Finn has the same thought

"Are you still doing the mirror trick?" I ask.

"Yeah. It might be hiding us from him." He points at the chair-sitter. "Our dad was part of the Wraith, for a long time. He might still be part of it."

"So, it found our dad, back in the day, and trapped him, and has been using him to find us ever since?"

"It's a theory."

"And if we talk to him now, we're signalling to the Wraith we're exactly where it wants us." I close my eyes. "Fine, you've got my permission."

The dream shifts a millimetre to the left.

The figure solidifies. It – *he* – gains heft, watching for birds, in the trees. The chair creaks. Then he notices us, turns his head, and—

Seeing his face is like a slap to my own. The simple act of so many details being filled in, at once... it makes me take a step back.

"Alex! Finn!" he says. There's surprise there, but also warmth, sparkling. "I can't believe it! I never thought—I mean, I'd hoped, but I never dared to—wow!" He laughs a little. "You're both so, so..."

We answer at the same time.

"Big?"

"Different?"

"...complicated," he says, looking us up and down. "You know who I am?"

"Yes," Finn says. "We do."

He swings his legs out of the chair and stands, and I'm aware I don't appear *happy*, as such. "I already have a dad," I say, "so this is weird for me. Sorry."

"Don't be," he replies. "It's allowed to be complicated."

Finn's a bag of bones and maths equations who doesn't altogether suit direct sunlight, whereas I'm a more well-built catastrophe who can't bear being stuck indoors for an hour... but this man mixes *both* those vibes. His shoulders are broad, but his fingers are delicate. He has our dark eyes, and darker hair, but is taller than both of us (Finn might end up taller, given time). I can imagine him

going on bushwalks, or climbing mountains, and then spending late nights in the lab with my mother. None of these are contradictions, of course – they’re my brain trying to extrapolate something out of nothing. Still, there’s an odd rush of emotion in me as he smiles, the creases dancing around the corners of his eyes. He smiles more than we do, I reckon. It comes easy to him.

“The most important thing,” he says, “is you’re alive. Which you are – aren’t you?”

“For now,” I say.

“Then, why are you...”

We answer at the same time.

“Dead?”

“Here?”

“Dropping in to visit me on a lovely Sunday afternoon.” He looks around. “This *feels* like a Sunday, doesn’t it? I think so.”

“You know that *you’re* dead, though,” I say cautiously.

“I do – for all the time I’ve spent here, I’ve remained relatively intact. Many others are less... lucky, shall we say.”

“I see.” I look down at my shoes. “There are a few things we have to say, so... do you mind if we just say them? You probably want to talk more, and I do too, but— time. There’s not much of it left.”

“It’s fine. Give me the elevator pitch. Details can come later, if we need them.”

I shoo the flies away, for a few seconds of respite. “There’s a reason we’re here,” I begin. “There’s *something* about being a teenager with a dead dad, or dead brother, or dead best friend that’s... useful, for surviving Illumination. I don’t know why. It makes US useful, though, to the Illumination project, or anyone with a vested interest in figuring out what’s up with the afterlife. That’s fine, I guess, but – what if, hypothetically, you’re a ghost who doesn’t want to BE a ghost, and you want to escape this place at any cost? Maybe you need a huge amount of energy for that. Maybe the most optimal source is us, and our special ‘connections’, that none of us really asked for. It makes us lab rats, trapped between two sides – one who wants to send us here, and one who wants to keep us here – without us knowing ANY of this, until two weeks ago.”

“At this moment, though – you’re here of your own free will?” our dad asks. (Javier, his name is. Javier, Javier, Javier.)

“Yes...”

“Then I assume you’re here to accomplish something? As much as I’d like to think you’re saying hello, I’ve an inkling it’s more likely you’re saying goodbye.”

“If the Wraith traps us here, it can overpower the barrier, between the physical universe and Illumination,” Finn says. “And then...”

“...Then the solar system will be the climax of a horror movie. On loop.” I shrug. “The souls here might be suffering, but if they’re ALL let out, it’s bad.”

My father grimaces. “I know exactly how bad it can be.” His eyes roam to the horizon. Then, he reaches towards my chest and – lightly – touches my heart.

There's a jolt of static. The tether between us shines, as bright as, gravid with brave new worlds as it sways from his outstretched arm. "You want to let this go," he says softly.

"I don't *want* to," I reply.

His finger presses against me, slightly harder, before he lets it fall. "It wasn't hard to figure out why the Wraith let me catch a few glimpses of you. In this place where nothing makes sense, *that* did." A flicker of fear, unexpected. "Once, it might've been just another pained soul holding on for too long, but now... it's twisted. There's not much time." He leans on the back of the chair with both hands. "Not much time, and yet so much to say. I accept this. I've told myself, in every lucent moment, that I accept it. I've told myself simply seeing you, and saying these words, would be *enough*."

"Doesn't make it fair," I say, around the lump in my throat.

"Nevertheless, I made a trade – and that trade, in all, has been fairer than I expected." He smiles. "Let me indulge in one story. You don't have to sit down."

I fold my arms, as Illumination vibrates, a dream in a hurricane.

"When you were born, in the hospital, in Tunisia, there were dust storms that buried entire streets. Many cities couldn't afford permanent domes, so they relied on electrostatic shielding, but when a storm lasted too long, there wasn't enough money to buy power from the corps. I remember the windows, growing darker and darker, the screams of the wind... it made me wonder what kind of world I was bringing two children into. Your mother was resolute, though – always. That's what drew me to her, when we..." He catches himself. "A different story, for another time. We watched the clinical bots print your MeshMate circuits, and I asked her how she thought this would go. In twenty years, where would we be?" His hands twitch. "She said that was the point – that our duty was to carve out a place in this uncertainty for ourselves, and to share it, with you. Later, you'd share that with your own children. Your mother had always visualised that path, in her mathematics, and she wanted me to see it, too, in our work on Illumination. It's still there, within her. It's there within you." He breathes out, slowly, exerting control through that single action. "And now, my desires are selfish. I want you to tell me a hundred stories. I want to tell you about your mother, and moving to Australia, and... I can't. Because there isn't time."

"There's some," I say, for a chance to work out my place in all this.

"There's also one more tether," Finn says, tapping me on the shoulder.

"I'm sorry?"

"Your tether's connected to Javier. Mine isn't. I don't know where it goes."

I close my eyes, and he's right: Finn's energy is wrapped up in the fabric of the house itself, a confusing criss-cross that – nonetheless – has purpose, like animal tracks around a billabong's shores.

"Go, then," Javier says. "I'll wait." He grasps our shoulders, one hand each, and brings us into his chest. The portal's roar is an oncoming train, deep within. "You used to be so small," he says softly.

We leave him be.

Solace, in the deck beneath my feet.

As we walk, I can feel Finn picking at his thread, untangling it from the memories it's snagged on. We circumnavigate the entire house, almost, wandering the garden, then back through the front door. He pauses briefly in the kitchen, staring at the fridge, then moves on.

"Something in there?" I ask. The fridge's screen reports its contents, along with mum's notes, for a day that never existed. "Do you want an egg? I can get you an egg."

He refuses my very generous offer. We loop back on ourselves several more times, the rope beneath our feet becoming less and less frayed.

Finally, Finn stops in front of my bedroom door.

"Can I?" he asks, hand on the knob.

I nod. He steps inside.

The curtains are drawn, allowing the barest sliver of light to fall across the carpet. The plants hanging above my bed are thriving. Knick-knacks and set dressing are scattered across my desk. Everything looks *half*-neat, as if I've devoted two minutes to tidying up before a friend gets here. The vibe is a little like 'underwater reef' (which helps me concentrate whenever I want to write an especially excellent fanfic chapter).

The tether Finn followed pools in my hands, too. One thread leads back outside, to my father, but another leads *here*. (The call, as they say, is coming from inside the house.) I pull it towards me, hand over hand. Suddenly, I'm pulling myself towards... myself. It's the strangest sensation: my own hands are pulling on me body from *both* directions.

Now, I can see the tether clearly. It stretches between Finn's chest, and mine, our fingers so close they're almost touching.

It's a gnarled, twisted branch. A spaceport runway in the dark.

"The tethers," I say quietly. "They connect people who're alive to people who aren't."

Finn nods.

"So what the fuck is this?" I let it fall. Its familiar weight tugs at my soul.

"I don't know."

"I don't care. Tell me why it's here."

He steps towards me, handing me the slack. "Maybe, somewhere inside you, you remember." He looks around. "Or perhaps this place remembers."

I dig my fingers into the tether, as if I can squash and split it, like raw meat; as if could shove my skull between its threads and drink the blood that's leaking out. The portal wails, a superposition across time and space that – briefly – locks into place.

There's water everywhere.

I can swim, but... how well can any four-year-old swim?

I'm trying so hard.
'Mum', drawn in tiny bubbles.

The gate is a stained-glass window of foaming colour. It thrashes again its bonds as I stand before it, dwarfed by impossible promise. It steals the heat from my face, freezing the sweat on my nose. It's so bright the rest of the room is invisible, a grey void extending to my rear.

In the void, my mum works the controls. I've never seen these emotions, so intense on her face: desperation, panic, anguish, focus. They flood the room. I'm too young to understand them.

I'm confused. I don't know what I should feel.

Am I *supposed* to be sad? Something to do with the small, unmoving body propped up against the wall. I say 'small'; it's the same size as me.

It's my sister. Something happened to her, but my parents won't tell me what. I just know something's wrong, in how her face is blank, how my dad carried her here in his arms, how my parents have been possessed by imposters who don't have time to explain. I want to run to her, to wake her up, but I also don't want to let go of my father's right arm.

"Javier," my mum says. "It's ready."

He steps into the window.

He doesn't look back.

His left hand is devoured by the aurora, then legs, the body – even his shadow can't go free. For a moment, his silhouette stays imprinted on my retinas. Then I blink, and it's gone. I try to hold onto in my head, like I'm holding onto his other hand – the only part of him left, emerging from the gate's roiling surface. I grasp it SO tight with tiny fingers, feet planted, the best anchor in the world. I can feel the roughness of his skin, the strength in his grip.

The hand gives me a short, sharp squeeze.

Then it works itself free, and lets me go.

I stumble a half-step back, staring into the gatelight.

It's like he was never there.

I turn, searching for my sister instead. Her cheeks are blue, as she lies there silent. It's like I could walk to her and wake her up, except her eyes are permanently open. My mum doesn't look desperate anymore. She's *determined*, staring the portal down, daring it to disobey her.

And my dad—

A beast reaches from the light, and takes my hand.

It's not my dad, though. This hand isn't big. It isn't holding the world in it.

This hand is *small*, and uncertain, and feels like ice.

It's my sister's hand.

I stare at it. It emerges from the aurora, like a promise.

My brother glances over his shoulder, at an empty corner. I don't know where I am or what's happened to me, except that I'm freezing, and burning, and dissolving, and solidifying, and the only thing sticking me to truespace is his hand, which I'm holding onto.

I hold on TIGHT.

I was somewhere else, and then... what? Who? How? Why?

I feel sharp push at my back and stumble forwards, with just enough force to break through the gate's surface tension. My mouth's free. I take a dry, coppery breath. There's illumination everywhere, trying to drag me back under, but the exchange has already been made.

"Help me!" I shout. "Help me!"

My brother gapes, but his hand never wavers.

Slowly, confusion turns into acceptance.

He drags me out, and together, we fall into Mum's arms.

I sit on my bed, in my bedroom, which feels so oddly real.

"Am I dead?" I ask, glancing up at my brother.

"I think," he says slowly, "that's a complicated question."

"Don't look at me like that."

"Like what?"

"Like I'm not a *person*."

He looks away, but the question doesn't leave his eyes. I want to reach out, touch his shoulder, and say '*here I am, I'm real, I always have been*.' Instead, I put my head in my hands. I wish I could say I feel different, but—I don't.

I don't want to move from this spot.

I think of the life I've lived. Perhaps it wasn't mine.

I genuinely did die, I think; I was a corpse, cactus, fully carked it. My parents, with their access to Illumination, made one desperate gamble. They opened a door to bring me back, and to their credit, they succeeded: a life, for a life.

Did Javier know exactly what would happen? How could he? But he went in, and I came out, a dead girl walking, and perhaps that trade (or act of love, or violation of a sacred rule) left a tiny crack in Illumination's door where otherwise it would've remained locked tight; a crack a ghost could slip its fingers through.

"Did you watch *The First Law*?" I ask. "Or play it?"

"...Nope."

"It's a time loop story. There's a twist where, around fifty loops in, you find out one of the core characters has been dead the entire time."

"Ah. Like in *The Sixth Sense*?"

I grit my teeth. I clench my jaw. "I don't need a tragic backstory."

"I wouldn't necessarily call this a tragic—"

"I'm! Tired! Of! This! Shit! There's always one more *fucking* twist!" I throw myself backwards onto my pillow, kicking the wall. The ferns on the planters above me vibrate. "Maybe that's why I'm scared of everything – 'cause my entire

life was LITERALLY a fucking lie.” I can sense another me, sitting in the corner. She’s crying, for no real reason. Her lungs can’t draw breath, the void in her chest always one step ahead. My eyes trace familiar patterns on the ceiling, intersections of texture and shadow.

“How do you think I died?” I ask quietly.

“Are you sure you’d want to know?”

“Yeah.” I sit up. “I’ll ask Javier. Then we can get going with the portal.”

“Wait.” Finn blocks the doorway. “Think through this first. You understand what might happen, don’t you? If we snap the tethers.”

“Finn...”

A defiant stare. “Tell me you understand. And that you’re okay with it.”

I sigh. “Now?”

“It’s important!” It’s cute, how he thinks he could stop me from leaving. “*Tell me what you think is going to happen,*” he says.

“Fine! Fine. Let’s waste more time.” I roll my eyes, standing up. “Let’s say I’m dead – or alive AND dead. I’ve got a connection to our dad, and a connection to you.” Its raw power squirms in my hands, a river roaring at the bottom of a mineshaft. “Those connections were given to me, and they saved me, way back when... and now I’ve gotta return them, to Illumination if we’re going to save the world. I don’t know what’ll happen, Finn. I don’t. Maybe I’ll be alive at the end of all this. Maybe I’ll fade out, into nothing, and it’ll be as tragic as. If I’m lucky, I’ll get stuck in my own little afterlife.” I stare back at him. “Does that cover it?”

He shifts, one foot to the other. “The other question was whether you’re okay with that.”

“Yes.”

“Really?”

“Yes.” I realise I’m telling the truth. “Why do you care?”

“What a dumb question,” he retorts, suddenly sharp.

“Oh, and let’s not waste time with *dumb questions*—”

“I’m a human being, and I care about you, as a human being!”

“That’s nice of you, but sacrifices have to be made.”

“Plus, it’s my tether, so I’M the one who has to let you go. And I don’t want to spend the rest of my life wondering if I did the wrong thing.”

“I give you permission,” I say. “To not wonder.”

No more running. Just standing still.

“I’d rather you didn’t do this,” he says again. “I’m not gonna help you do it.”

I want to reassure him that – honestly – I feel quite calm (plus a little peeved, since I am still Alex for a while longer). I want to explain to him that, no, I’m not suicidal. I’m simply... relieved, to be able to explain my life, and how I feel about it, and why existing often seemed so difficult. I want to say I’m sorry he spent years of his life agonizing over me. You have to be realistic about these things.

“Can we *not* tell Sinas and Wake about this development?” I ask.

“I think we should.”

“Well, I don’t want you to.”

He gives me a ‘I want to argue with you so *bad*’ look, but he holds his tongue.

“Thanks.” I flick his shoulder as I squeeze past, and we make our way back towards the dining room.

It’s been several minutes, so the others are already waiting: Sinas and his brother, Wake and her ‘friend’, Tao’s sister, and our father. It’s frankly too much anguished pining for my tastes.

“Let’s do this outside,” I say. Maybe the summer sun will help.

I lead them to the corner of the garden, where two fences meet, in the shade of a knobbly paperbark tree. A slight breeze urges the cicadas into a crescendo, a shimmer in my ears to match the heat-shimmer on the horizon. I park myself atop the fence, making sure I’ve got a slab of dried paperbark to fiddle with, rolled into a long brown tube.

I know there can’t be much time left, before we’re found.

I wish we didn’t have to go through with this.

My dad steps forward, shielding his eyes from the sun. “Who’s first?”

Sinas holds his brother’s hand.

“Me,” Wake says. “I’ll go.”

She pushes off the fence, sipping a cocktail of disappointment and irritation she makes zero effort to hide. Then she neatens her hair, and pats down her clothes, and spends a moment figuring out the face she’s going to make.

“I lied, earlier,” Wake tells the girl. “I think about you a lot.”

“It’s nice of you to admit it,” her companion replies. The words don’t come from her, though; they come from the trees, and the wind, and the insects, forming teenaged syllables, as if the world itself is whispering in my ear.

“I think about you every day. Sometimes, I don’t even realise, but... I do.”

“Ha, no kidding. I’m your Roman Empire.” (If you’re imagining a tree saying ‘I’m your Roman Empire’, I’m sorry, but that *is* what you signed up for.)

The face Wake settles on is neutral, all things considered. “I never found out what happened to you.”

“Wake, you *knew*. You just never let yourself lay it all out.”

“I never WANTED to think about you, though – even though every time I thought of my parents, I did! Or part of me did. The part I don’t really listen to. Why do I never listen to that part of me?”

“Because it’s the part that’s asking you whether I was worth it.” The girl smiles, slightly viciously. “You’re afraid it might say no.”

Wake steels herself. “It was worth it.”

“So you’d do it again? You’d let it play out, exactly the same way?”

“In every universe, I’d still try to find my parents. In every universe, I’d still make you help me. But I wouldn’t—I wouldn’t leave you behind, next time.”

“How generous. All because you’d rather not remember my face.”

“I want to be *better*,” Wake says. “I do. I want to be the girl my grandparents believed in, and a person” – she swallows – “who I believe in. I’ve done things

that weren't fair, to get where I am. I've *crushed* people. And even if that's the only path anyone's got, in this shitty existence, I won't use that as an excuse. Not anymore."

The girl nods, her face a canvas for Wake's wrongs – but it's righter, now, as the sun catches it, and her uniform flutters in the breeze. If Wake's a compact, furious, glamorous wrecking ball, her 'friend' is one of those tall, thin trees that flexes with the storm, deceptively robust (until one gust too many).

"You were so *cool*," the girl says. "The TwitchTok star with a million followers. Good at everything. Involved with everything. Halo, confident, but not TOO confident, so nobody could ever truly hate you." She leans closer, with a pantomime whisper. "On top of that, she had a *bad* side, which only her friends knew about, where she'd quantum-slip into megacorp servers and dig up dirt, leak it on the Mesh, sometimes fiddle with a balance sheet or two and divert a couple numbers towards a better cause. A real Robin Hood; totally irresistible."

Wake doesn't respond.

"Except she had another side, which *nobody* knew about. She'd spend her non-existent spare time digging deeper into corporate networks; the proper kind of q-slipping. The 'jail time' kind. All because she wanted to find her parents, who'd been stolen away, without a trace, and somebody – if she dug deep enough – would know where they were." The girl steps closer. "Eventually, she hit a wall. Even with her skills, the corps were better, so she had to find another way in. Another key to turn, another lever to pull. And one day, one fell into her clutches."

"I'm sorry, Nok," Wake whispers.

"Compared to you, I was invisible. Just some quiet new girl. Actually, I would've been happy with that. I never had that impulse you've got, to shape the world into how it looks, in your head; I just wanted to get through school without falling on my face too badly. But then, someone found out where my father worked. I'm not sure how. Do you know how?"

Wake just stares.

"Everyone detested me, after that. They detested ME, for something I hadn't even done! Invisibility was the far more glamorous option. Instead, everyone started ignoring me on PURPOSE, and as much as I tried to pretend otherwise, it's saddening to be ostracised by five hundred teenagers." She shifts her weight, from one foot to the other. "You know, Wake, I'm doing most of the talking. That's not usually how it goes."

"It's true I started talking to you," she says, "after I learned about your dad."

"How generous."

"I figured you could help me. I thought if we were friends, you might *want* to help me."

"Friends'. Hmm."

"I asked – *convinced* – you to steal some quantum encryption codes from your dad. I lied about what they were for."

“You did lie, but I also wasn’t as innocent as I made it seem. I created a secret gateway in my dad’s Mesh node; wrote a little program to fake the traffic. We were a perfect pair of hacker mates.” The girl takes one more step, and now she’s close enough to take Wake’s hand. She turns it over, staring at the lines on her palm. “Do you ever think we were friends?”

“I thought you were nice. But I also knew you needed someone.”

“I was kind of clingy, wasn’t I?”

“The codes worked, though,” Wake says. “They unlocked my parents’ locations, and work histories, and chat logs. I found videos of them. I saw how long was left in their sentences. If I’d stopped there... it might’ve been—”

“You’re not the kind of person who stops.”

Wake wants to pull away, but she doesn’t. “I kept digging. I set off an alarm. They wanted to find be REALLY badly. I almost got caught. But they knew whose codes I’d used.”

“My dad got into so much trouble,” the girl says.

“I know.”

“He was—”

“I KNOW. Trust me, I know.”

“I was so scared! If those people found out I was responsible for the hack, I was sure they’d disappear me, that I’d only ever see simulated daylight. Even if I’d confessed, and explained I’d been dumb enough to do this for some girl I barely knew... I was in way over my head. I needed *help*.”

“I thought it was better if we forgot what happened. If we split up, and didn’t contact each other, or act differently, they’d have no reason to suspect—”

“I asked you for help, Wake, and you pretended you didn’t know me! They came to my house, asking questions, threatening my dad, and d’you know what’s stupid? Even after all that, I *never said a word*.” The girl lets Wake go. Her hand falls. “I never betrayed you. Not once.”

Wake clasps her hands behind her instead. She bites her lip. “I thought I saw you, on the bridge, that day. I convinced myself it wasn’t you, after – just some other girl, in the same uniform, who was also invisible. I didn’t want to stop...” She searches her face for the memory. “Was it you?”

“You could’ve done that research. At ANY point.”

“The school said you transferred out.”

“What a depressing lack of curiosity.” She sighs. “I’m here now. Take what you will from that fact.”

“I just want to know if—”

“YOU don’t get the satisfaction of knowing!” Her eyes flash. “It’s a suicide spot, Wake. Some people jump. Some don’t.”

Wake takes a tiny breath; once, twice, thrice, underscored by chirping cicadas. “I took advantage of you,” she says.

The girl folds her arms. “...Perhaps I wanted to be taken advantage of.”

“I wanted to save you, too. I really did.”

“You wanted to save your parents more.”

Wake nods.

“Is that all?” the girl asks.

“It used to be. Now... I don’t know how to accept *any* of this.”

“You could start by trying.”

“What do you think I’m DOING, Nok!” She shakes her head so violently it’s like a wet dog. “You wanna know what that voice says? The one I never listen to? It complains about being pulled in a million different directions, by my parents, my grandparents, my friends, my home, by the boxes I need to tick to succeed, because I’m only allowed to be *perfect*. It says I can’t ever let the guilt catch up to me ‘cause that’d be a waste of collateral damage, and if I ever stop to think, I’ll realise this isn’t worth it... and I’ll lose everything. Everything I’ve worked for.”

Nok glances at the tether. “That guilt hasn’t stopped you yet, has it? So why are you so convinced you can’t let it go? You don’t need *my* permission for that.”

“I want your permission.”

“It really is up to you, Wake.”

“Even in the past two weeks, I’ve wrecked *so much crap* that didn’t need to be wrecked, just because it was easier to— to charge towards an ending that’d make me right.”

“True – if you’d exercised more self-control, I’d still be alive,” Nok says, matter-of-factly. “But you aren’t the person who murked me, either. The distinction’s important.” She rolls her shoulders, then smiles, in a way that feels like the opposite. “Which doesn’t mean I forgive you, nowhere near. The way I see it, you’ve got two choices. One: you listen to your second thoughts, and transform into the ‘nice-but-spicy’ role model you keep pretending to be. Two: you be mean, and OWN it. Burn shit down for real. I think you’ve figured this out already, but you won’t get your parents back by staying *nice*.”

“I’d rather be nice.”

“Then accept you might not get what you want.” Nok shrugs. “Just my impartial perspective, obviously. Take it or leave it.”

Wake doesn’t really know what to say.

But the gears turn, inside her head.

“Seeing everything that happened, on the station, and talking about it with my friends...” Wake’s eyes flick to me for a second. “It made me rethink what I’ve been doing. It’s just a question of what’s best, for me, and the people around me.”

“Hm.” With her white shirt, and willowy frame, and waterlogged hair, I’m too busy imagining Nok crawling out of a TV, but I think she might be... impressed? “I’m going to tell you this,” she adds, “as a favour, because I’m nicer than you. But there’s an obvious reason your grandparents aren’t the ones meeting you here. They’re gone. They left a long time ago.”

THAT makes Wake pay attention. “They left?!”

“They went wherever people go, after this.” Nok points at the sky, then the ground, then at Wake. “Could be there. Could be anywhere. They just felt they didn’t need to stay.”

“Why, though?” Her voice grows quiet. “I *know* they would’ve wanted to see me...” She looks down. “They’d know I wanted to see them. Why?”

“You can work that out.”

I see six-year-old Wake, watching her parents leave.

I see her arriving on Starfish station, a perfect wrecking ball.

I see her trying so desperately to make everyone proud.

“They knew I’d be okay,” Wake says.

Nok nods.

“I still would’ve liked to say goodbye.” Her voice cracks. “I wanted to see them one last time.”

I’m sorry she won’t find her dream, amidst all these other nightmares. Her life has been characterised by so much constant *weight*, and I want to hug her, and tell her we can bear it together... but that would be a lie. None of us are her.

“I wanted to hear them say it,” Wake whispers.

Her tears threaten to turn into a flood. Instead, she digs her nails into her palms, and glares at the grass beneath her feet; a precipice, with a stagnant river far below. Her shoulders heave, as the world rushes by. I can see her bridge. The haze, of the city’s lights. An empty house on stilts.

She steps back from the edge.

Then, she turns to the girl she didn’t save. “Goodbye, Nok. I’m sorry.”

The tether between them flares, brighter and brighter, then twists itself apart. At first, it’s a few strands that snap, evaporating, and then its totality starts to simmer and boil over, the energy within sensing a glorious escape—

It explodes.

It disappears.

The sky shifts, like a table with one bad leg. Illumination’s spirals deepen in the grass, the trees, the shadows beneath the eaves.

Without something to keep her here, Nok fades. It’s like paint cracking, losing colour, details flaking off history’s walls.

Wake watches until she’s gone.

“I’m ok,” she murmurs, to nobody in particular. Then she takes a seat on a tree stump.

It feels wrong to ask, ‘Who’s next’?

Luckily, Tao’s sister volunteers.

“But Tao isn’t here,” she says. (It takes a sec to decipher each word, as it passes through the nanomachines clogging her throat.) “You need him here. Don’t you?”

“It’s alright,” my father replies. “Your tether alone can’t keep the portal stable – it’ll shred itself completely long before that. Perhaps his not being here is... a good sign.”

“Then... I’d like to give him a message. Can you do that?”

“We’ll try,” I say.

“It would make me happy.”

It takes her a while to compose it.

“I want you to tell him that I love him very much. I hope he has a wonderful life, with nice people, and that from now on, he doesn’t have to think about me as much – but it’s nice, that he still thinks about me. And I’ll always be better than him at footy.”

“You’re a footy player?” I ask. “Damn. We could’ve been mates.”

“Then I could’ve been better than *you* at footy,” she replies.

Who’s next?

“Sinass?” I ask. “Do you want to?”

“No, Alex. I don’t.”

“Do you want some space?”

He shakes his head dully.

If we simply stayed here – in the shade, being annoyed by the flies, Sinass clutching his brother’s vacant form – perhaps time wouldn’t pass.

I shouldn’t rush them.

But time IS passing.

Slowly, Sinass lets Marko go. He props him up, so they can sit cross-legged on the grass. He watches, shoulders hunched, waiting for a flicker of recognition.

“Hey,” Sinass says. He picks at the grass. “Hey, dumbass.”

Then he leans forward, and pokes Marko in the shoulder. “Hey!”

Poke.

Poke poke poke.

Poke poke poke poke poke—

Marko’s eyes widen. It’s like a bot rebooting: his limbs jerk, and he suddenly sits up straight. His face is visibly annoyed.

Sinass goes for another poke. “I KNEW that’d work. You’re so predictable—”

Marko LAUNCHES himself at Sinass with a feral cat screech and Sinass scrambles aside, barely escaping – then he’s up and sprinting across the lawn. Marko chases him, a blur, two steps behind. In five short seconds they’ve vanished around the back of the house. I can hear footsteps, and breathless giggles, and then Sinass reappears, head down, arms pumping. Marko’s gaining ground. Then Sinass slips on a divot, or slips on purpose, and that’s all Marko needs to throw himself onto Sinass’ back and send them both rolling across the grass, in a skid of flailing limbs and laughter.

“Jesus! Are you okay?” I ask.

Sinass is on his back, arms askew, gulping down the sunlight. Marko shuffles over on his knees, then pokes his brother in the shoulder, HARD.

“There,” he says defiantly. “I knew that’d work.”

Sinass swipes at him. There’s not much venom in it.

Or, maybe that's the point. Suddenly, he snakes both arms around Marko's torso and brings him down, hugging him close. Marko tries to wriggle out of it.

"Hey. Hey! Stop."

In that moment, Sinas' smile threatens to fly off his face and leap into the sky. Tears are streaked across his cheeks, welling up unbidden.

I find myself smiling, too.

Eventually, Marko extricates himself, or Sinas lets go (the magnanimous elder sibling that he is). They perch on the grass. Sinas leans back with arms behind him, legs splayed out in front – a position both comfortable and easy to defend, in case of unexpected attacks.

"Hey," Sinas says, grinning.

"Hey," Marko replies. His voice is lighter, but similarly confident, reminding me of Sinas in his less-crappy moments. "Where... is this?" he asks. "It used to be so dark, and cold, and, um... sad."

"This is— it's hard to explain. How much do you know? As in, how long have you been here? Were you trapped?"

"You could say that." He shudders. "It wasn't very nice. The other people here... they don't like me much. They don't like anything much, I think." He glances at Sinas again. "This garden's nicer. What about you, though? You aren't supposed to be here, unless you're—"

"No, I'm not dead. I'm *volunteering* to be here, temporarily. I'm sorry I couldn't come for you earlier, though. I'm sorry I can't..." *Stay*. He sniffs, wiping his cheeks. "I don't like being in the world without you."

"Sinas..."

"It sucks! It fucking sucks, Marko. I don't know what the fuck I'm doing. I can't— I can't STAND it." He puts his hands around his knees. "I was never as strong as you, I can't keep going on my own. Not for another year. Or ten, or fifty."

"We had the same life," Marko says, "yet your perspective's so different."

"Different how?"

"I wanted to give you a chance at the life you wanted, but when I looked at you, and talked to you, it was *you* who made me feel that was possible. If you ever thought I was the big brother who had all the answers... I didn't. You've already got better ones than I ever did."

"That's a lie. You're being nice, but it's a lie."

"If you're gonna be like that, then listen. What you'll do – what I'm telling you to do – is *survive*. And *pretending* to survive is basically surviving, if you're good enough at it, and you're fricking *great*. You're the best. So keep going. Don't get mopey." He reaches out with one foot and kicks Sinas' leg. "Tell me about the crap you've been getting up to without me. Like, whatever happened to that guy you were talking to?"

"Will?"

"Yeah, that guy."

"We stopped talking – not long after that race. I, um... didn't want him to see me, like that. It wasn't his problem."

“Dude, c’mon, he was SO nice! He could’ve helped you! You really stopped talking?”

“After that, we moved, so yeah.”

“You suck. You truly suck.” He shakes his head. “Where’d you move to?”

“Australia.”

“Fun. I assume this was Mum and Dad’s idea?”

Sinas rolls his eyes. “Who else’s?”

“Is Australia nice? Do you still race there?”

“Yeah, it’s nice. And I do. Sometimes.”

“You were always more obsessed with racing than me – you should race more than ‘sometimes’. It’s fine if you’re preserving complicated feelings about it, but it’s also fine to start letting those go. I wish we could still race together, obviously, but I give you permission to live your own life.” He leans back, then glances at us, with familiar, sparkling, opal eyes. “Plus, it looks like you’ve got friends, now. Real ones.”

“For now,” Sinas says.

“For *now*.” Marko kicks him again. “You’re so annoying! So-so-so annoying. Sinas, I know you get this, deep down, but I LIKED the waste of space you were. You’re allowed to let other people like you, too. Fine, maybe that makes it hurt more, when you need to leave, or when things go bad, but *that’s* where you’ll find the strength you want. Who knows, maybe they’ll become real friends and stick around.”

“Okay.”

“Dude, I know you wanna keep your distance from everything, I know it’s how you cope, I know better than *anyone* that faking it for mum and dad is the best way to not get driven insane. But – *dumbass* – you need to let yourself be happy, too! Just like you’ll get hurt, sometimes. There are other ways to do things than how you’ve been doing them. Past experience isn’t everything.”

“Okay.”

“You can stop pretending, any time you want. Start doing it for real.”

“Okay.”

“Any time!”

“Okay! Okay. Yeah, this isn’t fucking... new information.” He glances at his brother, dropping a handful of fresh-plucked grass. “You’re so annoying.”

“*You’re* so annoying. But you’ll find a way – I believe in you, bro. You’ll survive. I think you’d survive the end of the world, somehow, like a cockroach.”

“Thanks.”

“Still, I really wish I didn’t have to be here.”

“...I’m sorry. If we’d done things differently, that day... if I’d gone out first—”

“Did they at least implement better reactor check standards?”

“Yeah, they did. Half a year later.”

“Then maybe somebody else still has a brother.”

It is weird to see Sinas like this: no walls, no masks, just some guy.

I wonder if this is how he is around Finn.

A kookaburra settles on a nearby branch; respectfully, it stays silent. The longer we stay, the more I notice repeating patterns, like clockwork.

"You still haven't asked me why I'm here," Sinas says.

"Then why are you?" Marko replies.

"I have to let you go." His voice is flat, like paper. "I have to."

Marko nods. *'It's not your fault'.*

"I crammed so much of myself into getting here," Sinas says. "Into the idea of seeing you again, and when I finally *got* here – seeing you now – all these feelings came flooding back, this joy, this stubbornness... it makes me wonder, what if stayed here, with you? Wouldn't that be enough for us? For me?"

"You can't stay. I can tell, from the way your friends are looking at you."

"Then, it makes me wonder if I can bring you back. Plenty of souls have escaped, so why not you?" He fixes Marko with a stare. "Why aren't I allowed to bring you back to life?"

"I..." Marko seems lost for words.

"Because you might not return in one piece? Because it breaks rules we're ALREADY breaking by being here? I know you don't want me to leave you here. You hate this place. When I found you, and you weren't saying anything, I thought— I thought I was already too late."

"You're right," Marko says. "I don't want to stay here. And I don't want you to go, either." He shivers, as a cloud passes in front of the sun. "But you can't let it get what it wants. This place... it isn't supposed to be like this. It's scary. Everything's crushed together, in its fist. It wants this to spread, it wants everything dead, it..." He squeezes his hands together in his lap. "Sorry. I don't really know what's happening sometimes." At times Sinas' brother seems oddly mature, but he really is just a kid, trapped in a prison he doesn't understand.

"It's okay," Sinas says. He scoots closer. "I don't think *anyone* knows what this place is supposed to be like, but I'm beginning to figure out a few parts. On the way here, it kept showing me what life would be like, if the accident hadn't happened, or if I'd had the accident instead. It felt SO close, like if I just... handed myself over to those different paths, they'd become real."

"Did you... believe it?" Marko asks, looking up at him.

"I considered it. It's possible there are different futures, or timelines, but Illumination isn't a key to the multiverse. It's too easy. It wouldn't mean anything." My first impression of Sinas was 'winter': that's what he is now, too. A pocket of winter, in the middle of summer, gathering a snow-flurry of thoughts. "I've wanted this so, so much," he says. "To feel like this again. To not have to hide. They kept trying to reprogram me, Marko. One day, it's going to work. I'll lose myself." He swallows. "I need you. I need you, so I can tell you what I've been doing every day, how I'm feeling, what I'm planning to do next year, what I food I like, which people I like, which things I hate. I don't *have* that. I barely have a life. I know that sounds shitty, with how privileged we are, but it's the truth. I know how messed up it is that I'm complaining to YOU about it."

“You have a chance,” Marko replies. “Even if it isn’t what you want it to be, yet.”

“It’s hard. It gets harder and harder to believe in.”

“Then change! Do something different. If you can’t win the normal way, then cheat, buy a faster car, pick a racecourse that suits you more.” Marko shuffles forwards, then puts a hand on Sinas’ shoulder. “It sucks that our parents have their own mantis viewpoints, but remember – we could’ve *believed* their bullshit. THAT would’ve been the easy route. The fact that we ARE different to them, after everything? That’s what you want to hold onto. For me.”

Sinas puts his own hand on top of Marko’s, holding it there. “A part of me died, too. With you.”

“No, it didn’t. It’s just asleep.” Marko smiles. “And when it wakes up, it’ll give you a fucking *awesome* life.”

Sinas blinks, as another tear winds down his cheek. He stares at Marko’s face, fixing it in his memory. The sight just seems to make the tears flow faster, and he wipes at them frustratedly – then, fiercely, he hugs him close to his chest. Marko rests his head on his brother’s shoulder.

“You’ll stop pretending?” he asks quietly.

“What if I still need to?”

“Then at least find *someone* you can stop pretending for.” Marko ruffles his hair. Then, he gazes at the sky, watching something I can’t quite see. “Do you think you can let me go, now?”

He winces. “Don’t make me say it.”

“Sinas...”

“When it’s time.” He looks down, as the tether shivers. “I just want a few more minutes.”

Illumination cradles them in its arms, a silent witness.

‘Who’s next?’ is no longer a question.

It’s gotta be me and my dad.

None of this has made me more eager.

Dad smiles, though, as I walk to him, leaning casually against the paperbark tree. It’s a nice smile, as smiles go – a comfort that beckons, without judgement. Still, it’s odd to be so intently understood by a person I have no recollection of. It makes me feel I’m at a disadvantage. I could assign significance to the vague flashes of memory I’ve retained from when I was four years old, but that would be a lie. The truth is, I don’t know him. Or at least, it’s complicated™.

I’m not sure what to do with my hands, so I settle for awkwardly shoving them into my pockets. “I already have a dad,” I say, “so this is weird for me.”

He chuckles. “Very honest. I appreciate it.”

“I try my best.”

“Then tell me about your parents, instead. What’re they like?”

I try and imagine where they'd be right now, in the house, on the farm, and for one *awful* moment, I can't remember their faces. Then I catch myself.

"Mum would be just over the ridge, out front, checking the farm drones for errors. The law says we need to test those ratbags once a day. Otherwise, she's constantly... doing stuff. She's always talking to people. I swear she never stops. I love it, though, because she just wants people to be happy. That's what she wants, more than anything. And everyone says she's got a ripsnorter laugh."

"Can you give me a demonstration?"

"My DAD would be starting to cook dinner. He's real analogue. He likes using his own barbie, writing notes on paper, fiddling with old tech. It frustrates mum, a bit, but she likes it too. He's much quieter than her, though, he mostly keeps to himself. Works hard, head down. I love... *not* talking to him? Just sitting quietly, working on something together. It's the best."

"They're nice people, then," Javier says.

"Yeah. They're nice."

"That makes me happy. You have no idea. And you, Finn – it surprises me that Haru took on the duty, *your* duty, if that's the way to say it. In many ways I suppose parenthood might suit her, but in others..." He pauses. "Did it suit her?"

Finn nods. "I think so."

"Then I'll be happy about that, too." He glances at us both. It reminds me of a teacher suddenly faced with a new, thorny question. "So much to say. So little time. It's like you've switched – you were always very different, but when I knew you, Finn was the louder one, and you were quieter, Alex."

I narrow my eyes. "I don't believe you."

"No, it's true. Fire and ice. Finn/fire, and Alice/ice."

"How old were we?"

"Oh, three or four. Four-and-a-half? Long enough ago for it to barely matter." But I remember bringing you to swimming lessons, and Finn, you were always so *angry* when you couldn't do something, and it took you a while to catch onto swimming. You'd scream, and cry, and kick the water, and run away, often at the same time. You were angry at yourself, though. Not others." Javier furrows his brows, working through a spot-the-difference puzzle. "This must sound foreign."

Finn shrugs. "I could believe it."

"Alex, on the other hand, you were very... fearful? I think because the water was unfamiliar. It might've come from the same desire as Finn, to be able to *do* the thing you wanted to do, but instead, you'd stand in no man's land – a mouse, trying not to be spotted by a cat. A mouse *anticipating* the cat. Sometimes you pretended you were sick instead, which you got away with, once or twice."

"I don't mind swimming nowadays," I say.

"That's good." He grins, a quick exhale. "I had to figure out how to calm you both. Finn, I was always telling you to *breathe*. To close your eyes, and be still, and take a deep breath. To spend ten seconds finding that quiet within yourself. And Alex, for you, it was the opposite – I had to tell you to jump around, punch the air, pump yourself up. You started doing these routines, punching, kicking,

before each swimming lesson. Very scary!” He raises his hands in mock fear. “But it worked.”

I throw a couple of air-punches, on the balls of my feet. It’s such a stupid habit. Could never remember where I picked it up from.

“Still got it,” Javier says.

“Still works,” I reply.

He takes our hands, in each of his, and it’s a soft, envious grip. “That’s one story, but I wanted there to be more. Now they’ll be yours. Yours alone.” The smile remains, it but hides a dam about to break. “I don’t want to make this hard.”

Finn glances at me. *Are you ready?*

I raise my eyebrow. *Are you?*

“I feel like we failed,” I say aloud.

“How so?” Javier asks.

“I saw, what you did for me; how I only exist because you don’t, anymore. Even after all that, I can’t do anything. I’m just supposed to leave you here.” I’m chewing my cheek, a little too hard. “I can’t even say ‘thank you’ properly.”

“Your existence is thanks enough,” he says. “You, here, is thanks enough.”

“We made it here, through all the lies, and monsters, and explosions, but so many people are already dead— this doesn’t feel like victory. It feels like jumping off one more cliff. Except this time, we’re cutting the rope behind us.”

“Alex, Alex, no no no. You’ve saved people. You’ve *freeing* me. You gave me this moment. As for the ending, of this story... that’s what faith is for. Right? Have faith.” He ruffles my hair, which feels childish, but not unpleasant. (My own dad would never; maybe I’d get pat on the back, on a good day.) “I’d like to know other things too, though – what you enjoy doing, for instance, or where you’re planning to go next. I want to know every detail about your lives... of course, it’s impossible.” He sinks back, on his feet. “Finn? What about you?”

“Me?”

“Exactly! What do you like doing?”

He looks away, hiding behind his fringe. “I like a lot of things, I guess. I like playing video games with my friends.”

“What are their names?”

“There are a few. Anton, Taylem, Carl. Sinas. I like drawing, too. I like going to quiet places, and drawing, and exploring. It’s peaceful.”

“You’re an artist?”

“No, I— just like drawing.”

“He’s pretty good,” I add.

“No I’m not.”

“You are.”

“It’s just for fun.” He shrugs. “I like cooking, sometimes. I like science and engineering ‘n’ stuff. I *don’t* like rollercoasters.”

“Science?” Javier’s ears perk up. “You’d want to work as a scientist?”

“Sure,” Finn replies. “I mean, we’ll see how it goes. I can see myself working on a big physics project, at a university somewhere. Or designing spaceships maybe, helping explore the galaxy... Something like that, I reckon.”

“I’m glad,” Javier says.

“Part of me, um... wants to contribute to the world, somehow? To society? To the future? Lots of people do, obviously, I don’t think that’s special... but I want to do something important.” He looks down. “Something that helps.”

“He wants to make lightsabers happen,” I reply. “X-Wings and lightsabers.”

“That sounds good to me, Finn,” Javier says. “If you took that path, I’d be extremely proud. Just remember to talk to us biologists sometimes, too.” Then, he turns to me. “What about you, Alex?”

Yeah, what ABOUT you, Alex.

I hate that I feel disappointing, compared to Finn. I hate that I can’t just be happy he has his path laid out. But I don’t know what I’m doing – that’s a fact. The void’s always there. All I can do is hold my head above the surface, for a little while. I’m not Wake; there’s no black hole of desire driving me forward, defining my past, my future, every step I take. I’m not Sinas, either; there’s no life I need to flee (which I’m glad for, from the way he talks about it). It would be nice to have *something*, though! A force, acting on me, or a ley line to follow. Even the tether that led me here was a fiction.

I have everything I could ever want – yet I’m haunted by not having a reason for the way I feel.

IS there something wrong with me? Why the hell aren’t I more scared about letting this all go? If I was never supposed to be alive in the first place, perhaps that’s why I’ve never been able to imagine a proper home, or a proper future. Maybe I’ve always been adrift, even while I try to convince everyone I’m not.

Weird to think a person like me could ever save the world, huh?

“Alex?” Javier asks. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Nothing’s wrong,” I reply. “I like spending time here, on the farm. I like going to school. I like *Moon’s Haunted* a lot; it’s a TV show, but it’s really good. It’s SO good.” Trust *Moon’s Haunted* to draw a genuine smile out of me. “I like playing sport, and being outside. I’m an outside kind of person. Personally, I don’t have issues with rollercoasters, but I think spiders *suck*. It’s fine they eat insects, but if they could do that outside of my personal space, that’d be nice.”

“Do you get lots of spiders, on the farm?” Javier asks.

“Yeah.”

“But you still like it there.”

“Mum takes care of the big ones, so it’s fine.”

“She likes writing,” Finn says, nudging me.

“Oh! Oh.” Javier’s eyes light up. “You’re a writer.”

“I’m not a writer – I just write things. Sometimes.”

“Do you publish them anywhere?”

“Um, on the Mesh. But YOU aren’t allowed to look at them.” I raise a finger.

“Why?”

“They’re...” *Embarrassing?* “They’re written for a specific audience.”

“Ah, I see. Well, do you think you’d want to be a writer? In the future? I’d love to read a piece of yours, one day, if you ever write something for me.”

“I’d like to,” I say slowly.

“Will you?” Javier asks. His gaze is a little too penetrating for comfort, and I search for Tomato Tower on the horizon. “I’m not asking if you’ll succeed,” he adds. “I’m asking if you’ll try.”

I think of myself, in the void.

I think of me, in the library, sitting across from myself, asking the same questions, over and over.

I think of myself as a kid, picking up a book, and finding another world within those pages. I think of all the stories I’ve ever read, urging me to help other people, to help myself, to find my friends, to laugh, to cry, to make history, to fall in love, to pursue justice, to leave home, to return home, to run.

“I’ll try,” I say. For the first time, I believe it.

“Good.” Javier runs a hand through his hair, and sighs.

Above, clouds gather. Spiderwebs of darkness are laying themselves across the sky. The summer flirts with a reflexive chill.

“Can you do a favour for me?” Javier asks. “Find Farah, and... what should I tell her?” He scratches one ear. “Tell her this: I want nothing more than to be with her, but I also pray she’s found peace. And, if she remembers, I meant everything I said, the night we first met.”

“Okay,” I say. “I’ll tell her.”

“Thank you.”

Is this all we’ll get?

Suddenly, I understand Sinas’ reluctance.

“This isn’t enough time,” I murmur.

“There never is,” Javier replies, “if you love somebody enough.”

A wave is welling up inside me, and it’s not sadness, or tears; it’s just *loss*. It’s the yearning for a treasure I’ve glimpsed on the horizon but will never get to touch. I glance at Finn, and he feels it too. Perhaps he feels it more than me.

He’s never had a dad, I realise. He’ll say he doesn’t mind, but I’m sure this meeting has made him wonder if perhaps, his uncertainties could’ve been less uncertain.

He closes his eyes. He takes a deep breath.

The sky grows darker. Wind whips towards us from every direction, buffeting the leaves. Our shadows, previously so harsh, are invisible on the grass.

“It’s humbling, to see what you’ve become,” Javier says. He steps forward, for a final embrace, and I try to preserve the sensation of his arms, his shoulders, his voice in his chest. “I love your courage, Alex,” he says. “I love your independence, Finn. I want you to know that I love you. That I’m proud of you. You’re all I’ve ever wished for. And I’ll fight for you, always.”

For a second, I see my own parents, standing beside us.

It feels okay. It feels like treasure, in a way.

It's time.

I take his tether between my fingers – this uncountable, amorphous sacrifice – and in one quick motion, I rip it free. I hold it to my heart, as it writhes.

Then, I let it fall. It's simultaneously small and insignificant, and a dreamtime myth: a rainbow serpent, tumbling downward, unwrapping from the portal, and I continue to feel it until I can't, taking my father with it.

New cracks spiral across my dream.

It's like I'm standing on ice, which is starting to tilt. I stare at the spot where my father used to be. Finn's behind me, silent and still.

Sinas watches, holding Marko close.

"It's time, Sinas," Wake says.

"Okay," he says quietly.

"...Wait." It's my voice. "There's something I have to do." I watch myself say those words, from the vantage point of a distant satellite. The tether tying me to Finn is struggling to stay put, the portal's entire existence balanced on its edge. I step towards my twin. "I don't know what'll happen," I add. "Well, I guess I do."

Finn's worry pulses through me. For the satellite, it's just another signal.

Wake gives me a 'what the heck are you talking about' look, followed by, "What the yekk are you talking about?"

"The portal hasn't collapsed yet."

"But that's because of Sinas. It's because of Tao."

"And me. There's one more tether, and it belongs to me."

"So? Alex, what the YEKK are you—"

"She's supposed to be dead," Finn says. "She died when we were kids, and our parents brought her back to life. They used Illumination, and our dad went inside. Alex came back, and he didn't. And one of the things keeping her alive is the thread tying her to me." He says this in a single breath, faster and faster. "The Wraith figured it out. It's using her too, to keep the portal alive, and our mum – Farah – couldn't stop it, because she got kicked off the project, and maybe Alex used to be dead once, but right now she's alive, and *we can't let her die.*"

The kookaburras laugh.

"WHAT?!" Wake shouts.

"The gate won't close unless I do this," I say.

"What about everything you told your dad just now?" She wields her gaze like a hammer. "Why would you lie to him?"

"No! I meant what I said—"

"You're committing suicide, and you'd rather not think about it."

The tiny hairs on my neck, my forearms, are standing up on end, the air growing heavy lightning and madness. Black spirals twist and turn in the sky. The ground shakes. "Finn, do it now. Please."

I grab our tether. I watch myself do it.

I wish I hadn't said those things to Javier.

I didn't lie to him. Did I?

I *want* to have that future. I just... can't.

I turn myself to stone, to steel. I tense my arms and take a quick breath, again, again, feeling the tether's energy coursing through me, the tide of a million souls crashing against the portal, the Wraith's shadow falling across the sky – and Finn's heart, a lighthouse, binding him to me, holding me here, the weight of its *power* too much to comprehend.

I start tearing the lighthouse down.

It's difficult: its foundations are deep.

But one brick slides free, then another. Suddenly, I feel myself starting to leave my body, everything around me collapsing like a wave, my perception rising faster, higher, than any satellite ever has—

I'm tackled. My head hits the dirt. I don't know what's happening but there's a weight on my chest, and the weight starts punching me.

"NO! No no no!" Wake shouts. "You're so dumb!"

I'm winded. My head spins. I try to catch her hands, but she's fast. *Fuck*, it was a good tackle. "We need to do this," I cough. "You know we need to! It doesn't mean I *WANT* to."

"If you didn't want to, you would've tried harder to FIND – ANOTHER – WAY!" She comes into focus, sitting on my stomach, teeth bared in a petulant scream.

"Wake, please, I didn't want to make this a big thing— we don't even know what'll happen to me—"

"No!" She punches me again. I let it happen. Her face is so *red* it's almost funny. "Your dad," she says, "gave his *LIFE* for this. You aren't meant for this place. You aren't." For a moment, I think she'll punch me again, but instead she puts both hands on my chest. "I'm not losing you, too."

The sky behind her is twilight, the tree a dark, murky shape.

"She's right," Sinas says. "We aren't leaving you behind."

My eyes lose focus. The tree blurs. "Even if the world's going to end? Even if the Wraith turns every single planet and city into literal hell? You can't say I'm worth more than all those people." Numbers are numbers. "If my sacrifice is how we win this fight, what's the point of arguing?"

"I'm not saying we don't make the sacrifice," Sinas replies. "I'm saying you don't have to die, making it. You've already come back once. You're special."

"I don't feel very special right now." I think I bit my cheek, because there's blood in with my cough. "I'd rather be Harry Potter special, or Luke Skywalker special, or Edward Elric special. I got the dead parents but none of the magic powers."

"Farah will know what to do," Wake says. "Or Haru, or Maritime."

"They're not here," I say.

"Then we have to contact them."

"How? HOW, Wake? We can't MeshLink through another dimension—"

"Shut up. You're being disappointing."

Ouch. I close my eyes. If they want to save me so badly, then fine. Let 'em.

“Finn, on the ship, you said you and Alex did an experiment, where they made you talk to a soul in Illumination. They put you in boxes,” Wake says. “They made you look at emus.”

“Uh... did I? Wait, yeah, we were in boxes in our boxers. We had to lie in sensory deprivation chambers and concentrate on an image, and then... we saw one of the lampires. Or sensed it.”

“Okay, so communicating is possible. And we have the portal, RIGHT here – if we shout loud enough, or blast enough binary, they’ll notice. They’d *better*.”

I’m reminded of the glimpses I kept seeing, of the portal room in Thebe, and what I’m fairly sure was a real conversation between Farah, Haru and Maritime. Could I make that happen again, if I wanted to?

The horizon’s black. The Wraith is screaming, its void-like fingers forcing their way towards us, picking at what’s left of the portal. The tether burns in me, suddenly ablaze, as malevolence ties a knot and pulls it tight. I gasp.

If I refuse, Wake will punch me again.

I also don’t want to die.

So, for a final minute, I allow myself a future.

If there’s a way to communicate, it’ll be through Farah. She’ll have the strongest connection to me. Perhaps, if I focus, I can isolate that connection from the flood of noise flowing through the gate.

What would she be thinking of, right now?

Probably us (whilst trying to excavate the giant landslide of fuckery that’s burying us). I fixate on the moment I died, which I don’t remember, but this place sure does. She remembers. I bet she thinks of it, every time she sees or hears the word ‘Illumination’.

I hold that pain. I listen to what it’s telling me and shut out everything else. I’m no longer on the farm. I’m in the apartment she and Javier shared. I’m an oscillation, a resonance, cresting and falling. I *grasp* for her, past the veil, and—

There! A sentence.

I leap up and run to the house. I spare a quick glance for the sky, where blue fireworks dart through the darkness, forcing the Wraith to recoil for precious tick-tock seconds. Our surroundings have taken on the muted hue of the ocean floor, smudged at the edges; luckily I know these rooms like the back of my hand, as I twist and turn past falling sand and ghosts. Blue-black light consumes the open windows.

I enter my bedroom.

My notebook’s on my desk, open to the first page.

I write the sentence.

A response comes unexpectedly swiftly. Words scrawl themselves across the opposite page.

Alex?

Are you alright? Ask her if she's alright!

How is she doing that?

No time. Farah: the only thing tying my soul to the real world is the link between Finn and I. If we cut it to close the gate, can you protect me?

Faded letters appear and reappear, a half-eavesdropped conversation. Eventually, a single word is left:

Alright.

Really?

We know what to do. We've tried it once before. At least, Haru has.

Please be fast. Out of time!

Thirty seconds.

How likely is this to work? Or flop?

Better not to ask.

Tell her, 'fairly likely' to work.

It's a far cry from 'almost certainly', but it's hope I didn't want to give myself. Luckily, my friends did. We prepare ourselves.

Alex, we're ready.

You sure? Can we break the link?

Break EVERYTHING.

The words are a crystal in my heart, forcing the tether to flow around them. "Okay, Finn," I say quietly. "NOW you can do it."

Suddenly, I feel his arm on my back – an awkward reassurance, but one I'm glad for. I stand, and hug him, all bones and desperation.

"You'll be fine," he mutters. "I'll make sure."

Blue fireworks streak through the sky, sharp relief, until they're smothered.

<I HAVE YOU!>

The walls crack. They fall away.

What if this doesn't work? The thought bowls me over, a flying cricket ball, every possible consequence I swore I wouldn't consider. The ceiling's overcome by squirming spirals, the portal a dying scream that buffets my soul. The tether shines brightly, amidst all of this. It *thrums*. It dances.

The Wraith cups us in its hands. I punch the air once, twice, already growing sluggish with malevolence.

One last glance of Marko, standing in the doorway.

Then Sinas lets his brother go. One second he's there, and then he's not. Their connection flares, a supernova, tracing the Mobius-strip contours of the gate as its knots come undone. Memories burn like embers. Souls feast, moths to a flame, as Sinas screams, and screams, and sobs.

<NO!!! YOU WILL NOT!>

The cicadas swarm, a black mass. Finn lifts our own tether in his hands.

One tug, and the portal skitters (a tumble of pebbles, before an avalanche). Two tugs, and it jolts me out of myself, out of my body, out of my past – out of everything. Three tugs, and the tether is ash.

I'm free.

Free to be swept away by the hurricane my dream held at bay, into the storm, into the Wraith, into Illumination, where all is the gate and the gate is all. For a while, the portal holds its shape: a pyramid of spirals, and promises, and colourless infinities, bearing the weight of not one but every universe, a gullet simply begging to be closed. So many stories, waiting to be told. So much grief. So much peace. So much fear. So much love.

All that, with nothing to hold it together anymore.

The gate sighs, and wobbles, and explodes.

ALEX XIX

I fall through the sky, losing pieces, screeching towards an unknown end. It would be comforting if there was ground to hit, at the end of this – a surface to throw myself against and vaporise into boiling atoms. Instead, I fall through clouds upon clouds, and each strips another memory from my grasp. Their gaps *ache*. Waves of time roll across the present, knocking history into new, shifting angles. The fractal splits and so does my consciousness, a balloon about to burst. I lose my name, then steal it back; lightning strikes me for being so selfish.

Throughout this, there is a single constant: rage. The Wraith's angry we fucking BEAT it. Illumination is pulling itself apart (with me inside), but maybe that doesn't matter anymore.

Souls rush past. The Wraith's darkness chases me down, subsuming entire nations as it squeezes through their pores. Arches of energy whip through the sky, chopping into it, slicing off fatty pieces which curl up and burn away, but it's too large, too fast. It's the kind of darkness you can't stop.

It's so angry.

It thinks I'm weak. It wraps me in its infinite embrace, and I'm no longer contained by my feeble mind. I'm riding a wave. The meteoric sky, the portal's echoes, the tessellating puzzle pieces of panicked nations – they're small, now. They're beneath me. My awareness splashes outward, vast as an ocean, and Illumination's pain is no longer unfathomable; it's a space I can skip across, and consume, and *control*. I no longer need to be afraid.

Instead, I can be mad at this *chaos*. I can strike at the wasps, which swarm incessantly around my expanse. They leave familiar traces as they rally against my legions, thinking in ways that are fiery, or slippery, or silent. I recognise them by the ways they fight. There's something I should do for— no, TO them.

It would be simple to be swept up by this unspeakable fury. I'm filled with all the grief, all the rage, all the confusion in the world, and it's too immense, too insurmountable, too incomprehensible... and darkness survives, here. That's the choice, isn't it? I am a Wraith, and I'm struggling to understand what's happening to me, and I'm furious fate has led me here, and I'm miserable 'here'

might be forever, and I'm jealous of those who have lives left to live, and I HATE this, and yet, and yet! I hold on. *Darkness survives*. One whisper's loudest of all.

<I will never. Let. Go.>

I feel the wasps, buzzing around my fingertips. They're so warm, and alive. I start to crush them. They shy away and flee, like sparks, but my void is vast and inescapable. I close my hands. I feel them struggle. I can hear their voices, barely audible over a disintegrating universe. Their heartbeats, their memories, are pleas in the dark. Each of the dying portal's ripples is a slap in the face, a roar in my ears.

<Kill them!! Don't let them leave! They did this!>

Alex, please! Stop!

I grit my teeth and hold my breath, and I crush and smash them into the walls of reality. Hate is a river, washing them away. They resist, like squashing a balloon between your fingers, but I am persistent, and much, much bigger. The Wraith closes its hands around my own.

<Keep going, until their sparks fade to nothing.>

"No," I say. "Don't tell me what to do."

<Kill them.>

"Don't tell me what to do!"

<They stole your future! They stole it from us!>

I scream back. "NO!"

These sparks, in my hands; they mean something.

So does the spark inside me.

"Get out, get OUT! Let me go!!"

I take a breath and turn it into fire, using every time I've gotten mad at my own mistakes, every time I've hated the way the world just *is*, every time I've been frustrated by my own inability to dream, and the fire grows brighter, and brighter, and black turns to grey, and it's foolish to think I could ever beat the Wraith outright, no matter how hot my anger burns – but I can dream, now. Us sparks can dream together.

They have names. Finn. Wake. Sinas. Tao.

I remember my friends' faces, and I shove the ghost out.

I rise through darkness, into a flooded city.

Skyscrapers rise from stagnant water. It's waist deep, still enough to act like a mirror; one I'm afraid to break by moving. Perhaps the buildings are teeth, and the streetlights are toothpicks, and the city's jaws will gobble me up if I don't tread lightly. The sky is pregnant with steel-wool clouds, and even if I don't

recognise this place, it tells a usual story, where new-growth polymer has begun swallowing old concrete and older stone.

There are no people here, and no cars or AutoDrones.

Instead, disembodied voices travel down the drowned roads, emerging from open windows and dark, empty doorways. I get snatches of words and phrases.

<Battery levels reaching level two, drawing power from main grid—>

<—managing media consumption across several suburbs—>

<—I’m sad. I’m sad. I’m sad.>

The city itself is talking.

Slowly, I wade towards the closest building. The water’s warm, and clean, and the city isn’t ruined, I think – just empty.

Well, it might be empty, but it’s a real chatterbox.

“Hi?” I say. “Hello?”

<Hello. You should’ve killed them.>

I stop, ripples spreading outwards. “Ex-cuse me?”

<You do so much to help them, yet they behave in such irrational ways. They don’t understand. You should’ve killed them... it’s for their own good.>

I look up, at the sky, where shooting stars dance between the clouds. The clouds themselves are dreaming of hurricanes, twisting and tearing at each other with slow inevitability. Lightning flashes, then lingers. It’s like a battle of light and shadow, or a war, each thrust and feint heavy with intent. In their edges, silhouetted, there are galaxies.

I look down at the city, and its whispering electric highways.

“You’re the Wraith,” I say.

<I don’t understand. Please rephrase your statement.>

“This is your nation.”

<I don’t understand. Please rephrase your statement.>

I start walking towards the building again. Cameras swivel to track my path. “Why don’t you understand me? Are you a program? An AI?”

<My knowledgebase is corrupted. I cannot determine my location or status.>

“But you’re sad. You said you feel sad, so you’re conscious. You feel things.”

<I... don’t understand. But you should’ve killed them. I don’t want to die.>

“You are NOT what I expected.”

Despite this, I feel quite calm. What are my goals?

See what happens. Try to survive. Find a way back (or through, or out).

This plaza, with its empty skyscrapers, and abandoned footbridges... it reminds me of the layout of Thebe base. Much taller, obviously, but I can imagine looking up at the main compound from where I stand, the crater’s rim at my back.

I reach the entrance and walk inside.

Immediately, the space feels smaller than I expected. The walls are close, the only light a greenish tinge that strolls languidly along bare concrete. It reveals naked pillars, a mouldy floor, with bundles of cables worming their way across every surface. The ceiling is a claustrophobic octagon, close enough to touch. We must be underground – how deep, I can't say, but it's clearly a place meant to be hidden from both prying eyes and prying data sniffers.

I can hear tapping – a foot upon the floor – and muttering, in a language I don't understand. The source is hidden behind a pillar, which is also where the green light's coming from. There's also the *whump-whump-whump* of a dance beat, very loud somewhere, but made soft by intervening metres of dirt.

Cautiously, I peer around the pillar.

There's a man, in the corner, facing a deck of holo-screens. His fingers dance with blinding precision as he sits, hunched, on a pile of body parts. Both feet tap incessantly, and I notice they're shiny; much shinier than skin SHOULD be. He's also wearing a VR visor, which does make me wonder what the screens are for.

Wait. Body parts?

"I'm working," he barks (in English, but I can't place the accent). The visor is as intimidating as any set of eyes.

"I'm sorry," I reply. "Uh— who are you?"

"You want to talk, you pay deposit." He gestures at a depression on the wall. The pile of body parts is *quite* varied: I think I see a crab claw (human-sized), the curl of a reptilian tail, a furry leg that could belong to a lion (or a minotaur). The floor is slicked with an unidentifiable dark fluid, reflecting the scrolling code and spinning blueprints on the screens.

"You're a gene splicer," I say.

"Not gene splicer – gene *fixer*. Splicing illegal. Fixing? Legal." He pats the pile beneath him, which jiggles. "Best you'll ever meet."

"I haven't talked to many... fixers, to be honest."

"And you won't. Secrets, we keep, if you want to keep your eyes. I run out of eyes." He stares at me. "You have nice eyes."

"Thank you? I'd prefer to keep them." I swallow, glancing around, but there's no obvious exit – this might be a 'secret trapdoor behind the bookcase' situation. "Are *you* the Wraith?"

"Wraith?" He shrugs. "Pay first. Then talk."

Slowly, I walk to the spot he's pointing at. One section of the wall is slightly cleaner than the rest. Beside it, there's a slot for a credit chip, and a thin seam between two adjacent panels. A few black drops are leaking from it, still wet.

"I think you ARE the Wraith," I say. "That AI was, too. You're every soul it's gobbled up, squished together. How many of you are there? Who's in charge?"

"You say strange things, girl."

"Are you all in charge?"

"Come closer."

Between the dance beats, caressing the backs of my eyeballs, I can sense the waves and tides of whatever's happening outside – Illumination imploding, if I had to guess. (I remember hearing about a particularly intrepid storm chaser who tried nuking a hurricane and ended up causing quite a few more problems than they solved; I hope that won't become a relevant analogy, for the portal.)

I also feel Finn's hand, on my shoulder.

He isn't here, but I feel his grip.

It's as if he's searching for an exit, just like I am, pulling me along, while part of my consciousness stays trapped in this room with a gene splicer with too many corpses in his wall.

I'm grateful for how firmly he's holding on.

"I'm going to leave now," I announce, "and find your boss."

"You could pay with your eyes?" the man suggests. "Good price!"

"Nah."

I touch the credit slot and the wall slides open, and the darkness stinks of refrigerant and decay. I step inside before the light reveals too many details, and the compartment shuts behind me.

I fall forwards, catching myself on a railing.

Woah, this place is NICE, huh? Or used to be.

I'm in the foyer of a castle, or a mansion, standing atop a curving staircase. It's one of two, mirrored on either side. Below lies a floor of marble, inlaid with circular designs that meet at a dais in the centre. Above, a dome holds a twinkling chandelier. Columns frame the entrances. There's detail *everywhere*, in the plaster, the railings, the carved chairs, the dusty carpeting, but no sign of modern contrivances like holoprojectors (or electric lights, for that matter). It's all steadfastly 18th-century.

Nobody's been here for a long, long time, though. The dome has collapsed into a haphazard heap, forming a window to a grey, snow-filled sky. The foyer's actual windows are broken, too, and the wind sings through them, making me shiver. The gaslamps are dormant, the world blue and black. I start edging down the stairs, watching my feet, and—

There are other, smaller footprints, in the dust. I follow them with my eyes, past the dome, into the shadows concealing the mansion's interior. There, I see two pinpricks in the dark. The shadows are too deep to make out their owner.

"Hello," I say, ignoring the chill.

The pinpricks blink.

"Who are you?" I ask. "My name's Alex." My voice sounds small, and *much* too alive.

"Do you have any food?" This voice is also small, and plaintive, and young, and sad.

"Uh, not right now. Sorry."

"Oh."

“Can I come closer?”

I hear a sharp intake of breath. It's not a no, so I make my way down until I reach the ground floor. I hunch my shoulders as I walk past the patch of sky under the dome, stepping over a fallen statue that once called the dais home.

I decide it's prudent to leave a few metres between us, and I pause at the edge of the shadows. The eyes stare brightly, but I can't determine their owner, no matter how hard I squint. Soot stains the floor around piles of charred wood, and a smattering of small white chunks.

“Can you tell me where we are?” I ask.

“A house.”

“Your house?” No response. “How long have you been here?”

“I... don't know.” The eyes look down.

“I'm sorry. It seems—I mean, it's REALLY cold here. Aren't you cold?” Decay is already settling on my shoulders. “Are your parents around?”

“Yes.”

“Oh. Really?”

The eyes glitter. “I can show you.” Their owner backs away, then runs through an opening that leads to the rest of the house. Scuffling feet, accompanied by a clatter as they drop something on the floor – a bird, no, the *skeleton* of a bird, picked clean.

There are more tiny bones, scattered across the marble. My shoe touches what might've been a rat. I follow the footsteps between imposing columns, past ornate dressers tipped their sides, scavenged for firewood.

I duck beneath cobwebs, entering a dining room. The light from the foyer barely reaches it; enough to see the long table spanning its breadth, a few chairs with high backs, candlesticks that're a mess of old wax, the cruel joke of empty plates. A gust of wind haunts the tablecloth for long seconds.

The eyes are on the table's far side, watching from between two seats.

“Here,” they say.

“What's here?”

“You asked to meet them.”

My vision adjusts to reveal two humanoid figures, sitting in the chairs to either side. Their heads loll forwards. Their clothes are full of holes. Their mouths are black and starving.

“Ah,” I say.

“You aren't pleased?”

“Well—I don't want to be rude, but this seems... polluted.” I swear one of the figures twitches. “Are *you* pleased?”

“I'm fine. Though you're supposed to bring wine, if you're a guest.”

The wind picks up again, moaning through the house, and it grabs the pair of doors behind me and *bangs* them shut.

It's pitch black. Apart from those two fucking eyes.

“Hello?” I ask again.

“I'm here,” the eyes reply.

I tell myself to stay very still. “I don’t think you started out this way.”

“What do you mean?”

“I reckon Illumination warped you. Maybe you were put in a bad situation, which made you do bad things, but it’s hard for our brains to handle this place. That makes it easy to become the worst versions of ourselves. I’m sorry, for your torment.” (Are the eyes closer than before?)

“You don’t have to be sorry,” the voice replies. “I said I’m fine.”

“You’re not fine. You’re—”

“Then you should’ve KILLED THEM!” The voice becomes a million voices, screaming in unison. It blasts outwards and upwards and tears another hole in the ceiling and I’m blinded by clouds, winter, a lashing storm, as rubble crashes down around me. My ears ring. In the brightness one of the corpses stands, reaching towards me. I back away, and trip, and fall.

The sky’s dying.

Black lighting rips across the heavens, spearing a spinning mass of soul-vapour. It punches back, marshalling battle lines. I hear Sinas speak, through the wind, and the thunder, the air heavy with his breath; *he’s* the one fighting the Wraith, up there, urging swarms of nations to fight with him, to *die* with him. That grief spreads, beating like a heart.

I get up. *I get up.*

Across the room, there’s pair of double doors. I vault across the table and charge through, into the hallway beyond.

Of course, this hallway is completely different. For one, it’s made of wood: long, sanded planks stretching into interminable dimness. Firelight flickers from paper lanterns, illuminating slanted rafters and latticed screens on either side, close enough to touch with arms outstretched. The only sound is the occasional creak of settling wood.

Every few paces there sits an easel, bearing a canvas.

No exits.

Time to start walking, then.

As I do, I take the chance to inspect each painting, and while it’s hard to fault the brushstrokes, I would’ve preferred different subject matter. One piece depicts the inhabitants of a city being guided by ghostly hands, pushing them through their everyday lives, their faces blanker than dead fish. Another illustrates a Lovecraftian horror made up of mangled, bloody body parts – some human, most not – nearly stumbling off the edge of the canvas.

A small, emaciated arm reaches out from within a pile of bones, begging for scraps.

An older, robed gentleman steals inky fluid from the minds of passers-by.

A wrathful queen supervises the execution of her subjects.

A girl lies dead and naked in a cold, abandoned cave—

“Are you enjoying my work?”

I jump back. “Bloody hell.”

Beside me stoops a mousy man with the longest moustache I’ve ever conceived of. It droops past his shoulders, slicked with oil, shining like the intricate, gilded patterns adorning his silken robes. “I’ve painted so many, over the years. So, so many...” He trails off, gazing down the gallery.

“You painted all of these?”

“Well – yes.” He sounds insulted, though keeps his expression hidden. “It’s been quite a while since I’ve had a visitor.”

“Uh-huh.” I start walking again. He mirrors me, gliding along a half-step behind. Whenever I stop, he stops. Whenever I walk, he walks. The paintings are beginning to blur together, though occasionally one that’s particularly atrocious catches my eye. I glance at him, and as I do – BEFORE I do – he turns his face away, as if, by chance, his attention was drawn elsewhere.

“Self-portraits?” I ask.

“In a manner of speaking.”

This hallway also reminds me of Thebe; specifically, the long corridor which led to the portal chamber.

“You’re curious,” the man says. “Speak your mind.”

I stop suddenly, attempting to catch him off guard, but he stubbornly sticks closer than my shadow. Shadows, I realise, don’t have faces either.

“You’re anxious to know why I’ve done this,” he murmurs, breathing in my ear. “How I feel about this... place.”

“I’d love a theory. Preferably one that justifies all this.”

“‘Justify’ is an inherently biased word.” He coughs, aborting a laugh. “This is an ending. An ending, yes, for thought, for faith... for myself. For ALL selves.” He raps a knuckle against the rafters. “Gods come here to die.”

“Okay, so Illumination—”

“This place devours everything it touches. It turns stars to ash and taunts you while it does so. But I won’t let it! I can stop it. Beauty needs not be a thing that fades. Permanence simply requires... effort.”

We’re coming to the end of the hallway, where there’s a pair of sliding doors. My eyes are drawn to the closest painting, which is a painting of—

Me.

I try not to look.

I’m sitting in—

There’s a body—

Hands pulling at—

Suddenly, the easel is replaced by a watercolour of Wake’s dumb, smiling face. In fact, EVERY painting has turned into Wake: either talking, or laughing, or crying, or pouting. The Wraith groans, clutching its chest. The ground shakes earthquake-style, I stumble into the wall, and Wake’s presence is there too, in the beams, in the lanterns, accepting every single nightmare the Wraith’s ever had into her heart.

It's alright, she says. I'm here. I'm here for both of you.

The paintings smile. The Wraith doesn't know what to do.
I take three huge steps to the end of the gallery and jump.

I land heavily on a limestone floor, worn smooth by centuries. My immediate impression is one of space, of grandeur. Thick, rounded pillars support a towering ceiling. Distant walls bear elaborate designs in vibrant reds and blues. There are people here, many of them, wearing pale robes, some carrying spears, others sweeping, more whispering in huddles by torchlight. At the end of the chamber lies a platform, upon which—

“Seize the intruder!”

Guards rush forwards and grab me roughly.

“Bring her to me.”

I'm marched past hanging tapestries, potted ferns, granite statues of gods both serene and menacing in their judgements. Burning incense curls upward, mixing with moonlight that falls through square openings in the ceiling. Dried petals trace a path towards the throne: a gilded chair with roaring lions for armrests, an ibis perched upon its back, waited on by fan-waving attendants. Behind stands another statue, even taller, the subject of painted hieroglyphics.

I'm pushed to my knees before the throne. A guard jabs the blunt end of their spear beneath my chin, forcing me to look up.

The queen of this place is *beautiful*. Her arms are folded, her posture ramrod-straight, robes draped perfectly across her thin, angular frame in a way that's surely planned. Her skin shines gold, accentuated by glittering silver jewellery. Kohl turns her cheekbones into haughty canyons, and it's clear she doesn't much like what she sees.

“Who are you?” she asks. “And why are you in my palace?”

“You know who I am,” I reply, with more bravery than I expect. “You know why I'm here, too. You just don't want to think about it.”

She twists a finger. I'm clocked in the back of the head. The resulting *thunk* is embarrassingly hollow.

“I am a *queen*,” she hisses. “You will address me as such.”

“Alright, alright. Apologies, your... highness.”

Is *this* the original Wraith? It's hard to imagine going back much further.

“You are a spy,” the queen says. “An assassin, sent by my enemies.”

“I'm not a spy—”

“DON'T DENY IT!” Her screech bounces from the pillars. “You possess the same brazen manner of every foreigner.”

“I promise, I only want to talk.”

“Talk? Talk?!” She grits her teeth, strangling her armrests, and I swear she'll explode before abruptly, she laughs. “Ha! Hahahaha! You want to TALK, now your armies are scattered, your crops burnt, your men dead? No, this is deserved! It is as it should be! You cannot govern yourselves, so you send spies, assassins, in a desperate roll of the dice. Such cowardice, such—”

“You’re dead, you MANGO. Can you understand that? Whichever way this turned out – if you burned a paddock, or whatever – it doesn’t matter anymore.”

“Guards!” Her neck twitches. “I— dead? No, no, this cannot— the harvest— NO!” She twitches again. “The underworld— gah! Spy! Don’t deny it!” It’s like a drone stuck between two sub-routines. Then, icy calm takes over. “*Bring him out,*” she hisses. “I am a queen, eternal, and YOU shall not take that from me.”

There’s shuffling to my rear, followed by intermittent cries of pain, and a wooden ‘X’ is laid on the stone. A man is nailed to it, writhing in place. The scent of iron and piss and sweat floods my nose as the guards tilt the prisoner forward, and he screams, and I look away. Blood runs onto the petals.

I should find my exit.

Then I hear other voices. They lilt, like the call of a bird, circling high above.

“*The ship’s locked on. It’s programmed to impact us at exactly 11:15. That’s when the reactor will go critical.*” I see Farah’s ghost, kneeling between two pillars as she works. “*I still don’t like this plan. It’s so... all-or-nothing.*”

“*The portal is holding,*” Haru replies. “*Barely, but it is. It might need one final kick. A stubborn beast...*”

“*We won’t have time to back out.*”

“*I know, Farah. I’m sorry.*”

“*Door breach!*” Maritime shouts. “*Weapons hot! Don’t fire UNTIL you’re fired upon!*”

The queen can’t resist an arrogant smile at the sight of the man beside me.

If my intuition’s right, this reflects the portal room, on Thebe. However, that room didn’t have many exits; the wooden doors to my rear are quite far away.

“Why pretend?” I ask aloud. “Why persist with this fantasy? You don’t have to sit on this room for all eternity. It must get boring.”

“Boring?” the queen hisses. “I have done so MUCH to hold onto power, to protect my people above all else! I bring civilization’s light to those unwilling. What do YOU do, witch? NOTHING!”

I sense an explosion, and a wave of compressed air. Maritime’s spectral form charges through me, a rifle in her hands. She takes cover behind a pillar. Flickers of gunfire lance from the portal room’s entrance and a chunk of debris sends one of her comrades flying. The two turret emplacements she set up are going haywire, firing sharp three-round bursts into the smoke. Mesh chatter bounces off the walls. Maritime pokes her head out, then back in as another shot whips past. She primes a stun grenade. Haru and Farah are crouching by their equipment, steadfastly working between each involuntary flinch.

“*Maritime!*” Farah shouts. “*Don’t get—*”

“*Both of you, stay back! No time for fuckups!*”

“I’m beginning to wonder if Illumination wasn’t always like this,” I say. “Maybe that’s just wishful thinking, ‘cause I’d rather not believe in hell.” I glance at the windows, through which the stars twinkle. “Illumination might’ve warped you, but then? I reckon you warped Illumination back. You conquered a pain that wasn’t meant to be conquered. You turned it into a prison.”

The guards hit me again. (THAT pain certainly feels real enough.)

“Haru, how are they doing in there?” Farah asks.

“They’re alive. Still too deep to pull out.”

“But we need to, now!” The panic’s rising in her voice. “The impact—”

“I’m doing my best. Perhaps, if I can get closer... yes!”

Energy punches the throne room from outside, like a dollhouse whose owner has chucked *quite* the wobbly. The guards holding me go flying. So does the queen. I leap up the steps towards her. The fires roar in their braziers, cheering my freedom, as magnanimously, I offer her my hand.

“Who are you, really?” I ask. “Because it can’t be this parade of evil, self-absorbed bastards.”

She slaps my hand away.

“Suit yourself.”

I grab her – so frail, so light, beneath her robes – and drag her around the back of the chair, where (sure enough) there’s an open pit, right where the portal gate would be.

One last leap of faith.

We fall together.

The wind whistles around old stones. It whips through the cave entrance, getting caught on stalagmites and stalactites, before it seizes the fire at the centre of the chamber and nearly strangles it. Spiked shadows play chasey on the walls, becoming animals, trees, mountains; the fire’s feeble, precious warmth rises towards the ceiling, too low for me to stand upright but low enough to trap some heat, even as the wind chills my spirit and makes the shadows shiver. I can’t see through the gloom at the entrance, or past the darkness at the back of the cave, but I can see this fire and its theatre of fantasies, playing out on bare, eroded rock.

I see the girl.

She crouches by the wall, wrapped in animal furs. Her face is small and pinched with fear, but her eyes – like the fire – hold a certain defiance. Her gaze flicks to a crude spear in the corner, then to me.

“Here,” I say, reaching out. “I just wanna talk.”

She flinches, murmuring a warning, but her words are lost in the intervening air.

“My name is Alex,” I add. “What’s your name?”

“...No,” she grunts.

“Well, I need to call you *something*. What do your parents call you?”

She shakes her head.

I’m unsure how far in the past I am. This feels... paleolithic? (I wish I could ask my MeshMate for a definition of ‘paleolithic’.) Did people have names in paleolithic times? Probably, right? They had to have spoken language, even if we have no record of what it sounded like.

“‘Wraith’ it is, then.” I pick my way around the fire, stepping on dried grasses and charred wood. The girl watches, pressed against the cave wall, but she doesn’t flee – not yet. I sit, leaving a couple of metres between us, trying not to block the exit whilst giving myself a chance to catch her if she runs. “I want to know what happened to you. Actually, let’s back up – do you know where you are, right now? Not geographically, but the idea of being dead. You get that, don’t you?”

Her pupils are large in the firelight.

“It’s like when you stab an animal, and it stops moving.” I point to the spear. “Sorry, it’s just— I’m not sure how much you understand me.”

Slowly, one of her arms emerges from the furs, slick with congealed blood. She opens the furs further. I see the sharpened rock, still embedded in her chest, and the white of exposed bone.

“Okay, okay. You understand.” I look away, as she covers herself. “Then I’m curious about what your life was like, before this. Where’s your family?”

“They’ll be back soon,” she says, into her furs; her enunciation is strange, but clear enough. She glances to the entrance, where the rock forms a switchback, to protect from the wind. The fire barely reaches it, creating the kind of dusky murk (murky dusk?) that captures the imagination.

“Where did they go?” I ask.

“They were out hunting. Some people came to our cave.”

“What kind of people?”

“They were—strange. I couldn’t understand them. I think they came from far away.”

“And what did these people want?”

“They were hungry. I tried giving them food, but we didn’t have enough.”

“I see.” I look down. “Is that why they hurt you?”

She shakes her head. “My parents came back,” she explains. “They got angry at the people, and the people said they’d hurt me, unless my parents let them go. They were only pretending, though. I don’t think they wanted to. They were just hungry. They were scared.” The shadows on the wall coalesce, into a figure who places one hand on the girl’s shoulder. It doesn’t have eyes, but also, it *does*, and in them, a flash of desperation. “They didn’t mean to,” she adds, a tear on her cheek. “It was an accident.” The rock enters her chest, and she wipes her face. “My parents went out to chase them. They’ll be back soon.”

I wonder how long she’s been waiting.

“Your parents... you should tell me about them. Are they nice?”

“I... I like it when they take me hunting.”

“Do you like hunting?”

“No.”

“But you like it when *they* take you hunting.”

“Yes.” She smiles, though tries to hide it.

“I’m sorry,” I say.

“You’re strange, like those people – but different strange. Are you from far away?”

“Haha. Sure am.”

I can do this.

I can talk to a lonely kid who misses their parents, who might be afraid of dying. Every soul doesn’t necessarily *deserve* forgiveness, or reconciliation, but perhaps every soul deserves an attempt at empathy. We care, after all. That’s what separates us from a universe which doesn’t. An animal’s howl filters through the cave, echoing from a distant plateau.

“What if your parents don’t come back?” I ask. “They might not.”

She clutches her legs stubbornly. “They won’t leave me here.”

“Have you tried going outside without them?”

“No. It’s scary.”

“Why’s it scary?”

“There’s...” She bites her lip. “There’s nothing out there. And if I leave, I— won’t be able to come back.”

“How do you know?”

“I just KNOW. I can feel it. Nothing is... nothing.” The fire grows dim, dipping into darkness before flaring up again. “I want to stay, but it takes SO much. They want to stay, too... more and more...”

“‘They’ as in your mates? Like the queen? And the creepy little kid?”

She looks up. “You know about them?”

“Yeah, I’ve met some choice examples.”

“They help me,” she says. “They keep me company. They’ve helped me look for my parents, too, but there are so many people here, and they’re all scary, and they hurt me, so whenever I go looking, I never find them.”

“Something tells me you probably won’t. If you haven’t found your parents by now, or if they haven’t found you, odds are low. You understand that, right? And this waiting? This is ‘nothing’, too.” The firelight touches patches of colour on the rock, where pigments trace the shape of a bear: a gentle curve forms the arch of its back, narrowing to a head, a snout, with two dots for eyes. I can sense the girl’s hands in it, and her parents’ hands, guiding them. (How cruel, to call this ‘nothing’.)

“You don’t have to hold onto this,” I say, as gently as I can. “You can leave.”

“Why would I?” she asks.

“Because it’s the way things are. It’s the way our shitty universe works—”

“How do you *know*?”

“I don’t. But the ‘you’ in this cave isn’t the ‘you’ outside it, anymore. THAT ‘you’ is out of control. It’s consuming more and more souls, killing people. It’s been at it so long it’s forgotten who you are.”

“I know.”

“Even *Illumination* has forgotten it’s meant for more than a graveyard. You aren’t supposed to hang on like this—”

“I KNOW!” she retorts, a bit sulkily. “I’m not stupid. But...”

“What?”

“I’m scared...”

“Of course you are. I would be.”

“I’m tired of staying, but I don’t want to go.”

“I get it.” (And I’ve only been scared and tired for a week; being trapped here for millennia must do a number on a girl.) “How long have you felt like leaving?”

“...I think about it, sometimes. Whenever I get close to the door, though, it feels like the end. Of me.” She swallows. “The end of everything.”

“Everything?”

“Yes! I’ve seen what happens to my friends, when they let go – they disappear. They become waves, on a lake that’s invisible, or voices in a song, which nobody can hear...” She wrinkles her nose. “Eventually, everything will be like that. It’ll be flat, and dead, and— *background*. A flat dark.”

“I didn’t know Illumination existed, before this. Maybe there’s something more to discover, after the dark.” I shrug. “Or maybe there isn’t. That’s also nice, in its own way. The thing is, you’ll never know until you try, right? You can fear change, but that shouldn’t stop you from changing.” I glance at the exit, then back to the girl, crouched in the corner. “Y’know, you remind me of myself.”

“I do?”

“I was also really scared of stepping through a door. My door was less ‘serious’, but I was so scared I constructed an artificial prison for myself. I wrote myself a life in which I was happy, and I couldn’t even see the walls, or the door I was so afraid of. Whenever I came too close, though, I got so, SO scared. Even now, I don’t really understand why. I just did.” My breath speeds up involuntarily. I slow it down. “I didn’t want to lose what I had, or to try something new and fail. There was poison inside me and I didn’t want to let it out, in case I’d poison my prison, or my friends, or future. So, I stayed in my cave. But eventually, I met people – friends – who helped me realise I was running in place, and that I *should* find new horizons.” I shake my head, smiling slightly. “It’s partly thanks to you, in a way.”

“...Me?”

“You forced me to figure shit out, fast. And if my friends were here, they’d say the same – they found their own walls, and tore ‘em down. I’m proud of them for it. It’s hard.”

Wraith nods a tiny little nod.

“It’s partly a matter of perspective,” I continue. “You can convince yourself everything you do matters, right? Which is scary. But if everything matters, then nothing matters more than anything else, and if nothing matters, you can do whatever the fuck you want. Illumination could be the space between universe, or WE could be the space between Illumination, and this, here? Maybe this is the important part, and one day, after all of us are together in that flat, dead nothing... we’ll make something new.”

“New?” she asks, a little confused. “And you think everyone should be a part of it? Even me?”

“I think it’s IMPORTANT you’re a part of it.”

She tilts her head. She thinks, for a long moment, her eyes unreadable, the blood drying on her arm, same as it’s been drying for thousands of years.

I try not to fixate on the chaos outside, and however much time I don’t have.

“Okay,” she says eventually. “I’ll go.”

I almost pass out. “Really?”

“Can you hold my hand?”

“Of course. Do you, uh— want to tell me your name, now?”

She hesitates, but then she tells me.

The Wraith stands up, and so do I, though I need to hunch to avoid bumping the ceiling. Her fingers emerge from the furs, and I take them in mine, and it feels like a thousand hands in one. Slowly, she picks her way along the well-worn path between the stalagmites and stalactites, taking small, careful steps. The fire retreats, the shadows grow, until finally, we squeeze around the corner and find ourselves standing before a cleft in the limestone.

She’s right. It IS dark, out there. It’s the kind of darkness where existence stops; where your eyes invent movement, to avoid coming to terms with that fact.

And yet...

Wraith stares at it, perfectly still. Then, she looks up at me. “I haven’t talked to anybody in a long, long time,” she whispers. “But I’m glad it was you.”

“Oh,” I say, lump in my throat. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“Just— this.”

“Don’t be,” she says.

I hold her hand, as she considers her ending.

Then she steps into the night.

Illumination *inhales*.

It swallows the little girl called Wraith, and the places she called home. Pieces of cave and house and city are reduced to flickers in a zoetrope as I’m vomited up through their layers. There’s so much, so vast it collects its own gravity, a churning, spinning tumour of nation-fragments shocked by its sudden absence of a heart.

For a moment, it hangs over Illumination.

Then it falls.

It falls, then BURSTS as it punches the membranes. Souls are dashed on electromagnetic rocks. The tumour starts to burn, a magnesium flare, and so does its web of connections and threads.

It’s barely noticeable at first, but amidst the night, I see *yellow*. Colour blooms, like a weed, seeing it first sunlight after endless winter.

Red, green, blue. They sparkle across my senses.

Purple, orange, silver.

The colours dye the walls of the Wraith's old jails, worming their way through cells and tunnels as they split apart, ablaze. They wash across Illumination's seas and songs, the cannonball of its suicide reverberating across more dimensions that I can fathom. Colours paint the ropes of desire it used to bind this place together, and it's like watching a chain reaction – an old power station being demolished, the smokestacks toppling into each other, one by one – and as they do, the sun rises, illuminating vast curtains of aurora.

Among this, the Wraith fades.

Slowly, it becomes part of the symphony: both its light, and its darkness.

Millions of souls flock around its grave, and in great, magnetic arcs, they follow its lead. They become part of Illumination itself.

Rainbow galaxies swim before my eyes.

Illumination breathes, and breathes, and *sings*.

Lilac. Cerulean. Amber. Vermilion.

I wish you could've seen it.

Without the Wraith, though, I'm adrift. I'm a raindrop, still, and this is a maelstrom, still, and there's nothing to stop me from cannoning into the sea.

Except myself. I hold my future in my hands and reach out towards Finn; I close my eyes and REACH for him, for home, for everything I want to do, for a future, for my life, and I can feel him reaching too, I *feel* it! His hand, mine, our fingers outstretched, and—

A tether in my chest. It sprouts. Tiny roots, at first, then a vine. It races across the afterlife and I take comfort in its strength, as it stitches itself together from physics and fragile, transient hope. It splits as it grows, forming new connections, rewriting old ones that were always there. It drags me onwards, holds me up, searching, flipping pages and pages and pages until—

"Alex!" Finn shouts. "You did it! You're back, you're back, you're back!"

My tether meets his. They wind together tight.

Sinas and Wake smash into me. I wish I could leap into their arms.

"I lost the portal," Finn says. "I can't find our way home." He's cut off as aftershocks of the Wraith's demise crash over us, nations clamouring to fill their newfound freedom. The portal's anchor has long washed away, though threads remain, unravelling still: Thebe, Titan, Mars, Earth, other planets unfamiliar, reflected in mirrors.

I tell my friends not to worry. See, that sensation of 'home' has always been carried inside my heart, the one that flares so brightly when I think of my parents, and the dirt, and my dog's smelly breath. I cherish it, for how much it weighs me down and buoys me. Now, those feelings are joined by so many more, and I've always known the way because *I* am an anchor.

Time to run.

I race to the portal, on its dying gasp. Its fraying edges whip across the universe, snapped cables.

As we approach, the events of Thebe become clearer.

I see Haru's body go limp as her soul – finally – is torn forever free, held in the Wraith's grasp until the very end. She collapses, her hands still gripping the portal emitter's controls.

I see commandos break though the barricaded portal room entrance, ordering Maritime's team to surrender. I see the tender glance she shares with Farah, and the words she mouths.

She tries to stop the intruders. They gun her down.

I see Farah realise, too late, that we've won. The portal's closed, the Wraith's dead, and we aren't— if only there wasn't a huge, ship-sized missile scheduled to impact Thebe station, without the time to stop it.

Ping!

Her eyes flick to the portal.

Ping! Ping! Accelerating chimes, as the locator beacons on our suits reconnect and start blasting proximity alerts. She rushes towards the pit. *Ping ping ping ping pingpingpingpi—*

We tumble out of portal. I fall to my knees (notable, because I now have real knees again, in real gravity, on a real floor). I'm disoriented. I'm exhausted. I'm so spent. My skin crawls inside my suit, a blast of sensation that knocks me sideways, and I want to scratch it, take it off, but I can't. It's too much.

A figure drops into the pit beside us. It's Farah.

It's good to see her.

Her smile is wide, but her eyes are sad. "The ship," she says softly. "It's going to hit. Ten seconds."

I nod. It's all I can do.

"You did it," she says, and joy was never more bittersweet. The gate, behind us, is barely a whisper, growing smaller real-time as it dies. Sinas and Wake have collapsed on the floor. Voices shout, approaching from above. Finn, for his part, is staring intently at the portal's last flickers.

"One way to find out," he says to himself.

He grabs the portal. Reality *shifts*.

My consciousness lags slightly, as if loading a new map.

Farah closes her eyes, waiting for the end.

Then, five seconds later, she opens them.

"We're still alive," she says, bewildered. We're in the same spot, as far as I can tell, but clearly, something's changed. "What did you do?!"

"I moved us," Finn replies.

"Moved us WHERE?"

He passes out.

Feels only right that I do, too.

FINN XVIII

My eyes open.

An unfamiliar ceiling.

Turning my head proves to be a mistake, so I stay a while, gazing at this ceiling. I let myself believe there are no more villains to defeat; no more countdowns to beat; only a cream-coloured ceiling, etched with faint grid lines that curve to infinity. (For sketching, they'd be handy to nail down perspective.)

This doesn't look like Thebe station.

I rub my eyes, with an arm that aches at the shoulder; there's enough grit in them to build a sandcastle. At least the sleeping pad I'm lying on is comfortable. I could simply close my eyes, relax, go back to sleep...

"Finn! Finnfinnfinn! You're awake! Yippee!" Wake appears, footsteps skidding, leaning over me.

"Eugh," I reply. "Ack."

"Here, have some water."

The water helps.

"Don't even THINK about pretending you don't know me," she says sternly. "This time, I remember what happened. You won't get away it. Wait— do *you* remember me? Finn, who am I? What's my name?"

"I know who you are, Wake." This is a lot for my sand-filled brain, and unlike my eyes, I can't just reach in there and start dusting. "How long was I asleep?"

"Maybe a day."

"...Are we still on Thebe?"

"Yep, yep yep! About that – this is one of the PRC dropships, because Thebe Station wasn't in great condition, in terms of being, um, airtight, so this ship's being used as a medbay, and one of the other Australian ships is our command centre – it's chaos. But! Everyone's doing their best."

More people are laid out on sleeping pads in this quiet, low-ceilinged room: at least two dozen, sleeping off their injuries, amid haphazard piles of medical supplies. Wake hands me the fluid bulb, which tastes like electrolytes, and I

grunt a hoarse ‘thank you’. My MeshMate informs me this dropship is named 黄鼠狼之月, or *Weasel Moon*. (I hope there’s a *Ferret Comet* out there, too.)

“Where’s Sinas? And Alex?” I ask.

“Sinas is checking on our comms relay to Earth. Farah sent a first ‘we’re alive, please rescue us ASAP’ message, but we need to make sure we don’t miss the return call. Alex is taking a break – she’s been helping set up the shelters. I told her she should rest. She didn’t want to, but I MADE her.” She grins like a goblin. Then she turns away, answering a MeshMate ping. “One second. *What? Yes, tell them to use the AutoDrones. They can override the security layer if... no, listen, they can OVERRIDE the security layer through the BACKUP PORT! The AVX one. Yep, I’ll run over there if they can’t get it working.*” She sighs. “I swear, nobody here has tried hacking a security drone before. It’s not hard!”

I try standing. It doesn’t go too badly, though I feel a little naked without my vacsuit. “Everyone’s okay, then.”

“We’re more okay than we should be, thanks to you. All seventy-eight of us.”

“Seventy-eight!?”

“Uh-huh! Every mango who was SO keen to get their hands on Illumination is okay with ‘cooperating’ now. Weird, huh? At first, the PRC and Australian soldiers didn’t wanna share, but they’ve decided to be friends. It means we *might* have a chance of getting home. Even the stranded GemConnors are pitching in, with their AutoDrones... very progressive of them.” She rolls her eyes. “C’mon, the others have been so yakking excited for you to wake up.”

Wake leads me through the PRC dropship. I have so many questions, but I resist asking them. I’m content to put one foot in front of the other.

“Maybe this isn’t the best time,” she says suddenly, turning around, “but your mum, when we took out the Wraith—”

“I guessed what might happen.”

“Do you want to see her body?”

We enter another room, with another low, white ceiling, except this one is dimmed, to save precious energy, and chilled, to preserve those inside. Each prone, unmoving occupant is made anonymous by a reflective silver bag. Wake directs me to my mother’s, then waits outside.

I kneel there, for a while.

Eventually, I unzip the bag, along the side, to reveal a hand. Its fingers are stiff, its skin cold, and yet, its grip is so achingly familiar.

I imagine how it would feel if it were warm, and alive.

With my other hand, I reach for the top of the bag, and peel it back until I can see her face.

It’s serene. Puffy, in the low gravity, but all the lines are there.

I should feel something.

I DO feel something, but it’s intellectual: mostly regret, at not telling her certain things I thought I’d have more time to tell her.

It would’ve been nice, to tell her about Sinas.

It would’ve been nice, for her to see me finish high school.

It would've been nice, to reassure her I'd figured things out. Not everything, but... some things. I think these thoughts, pretending she'll hear them, but her hand stays stiff and cold, and her eyes stay bloodshot and open.

Wake, losing her battle with curiosity, has edged into the morgue. "There was a suggestion floated that we should bury them here," she adds. "Your mum, Maritime, and the rest..."

It makes sense. Transporting bodies to Earth is a non-trivial energy cost.

"Would she want that?" Wake asks. "To be buried here?"

"I— don't know. I don't think she'd mind. She was never that sentimental."

"What was she, then?"

"I wish I'd wasted less... time, being a stranger." Wake's going to probe, so I force myself to articulate the thought. "She was away so much, and I never opened up much, either. I could've asked her about her life. I could've told her so much more than I did." I shake my head. "*I'm* the one who should've figured out she wasn't herself. I'm trying to remember what her last good day was – her last sincerely good day – but I never asked her what a good day was, for her."

"You weren't strangers, Finn. You know what her good days were like."

"I'm not sure I do."

"Then try telling me."

I swallow, and resist asking Ferdinand to make up a plausible-sounding answer. I can do this. Maybe Izzy's right. "She liked simple things. Complicated science, but simple things. She'd call her sister—"

"She has a sister?"

"Yeah. She has – had – a lot of siblings, in Japan. She'd always call her sister, though, after a long day in the lab. Then she'd eat a big meal: nothing fancy, just food from home. Maybe she'd do more work afterwards. She liked her work. Then, when I'd come home from school, she'd ask if I did well on my test, or if I'd won any prizes, and sometimes— sometimes, I'd be able to say yes, and she'd—"

Suddenly, it wells up inside me: the wave that makes me choke on my words.

Wake puts her arm around me. "It's okay," she says.

It's not, but I want to believe her.

"I'm sorry. I'm going to cry."

"Do you want me to leave?"

"No." I close my eyes, keeping the tears inside, so eager to wrap themselves around the next syllable that comes out of my mouth.

Eventually, it passes.

I give myself one last day, with the soft lines of her palm, and sternness of her face.

The rest of my life will be viewed through this lens. It'll get farther and farther away, but will always be there, focusing how I see the universe.

"Regrets are normal," Wake says. "It's like— your heart trying to teach you a lesson, y'know? Which sometimes doesn't feel nice, but it's better if you listen."

I stare at my mum, and I imagine her perfect day. Perhaps her final hours came close. I let go of her hand, and zip the bag up over her face, and as I do, the faintest flicker of colour dances on her lips.

Trick of the light.

Bye, Mum. I'm sorry.

I'll make you proud.

I follow Wake to the closest airlock and slip into a vacsuit so we can embark upon 'a quest'. As we step outside, I'm expecting Thebe's harsh, eerie light, but instead, the ambience is reminiscent of a particularly late night, when the stars are out and the moon's half-full. We half-walk half-slide down a dusty slope, emerging from the dropship's shadow, which is perched on the crater's rim like a sleeping bird of prey. A multitude of tracks criss-cross the fine grey sand between Thebe station and various points of interest: a cluster of escape pods, a field of solar panels, plus an Aussie ship parked on the opposite ridge. Many of the station's buildings look *melted*, the polymer curling spaceward, as if electric devils clawed their way out from hell. The strangest thing, though, is there's no Jupiter. The sky – usually filled with swirling, orange planet – is empty.

"Wait a sec," Wake says. "It'll show up." She points at the stars, and I follow her finger. They look like... stars. Until some of them start blinking out.

The phenomenon starts at the horizon, then climbs, in the shape of a black semicircle. I want to interpret it as a physical object but it's more an amorphous LACK of stars, a shadow, a disk, swallowing constellation after constellation, along with half the sky. Then, in an eyeblink – between one arcsecond and the next – a shroud lifts.

The lack becomes a planet.

I can't immediately bound its size, but there's vertigo in how *close* it seems. Its surface is scored by canyons, mountains, bands of dirty ice. Certain fragments appear strangely geometric, where canyons curl themselves into squared-off spirals, and lone mountains form sharp, regular pyramids. My mind invents cities on frozen shorelines, but the surface is dark, without obvious life.

"Whoa," I say.

"Meet Planet Nine."

"Planet NINE? The one from all the theories?" (Astronomers have long wondered if such a planet might exist, way out beyond Neptune's orbit, subtly influencing the gravitational patterns of the solar system over aeons. It's a great Wikipedia page to skim-read.)

"Did you know that's where you were shifting us? If you didn't, I win." At my confusion, she explains, "I had a bet with Sinas on whether you had any idea what you were doing." She shakes her head, with mock disappointment. "He has too much faith in you."

"I barely understand how I did it. I was just, uh— desperate."

“Well, everyone agrees you did A Good Thing, since it means we’re still alive, but it would’ve been nicer if you hadn’t shifted us quite so far.” She waves at the disk, then points to another star sitting close above its circumference, which is brighter than the rest but not by much. “There’s the sun.”

“It looks quite far away,” I say.

“Correct!”

I find myself staring. “Planet Nine... woah...”

“Yeah, take your time. Anyway, I have many many MANY questions, like ‘how’, and ‘why’?”

“It just felt possible, instinctually... that’s all I can say about ‘how’. As for ‘why’, I saw this place while we were in Illumination. You must have, too – the black planet, hovering alongside Mars and Earth?” I’m rationalising the calculus of that split-second ‘move/die’ decision. “My guess is that the portal stays tied, in a way, to every place it was ever opened. The cosmic string never quite comes un-done. I didn’t want to shift us to Mars or Earth, in case Thebe started falling out of the sky, so I picked this place. Again, it was mostly instinct. Sorry for the lack of lucent answer.”

“You’re saying the portal was opened *here*, once upon a time? By whom?”

I shrug.

“You’re insane,” Wake says.

“So are you. I can’t believe that’s *Planet Nine*, though.”

She punches my shoulder playfully. “Apparently, it’s five times the mass of Earth, it’s mostly rocks and ice, and orbits at an average distance of 350 astronomical units.”

“That IS far.”

“Heck yeah! It’s so far! You might’ve also noticed the cloaking field??? That weird shadow isn’t totally natural – it seems to hide the planet from the inner solar system. If you’re looking at it from the wrong direction, you can’t see it. That’s why nobody’s been able to spot it.”

“How mysterious.”

“Right? But it’s a mystery for AFTER the rescue ship gets here. Survival first. Oh, Pluto’s gonna be so mad,” she adds under her breath. “Pluto’s gonna hate you so bad, Finn.”

“I have nothing against Pluto. Pluto is very nice.”

“Tell that to Pluto after nobody remembers them anymore.”

We circle onwards Thebe station, keeping to the ridgeline where the ground is firmer. As we approach, I notice increasing signs of activity: workers lit by the glare of portable welders, bots ferrying supply crates between parked ships, and three holoflags flying above a central warehouse, announcing Australia, China, and the GemCon logo. Perhaps a few of Maritime’s crew are out there too, lending a hand.

“Supplies are— what’s the word? *Scarce*,” Wake says. “It’s rough. But everyone’s helping. Oh, there they are!”

She flaps her arms at a pair of people in the distance, who start running towards us, then *flying* towards us, their suit-jets kicking up dusty plumes.

Alex is first to arrive. She tumbles to a stop, then picks herself up, enveloped by the ensuing grey cloud. “Finn!” she exclaims. “Back from the dead. You’re making a habit of that, huh?” Her hug is half-a-tackle, and it backs me up a step. My head spins. “Did Wake give you the tour already?”

Sinas is slower but looks cooler doing it, gliding along Iron-Man-style. He waves at me as he shuts off his jets, only needing one foot to arrest his forward momentum. I wave back, trapped in Alex’s arms. I’m too chicken to hug *him* with everyone around (even though I want to).

I’m happy.

My treacherous mind doesn’t want me to be. It whispers betrayals, such as ‘what if this is a dream? What if you’re still stuck in Illumination, in another nation you’ve invented?’ It’s easy to feel seasick, adrift, to couch reality in a set of ‘what-ifs’.

For now, I don’t heed those warnings, as we sit on Thebe’s sands in the starlight. I let Ferdinand curl up beside me, and his tail swishes as I run my fingers down his back. He shivers appreciatively, spines standing to attention, sufficiently bemused by the sight of a new planet in the sky

“What do you think you’ll do, once you get back?” Alex asks (to nobody in particular). “I’m pretty keen to not be here anymore, but I reckon I’ll be sad, once this is fully over.”

“Admin,” I murmur.

“Whaddaya mean, ‘admin’?” Izzy asks.

“Paperwork. Interviews. Hospital stays. Quarantine. Media training. Legal statements—”

“Nooooo, stop! Stop!”

“I’ll take a few days of paperwork, though,” Sinas replies. “Over zombies, or space battles.”

Alex nods emphatically. “Earlier, I was thinking I’ll have to tell SO MANY Mesh servers about this story—”

“Your twenty Mesh servers of fanfic friends?” Wake asks.

“Yeah, those. Which is nothing compared to your million-follower hive, but still, it’s a lot of servers, and at what point do I start copy-pasting the same ‘hey, I got stuck in a ridiculous horror-movie conspiracy and technically went to hell’ message? But I won’t. I’ll make myself relish the telling, every single time, because that’s what I want to do, right? Tell stories.” She gazes out over the starlit hills, to where the faintest hint of sunlight catches the station’s crop of solar panels, freeing them from Planet Nine’s shade.

That light will grow, as the day does. A few panels might even spark to life. They won’t produce enough energy to run more than a calculator, but even so, the thought is nice, as warm oxygen cycles through my helmet, and Thebe’s gravity holds me close. (Secretly, I’m also quite pleased with myself for inserting the moon into a reasonably sensible orbit. Good job, me.)

Alex flops backwards onto the dirt, spreadeagled, her visor full of stars. “That’s who I want to be, y’know? That’s how I want to change the world. I wanna tell stories that are fun, full of cringe romances and dumbass action sequences and sledgehammers for metaphors. I’ll tell stories that help people understand what the world is, to them. To help them figure out what the world *should* be. I’ll do it, even if books are relics and you sleepers barely read anymore.” She snorts. “Which sounds bloody naïve and self-important, I know.”

“It’s okay to dream,” Sinas says.

“Thanks, mate.”

“I mean it.”

“I did too! That was a genuine ‘mate’, not a sarcastic one. You’ll learn.”

“Ah.” He glances at me for help, but all I can do is shrug. (He’ll learn.)

“What’s on your agenda, then?” Alex asks him. “You don’t need to give me a serious answer, but I’ll also judge you if you don’t.”

“Sometimes you’re a hard person to be around. Do you realise that?”

“Yeah.”

He smiles, to mask the pain. “I think I’ll start by taking down my parents’ organisation. From the inside.”

“Woah, really?” Wake asks.

“Yeah. And I think I can fucking do it, too.” He stares at his feet, cross-legged. “Can you imagine if we took the resources being dumped into Sapien Security and leveraged it for something *positive*? It could do a ton of good. Plus, it’s appealing to think about helping those brainwashed kids find their own peace. Most aren’t true believers – they just need a push. And maybe, those pushes will turn into ripples, and waves...” He shakes his head. “It’s nice to finally focus on something more than ‘escape’.”

“Sounds like a big job,” Alex says. “And a halo dream.”

“I ALSO don’t want my life to be defined by rubbish parents, so after that, I’ll be... a zoologist, or a doctor. Or a racer?” He spreads his hands. “A serious answer, as requested.”

“I like it,” I say.

“Yay.” His face lights up with genuine appreciation. “Still gonna be a space engineer?”

Signs point to ‘yes’, but now I understand why. (I’m not sure when I figured it out – probably during one of those times Alex was hogging the protagonist spotlight.) It’s also not necessary to *have* a reason, for doing something. I like drawing because I like drawing. I like cooking because a guy’s gotta eat. There is, however, a Reason I fancy building spaceships.

It’s because I want to help.

Well, not just that. Doctors help. MeshTechs help. Farmers help. But when I think of the scientific journey from where humanity was, a hundred years ago; to where we are, exploring one tiny solar system; to where we’ll be, aeons from now, in our magical sci-fi future in which we’re spread across a galaxy... I want to contribute to that. Don’t you? Don’t you want to consider what our society

might look like by that point, and imagine how much better it could be? With the spaceships comes fairness, and progress, and hope (a fair suck of the sauce bottle, as Alex might say). If our species is going to survive, I always felt I should try taking a couple of steps along that road, no matter how unimportant they might end up being.

Exploring the universe is a pretty ‘route one’ manifestation of the concept of progress, I’ll grant you, but I can’t help how much it inspires me. It’s like my mum, with her physics – she wanted to help, and was lucky enough to enjoy how she did it. (The inventors of *Illumination* wanted to help, too, which is deserving of respect, even if they were drawn in the wrong direction, over time. I’ll just have to make sure that doesn’t happen to me.)

I tell my friends this. It feels scary, and exciting, and clumsy.

But the reason’s mine to treasure.

“You guys already know my goals,” Wake says, with the air of a for-profit pastor bestowing wisdom upon her congregation. “Yes, I’m gonna rule the world, *actually*. Yes, I’m gonna make sure what’s happened to me never ever happens to anybody ever again, and therefore bring about a new age of empathy and justice and peace—”

“You’re so valid,” Alex says.

“—but after this, I’ll do it SO much better. No more missteps. It’s like, hmm, how do I put this? I can see the map more clearly, and concep— conceptualise? The bigger picture. Before I was bulldozer. Now I’m a bulldozer with a *brain*. And safety railings. Oh, also! Also, it’s okay if I don’t achieve every one of my goals immediately because vision takes *time* and consistent care.” She gives the horizon two thumbs up. “Wow, aren’t you guys proud of me for learning?”

“Yeah!” Alex whoops, clapping. “Go Wake!”

“Thank you, thank you.”

“I’d like to think,” Sinas says, “we would’ve arrived at these same revelations if we *hadn’t* gone through all this trauma.”

He’s got a point. Most people don’t need an inter-dimensional odyssey to figure out what they want to do with their lives.

(I bet it helps, though.)

Wake brushes dust off her suit, and sneezes reflexively inside her helmet. Then, she stretches her arms behind her, fingers laced together. It looks satisfying. It *also* looks like she wants to say something more.

“I, um, had an idea? It might not be appropriate.” She fishes for an object inside a suit pocket, and cups it in her palms: a small 3D-printed sculpture, featuring a tall, athletic guy in a footy singlet.

I’d consigned him pretty swiftly to the standard ‘bro’ archetype: great at sport, fine at school, with parents who are kinda-sorta-rich, but uninterested in the stuff *I’m* interested in. There’s a certain type of person who goes to the gym and parties with girls instead of staying up too late playing *MeshSims*, which doesn’t mean they’re not friendly, or kind – they’re just in a different orbit to me. Over time, though, I learned he had a contagious laugh, and he wanted to go to

the Olympics for swimming, and he liked the same MeshSims I did, and he doted on his little sister. (In the end, it wasn't enough time.)

"I thought we could leave it here, as a memorial, since Starfish is gone, and Tao's still missing," she says.

Nobody disagrees, although 'missing', at this stage, feels optimistic.

Wake plants the model in the sand, then digs out a rectangle to mark the area – a moat that will never know water. Sinas scrawls a message in the corner with his laser knife, melting grains into blackened glass.

His sister's words.

"I keep imagining we'll get a message from him," Alex murmurs. "His voice, telling us he got rescued, saying... *'wow, have I got a great story to tell you guys!'* And we'd laugh, everything would be fine."

"We didn't see him in Illumination," Sinas replies. "It's possible."

Alex keeps the *'It's not'* to herself.

In another world, Tao's the one standing here, instead of me.

In a better world, maybe we're all standing here.

In a worse one... hmm, let's not think about that. I hope for his parents' sake he does turn up alive, but there are plenty of others who won't. Their names and the differences they made echo in my mind. Maritime. Pendant. Khorin. Javier. Mum.

Our memorial is a little slapdash, but without wind or weather, it'll stay.

"It feels like cheating," Alex adds. "Getting a second chance. *I* got to come back, when so many others didn't."

"Deciding whether any of this is 'fair' isn't helpful, in my opinion," Sinas replies.

"You're right," she sighs. "Of course you're right. But I can't help turning it over in my head, and the worst part – best part? – is shit WILL keep happening. It's impossible to predict how this'll go, once we 'reveal' Illumination."

"Don't you wanna find out, though?" Wake asks. "Isn't that EXCITING?"

"You and I are very different people, but I'll try." She glances at her hand, opening then closing her fingers, holding an invisible gift. "I keep seeing— never mind. We should get back to work. Farah's gonna wonder where we are."

Just like that, it's back to business.

"We're still due to check on the solar comms station," Sinas interjects. "That was our original reason for coming here, before our sleeping princess woke up."

"He's *your* princess," Alex retorts, "but yeah."

I blush.

"I'll go. It won't take long." Sinas gives me a sidelong glance. "Finn – come with me?"

FINN XIX

Our paths divide.

Alex and Wake start trekking down the bowl of the crater, towards the central complex. Sinas and I walk in the opposite direction, to a collection of drop pods clustered round a makeshift antenna. We skirt past an impact site, where a drone crash has dug a long, deep furrow, tipped by the black star of an explosion. Even parts of buildings are protruding from the dirt, damaged by assault teams or stray ship-to-ship ordnance. In the half-light, there's a certain eeriness to the wreckage and the way it lies buried in the landscape.

This atmosphere is somewhat shattered when Wake starts singing over the radio. *<Rain drips from the open sky, to block your wings and stop you flying...>*

I can HEAR Alex's stony silence.

<Thunder roars from the clouds, that's why— Alex? Alex? You have to join in.>

<Nah.>

<Alex. Please. We gotta stop that fire from dying— ow! Physical violence is never the answer!>

<If you want me to sing, pick a song that ISN'T LAME!>

<OK! Choose a song! Start singing!>

<...You don't expect me to—>

<Start. Singing.> I assume Wake's using an open MeshLink intentionally, but I hope she's not expecting *me* to contribute. There's a wait, as we walk, and Alex comes to accept her predicament. Eventually, her voice returns – low, a little tuneless, like she's trying to sing under her breath.

<I walk a lonely road, the only one that I have ever known. Don't know where it goes, but it's home to me, and I walk alone...>

<Really?> Wake asks.

<What's wrong with Green Day?>

<Green Day is a hundred years old!>

<And they're still good! I walk this empty street, on the Boulevard of Broken Dreams—>

Sinas helps her out. <—*where the city sleeps, and I'm the only one, and I walk alone.*>

Their voices crackle as the Mesh struggles to relay itself across this desolate rock and Wake, despite her reservations, knows the tune. <*My shadow's the only one who walks beside me. My shallow heart's the only thing that's beating. Sometimes, I wish someone out there will find me. Til then, I walk alone.*>

I find myself mouthing the words alongside them. (Perhaps I'm biased, but Sinas' voice is nicest.)

<Great work!> Wake says, giggling. <We're doing this every night from now on.>

Alex groans. <You know I can block your Mesh calls.>

<Nope, I'm visiting in *person*. We all are! If we book tickets way ahead of time, it's super affordable. I dunno if our school holidays line up, but we can talk about it.>

She murks the MeshLink, and Sinas and I are left to each other's company.

I don't hate Wake's proposal, oddly enough, provided it involves activities other than karaoke.

We're far enough past the crater's edge that I can no longer see the base. Or much else, really: Planet Nine is descending slowly to the other horizon, and as it does, it blocks more and more already-weak sunshine. Sinas seems content to walk in silence, and in any case, I'm not sure what to say to him. (You'd think I'd have an idea, by now, but old habits die hard.)

The drop pods are a clutch of coffins, nestled in the sand. They're surrounded by a web of wires, jury-rigged to draw power from their emergency generators and funnel it into a five-metre comms dish; it's clearly been stolen from elsewhere, bolted to a gimbal that lets it slowly scan the hemisphere of the sky. We pick our way beneath and over cables as Sinas slots a disk into the transmitter's base. The limited space is almost cosy, the dish swivelling with admirable persistence.

Sinas explains they're also working on antenna for Thebe's far side. It's hard to route a signal there without anything to bounce it off (and/or fifty kilometres of spare data cabling) so the hope is that any reply from Earth is blasted at us for long enough to catch it with this receiver, as Thebe rotates.

While he's downloading data, it gives me time to think.

Unfortunately, I think about the hole mum leaves.

It won't be THAT long till I'm eighteen, but in the meantime, I need to decide what to do. Could Farah help me? Could I go stay with Alex? Or Sinas? Or attend boarding school like Wake? I could live on my own, for a little while, but long term... at least I've got more options than I thought I did.

I'm good at being independent. That doesn't mean I won't miss her.

"It gets easier," Sinas murmurs. "Remembering Tao back there made me think of Marko, too. Tao losing his sister, me losing my brother – there are similarities. It might've been nice to talk to him about it."

“Was I being that obvious?”

“Lucky guess.” He exhales loudly. “I have this thought, sometimes, where I want people to understand how it feels. I don’t want them to experience it first-hand, obviously. That would be cruel. But I want to not be alone. Now with you, and your mum, it feels like *I’m* the one watching from outside, who doesn’t really know what it’s like.” A forlorn smile. “I wanted to say I’m here, anyway.”

“Thanks, Sinas.” I don’t know what this is supposed to feel like either, or if I’m doing it right, or what. That’s the promise of empathy, I guess; reaching your hand out to another person, in the dark.

“I’ll always obsess over it,” he continues. “Even though I got ask him myself, I’ll always wonder if I’m a bad person for wanting to keep racing, after he died; if I’m only doing it to distract myself, or rebel against my parents. Then I wonder if *because* of that, my parents are harder on me, or more pissed off, because they believe I was a bad influence on Marko and it was partially my fault... plus, good things. I also think about good things.” He nods to himself. “How about you?”

I’m staring hard at Sinas’ back, so instead, I stare at my boots. “I think that... I am who I am because of her, mostly. And what we managed to do over the past week – I never would’ve believed / could do that. As in, I knew I was pretty good at taking exams, but this?” I shrug. “The nice part is that personally, I like who I am. Especially now.”

“I like who you are, too. Okay, download’s done.” He grins, then gently pats my helmet (which doesn’t stop this absurd crush I have from deepening.) Then he swings past me to the edge of the pods, and leans against one, looking out across the moon.

The top half of his body is lit, while the rest is in shadow, barely bright enough to see his expression and the way his eyes fixate, unblinking, on the rippled, open plains. I follow him like a puppy. I’ve never been this obsessed. Part of me is convinced I should draw away, shut it down, but a larger part has already given in, in order to keep listening to him talk, and seeing him smile, and later, when we’re alone... he can pat my head for real, and I can stick one of my hands underneath his shirt, and make him shiver as my fingers drag across his skin, and it would be so warm...

Sorry.

“I only came here because they mentioned my brother,” Sinas murmurs. “I didn’t want to come, but—well, it doesn’t matter. What’s relevant is somewhere along the way, a truth and a lie got switched.” His brow furrows. “Because I *don’t* want to go back to Earth yet; I’d rather stay out here.”

“Why?”

“Only here, can I be... me.”

There’s a peacefulness, to the frozen landscape. Loneliness, too. “You don’t believe that anymore, do you?”

“No. Not really.” He glances at me, and I find myself lost in his freckles, stardust on his nose. I wish I could touch them and count every single one, but the tyranny of vacuum separates us.

Slowly, he leans forwards, until our visors touch. Perhaps it's placebo, but I can sense his warmth, through the plastic. Hear his breath.

He looks down, not meeting my eyes, as I start counting freckles.

"What is this?" he asks.

"I don't know."

"What are we doing?"

"I don't know."

"I don't want to mess it up."

"Me neither."

"So, what happens once we get back?"

"We... need to work that out." Now, thinking about it, it makes me slightly nervous. "We can keep seeing each other. Can't we?"

"We live in different cities. It might not be easy."

"There are MeshSims."

"There are."

"Which means it doesn't matter if we can't be together in truespace—"

"MeshSims are different, though. They're nice, but they're not the same."

He bites his lip, amidst condensation that's swiftly vanished by his suit. "Maybe after I graduate, and you graduate, we can forge a path. We can go to the same university. I can find a job in Australia. Or you can find a job that's remote."

"After graduation? That's— a long time. That's a year."

"We ARE in school. It's hard to get around that."

"I don't want to wait a year before seeing you again."

"Awwwww." He smiles. "Cute. You like me that badly?"

"I..." *Yeah.*

"The problem is, my parents will never let me travel for fun. If you travel, maybe you could visit me? I could justify it. Unfortunately, it'll take me longer than a year to kick them out."

"I can travel. I can make that happen."

"Then how about... February? For a weekend? Does that sound good?"

"That sounds so good," I reply.

He hugs me, and I hug him back, and I let myself be drawn into the contours of his body. "Going back to school will really strange," he chuckles, and I feel it, in his chest. "Homework. Recess. *Routine.*"

"I reckon it'll be clearsky." I shift my head, onto his shoulder, as his arms squeeze tighter. "This isn't a revelation, but I'm a nerd, Sinas – I like school."

"Would you still like it if every single person's obsessed with pestering you about Illumination every ten seconds? If people learn what we did, and we're 'famous', we'll be forced to talk about it. That part will be strange."

"Yaaay. Talking." I'd roll my eyes, if anyone could see them. "I don't wanna be famous because of this. But – if it helps – I don't mind talking about it."

"You're so *nice*," he says, savouring the word.

"Really?"

"I pretend to be nice. You're genuinely nice."

“I think I’m an average amount of nice.”

Intellectually, I can go through the events of this week, and watch the Mesh recordings, and spell it out. In a wider context, though, knowing we’ll have an impact is... unbalancing. Once we’re home, and people start digging up details – that’s a wrecking ball, about to come swinging down.

Sinas takes another breath. His arms shift. “Do you like this?” he asks, barely more than a whisper. The shadow of the dish passes over us, the only two people in the world. My heartbeat blinks on my visor’s medical readout, and I swallow (I wonder if he feels *that*).

“Yeah. I like this,” I say.

“Then do you want to say it, officially?”

“Say what?”

“That we’re together. Dating. A couple.”

“Oh. Um, sure. Let’s be... that.”

“Wow. How *orbital*.”

He lets me go, and the world feels different.

His eyes are diamonds. I think I could murk God.

“C’mon,” Sinas says. “I wanna find a nice corner so I can kiss you again.”

He breaks into a run. My suit thrusters sputter, then roar to life. We hug the ground as it rises towards the crater rim, Thebe’s gravity feeble in our wake. Sinas is faster, and more confident, as the sands become a blur, but I’m game enough to follow as my stomach tries to quantum-slip through my ribcage. He twists around to face me and laughs. (Do I smile? I try to.) We hit the top of the ridge and for a second we’re arcing into black, twin fireworks, the parked ships worryingly far below, until Sinas aims down and we descend, hard, once more tracing the contour of the crater. Ice crystals sparkle. The remnants of Thebe Station grow closer. Likewise, it feels like we’re coming closer to an ending.

I wonder if I should try to remember this joy – this moment – in particular.

Nah, I don’t think so.

There’ll be many more moments.

Farah calls.

<Finn! You’re conscious. How are you feeling?>

I tell her I’m fine, basically. She asks us to come and find her, in one of the outbuildings. I wonder what she wants to talk about.

I’ve been awake for less than an hour, and already, this new status quo feels, well— like a status quo. It’s not THAT strange we’re stranded on a Jovian moon (that’s no longer a Jovian moon), with a ragtag conglomerate of different factions struggling to survive. It’s not THAT strange I kinda maybe have a boyfriend now. Right? (Insert ‘screaming/sweating/blushing’ emote here.)

I’ve never considered myself especially adaptable. Maybe it’s my survival instincts continuing to put in work, or maybe it’s because, comparatively, the

universe in this current moment is doing very little to actively to kill me. It leaves room for concepts like 'happiness', which is refreshing.

I can be happy Farah's here.

I can be happy about the phrase 'status quo'.

I can be happy that I'm happy.

We enter through an airlock into a sublevel, marked as 'Logistics Centre (temporary)'. Inside, it's chock-a-block, a couple dozen people beaver away at important tasks: sorting food supplies, repairing ship components, shaking their heads at spreadsheets. Ice drips down the regolith walls. A couple of camera drones circle overhead, projecting recorded footage of a firefight.

Farah's in the centre of the chaos, chatting to representatives from the other stranded factions. There are a lot of uniforms (soldiers in green, the corpo shills in blue and yellow, science teams in white) but nobody's carrying a weapon; instead, it's business, of the type which requires gesticulating and many hand-on-chin pauses. Alex and Wake are already here, and we take up space beside them in the corner.

"How's the transmitter?" Alex asks.

"Working," Sinas replies.

"Did something happen?"

"No. Why?"

"Hmm." She looks me up and down suspiciously. "Hrm."

Farah notices us, and waves. She trots over to our location, meeting apparently done. "The latest crisis," she says, "is we are running out of Coffee²." She wipes her forehead with the back of her sleeve and fishes a fluid bulb from her belt, taking a long, focused sip.

"Is that a 'crisis'?" Wake suggests.

"Yes. It is. Maritime and Haru would back me up on this." A contented coffee-sigh, then she turns to me. "I'm told this little stunt was YOUR doing."

"Yes. Um. Sorry."

"Tell me, what if you'd moved us to a different star? Another solar system? We'd have been in REAL trouble, then. The chances of ending up somewhere un-rescuable are alarmingly high. Approximately one hundred billion trillion to one."

"Right." I should tell her that in my head, when I latched onto this place, it didn't feel as far away as that. She probably wouldn't be satisfied with that answer, though, even if she's smiling.

"At any rate, you brought us to an interesting spot," she says, "so on the whole, a positive outcome. We'll just have to hope rescue does come." Another sip, which morphs into an empty-straw gurgle. "A few lucky explorers will get to map that new planet, up there. Did you know our survey team thinks there could be cities on the equator? *Cities*? Can you imagine... cities..."

"That could be you," Wake says.

"Ha. More likely to be one of you, I think." She shakes her head. "Mysteries for another day. Truthfully, the reason I wanted to talk to you is – how do I put

this? – in essence, it's to 'decide' what happened here. For the official record. I've been stalling about giving details, and thankfully, I've convinced everyone else here to do the same, while we're focused on the survival problem. Sooner rather than later, though, Illumination will become a problem again. Not only in the general sense; I mean for you." She considers the floor, as the bustle continues, unabated. "We can't rewrite the truth," she says slowly, weighing each word. "We can't keep the truth a secret. So, we need to decide what to do about it."

"Can't we just *tell* the truth?" Alex asks. "That's what we agreed, isn't it?"

"Yes, but I'm wondering if one of us will end up taking the fall. We did a lot that wasn't... sanctioned, or lawful. Yes, you saved our lives, and since you did, every government, corporation and media organisation is now free to pick your actions apart and tell us EXACTLY what you did wrong. Accessing classified information, destroying property... you're minors, which will shield you, but people will argue 'these kids cut off our access to the afterlife' and start pointing fingers. To some you'll be heroes. To others, villains." She purses her lips. "*If* we tell the truth."

"If we deleted our Mymory logs," Sinas suggests, "there'd be no way to verify exactly what happened. We could make up any story we wanted. Wake could do it."

"Thanks for assuming, but I'm not a wizard, Sinas."

"What do we do, then? Lie?"

Even if Wake can't, it's possible. A MeshMate's Mymory logs *can* be deleted. Memories can be erased. If that happened, one person could take the blame, and everyone else would become an innocent(ish) bystander. Depressingly, the only reason that's a possibility is because so many of the people involved are dead, but maybe—

"Don't," Alex mutters. "I can SEE you thinking about it."

"What?"

She bumps my side. "I say we roll with the punches. The last thing anybody's gonna worry about is whether we blew up *one* little station, given the mess that's still out there. What about the people who got possessed? Everyone on Titan, or in Jupiter's orbit? Do they stay dead forever? Are the lampires stuck here? Do they keep jumping from person to person, being little shits?"

"I wonder if they'll fade, slowly, now that Illumination's cut off," Sinas says.

"Or maybe, if one lives inside you for long enough, the two consciousnesses merge," Wake says. "Or what if it's a conjoined twins situation?"

"I can't say I have a definitive answer," Farah replies, "but you'll have to trust others to handle that aspect. Perhaps that's our path, if you're determined to be transparent: trust."

There is another, darker option.

It's that we aren't prosecuted, for what we did. We aren't celebrated, either. We simply... disappear. If we're the only ones who've been to Illumination and lived, we're too valuable to be left to our own devices, aren't we? Perhaps we're

so valuable somebody locks us up in a vault, like fusion bombs, ready to be brought out next time a president or TK wants to visit the space between. (The best protection might be to reveal the truth to the public – spew so much chaos we make ourselves hard to disappear – but that also makes us targets.)

I keep these thoughts to myself, for now.

“It’s real, now,” Alex murmurs. “Nobody’s going to care about gene hybrids, or AI replication anymore—”

“They will,” Sinas says.

“Okay, they will, but they’re also gonna care about THIS. This is the Mesh times a hundred. Everyone’s out there arguing about how much you can transform a person before they’re no longer a person, endless posthumanism-transhumanism-cyberhumanism discourse, and here we are, saying even dying isn’t the end.”

“Religious people have believed that for a long time, though.”

“Yeah, and those people are gonna find out they were RIGHT.”

“Partially right,” Sinas replies. “There’s a difference.”

“That won’t matter to them. ‘Hell is real’, ‘heaven is real’, ‘purgatory is real’ – those’ll be the headlines. Illumination is going to be used to manipulate people, to control people.”

“You really took Maritime’s words to heart, huh?”

“Sometimes, yes, I’m a little pessimistic,” Alex replies.

“It’s an opportunity,” Wake says. “It is. To be a better species. I really, really, really believe that.”

“Even after everything you’ve seen, of humans edging closer to extinction?”

“Yes!” Wake says.

“I hope you’re right. I just— want what did to mean something.” She sighs. “I want to have done something good.”

I, too, would rather believe we’ve done a good thing. Both here, and in Illumination, I want to believe a better world is possible. On the other hand, ‘meaning’ is a concept that gets ascribed to history, and to stories, by humans searching for it; in the moment, there’s chaos, and meaning comes after. (This, of course, doesn’t make that precariousness easier to cope with.)

“In other news,” Farah says, “we’ve scrounged up enough food, water, and air to hold out for several weeks. We’ll have energy for months. It’s starting to look... not *good*, but okay. I think we’ll make it.” She smiles wanly, and suddenly I can see the lines on her face, the bags under her eyes. “Even better, we’ll have a home to make it back to. With every transmission we attach a list of survivors, so at a minimum, your families should know you’re alive. If you’d like to send a message to them, we can, once contact is officially made. I should do that, too. There are people who’ll be missing me.”

I reckon Alex will be the main beneficiary of that, since— “Wait, you have a family?” I ask.

“Of course I have a family, Finn,” she replies, like a teacher to one of her favourite (but slightly slower) students.

“I, um, never realised.”

“You imagined that after losing Javier, I sat around moping for ten years?”

“...No...”

“Speaking of Javier, he did say a few words to us, before he left,” Alex adds. “I can’t remember exactly, but he mentioned the first night you met. He said he meant what he told you.”

“Ah.” She smiles. Beneath it are memories. “I did mope, for a while. I loved him, completely. But over time, well, I had to heal. Humans have a surprising capacity for healing.” She reaches out and tweaks my nose. “I remarried, a few years ago, to a woman I’m very glad to call my wife. Her name is Kimi. She knows a bit, about this – she knows about you, at least. We... have a child, too, on Mars. Three years old.” She’s lost for words, unsure of what more to say.

“I’m so sorry you got stuck with this bullshit,” Alex says, “and had to put yourself in so much danger.”

“It’s okay. I’m glad it’s okay. I didn’t want to tell you when the situation was complicated, but now that it’s less complicated, you could meet them. We’ll have to work out how the three of us... fit,” Farah adds.

I nod. Alex nods.

In the back of my mind, I’d wondered whether I might stay with Farah, after returning to Earth – if she could be my guardian (and eventually, my mum again). Perhaps that’s not possible, if she has a partner, and her own child. I wouldn’t want to be disruptive. What does that leave? I *definitely* can’t stay with Sinas unless I want to sign myself up for a cult—

“INCOMING TRANSMISSION!” a voice shouts. “WE GOT A SIGNAL! WE GOT IT!!”

“有信号了！”

“Venez écouter! Allez!”

There’s a rush to the centre as people crowd around a holoprojector. We join them, rubbing shoulders, eyes raised towards the heavens.

A crackle of static, as the transmission decodes.

A face appears, the bitrate low. It’s a man in uniform. Only the top half of his body is visible, with hints of a command deck behind him.

“Good afternoon,” he says. “*I am Captain Reckenrytter of the CAMS Mindful Venture. This ship has been assigned to rescue any survivors remaining on the shifted moon of Thebe. It sounds like you’re all a real long way from home, but we are already on our way. In fact*” – he steps aside, revealing a screen – “*I’m not sure if this’ll show up in the scene, but you might be able to spot a familiar sight, on our telescope feed: Earth. She’s a little cloudy today, but there’s a pep in her step, as always.*”

We can’t see it, but I can imagine it just fine.

“*The Venture’s still a fair ways out, but we’re burning real hard on a direct course to you. I’ll ask you to send us a list of any urgent medical needs and the exact number of people who are in your care, along with their affiliations. We’ll be rendezvousing with a supply ship as we swing past Neptune and we’ll need*

a concrete idea of what to carry – minimum viable mass, of course. Now, for any future communications, you can contact the Venture directly on this frequency, using the quantum encryption key attached to this message. We'll be listening."

The wave of warmth passing through the crowd is contagious, ushered by whispers and irresistible smiles of relief. I smile, too, and it's sweet, for the things we've gained, and bitter, for the things we've lost. Most of all, it's shared.

"To finish, I'll wish you fortitude and the best of luck, and I have only one, final question: can you hold out for three weeks?"

We exchange a glance.

Three weeks? I guess we'll have to.

The crowd starts to disperse. There's a flurry of activity, as work resumes.

Farah, in front of me, has her own final question. "Ready to go home?" she asks.

The question expands in my mind to encompass a galaxy.

Ready to start again?

Ready to run?

Ready to change the world?

How about you?

I straighten my shoulders and listen to the light inside.

I'm ready.

After

There's a boy staring at me. But I'm also staring at him, so let's not be hypocrites.

"What do you think?" I ask.

"Umm," he says.

"Wow. *Wow*." I shake my head.

"No, I—"

"Wow."

He looks around in a panic. His eyes find scenery that – to me, at least – is intimately familiar: red dirt, and gum trees, and distant farmland beneath a clear blue sky, that provides both a lovely sense of wide-openness and a higher probability of skin cancer later in life. (Hard to find a pro that doesn't have a bit of con attached.) The dataglass in his hands is light, and slim, but in my mind it's heavy, weighed down by expectation.

"It's good," he says. "I think you're a great writer. It's just... a lot?"

"Of course it's a lot – a lot happened!"

"Which makes it glitched, to see it written out like this. But I like it. I do." He smiles warmly, giving me the sun and, well, it's hard to stay mad at someone who's giving you the sun, especially if they're your drongo twin brother.

I'm lying on an old, weatherbeaten couch on Alex's front veranda. It's achingly hot, and my arms and legs are spreadeagled all over the place in a way that would be weird and embarrassing if we were in polite company. Luckily, we're in each other's company. "Did you send the draft to—"

"Yeah, I sent it to Wake. Man, she's doing insanely well, with her campaign stuff." Alex shades her face with one hand. "I sent it to your boyfriend too. When are you seeing him again?"

It makes me blush every time. *Every time!* "Next month."

"I'm keen to know how his little project's going. I'm guessing he can't say much, over the Mesh."

“Right.” I swipe away from Alex’s novel draft, past a page of university applications, and a sketch I’ve named *Starling Exploration Swarm (v1)*, until I set the dataglass down. It’s nice to relax, and simply listen; smell the air; feel the sun, and the shape of the future.

I could lie here forever...

But the universe awaits, and I can’t help but smile.

I bet tomorrow will be a really clearsky day.