

Back to Square One

For everyone who ever wanted to be acknowledged in one of these books.
Sure, why not.

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Pronunciation Guide:

| | |
|---------------|---------------------------------|
| Adrastea | Ahd-rah-STEE-ah |
| Aitne | AHYT-nee |
| Alex | AH-lehkhz |
| Amalthea | Am-ahl-THEE-ah |
| Arche | ARK-ee |
| Astraea | AA-stree-ah |
| Callisto | kah-LIS-toh |
| Carpo | KAR-poh |
| Coronatus | Koh-roh-NAH-tus |
| Corsair | core-SAIR |
| Daka'aranoa | DAHk-(inhaled ah)-Ahr-ahn-OH-ah |
| Darian | DAH-rec-an |
| Darius | dah-RAHY-us |
| Denham | DEHN-ahm |
| Elara | EHL-ah-rah |
| Endymion | en-DIM-ee-on |
| Fields | FEELDZ |
| Francesca | fran-CHEHS-kah |
| Ganymede | GAA-nih-meed |
| Garnele | gar-NEE-leh |
| Greif | GRAHYF |
| Grey | GRAY |
| Himalia | Hih-MAH-lee-ah |
| Kale | KAY-lee |
| Katrina | kah-TREE-nah |
| Kotaro | KOH-tah-roh |
| Lance | LANS |
| Lion | LEE-on |
| Locke | LAHK |
| Lucia | LOO-shee-ah |
| Marian | MAIR-ee-ahn |
| Marius | MAR-ee-oos |
| Micah | MAHY-kah |
| O'Malley | oh-MAL-lee |
| Pachi | PAH-ch(ee) |
| piniakc | (...hmm...) |
| Reana | reh-AH-nah |
| Riordan | REER-den |
| Rockford | RAHK-furd |
| Serena | Seh-RAY-nah |
| Sinope | suh-NOH-pee |
| Sunni | SUH-nee |
| Themisto | theh-MIS-toh |
| X-One/Two/... | cross-one/two/... |

Conversion Tables

Terra Firma Earth

| | |
|----------------|--|
| 1 bit | 12.4567 seconds |
| 1 min | 3.5294 minutes |
| 1 hour | 1.0000 hour |
| 1 day | 1.4167 days |
| 1 week | 0.8095 weeks (5.6667 days) |
| 1 month | ~0.8028 months (30-day month) (24.0833 days) |
| 1 year | 1.1209 years |
| 1 heptadecade | 1.9056 decades (19.0561 years) |
| 1 aeon | 3.2395 centuries (323.9530 years) |
| 1 hand | 4.0000 inches (10.1600 centimetres) |
| 1 li | 0.3107 miles (500.0000 metres) |
| 1 pence | \$ 0.05 USD |
| 1 rio | \$ 0.85 USD |
| 1 heptaderio | \$14.45 USD |
| 1 tack | 0.8824 pounds (0.4002 kilograms) |
| 1 stone | 15.0000 pounds (6.8039 kilograms)* |
| 1 heptadestone | 255.0000 pounds (115.6661 kilograms) |
| 1 tonne | 4335.0000 pounds (1.9663 metric tons) |

*one Terran stone is one avoirdupois pound heavier than one Earthling stone

Glossary (abridged)

| | |
|-------------------------|--|
| <i>(species):</i> | Of a race resembling an Earth (name of species); i.e. vole.** |
| <i>common:</i> | The lingua franca. Also, "common tongue." |
| <i>heptade(ca/ci)-:</i> | Seventeen. Because.*** |
| <i>holiday:</i> | Weekend. |
| <i>human:</i> | Terran racial self-identification. Identical to Earth usage. |
| <i>germane:</i> | Similar to German, but wrong (maybe <i>bad</i> German). |
| <i>grid:</i> | One of the four sections of latitudes and longitudes. |
| <i>gryphton:</i> | A large (winged) quadrupedal, comparable in size to a lion. |
| <i>mane:</i> | Hair on one's head. |
| <i>prior:</i> | One who has come before. Slang for a mentor. |
| <i>quad:</i> | A geographic division—similar to states or countries. |
| <i>session:</i> | The normal school day, or the duration of a class. |
| <i>skin:</i> | Identical to Earth usage; Terrans have little to no body hair. |
| <i>ursa:</i> | A bear. |

**This book is translated colloquially from Terran common to English: Terran race names resemble Earth names to simulate the Terran sense of identity.

***Numbers less than thirty-ish are exact. Metaphorical numbers like *thousands* are written as the colloquial decimal equivalent because *4913s* is harder to read.

The universe is a vast expanse, greater than anyone could ever imagine. Its unfathomable size makes it probable that anything might be possible—somehow, somewhere—perhaps just outside the realm of our understanding. The sheer enormity of the possibilities means that no single entity can claim exclusive providence over the Truth of the workings of the universe, because there is too much to discover to ever claim to understand it all with absolute, unwavering accuracy. Yet those who are content with the idea of never knowing the whole of the Truth are among the minority; it is both the goal and the curse of sentient life to question the purpose of the very gift of sentience itself. "Why are we here?" "What does it all mean?" "Where did we come from?" "Where will we go?"

Perhaps the most boggling mystery is the origin of the universe itself: What power could create such an awe-inspiring greatness? Was it created by an Almighty God who forged life in His own image? Was it borne on the backs of an infinite number of turtles, each one standing on the back of another? Was it billowed forth from the left eyebrow of a forest sprite, or expelled from the belly of a drunken titan? Did it explode from the reaction of a singularity composed of all matter condensed into a space smaller than that of an atom? Or did it just always exist, rendering the question of its creation as meaningless?

The theories behind the Truth are as diverse as the forms of life capable of such introspection. Each culture is as certain as any other that its view of the Truth is the correct one, even though any evidence that may have existed regarding the Truth has long ago mired itself in the substance of folklore and legend. What may be accepted as irrefutable historical record in the present day may in fact be an old clerical error, a distortion of witnesses' perception, or even a flagrant lie with the sole intent of deceiving future generations. In particular, proof that is based on physical evidence—such as documents and artifacts—can be lost, damaged, stolen, or even forged, only serving to complicate the ability to provide the unadulterated Truth to one's descendants.

The many beliefs regarding the Truth tend to be more similar than not, with basic concepts differing perhaps only in name or phrasing. Yet too often the slight differences are enough to have the unfortunate side effect of creating conflict between rival belief systems. Ironically, this runs contrary to the core belief systems of many of the warring cultures so bent on proving its own vision as the Truth as to lose sight of the very ideologies they claim to follow; throughout history, more blood has been spilled and lives have been lost over religions based on love and kindness than could ever prove sensical. Even peaceful societies preaching the rejection of all worldly materials may combat over something as base as the proper method of breathing in the path to reach enlightenment.

To help maintain order, deities preside over each belief system. These existential guardians watch over society via their messengers: clerics,

prophets, oracles. Like the religions that honour them, these deities vary in appearance, ability, and temperament, depending on the viewpoints of their believers. The gods and goddesses of Olympus were said to control birth, death, health, illness, the weather, the planets, and the stars above—even if the deities themselves possessed all-too-human faults.

As with their according belief systems, many of these deities are so similar across cultures that they may in fact be different names for the same entity: Good is that which is beneficial to the whole of society, while Evil is what seeks to disrupt it. In turn, those who do Good are rewarded, while those who do Evil are punished. For the most part, the concepts of Good and Evil are universal—even obvious. Yet some would promote Evil veiled as Good, and those who would follow such an entity are as convinced of that entity's Goodness as others are convinced of its Evilness. Though true Goodness is debated as a social exercise, it is the ultimate duty of the individual to discern for oneself what, if anything, is the Truth and how to act upon it in accordance.

Lesser deities also exist, inspired by fear or ignorance: A believer whose faith is wavering may worry that a demon is causing trouble and will pray to a higher deity for guidance or intervention. These can be revealed as a paranormal deception—an ignis fatuus may be fox-fire from a kitsune, or it may be the flash of a lightning bug. In the latter, even followers of the same religion will disagree on the intent or meaning of certain unexplained phenomenon. Even the most complacent of believers may decry a harmless trick of the eye as Evil.

Perhaps the least controversial entity, one recognized in different incarnations in almost every culture and always as benevolent, is the soul—the spiritual force that drives everything and gives birth to new life, prompts growth and maturity, and departs from an old, tired body. This soul is believed to be the 'invisible hand' that guides society as a whole to do what is in its own best interests, by teaching that it is of value to oneself to treat others with the graciousness one would wish to receive.

The soul on its own is an unclear guide, of course, as is proven by the occasional disruptive force—Evil, or 'soulless' under our definition of possessing a soul. As an ideal, such deviants are subdued by the larger collective in the interest of progressive social growth; however, ideals are only as infallible as their executors, and Evil—like beauty—is often in the eye of its beholder. The conflict over what constitutes Good and Evil may never end, but the soul will remain pure.

Another universal entity is the piniakc: a fantastic creature of intense beauty, warmth, and benevolence that lives for ten thousand years before its death, when it immerses itself in—

"Sir?"

One person embracing nothing is never grateful. —Tavia

Day 1

Red grasped his pointer, exacting measured patience. He disliked being interrupted during the lecture portion of class; in his experience, most of the questions he received were elucidated in the course of the narrative—*if* the class would allow him to finish. "Yes, Mr. Han?"

The silver-maned hare by name of Samuel lowered his hand. Red preferred to address his students by surname in what seemed to be a futile expectation that treating them as adults would bring out their maturity. Unfortunately, his university accreditation was yet pending, and many of his students acted as though he was asking far too much of them. "How does anyone know the piniakc lives for ten thousand years?"

"It's hyperbole, Mr. Han," he explained with a thin veil of disdain. "Ignoring that the piniakc doesn't actually exist, most ancient storytellers had no accurate means of tracking time within days, much less over aeons. The trick about prehistory was that any span longer than the average lifetime could safely be declared as an arbitrary number of years—whatever number sounds the most impressive. The point is that, if anything alive knows the true extent of the intricacies and workings of the universe, the piniakc might. Only something as old as it is could even hope to have a conscious memory large enough to process all of existence itself."

"Mr. Coronatus?"

He sighed, not eager to answer, and did his best not to roll his eyes. "Please raise your hand rather than speaking out of turn, Ms. Lucia."

"Why are we talking about multiple deities?" The green-maned skunk sat up with an air of impertinence, as though it was her mission in life to prove this one fact at the expense of everything else. Several of the other teachers had also mentioned her overenthusiasm in trying to convert her schoolmates, to the detriment of many an otherwise productive lesson plan. "Isn't the mathematical precision of our planet's rotation and revolution proof of God's existence?"

Red had to exert greater restraint with the Lucia girl than the others, as though her upbringing meant she imagined herself to be a princess. It was difficult enough teaching at a mere secondary school with an experimental curriculum—how many students their age had a grasp of the significance of self and world that Philosophy required of them? "Education is not about hearing only what you want to hear or learning just enough to flaunt your superiority over others. There are so many more things that you don't know than do; by closing your mind to everything you don't like or understand, you lose a greater appreciation of not only the world but yourself as well." At this, she frowned in contempt, but Red paid her no mind. "Whether God

exists doesn't change the way godless people lived, and it is their history, not God's, that we are studying. We learn about other cultures to discover other facets of life, to see their differences and similarities to our culture, but we do so without passing judgement on them in the process or blindly imposing our ideas on them—the same way we would want them to learn about us. It is only through knowing and understanding each other that we can cooperate to learn more and truly know the world around us.

"The benefit of having diverging beliefs regarding the Truth—and life itself—is the explosion of ideas that diversity of thought creates: through telephones, audio and video recording devices, electronic media, antibiotics and vaccines, automobiles, boats, aircraft, spacecraft, and other such modern advances that would be considered nothing short of miraculous to previous generations. If everyone thought the same way and believed the same things without the slightest variance, there would be no creativity—no exploration of thought to bring about the mind-boggling array of luxuries we have come to expect from our life as we know it today.

"Regardless, if you had paid attention in World History, Ms. Lucia, you would recall the Technological Revolution founded in Year 0, when Terra Firma's greatest scholars and engineers constructed a vast network of systems utilizing the resources of the planet itself to regulate its spin, such that it maintains a constant thirty-four hour rotation, 289-day revolution. It is their many hundreds if not *thousands* of years of research that maintains our planetary regularity to prevent us from spinning down to the point where the planet has no rotation at all in relation to our sun—much the way our Satellite has no rotation relative to Terra Firma."

"I think that's a hoax!" she squeaked, clenching her teeth.

"It doesn't matter. It will still be on the final."

An orange-maned girl raised her hand. "Where is this machinery regulating the planet located?" she asked without waiting for her cue.

Red sighed again, aggravated that the class was never as inquisitive during the Q&A section as they were during the lecture. In the back of his mind, he could hear his mentor's due warning that the task would try his patience. "For that answer, Ms. Corsair, you will have to ask Ms. Fields, as it is her area of expertise. Generally speaking, however, the locations of its access points have been a closely-guarded secret, perhaps one lost to time."

"So you don't know?" she chided, as though calling him a liar.

"This is not World History and Geography, so I am not particularly inclined to discuss that subject any more than I would be inclined to explain an algebra problem. This class focuses more on the general socio-political and philosophical aspects of our history and interactions with other cultures than on specific world events. If there are any more questions *relevant* to the material, I will answer them when the lecture is done."

After a time, he was allowed to conclude the lecture, the morning's class trudging along much like a decrepit pack animal. It was a trial, to be certain, teaching an intellectual lesson when the only students awake were

the ones who spoke up just to be contrary. The occasional bright students were eclipsed by the inanity of their peers—a sure sign that this job wasn't a fit for Red, but his assignments weren't by choice.

One student in particular caught his eye that moment: a thin blue-maned boy at the back of the room, gazing out the window at the overcast campus grounds and swishing his tail on occasion as though something held his rapt attention. Red couldn't see what it could be from his point-of-view at the head of the room, but it wasn't likely to be of significant interest. He supposed most other people would look at the vole and see a spoiled brat, aloof and distant from his classmates in appearance and demeanor, but Red knew otherwise and held his expectations in accordance.

"Remember, midterms are coming up," he warned as the end-of-session bell rang, punctuated by students shuffling about in either eagerness to get out of class or annoyance at having been roused from a nap. "Study guides will be handed out next week, although I would advise reading ahead in the book and forming study groups if you can. Mr. Grey, please see me after class."

The blue-maned boy, not having paid any particular mind at the sound of the bell that signaled freedom to his fellow classmates, gave Red the most contemptible of glances and snorted in disgust before returning his undivided attention to whatever it was outside that held his fancy. It was only after the other students had left that he picked up his things and walked with a rigid gait to the front of the room. "Yes, 'teach'?"

"Don't give me that attitude, *Darian*," he snapped, breaking form. "I was just letting you know that your evaluation hasn't been up to par as of late. I'm sure you're aware of the penalties...?"

Darian's expression suggested that he couldn't care any less.

More than familiar with the routine, Red continued without a hint of compassion. "If you can't maintain a focus on what you're doing, you're going to have a lot more to worry about than grades. I'd advise you to get your act together soon."

"What does it matter to *you*?"

"I told you not to give me that attitude. You know what's at stake if you suffer any more mistakes."

Glowering at Red, the boy turned and left the class in disgust. He maintained his stoic composure the whole time, not muttering another word until he was out the door. "I don't make mistakes."

"I HEARD THAT."

2.16

"BIG D!"

A boisterous purple-maned boyleapt at Darian, pouncing on him in much the way any other cougar might stalk prey. He grabbed the small vole

in a playful headlock and gave him a vigorous noogie that, much to Darian's dismay, mussed up his once slicked-back mane.

"*Ngggh*," he growled through gritted teeth. It wasn't as though he hated the feline – much – but it was more than enough to bear the regular and inappropriate timing of Kotaro's childish behaviour and, though he was too proud to ever admit it to anyone, how much it made him wince to be assaulted that way.

Without a dress code at the school in terms of uniforms, Darian was among the select few in the student body who gave any mind to proper attire during session. He took pride in appearing as though he belonged to a top-tier academy. Kotaro was at the opposite end of the spectrum: His rumpled clothes were as loud as his voice, and he looked as though his mane had never seen a comb, not even for regular trimming—which he might have done himself, in the dark. The two were an unusual sight, to be certain, which no doubt compounded the ongoing snickering Darian received behind his back. Bothered by the idea, he broke free and went straight to adjusting his mane, face burning red from the stares they were getting.

Though Darian thought he hid his emotions well, it seemed Kotaro could still read him like an open book. "Why so glum?" he asked, waxing serious with the most exaggerated expression he could manage, as though trying to stretch the definition of 'comical' to its limits. He glanced around at everyone in the hall with a dramatic look of deep suspicion before leaning closer and whispering, "Is that prick getting to you again?"

He was tempted to tell him off for messing up his mane, *again*, but bit his tongue before walking away. "It's not that..."

"Then what?"

Darian stopped at his locker—more out of routine than having a real use for his books—and whirled the dial on the lock with a mechanical speed, even as he swung open the door and exchanged his morning texts for his midday ones. Glancing inside only a moment to make sure nothing was out of place, he closed the locker again and secured it with a few more turns than necessary, changing the combination in the process.

"You sure have your books under lock and key," Kotaro noted.

"Yeah, well – I don't want you stealing them," Darian countered.

"You kiddin'?" he laughed, playing along. "I can't even remember *my* combination, and I think it's still the default settings."

Darian snorted, continuing to the boys' bathroom. Dropping his bag on the floor, he took a comb from his pocket and rinsed it in the tap water, then ran it through his mane to slick it back. It was going to make him late again, but he couldn't stand looking – well, like *Kotaro*.

"Anyway, D," Kotaro continued unabated, "me and all the guys are gonna go hit Queens for the holiday, but we need a fourth. You in?"

"Are *you* kidding?" He had, without hesitation, turned down every invitation to do whatever ludicrous new idea Kotaro concocted, ever since making the mistake of accepting the first one several years back. Did he in

all honesty think anything had changed between then and now?

Whimpering, Kotaro gave him a mock pout. "You're breaking my heart," he sobbed, rubbing his eyes as though to wipe away tears. "I toil and *slave* for you, and this is the thanks I get? You'd better come with us, or – or I won't be your best friend anymore!"

Darian paused in his grooming to give a skeptical if not disgusted look. "Do you really want me to answer that?"

"Fine," he sneered in disgust, though his tail betrayed his feelings. "I'm definitely dragging you out to the Cave for a snack after fifth, though," he added, pointing a finger at him in determination, "and I'm not taking no for an answer!"

With that, Kotaro scampered away to slip into his next class just a moment before the bell, but not before turning to wave—his index, middle, and pinky fingers extended. This was his own victory sign and, as far as either of them knew, their own unique signal. At the sight, Darian sighed in defeat, shaking his head as he resumed combing.

As expected, the bell rang just as he was tapping his comb dry, to which he rolled his eyes before grabbing his bag and trudging off to class. Also as expected, Frau Greif took one look at his damp mane and shook her head as he entered. Though it was a test day, the other students were still talking with each other as Frau Greif worked at her desk. Darian took his seat under the disapproving stares of Nicole and Katrina, who had been whispering hateful things about him just moments prior, though they didn't realize he had heard every word:

"I heard him tell off Ko again this morning!"

"Yeah, what a pompous jerk! Why does Ko waste time with him?"

"I wish he'd waste time with me!"

They had grown quiet as he approached, but the damage had been done. Even so, he put on his surliest face to satisfy their impression of him. In the meantime, he glanced around and noticed that his was the only desk without the test everyone else had face down on theirs.

"Herr Grey," Frau Greif declared, as though on cue, "I would like to see you up front, please." As he started to stand, she added, "Bring your books, bitte."

Confused, he nevertheless obeyed, gathering his things and walking to the front. "Someone's in trou~ble!" he heard Randy whisper, much to his irritation. Frau Greif had been quite forgiving of his tardiness in the past... Was she changing her mind now?

Yet she rose at his approach, motioning for him to follow her into the hall. There awaited Madame Astraea, who strode past them and into the classroom to supervise the examination. "We are going to the library," Frau Greif explained, to Darian's astonishment. "I have been willing to overlook your—ahem—*numerous* tardies, because I can't entirely fault your attention to appearance. However, I'm afraid I can't ignore your homework and class participation. Despite your exemplary test performances, I'm going to have

to fail you unless you're willing to do some extra credit work."

Darian started to say he didn't care, but perhaps it wouldn't be a good idea to start telling off every teacher who had a problem. "Like what?" he asked, without enthusiasm.

They reached the library before she could answer; there, she opted to enter first. Darian was hesitant to follow, to where Frau Greif had to yank him inside by the arm, which nearly caused him to cry out in pain.

As they entered, a strange-looking girl bristled her tail in surprise. She was half a hand taller than Darian and wearing tinted aviator's goggles, but her most striking feature was her colour: Her brown mane and skin were so similar in hue that he wouldn't have been surprised if she had been dyed that way. The squirrel bowed with a shy uncertainty as they approached.

"Herr Grey," Frau Greif introduced, "this is Alexandra O—"

"Alex," the girl interrupted.

"...Alex O'Malley," she corrected. "She has just moved to here from Triangle Seven. Fraulein O'Malley, this is Darian Grey. He will be tutoring you during class period until you are caught up. The two of you may meet here without having to come to class first, as long as you check in with Herr Endymion at the front desk."

Darian started to protest, but he couldn't think of a suitable excuse. It felt unfair to have this kind of work dumped upon him, when passing and failing seemed all the same. He gave Alex a dour look that he didn't mean for her as much as for the situation—though she seemed to take it as directed at her, from the disappointment in her expression.

"Please, Herr Grey," Frau Greif begged, perhaps to underscore that it wasn't just his scholastic fate he was deciding. That seemed a bit dramatic on her part—it wasn't as though he was going to get violent about it. Still, he nodded, albeit with reluctance.

"Excellent!" Frau Greif clapped her hands together in approval. "I shall check on your progress in two weeks' time, when we may administer Fraulein O'Malley's first exam. However, if either of you have questions or concerns, you may return to class as well. Sehr gut?"

Neither said anything, which she must have taken as agreement in the absence of a valid protest. "Gut. Auf Wiedersehen." With that, she left them alone in the library with Mr. Endymion.

Though he agreed to the task to satisfy Frau Greif, Darian still didn't feel comfortable with the arrangement. Tri-Seven was well across the grid from X-Two, something affirmed by the accent hinted at in her voice. To complicate matters, her timid demeanor suggested a dependency on whoever could help her adjust to her new surroundings—none of which he had time for managing. When Alex didn't look like she would let him skip out on his job, Darian grumbled and led her to a table at the back of the library. The impression he got was that she almost needed him to hold her hand to get there, but he wasn't about to do *that*. "How much do you know?" he asked, cutting to the chase as he plopped down in a chair.

She seemed startled by the question. "Ah..." Alex paused to think of an answer that was satisfactory as she took her seat. "I am afraid what I know is not much yet. Before, I have only studied the common tongue as a second language."

Common as a *second* language? This might be difficult; she didn't even use contractions. "How high can you count?"

"...I know through twenty. Ah – zwanzig."

"Do you know the months?"

"Only the first twelve. I have trouble with the last five."

"Colours?"

"A few."

"Greetings and salutations."

"...Guten Morgen – Guten Tag – Guten Abend – Gute Nacht... Auf Wiedersehen. Wie geht es Ihnen? Sehr gut... That is all."

"How about giving directions?"

She scrunched her face in concentration, then shook her head. So, a foundation of just a few elementary words and phrases. He sighed more deeply than he did even when having to deal with Kotaro. The only method he knew was to just learn—sequence was trivial—but he had no idea how to teach that, especially to someone this remedial. Furthermore, the library was otherwise so quiet that it unsettled Darian, even with the noise he'd been hearing since that morning.

No, 'hearing' wasn't the correct word... It felt almost as though there was an earthquake, but nothing was shaking. He felt it in his ears the most, but it wasn't describable as noise, exactly.

"...Darian?" she asked when he didn't speak for several moments.

He frowned in bewilderment. Teaching wasn't something he felt he could do even for a single session, much less for the two weeks Frau Greif had recommended. Between the – resonance? – and the unnerving way Alex wore those dark goggles indoors, Darian had trouble trying to compose even a basic lesson plan. The silence was stifling, to where he felt claustrophobic just being there.

"Look," he started, reaching into his bag, "I don't know what Frau Greif must've told you about me, but I'm not a very good teacher. How 'bout I just lend you my notes, and you can study on your own? You'll probably learn faster that way."

Alex gave him a perplexed look. "Notes?"

"It's all phonetic," he noted, pulling out a medium-sized notebook. "You know how to read the germane tongue, correct? Umlauts and so on?"

She stared at him, uncertain if she should take it from him. "Ah..."

This was worse than he expected. He grimaced as he dropped the notebook on the table in defeat. Well, he wasn't so proud that he couldn't go back to class and insist that Frau Greif do her own job...

As Darian started to stand, Alex asked, "How old are you?"

It caught him off-guard such that he blurted out the answer before

he realized he didn't have any reason to tell her. "Fifteen – why?"

"Fifteen?" she echoed, surprised. "But I am fourteen! You look—"

"—like I'm eleven?" he asked, rolling his eyes in contempt as he slung his bag over his shoulder. "Twelve? Yeah, I get that all the time..."

"I apologize," she giggled, her attitude becoming lighter. "I was feeling embarrassed because you were tutoring me when you are littler than I am! But if you are older—"

He gave Alex a cold, bitter stare. "I'm not *stupid*, if that's what you're suggesting."

The words shocked her into sobriety. "I did not mean—"

"Bye," Darian said, not looking in her direction again as he stormed out of the library. Her expression was that of having had a door slammed in her face.

9.03

Though he'd eluded capture during session, Darian found himself yet again unable to avoid Kotaro on the prowl. Most days, he wished he had applied for one of the ninths or firsts to keep out of the cougar's range and/or attention span, but he had places to be after school that made changing his class schedule problematic at best.

"Come on," Kotaro begged in his usual pseudo-whine. "Time to go to the Cave! You promised!"

"No," he retorted, "you invited *yourself* and hijacked me!"

"Same thing! Let's go!"

Darian groaned as the impact from having been tackled dissipated through his body. Still, he couldn't bring himself to fight Kotaro, regardless of the embarrassing scene it was causing and the urgency of his own agenda. He hated sending mixed signals like this, as though he was excited at the idea of hanging out but too proud to admit that he was lonely. Yet fighting was more trouble than it was worth whenever Kotaro was involved. Only a burst of sheer willpower got him off the ground under his own strength—as bruised and exhausted as he was that his neurotic instinct to tidy up failed to kick in—and only Kotaro's overeager jabbering about this and that got him moving again.

"Anyway, today's my birthday, remember? So now you have to buy me a pie!"

"Liar," Darian huffed, stifling his discomfort.

Kotaro grinned the biggest smile imaginable, which was disturbing. "Alright, you caught me. It's *your* birthday, so I'm buying *you* a pie!"

That was a lie, too, but it was a trial to turn down his offers every time; despite the snobbish act, Darian almost never had any money on him. When was his last refusal? ...fifteen times in a row, and before that a very hesitant acceptance following a nineteen-day streak. He supposed he could

relent today. "You really need to eat better than that," he scolded, hoping it was an acceptance by way of discouragement.

"You sound just like my mum," he pouted. "It's my money—I can do what I want with it!"

"Yeah, and squandering it isn't a good use of money. Who knows what'll happen when you run out?"

"Aww," he whined, "my folks spoil me. I won't run out!" Even so, his tail was between his legs—embarrassed but trying to seem unapologetic. That didn't encourage Darian to accept, as much as he otherwise wanted to do it. Taking advantage of Kotaro was taking advantage of the Rockfords, and he didn't feel comfortable with that. He'd met them only once before, but Kotaro's parents were so nice to him then that he hated to do anything that seemed like exploiting their generosity, regardless of his feelings about their son. The truth was Darian envied him in that respect, and it was disheartening that Kotaro didn't seem to appreciate what he had.

"Oh!" Kotaro exclaimed, tail alert. "I heard there was a new girl in school, our level! Do you know anything about her?"

Darian swore in silence, struggling to repress the urge to react in a way that betrayed his having met her. "Really? No..." It was going to be difficult enough avoiding her on his own without Kotaro getting involved. That was another downside—Kotaro made this irritating habit of befriending everyone he met, including strangers on the bus thirty years his senior.

"What?" Kotaro put on a snarky grin this time. "I know something the Big D doesn't? How rare is *that*? Anyway, let's go meet her! It must be hard being new and not knowing anyone, not having any friends!"

"That's alright," he grumbled, losing his appetite. "I have all these things to do—"

There was a bit where Darian could almost feel the cougar break—it was a faint perception, one that he wondered if he'd only imagined when he considered how out of character it would be. Then Kotaro whirled on him, jabbing a finger into his chest in – mock? – protest. "You and your stupid prior obligations!" he snapped, gritting his teeth. "One of these days, you'll accomplish everything you've ever wanted, maybe earn fame and fortune, and travel the world thousands of times over, but you'll have no one to share it with because you've *pushed everyone away!* Life's too short to spend slaving away for the *Man!*"

What Darian wanted to say was consumed in the sting of biting his tongue. There was nothing but trouble down that road, and he didn't want to drag others down with him just to prove them wrong. "Don't lecture me on things you know nothing about," he retorted, choosing his words with care.

"Who was the last person you had fun with? And *admitted* it?"

All eyes were on them now, no denying it. Neither was shy as such, Kotaro much less so than Darian, but the negative attention they got was like a knife in his back. What was a mere loss of appetite was turning into bile, an insurmountable feat trying to stay neutral towards someone who seemed to

do his best to push all his buttons.

"Just because *you* are a social harlot," he sneered, jabbing his finger at the cougar's throat, "doesn't mean others have to like you. Some people have priorities that surpass having more friends than they can count."

"What priorities surpass having *one* friend?"

Darian wanted to scream. "Clearly, the kind of priorities you would never have, because you would rather be popular than respected."

Whether the cougar had anything more to say on that matter, Darian didn't stick around to hear—the only way to win was not to fight. He hiked his backpack over his shoulder and stomped off in a huff as though declaring himself the winner by virtue of wanting to have no further part in it. Some days, not even this worked to his advantage, but at least for today it seemed to do the trick.

"You're going to die a bitter old maid!" Kotaro shouted after him after a bit. As much as the words stung, Darian knew in his heart it was true. Why deny it? If only he had the option...

Still, the row meant he was free from harassment for the rest of the day, at least on the school front. The home front was a whole other war that required his full attention. To that end, he was careful to ensure he wasn't being followed—even after their rows, the cougar was persistent—and after winding down every alley in the city, doubling back, and slipping in and out of the least populated nooks and crannies, Darian arrived home three hours later. He slipped into the backyard and, checking one last time to see no one was watching, took out his key and let himself in the back entrance, slipping inside with the stealth of a shadow.

"Another day in paradise," he grumbled, trudging upstairs to his room. The house was a classy split-level with an innocuous appearance, but Darian only had access to a secret fifth of it. Should the authorities decide to look for him at the address, they would fail to find a trace of his residency, save an inconspicuous window in the back. His room wasn't even a room so much as a closet, littered with clothes in various states of wash, an iron and ironing board, assorted technological gadgets, and a couch that served as a rather poor bed. Every day he returned to this nightmare was a shock, he had to admit, but not the shock he would feel if anyone else found out this was *really* how he lived.

No sooner had he tossed his backpack on the couch than Darian felt an all-too-familiar ski mask thrown in his face. "Gear up, we have a new target," said someone in full camouflage.

He didn't look to see who it was, but he knew all the same. "I don't suppose there's any chance of renegotiating my membership," he growled at Lion, crumpling the mask in one fist as it fell into his hand.

"Not on your life. You're in this for good, lest you forget your deal with Lance."

He ground his teeth with such force that they might have splintered apart. "That would never have happened if I hadn't been a part of this in the

first place."

"Well, it did, and now you're stuck here. Gear up."

"I ought to *kill myself* out of spite for you."

A pause – followed by vicious laughter. "Heh, I'm surprised you haven't already. Still, that *would* be the only way out for you."

Darian's hands trembled from built-up frustration. It was easier to distance himself from reality as the months passed, but it still wasn't enough, and he had to close his eyes to keep from losing his cool. The torture in his mind might as well have been physical, everywhere he looked was a dead end leading deeper into madness. If he could find even a shred of hope... Sighing, he reached behind him and grabbed his goggles, put them on, then slipped on the mask.

"What's the target?" he asked, starting to don his coveralls. He tired of this dance, but what could he do until an opportunity presented itself?

"Another dump," Lion dismissed, "maybe a couple of others if they look promising—this one in specific, though, for what reason. Frankly, I'm starting to wonder about our orders, but it seems Boss Pachi's been pulling *something* out of it. I expect we'll hit rock bottom soon, unless a lot of fresh blood starts coming in."

Residence, Darian thought. Probably no security in the place, but it was best to be prepared, just in case. He snapped on his tool belt as well, then followed Lion down to the van waiting in the garage.

There were three others in the pack. He didn't know who they were, and the arrangement seemed designed with that in mind. No matter how far he dug, even from the inside, he wasn't likely to uncover everyone involved. Entry-levels like Darian were picked up and one per pack. The rest were second-tier and, so he assumed, more trustworthy about knowing the others.

Only the driver was certain where they were going, since they were in a windowless van, but Darian had practiced retracing his steps enough to get a general idea of where they were from the distance they traveled and the feel of the road. They arrived at a neighbourhood on the outskirts of the city, somewhat well-to-do from the look of things, and the sort of place that would be high-profile for break-ins.

That was where they came in.

It was not yet early evening when they arrived, meaning there was less chance that anyone was home. They moved quickly, Darian pushed to the lead. While he was certain the others were more experienced, in the end they were training their replacements, so he was forced into doing their dirty work more often than not. It wasn't something he was bad at doing, but he didn't like it all the same.

Darian did a quick scan through several of the lower windows. Sure enough, there was no visible security armed. In fact, the general disarray of the house made it seem as though the occupants had just moved in, or were planning to move out. He picked the lock on the front door, nervous about setting off an unseen alarm, but there was no trace even of a silent alarm on

his scanner. Wordlessly, they piled inside.

Two to a floor, the pack swept through, taking anything on their list. Most of the items they took seemed valuable or at least resellable, but others were downright ordinary. It baffled Darian as to why bother nicking such things, but that was far from the first thing he would have questioned about the raid.

He skipped past the living room, up the stairs, and swept through the upper rooms, finding close to nothing worth taking. In a study—ah, the top item on his list: some documents from a research facility based out of Pent-One. The reason for the raid was clear now, though it didn't make him any more interested in being a part of it. He flipped through the rest of the items in the filing cabinet but didn't see any headings of potential interest. It crossed his mind that they could have broken in just for these and left none the wiser, but Pachi must have his reasons for leaving footprints.

The last was a room containing a fold-out futon and a bureau topped with a jewelry box and some ornate frescoes. Despite his instructions, he ignored the bureau—entirely out of interest in maintaining the owner's dignity—and grabbed one of the plates.

Yet his grip was looser than he expected, and the fresco clattered to the floor. A triple-beep sounded in his headset: a warning that one of the others had heard it. Annoyed, he snatched the plate off the floor, getting a solid grip, and was surprised it had not the slightest scratch. Shrugging, he placed it in his sack, layering a cloth over it to keep it from further damage, then piled the rest in with equal care.

The jewelry box was plain, itself not worth taking. Inside, however, there was a number of ornate rings and bracelets—costume jewelry, from the look of it, but he didn't have the experience to appraise the lot without the requisite gear. One in particular caught his eye, however: a plain green band that looked like jade, which he sensed was special somehow. Maybe it was even worth the risk of being caught taking it. He stuffed the ring into one of his socks; it was one of the last places they would look if they frisked him for anything, and he felt confident it would be safe there. The rest of the jewelry he emptied into a smaller bag and added it to his sack.

Two beeps, a pause, then two more beeps: that was the signal to get out of there. They didn't want to risk too much time during daylight hours, not for the assorted junk they ended up nicking. Darian hightailed it outside and piled into the van with the others.

They had four more hits before nightfall, each one with decreasing success. Not once did they get caught, but it couldn't have been worth their efforts other than maybe the documents on his list. "A damn lot of good *that* run was," commented one, once the coast was clear. "I'd get more working a real job than pulling more heists like that."

"Yeah," agreed the others.

"Wonder what Pachi's doing with all this junk?"

"I heard someone say that the next drop point was being staged as a

yard sale or other."

"So we're stealing rubbish? Hell, *I've* got rubbish at home he can have for *free*. Why does Pachi waste our time like this?"

No one seemed to have an answer for that.

They dropped off Darian with no particular fanfare. "You know the drill," said one. "The schedule rotates again, so watch for the signal."

"Again?" someone else muttered. "It's getting hard to keep all this crap straight."

"Well, it's a good thing you're only a second, then, isn't it? I'd hate to have to rely on you remembering to breathe."

"Die in a fire."

As usual, Darian said nothing as they left, walking around back to his hole in the wall and pulling off his mask and goggles just as he stepped inside, not even stopping to remove the ring from his sock. As usual, he was too tired for homework; he went upstairs and flopped onto the couch, falling asleep with his face buried in his backpack.

Day 2

The morning was muggy and as sluggish as Darian felt, struggling to wake up as he walked to campus. Despite having turned in as early as he could the previous evening, he had never in his life managed more than four hours of anything resembling sound sleep at a stretch on that couch, and the accumulating deprivation was taking its toll. Now and again, he would try sleeping on the floor, using piles of clothing or a comforter as cushioning, but it was more often than not too cold or hard to get settled.

To make matters worse, he had dreamt again – or, it felt less like a dream and more like a memory, but always the same one: vivid, violent, and unforgiving. The pain had become unbearable, and he had awoken in a cold sweat, screaming—the same way it had happened every other time before. As he had done every other time before, he tried to shake away the memory in desperation by absorbing himself in the hustle and bustle of normality. Furthermore, it was frightening to wake up, to where he spent at least half an hour after each waking to calm himself enough to gain his bearings. It upset him not to be able to escape his grim fate, but his options seemed to be more limited by the hour.

As misery loves company, Darian took an unexpected interest in his surroundings, absorbing the mood-setting scene around him. The grounds were soaked from a light overnight drizzle, so the students waiting outside were quick to snag the available outdoor furniture—some cuddling together with the autumn breeze picking up. The couples bit at him somewhat, but it gave him a grim satisfaction to overhear a pair he didn't like arguing over a petty disagreement. Kotaro was nowhere to be seen, but that was a mixed blessing since it just meant he had to pay extra attention for surprise attacks. Still, he appreciated the relative silence, as it gave him time and atmosphere to glower over the inanities of his banal classmates.

—one of whom huddled by herself under a tree.

He recognized her at once, pushing thoughts of his own malaise out of his mind for a bit. "Alex?" Darian asked, approaching. He was surprised to see that she was still wearing her goggles despite the dismal weather.

She glanced up at him with a shy smirk, then returned her gaze to the ground. "Hello," she whispered, though there was a tremor of sadness in her voice as she clutched her tote close to her body.

A twinge of guilt bit at his conscience. "Are you feeling okay?" he asked, concerned. "You're not upset about yesterday, are—"

"W—we got robbed," she blurted, stammering yet still staring at the ground. "Someone c—came into our house, in broad daylight, and took – everything we had."

Darian froze, eyes wide as a chill ran down his spine and his tail bristled. The odds were too slim for...

"I do not care about most of it," she continued, pouring out her heart as she gesticulated in dismissal, "all – stupid stuff to make the house look like a home, but they also took the one thing that matters the most to me."

Ears flattening against his head, Darian bit his tongue to keep from revealing his possible involvement in the heist. "I'm – sorry," he muttered, still hesitant to get too close. "Are you going to be okay?"

"It is offensive that we escape a life of war and hatred just to come here and thieves invade our home. I do not believe people can be so cruel."

Uncertain of what else to do, Darian knelt down in front of her and looked her in the eye—or, as much of her eye as he could make out through the tinted lenses. "I don't think people always mean to be so cruel," he said, in all honesty, "but bad things can happen to good people."

She looked away in discomfort. "Why? What good comes of all the bad things in the world?"

After a pause, he stood again. "That, I can't answer."

Another uncomfortable silence passed, then Alex stood as well. "I guess I will see you later," she said before turning away.

"Wait."

Alex looked at him, head tilted in inquiry.

"If – it's not a personal question, what did they take that was the most valuable to you?"

She paused. "My mother's jade ring."

Darian stared at her, gob-smacked. Her eyes... Even from behind goggles, it felt as though she could see into his soul, inspecting his deepest secrets, and he flinched in embarrassment. He had to fight not to let on that he was keeping something from her.

"What?" she asked, perplexed at his silence.

"I..."

"What is it?"

He was being stupid. There was no way she could know he was in on it if he didn't give himself away. "S–sorry," he blurted, shaking his head. "I – I don't know. I'd like to help, but—"

Despite her mood, Alex perked her ears at those four words, which served to make him feel more awkward about the situation.

He glanced over to see several others entering the main building. "Sorry, gotta run." Without another word, he broke into a sprint to catch up with them. Only when he was in class again did he start to feel normal.

Normal? Ha! Darian couldn't focus, much less in his most hated subject of all, World Cultures. Certainly he would remember the lecture if he bothered, but his mind kept settling in astonishment on Alex and how—by sheer chance—he had saved her one most precious possession from the other thieves – but how would he get it back to her without incriminating himself? The questions that sprung to mind made him queasy, on top of the

whole matter of tutoring her when he was hesitant to get close to anyone in the first place.

Then there was the secondary matter of that – resonance, was it? The feeling echoed through his mind but was always just weak enough that he couldn't discern exactly what it was or where it came from. It varied too much to be something mechanical, and he felt it in too many places now for it to be one person or thing...

"Darian!"

He looked up, startled.

"You may have been too zoned out to notice," Red scolded, "but class is over."

He glowered in aggravation. Why couldn't he just be left alone?

Darian gathered his things and trudged toward the door, when Red stopped him. "The schedule's changed, you know," he noted.

"What, midterms moved?"

"No, you're due this evening."

He cringed, eyelids drooping. "Seriously, I've been ill lately. I can't do it tonight."

Red frowned at him in disapproval. "I'll pass the message along, but somehow I doubt they'll be sympathetic to your plight."

"Perhaps if I was given something better than a couch," he spat. "As used to it as I am, it doesn't afford the best night's sleep."

"Stop grumbling about what you haven't earned. You're lucky they listened to your advice about how 'rich kids don't look like thieves' and gave you an upgrade to afford such a nice wardrobe."

"Fancy clothes are a poor substitute for a real home life."

"Well, I'm sorry you think that, Darian, but in the end, you're still just a low-life among low-lives." Red nodded his head towards the door in contempt. "As you know, this isn't the best place to be talking, so I will say a good day to you."

Frowning in contempt, Darian turned and walked out the door as he strained to hold back a rude gesture. "A good day in Hell," he spat.

"I HEARD THAT," Red shouted.

8.02

As the morning trailed into midday, Darian's stomach growled with voracity typical for the hour. Most of the time, he stowed a nonperishable snack in his backpack to allow him to hide away in the library or out in the courtyard, but he had eaten his last yesterday with no energy to buy more before the job. Further, the lone vending machine at the center of campus was depressing—even taunting—in its emptiness again.

With his heart sinking into his chest, he headed to the canteen.

There, the rumours reached his ears like iron filings to a magnet,

increasing in enormity as onlookers noticed him enter and turned the subject of their vicious gossip toward him. That wasn't his concern. As he queued with the others, his eyes darted about the room with heightened paranoia.

Would he be safe as he progressed through the line? he wondered. At each pause, Darian glanced over each shoulder, hesitating between the mash and the spinach not out of indecision but worry. It always felt strange to him to get so worked up, but he couldn't help it—it had only gotten worse in the past few years, no matter what precautions he might take. Finally, he approached the register and pulled out his wallet, withdrawing a heptaderio and paying Ms. Garnele without incident, stuffing the change into his pocket to sort later. Lifting his tray, he breathed a small sigh of relief when—

"DEEG!"

From somewhere behind the remaining queue, Kotaro burst forth and tackled Darian, making him drop his tray. The contents splattered across the floor, except his bowl of junket, which landed smack on top of Serena's head.

"KOTARO!" screamed Darian and Ms. Garnele in tandem. Serena screamed as well, but hers was unintelligible by comparison.

Backing away a step at a time, Kotaro grinned in embarrassment. "Sorry?" he offered, though he didn't *quite* look it.

It was difficult to say who was angrier then, Darian or Ms. Garnele. Both gave chase as the cougar bolted from the canteen, although Darian was a mite faster. As Kotaro disappeared around the corner, Darian picked up speed and—

SMACK!

—collided headlong with Alex, knocking her to the floor.

"*Ouch!*" she whimpered as her backside hit the solid tile floor, her books flying in every direction.

Darian immediately got to his feet, mortified, as a strange dizzying sensation overcame him. "Ah... s-sorry," he stammered as his head started to clear, though—rather than offer Alex a hand up or to collect her books—he glared down the hall at the quickly-retreating Kotaro.

A tense moment passed in awkward silence as Ms. Garnele hurried into the hallway, having exercised a bit more caution than Darian had. "Are you okay?" she asked. "We'll get you another tray, no charge—"

"No, thanks," he muttered in disgust, a familiar discomfort in his stomach. "I'm not hungry anymore."

Then Ms. Garnele noticed Alex sprawled on the floor. "Oh! Are *you* okay, dear? Darian, aren't you going to—"

Darian, however, had other ideas and strode away without another word. Alex seemed confused by his actions, or lack thereof. "Dar—"

Her voice trailed off as he vanished down the hall. There was never a worse time to give her the ring, and he had no interest in blowing up at her on accident, regardless of what she or Ms. Garnele or anyone else who might have witnessed the scene thought of him at the moment. His mood failed to

improve as he approached his locker, intent on hiding Alex's ring there until he could figure out how to give it back to her covertly. Spinning the dial on the lock with a practiced hand, he reached into his pocket and was about to withdraw the ring when something caught his eye.

Tucked into the righthand niche created from the door's protrusion into the locker was a piece of paper, just visible from his vantage point. It chilled his blood to see it, because he wasn't the one to put it there, as well as it being where he had hidden a substantial portion of his on-hand cash.

—*had* hidden.

Furrowing his brow, Darian shoved the ring deeper into his pocket and snatched the paper with his left hand, uncrumpling the note with a tested patience. It was written in block letters—not to disguise its author from him but from anyone unwanted who might stumble across it—and in an elaborate cipher that was simple to decrypt for those in the know:

DID YOU EXPECT TO BUY YOUR WAY
OUT? IT WON'T BE SO EASY AS THAT.

Enraged, Darian tore up the note into slivers, slamming his locker shut without even exchanging his books. He realized this after a moment, but his patience was too thin for him to care, not even to reset the lock. It didn't matter—no one was going to steal his books, and he didn't need them himself because he wouldn't be going to class again today – not if he didn't want to cause some serious hurt.

14.12

As the light began to fade, Darian weaved in and out of buildings, making so many turns and circling back so many times that anyone trying to follow him would have gotten dizzy long ago. His destination was a dark alley in a desolate sector of White Oak where few were eager to go, even when fully armed with automatic assault weapons. It was located in the rear of a seedy grocery store—itsself legit, but underneath was a well-concealed warehouse full of the kinds of jacked goods that the packs had been stealing.

Darian knocked twice on the backdoor, paused, then knocked twice again. After a longer pause, the door swung open, and he caught a glimpse of the nigh-invisible peephole as he entered. As typical, everyone in the building was masked—even Darian wore his suit—but the pecking order was so well established that knowing who was who was unnecessary.

"You the Grey kid?" asked the bouncer. Darian nodded.

The bouncer turned to the large screen embedded in the wall near the entrance, running his fingers over it in that way that showed a casual ignorance over the delicateness of monitors that had always grated at Darian.

He couldn't make out the symbols from over the guy's shoulder; the text was encoded in a way that only the bouncers and third-tiers or higher understood.

"Themisto's got you on Level 6," he said, gesturing toward the lift. "Training or something, I dunno. You know better than I do."

Darian snorted, striding casually toward the lift. Inside, he punched the floor lights in sequence—2, 4, pause, 2, 4—and the doors closed, taking him to Level 6. As the doors parted, a dusty-maned woman perhaps twice his age met his gaze with dark violet eyes. *Strange*, he thought as he moved to one side, *I've never seen any women here before...* Of course, there could have been plenty of females in the syndicate, but he just couldn't tell the difference under everyone's masks and bulky suits. Why would this one be unmasked, though—boldness, or just a lack of concern?

Rigid professionalism in her every move, she stepped past him into the lift as he disembarked with neither a word nor a second glance. Despite his curiosity, he didn't have the chance to learn anything about her, not even to see where she was going. Certainly he didn't know enough to know what she was doing on Level 6, for that matter.

What *was* on Level 6, anyway?

None of the doors he could see were labeled. A few at the opposite end he recognized at a glance as special clearance, from the keypad by the handle. Taking a min to prowl the hall would be noticed by surveillance, however, so he didn't dare to dawdle, pushing his curiosity and his thoughts of the woman to the back of his mind. The lights were on behind the first door he approached; this one he opened to find someone already inside.

The large room was lined with different equipment—for aptitude testing, he supposed. "Darian," Themisto greeted in expectation, glancing up from his binder as he scribbled some notes. "How are we doing today?"

"Miserable," he grumbled, removing his mask in the privacy of the testing room. "I need a real bed soon, or my back's going to murder me."

He gave a cold laugh. "You know, it's hilarious that you say that." Darian scowled in response. "Here now, I understand you're turning sixteen soon? It's about time we looked into higher-tier evaluations, then. I mean, it's *obvious* that you're not going to do well on your own, isn't it?"

He had no answer for that.

"I'm serious, son – you take care of us, and we'll take care of you. It's really that easy. We'll even look into getting a bed for you, if that's what it takes, though I'd have imagined you would have allocated your allowance towards one already."

"Clothes are expensive, you know."

"You didn't have to choose such a preppy attire. One of the things you should have learned by now is how to budget."

"Looking snappy helps keep attention off of me."

Themisto shrugged. "Whatever – it's your life. My job is ensuring you have the proper training to advance in the syndicate."

"To be honest," he interjected, unimpressed with the small talk, "I'm

tired of this game. I just want to live my own life, free from the lot of you."

"But why?" Themisto cried in admonition, putting down his binder. "We take what we need, we give Pachi what he needs, and he gives us even more of what we need. It's teamwork at the highest level you can get! Even the Prime Minister doesn't have the unified front that we have! How do you expect to do better than that *out there*?"

"*Out there*, people are going to catch on. It's not as though there are unlimited resources for us to just take whenever we please. Enough crime and everyone in the quad will move away—"

"—but more will move in to replace them! Don't you see? Maybe individuals have limited resources, but *the world* has plenty! Even if X-Two is drained, we'll move. That's not as big a deal as you think."

He had no further way to argue with Themisto. Someone that self-centered would never see the benefit of the common good.

"Look, Darian, it would be a waste to have your skills go toward something as banal as journalism or art or business management or whatever sissy little career you may have thought about studying, and it would also be a waste for you to land in gaol."

He rolled his eyes in disgust. "Funny, since this is what's going to get me there."

"That's only if you get *caught*, which you *won't* if you get proper training and advance in the syndicate."

Darian was losing his patience. "Why did you call me here?"

"I was wondering when you would ask!" In eagerness, Themisto picked up a scope rifle from the rack. "It seems we're short of snipers—"

Furious, he struck the weapon to the floor with a fierce backhand. "***I can't believe you'd think of putting me in assault!***" Darian yelled at the top of his lungs, teeth bared. "***Are you out of your damned MIND?***"

With all the calm and delicacy he could muster, Themisto walked over and picked up the rifle, replacing it on the wall rack. "...you're lucky that these weapons aren't loaded." His expression was one of bitter tolerance as he returned to his notes, scribbling in haste. "A shame—your size and skill are ideal, but perhaps that's not the best concentration for you after all... Maybe cracking?"

"I don't want to have *any* part of this anymore," he snapped.

"Well, that's too bad," said Themisto. "I'm afraid we can't just let you go, even if you weren't still a minor."

"I don't see why not. The lot of you've kept me in the dark about who's in charge. Even if I tried to tip off the bobbies, they'd never find the place, much less do anything about it."

"Ah, but you know enough about our inner workings to prove to be a problem if you ever turned against us."

"That's your own fault," Darian snapped, donning his mask again. "I never wanted to join."

"That's too bad, because when we can't recruit, we have to draft."

"Can I go?"

"I suspect so," Themisto sighed, absentmindedly waving his hand in dismissal. "Be certain that you'll hear from us again, though."

Darian slammed the door behind him.

16.15

Halfway between the base and his private Hell, he ducked into an alley and stopped. Though the sun had started to set, it was still quite early in the evening, and he didn't feel keen on returning to his slave driver just yet, considering how he was down five months' savings after the surprise he'd found in his locker.

Even in the cool autumn air, Darian was sweating, in part from fury at the change in his situation. He took off his mask again and breathed in the stench of the alley, feeling it set the mood as he glanced around, wondering what in particular was giving off the foul aroma.

The alley contained a communal trash bin for the small family-run restaurant and the cheap electronics store that it fell between—an unusual neighbouring, but with potential.

"...yeah, why not," he mused, staring at the trash bin with interest. It *had* been a while since he'd gone diving, not just because he didn't have the time but also because more of the better places to score salvageable finds were now locked or otherwise protected from scavengers like himself. Still, a good find was a decent supplement to his paltry allowance, to recover and fix up the random junk he found in the garbage, though he had to be careful not to get caught or—worse—recognized.

Darian recalled with fondness the video recorder he had discovered in a bin, to his amazement. When he had taken it home and cleaned it off, he couldn't find a thing wrong with it, at least from the exterior. The pawn shop had given him forty-two heptaderio for it after a bit of haggling, and it jumpstarted his freedom fund. It had given him a new enthusiasm for life, the crazy treasure hunt, though—more than that—it amazed him how much otherwise perfect salable stuff people threw away. In fact, the half of his wardrobe he hadn't paid for came from diving, and what times he braved eating the food, it saved that much more money on having to buy groceries—even if it exacerbated his ill symptoms.

At the same time, he felt like vermin, scavenging in the trash. Why did he have to be reduced to such a level? If they wanted his help so badly, why was he being treated worse than the refuse he would dig through? They might have enticed him to their side long ago had he been as pampered as second-tiers, even. Instead, he fought off thoughts of suicide and hated the entire world for putting him in such a position.

The shame of his existence got to him—he bit his tongue sharply to stop from crying, though he didn't know why he shouldn't. What did anyone

care if he lived or died? To the organization, he was just another asset to be used and abused. Sure, Kotaro might notice, but the guy had so many other friends that he would soon be out of sight, out of mind.

In the distance, a pair of footsteps filled the air—heels, growing louder. Someone was coming.

There was a tiny part of his brain that assured him that, because he had his goggles on, he couldn't possibly be recognized, but the greater part of Darian feared being seen more than anything else. He scrambled up the side of the bin, slipping inside as quietly as he could. His boot made a faint clink as it tapped something, and he moved aside to pick up the object—if for nothing than to grab it for some kind of cover. Just then, a faint jingle caught his ear, and the footsteps stopped.

From the sanctuary of the bin, he listened for signs of detection but couldn't make out anything specific. Though the voice sounded familiar, he couldn't quite place it from that distance, but at least it didn't seem like he had been noticed. "No, I haven't seen him," a woman's voice stated. "The Black line is Amalthea's detail."

It's not that big a town, he reasoned. People's voices sound similar, anyway. All the same, he risked a peek.

It was the woman from the lift earlier in the day—an ursa, was she? It was difficult to tell from the lighting, though she had stopped to speak on her mobile. However, her expression was as rigid as ever. "I've alerted the patrols to keep a watch, but I promise you he would have been found already if he's somewhere in the city limits."

No – somehow she was more familiar than just being another party in the syndicate. He racked his brain but, without context, he couldn't match up where he had seen her before, if he had at all. It wasn't just passing by her in the street one day, either—it felt stronger than that, which made his inability to remember all the more maddening. Did she have something to do with his section? Darian grunted in aggravation at the mystery.

Mistake—the woman heard even his tiny utterance. She stared in his direction, stopping all conversation.

His tail bristled in shock. It spooked him in a way he had never been spooked before. Uncertain of what she would do and afraid of sticking around to see, he jumped out of the bin, landed with an awkward tumble, and bolted down the alley.

After some distance, he realized she wasn't pursuing him. A feeling of stupidity overwhelmed him, and he was disgusted with himself for getting into that mess in the first place. Not thinking, he slammed his fist into a nearby streetlight, breaking something in his hands.

Then he realized he hadn't put down whatever it was he had found in the bin and, to his astonishment, discovered he was holding a plate, now cracked down the center. The colours and textures looked familiar, down to the type of flower depicted on its face. He became even more surprised to realize it was one of the decorative ones he had stolen from Alex!

On further examination, though, despite it being the same design, he realized it couldn't have been the same fresco—there was a distinct chip out of the edge he remembered seeing in the one he had dropped, as well as some wear to the finish. Besides the widening crack he'd just made, this one was as flawless as if it had been shipped fresh from the factory, and it seemed strange that someone would throw one away otherwise. Yet it was an odd coincidence to get one from the same line as hers, however, and it was unfortunate that he broke it, or maybe he could have—

No, that was a stupid thought. If he was too much of a coward to give Alex back her ring, which she said she valued more than any of the other junk, why would it be any better to give her a stupid plate? Still, it would've made him feel even slightly less guilty if he could singlehandedly round up all the stolen goods from her house. He pushed the pieces together and wished he could fix not the crack so much as the mounting shattered bits of other ruined things in his life.

...but when he brought the pieces together, they sealed up, good as new. It took him aback to discover the plate whole again, as though he had imagined breaking it. His eyes and throbbing hand couldn't have deceived him—the plate had definitely broken—so how was this possible? As much as he turned it over, he could find no evidence of breakage anywhere.

It unsettled Darian like nothing else, and he dropped the fresco out of fright, letting it shatter again as it hit the ground. As deplorable as his life was, he had still taken a vague comfort in the fact it was predictable, that everything behaved according to an unchanging set of rules. That he had started hearing things, and now this phantom plate—

"It didn't happen," he muttered, shaking his head. "I..."

The shattered pieces of plate taunted him, laying on the ground broken again, into the exact two pieces it had been in before. Suspicious, he looked over his shoulders, but no one was around, no hidden cameras and practical jokers in sight. Kneeling, he picked up the pieces once again, cracking one in half to be sure it wasn't some kind of trick plate. The hair on the back of his neck stood on end as he joined the pieces together—

Whole. There wasn't a scratch to be found.

Screaming, he hurled the plate back into the alley from which it came, then ran headlong into the night.

We expect a kindness but only see others' nastiness—generations of regret grant endless concern in troubled youth. —CANY

Day 3

Alex felt much better than yesterday. In addition to being an extra day removed from the break-in, she had shared a good, long cry on Sunni's shoulder and was reassured that at least they were both still alive, if minus a few odds and ends. Things could always be replaced, but life was precious. On the whole, she could not complain.

There was one unfinished matter, and that was returning Darian's notes to him, even if he did not seem eager to be nice to her, much less her friend. It was the polite thing to do, of course, but it disappointed her to give up on him as a person without first trying harder. Did it matter? There were still so many others in the school—ones who would at least apologize after running into her...

A couple of girls walking some distance away gave her an answer. "...and afterwards, he didn't even help her get up!" one said in a disdainful air, not realizing that Alex was in earshot. "I mean, it's rude enough that he knocked her down, but—"

They had to be talking about Darian, unless the males of the local population were more uncouth than she had realized. It occurred to her that half of the gossip she had overheard during the week was about him, in fact – and none of it was good. Was he really *that* horrible a person?

"It couldn't be," she told herself. In her social experience prior to the war, she had never met a person who was not justified in being angry. This vile version of Darian the other students presented was unbelievable, to say the least, and went against everything she believed about the inherent goodness in people. If for no other reason than pure curiosity, Alex was determined to find out the truth.

She waited in the courtyard with impatience, worried that she might have missed him, even though she had arrived much earlier than necessary. It would have upset her to have missed her chance, with the holiday soon. As the beginning of her first class drew nearer, she became fidgety, fearing that maybe he would not show up – or that he had crept past her during a bit of distraction. Being alone with her thoughts was stressful...

From the corner of her eye, Alex saw someone making long strides towards the mathematics building. Unlike the tidy, proper demeanor she remembered from the previous days, the person's mane was tousled, shirt untucked, and posture slouched – but it was him.

"Darian!"

He froze in midstep, looking about for the source of her voice. She ran up to him like an eager pup as he stared, as though entranced. "Alex?"

"I wanted to give you back your notes," she said, thrusting the book at him with enthusiasm. "They are well-organized. Danke schön!"

He blinked his reddened eyes at her for a moment, as though trying to remember what he was supposed to do. "Oh – okay," he said, accepting the notes and tucking them under his arm. "I, um – I'm glad they were helpful... Bitte."

"Are you okay?" she asked, concerned.

"Oh, y–yes," he stuttered, catching himself. "I'm – great."

"What's the matter?"

"N–nothing," he stammered. "I'm just... I couldn't wake myself up this morning. I had a really bad dream. That's all. Really, it is. Really."

The most gullible person on the planet would be able to tell he was lying. "Is there anything I can do?" she prompted, skeptical.

"Leave me alone."

She started to retort, then thought better of it. Instead, she crossed her arms like a disapproving mother might.

"Alex," he chided. "I'm serious. This is my own problem, and I have to deal with it myself."

"Aha!" she exclaimed. "So you *do* have a problem!"

"Guh!" Darian cried in frustration, frowning at her. "Fine, you're absolutely correct! I have a problem, but it's *my* problem. I can't talk about it, and I have to work it out for myself."

"That is nonsense. It is always better to talk about your problems with someone else."

"Not this one," he insisted, waving the notebook about in an angry manner. It seemed to give him pause, however, and after a bit he stopped. "Look, as much as I appreciate your help, I can't involve anyone else – at all. I mean it, please."

Alex glared at him, putting her hands on her hips. "Are you always this unfriendly to people?" she scolded.

He paused, staring back at her with coldness in his voice. "Yes."

A tense moment passed before Darian proceeded to class without another word. Alex's expression was that of needing to pick her jaw up off the ground.

A much longer moment passed before she realized she was going to be late. "Eep!" she cried, hightailing it to the science building.

"—following our next examination. Alex?" Mr. Reed wrenched his attention away from the day's lesson schedule as he noticed her enter. "I know you're new, so this is fair warning that session begins promptly on the hour. Having three tardies results in a point taken off of your final grade."

Adding to her usual embarrassment was the feeling of all eyes in the classroom being on her. "I am sorry," she mumbled, taking her seat.

Mr. Reed continued in an amicable tone. "Today we'll be doing a lab on harmonic resonance, found on page 89..."

Yet Alex had her attention everywhere but Physics. What possible

problem could a person have that was so far beyond help from everyone else that he couldn't even *talk* about it with someone? Was he in serious trouble? ...or was it that he just didn't like her and this was just making every excuse to get away?

The latter thought made her uncomfortable, particularly since she did not know how else to befriend other people, but the first was even more unsettling. If he was in trouble, she wanted to help, even if only in some small way – but there was nothing she could do unless he told her even a little, something he would not do without trusting her.

Then there was that sound—sort of—she had started hearing once they arrived in X-Two, though she could not discern the source of it. She would almost swear that it was more resonating in Darian's presence, which only made her more interested in talking to him. Yet it made no sense that it would, and she had to remind herself that it must be wishful thinking, not based in fact.

"Everyone have their partners?" Mr. Reed called. "Let's begin."

Alex snapped back to attention. "Wait!" she cried, raising her hand. "Who was I paired with?"

"Alex..." He glanced at his lesson plans again, cracking a smile as he did. "Ah! You're with Kotaro."

"Thank you." She turned to look at the rest of the class. Who was Kotaro, again?

"You're Alex, then?"

She jumped in the air as the voice from behind her caught her off-guard. "Yes," she said, turning around with eyes widened and tail brushy. "Could you – not do that anymore?"

"Sorry," Kotaro said, smiling from ear to ear. "It's a habit I have."

"Well, it is not very polite," she snapped.

He pouted in a way that showed that he knew he was in the wrong but was trying not to bring attention to it. "Geez, you're as much of a stick-in-the-mud as Darian is."

Her eyes lit up at the mention. "You know Darian?"

"Ah, a link!" Kotaro exclaimed, even more excited now. "How do you know him? You have a class together?"

"After a sort – yes."

"Ah," he mused, scratching his chin with dramatic exaggeration. "Is *this* why he keeps bailing out of our group activities—he's sneaking out with a girl?"

Alex blushed at the accusation. "No, no – I have just moved here. He is not friendly with me at all."

"Okay, *that* sounds more like the Deeg I know," he said, trying to hold back a laugh.

She frowned in disapproval. "Why is he so unfriendly? I just want to get to know people, and he avoids me like I am some kind of freak."

As though just coming to this realization, Kotaro looked her up and

down with a mock determination for several moments. It made her uneasy when he did that. "Well, except for the goggles indoors, and maybe your mane, I don't see anything freakish about you."

"Oh – is something wrong with my mane?" she asked, blushing more strongly than before.

"Well, it's odd to see a skin-brown mane on someone around these parts. Most people have a more natural colour, like mine." He shook his shaggy purple mane with pride, hair flopping in his face as he did so. "Or, I'm told."

Alex grew quiet. "I see..."

"Why *are* you wearing goggles inside, anyway?"

She felt the blush becoming permanent. "I'd rather not show you..."

Kotaro shrugged as though it had been a foregone conclusion. "Suit yourself. I'm as flexible as the grass in the wind."

She envied him. It would be nice to be that carefree.

"Are you doing anything this evening?"

The question caught her by surprise. "What?"

"The gang and I were going to hit a movie, and you wanted to make friends, didn't you? Did you want to come along?"

Alex smiled. "I would!"

"There's just one catch, however," he added, winking with mischief. "You have to have a date."

Her face fell. "Huh?"

Kotaro's smile was distressingly wide. "Don't worry though, I'll fix you up in a jiffy."

4.01

Darian trudged through the hallway, for once oblivious to the natter of his smarmy classmates in favour of his more overwhelming problems. He not only had his knickers in a twist over the matter of that bizarre fresco and the mystery surrounding it, but also for having told off Alex that morning—one more thing hefted onto the mountain of guilt he had to endure. That was just the rubbish-flavoured icing on the vomit-flavoured cake of his violent illness yet again that morning... What he could take before it broke him was simply a matter of time, he supposed.

"*Got him!*"

He felt a pair of arms grab him, lifting him up and pinning him to the lockers.

"KOTARO!" he screamed as a torrent of rage spilled out. "*WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING?!*"

"You're coming with us to the movies, that's what!" He maintained a surprisingly strong hold on Darian, though it helped that Kotaro was half a head taller and more than a stone heavier. No amount of struggling could

get him free, between that and not being able to get any leverage. "I won't take no for an answer—you're coming, and that's that!"

Darian didn't feel like fighting in the hallway, though he would if it came to that. As he felt himself being lifted into the air, he was cognizant of all eyes on him, most of the onlookers laughing at the sight. Whether they were laughing at Kotaro or him, he wasn't sure, though neither would have made him feel any better about his situation.

Plus, it hurt, though he didn't want to let on as much and hoped it didn't show. All he could do was keep shouting. "I don't have time for this, you freak! Let me down!"

"No way, you and Alex are going to have a great time, compliments of yours truly!"

He stopped struggling as the implications of those words sunk in. Kotaro was trying to set him up?

Darian cringed in agony—there were many more things he needed than that, like a bullet through his head. In fact, that exact thought had come to him so many miserable nights, but he never had the courage to go through with it, as though a tiny voice in the back of his mind was calling out to him, *I want to live...*

...and he *did* want to live. He desperately wanted to paint the town red and watch movies with other kids and just enjoy life. He wanted to have really good friends like Kotaro and Alex. He wanted normal, loving parents like everyone else's. He wanted to do his homework and all that boring jazz and not feel it was for nothing.

He wanted to give in...

Kotaro must have felt him go lax. "Hey, you okay, D?"

"I feel sick," he said, which wasn't far from the truth. His eyes were tearing up from the surge of emotion, but also from the searing pain running up and down his body from Kotaro's manhandling. "Please, let me down. I need down now."

"No prob – I'll put you down at my folks' place. How's that?"

So much for that. He tried to fake vomiting—not much of a stretch with all the jostling he was getting—but that didn't phase Kotaro. In fact, carrying Darian down the stairs was getting his stomach churning and head pounding, between the motion and the pain. Pretty soon, he wouldn't have to fake it...

"Kotaro, put him down!"

Darian looked up—or down, he couldn't figure out which—and saw Alex, staring at them with fury in her eyes.

"Hey, Alex! I—"

"Put him *down*, *NOW*."

Kotaro relented, lowering him gently to the next landing. Darian collapsed on the spot and put his head between his knees, breathing deeply to calm down.

Alex rushed to his side. "Are you okay? You look ill."

A bit to his surprise, once he got his bearings, he started to feel better. Much better. "Yeah, I'm fine now. I was just hyperventilating there for a min."

"Kotaro," she scolded, "you have to stop doing wild things like that! You are going to hurt someone if you are not careful!"

The cougar raised his hands in defeat, a hint of timidity in his voice at having been scolded. "Sorry about that, Allie. I – was just doing what I knew would work on D. He's really stubborn about sticking to verbal agreements, you know."

"I want to go," Darian whispered.

They hushed. "What was that?" asked Alex.

"I – really do want to go with you guys..."

"Hey, that's great!" cheered Kotaro, slapping him on the shoulders, oblivious to Darian wincing as he did so. "We're doing supper and a movie tonight! We'll pick you up—"

"—but I can't," he finished.

"Why not?" Alex prodded, a mix of disappointment and concern. "Why can you not go with us?"

Darian struggled a bit with his dilemma. He was almost certain that the syndicate would try to do something to hurt one of his friends if they knew they were his friends, but he was tired of being their minion and felt more than a little rebellious after all that had happened of late. At the same time, he was powerless against the punishment they could bring down on him if he failed to obey. If they had let him grow up like a normal kid... But that wouldn't have been possible, would it? There was no way for him to live this double life, and the life he wanted wasn't the one that they would let him have.

"Please tell us," pleaded Alex, staring deeply into his eyes through her goggles.

...which raised another question. "Why do you wear those, Alex?" he whispered.

She blushed, taken aback from having been put on the spot. It *did* feel as though all eyes in the city were on them, nevermind the random kids actually in the hall who were bound to dispense everything they could to the school's rumour mills – but he didn't care anymore. Caring got him where he was now, with all of this concern about finding a happy medium between two bad places. What he wanted was something to get him off the fence, to shove him in one direction or the other, to make his choice for him so he wouldn't have to make the bad decision himself.

"...I'll tell you if you come to the movies with us," she said with some hesitation.

He was afraid that's what she would say, because it meant he would agree. "Okay."

"Yes!" Kotaro cheered, helping Darian to his feet. It was the first time in a long time he didn't feel the animosity toward Kotaro he expected.

"What are we seeing, anyway?"

"*Bloodsucker Five* is opening tonight!"

"What!" shrieked Alex, smacking Kotaro with her notebook. "You wanted to set me up with a date for a **gore flick**?!"

This is going to be great, Darian mused.

16.09

The three ended up meeting at the burger palace on campus, as the theatre was only a street away. Kotaro brought his current girlfriend Eloisa as well—*So much for this 'gang' of his I've heard him talk about so much*, he thought—and the four enjoyed a quiet meal before the movie. Of course, Darian had to repress the urge to cringe while forking over seven times what he was used to ever spending on a meal; surely the others didn't consider the expense on the level of breaking the bank, and he in his spoiled brat guise should behave no differently.

Nevertheless, he kept his ears perked and looked over his shoulder at every turn with his usual paranoia, but nothing in particular alerted him.

"We're not seeing a slasher, Ko!" Eloisa snapped.

"Why not?" Kotaro pouted.

"I have to admit that I'm not that eager to see it," Darian agreed, suppressing his usual reaction to even the idea of intense violence.

"See? That's three against four!" Eloisa chimed. "We're going to see something else."

Kotaro whined loudly. "Aww!" She smacked him in the shoulder.

"What's playing?" Darian prompted.

"**Besides *Bloodsucker Five***," Eloisa scowled over Kotaro's whining, "there's an action/romance comedy starring the guy from *Risk Storage* that I wouldn't mind seeing, plus a new animation from Grigori Shemhazai called *Great Thing*—"

"That's a weird name for an animation," Alex interrupted.

"It sounds cooler in the original language!" she pouted.

"Well, I say we see the action comedy," Darian declared, "because that sounds more like something you girls would enjoy."

"Really? I figured you'd want to see—"

He waved his hand in dismissal of any preference. "I'm interested in anything you guys are interested in seeing."

Eloisa smiled at the comment. "I – have to admit I had the wrong idea about you, Darian."

That made him twitch his ears. "What?"

She looked down in embarrassment. "I took you for the stuck-up type who looked down on everybody else because we weren't good enough for you or something, but you seem pretty normal to me."

Darian gave a weak smirk, looking away. "Yeah – well, I have a

hard time interacting with others..."

"I bet, the way everyone treats you." Here, she ruffled Kotaro's mane. "And *Ko* here's been telling me how you were on the swim team—"

"Really?" Alex piped up with interest.

"Uh-huh, the last year they had it was a couple of years ago, before I started – and before the pool got demolished."

"Yeah, they're supposed to be building a new fitness centre just off-campus to replace that," Kotaro interrupted, "but I don't see why they didn't leave the old one up, in the meantime. Deeg's got nothing to do now, which is why I bet he's so grumpy all the time."

"Aww – I bet he looked good in a banana hammock," Alex teased.

Darian swallowed with uneasiness at the phrase. "Actually, I don't like those much. I petitioned them to let me wear a full bodysuit instead."

"Did it help you swim better?"

"It was mostly for comfort. I feel better when all of me is covered."

"Afraid of sunburn or something?" Kotaro laughed. "You oughtta lighten up a little!"

"Tanning makes you darker, Ko," Eloisa snickered.

"*Durr*, is that so?" He leaned over and tickled Eloisa, making her squeal in a high pitch.

Snorting, Darian shook his head. "You're awful, 'taro."

"Look, look!" Kotaro cried, pointing at him with excitement. "Was that a smile? *Call the press!* The world's coming to an end!"

Darian looked away, frowning.

He laughed with warmth, rather than malice. "But it makes sense that he's in a chord all the time, if his home life's a bummer. I mean, if *my* folks always made me get all dressed up,"—here he made sarcastic finger-quotes—"because it reflects well' on them, then they said I couldn't see my friends for some stupid reason like they weren't good enough for me, I'd be pretty upset, too, and something like the swim team, which was the only way Deeg got to show off that he wasn't just a preppy spoiled brat—losing that would make *anyone* upset."

Expressionless, Darian stared at him, uncertain of what to make of his words—as were Alex and Eloisa.

"You're trying too hard to think, Ko," Eloisa scolded, jabbing him in the side.

Kotaro shrugged. "Am I close, though?"

Darian bit his lip, rubbing the back of his neck to make an obvious show of embarrassment. "I don't think my private life is appropriate..."

"Daddy, can I get an ice cream?" asked a small child.

"We've got ice cream *and* cake at home," chided the child's father. "Besides, I bet they don't have the kind you like, do they?"

In the booth behind them, a family of three was celebrating what Darian assumed was the child's birthday. He watched with envy, as he had never had a birthday party of any kind even once in his life.

The mother glanced over the menu. "Look, Don," she deadpanned. "Mint chocolate swirl—they *do* have it."

"See!" whined the child. "Can I get it, huh? Huh?"

"Well – uh..." muttered the father.

"So much for knowing your own offspring," the mother said, devoid of emotion.

The conversation struck Darian as unusual in many ways. Glancing up, he noticed that the woman was pale with her mane in a tight bun, with tiny glasses precariously balanced at the end of her nose. She was facing away, but even at that angle he was certain—that was the woman from Level 6. It was unusual seeing her yet again, but more so with a small child, as she hadn't looked at all like the type to have children.

She didn't *act* like the type to have children.

His ears twitched with worry as he wondered if she was spying on him... No, the child would slow her down if she was.

"Darian," Alex prompted. "Is something wrong?"

He blinked, realizing he had frozen during his observation. "No, I'm – fine," he muttered. "I just thought I recognized someone."

"Who?" she asked, glancing around.

"Nobody," he blurted, looking at his plate with intent. "It wasn't her after all. My mistake."

Alex stared at him for a bit before turning her attention elsewhere. He wondered if she believed him or not. He bit his lip, then dismissed the remainder of his concerns as he finished his meal.

As agreed, they bought tickets to *Double Dealer*. To his surprise, Darian found himself staring when they entered the theatre proper, as if he had entered another world. It took a tremendous amount of effort to draw himself out of his trance and act like everyone else, as mystified as he was even by the mundane processes of buying the tickets, presenting stubs, and being reminded during the previews to turn off their handhelds. It almost didn't register as a blip in his mind that Alex kept her goggles on even when the movie started—he was too excited to care. It was the first time he'd ever been in a movie theatre, much less with friends, and it thrilled him in such a way that he found himself crying in the middle of the movie.

"Uh, Darian?" Alex whispered.

"Hmm? What is it?"

"You are crying at an action sequence. Is something wrong?"

He smiled at her for the first time, perhaps for the first time in his entire life. "I'm really happy."

Alex furrowed her brow, then broke into a pleasant laugh. "That is wonderful. That is much better than being mopey."

"I hope we can do this every week," he replied, drying his eyes.

"Me, too."

As the movie drew to a close and credits rolled, Darian felt a hole in his heart, for a number of reasons. Despite how smoothly the evening had

gone so far, he couldn't dismiss the feeling of something bad looming over them before they went their separate ways.

"That was a nice show," commented Eloisa. "It wasn't too violent, and I really felt for the characters."

"Yeah," Alex agreed, "and the hero was cute!"

Darian rolled his eyes as the two girls giggled.

"Did you like the movie?" Eloisa asked.

He shrugged. "I suppose."

"What, you didn't like the ladies?" she teased.

"I just – wish it was longer, I guess."

"Longer?"

"Yeah, 'cause we've seen the movie, and now – we go home? I wish tonight could go on a little longer."

"Hey, I've got a great idea!" Kotaro interjected, excited at the idea of doing more. "Let's hit the game centre!"

"Game centre?" Alex asked, puzzled.

Darian looked somewhat interested, twitching his tail. "It's a place upstairs where they have video games."

"Video games?"

"Oh, you're in for a ride," Kotaro cheered, running off ahead of the others. "Let's go!"

They followed at a lax pace, arriving to find Kotaro standing in line for a rhythm game, where two others were having a go at it. Darian watched the monitor with symbols scrolling across, which he supposed corresponded to each player's control deck. It was an interesting concept, striking buttons in synch with music, though the odd combination of switches, keyboard, and what looked to be a turntable seemed daunting.

"Oh, isn't that wack!" said the first, a large bully Darian recognized as a schoolmate named Jordan. "Why don't you try hard?" Sure enough, the second player started missing notes, finally stepping down in frustration. He recognized her as Piper from school, feeling even more self-conscious about being seen and biting his lip in reflex.

"Get off the machine!" cried a bystander. It sounded like Rikiou— was this where everyone came after session?

He sneered. "Beat me, and I'll step down! Them's the rules!"

"Nevermind," said Kotaro. "This guy's already hogging it."

"You only ever want to play that old game!" whined Eloisa. "Let's do something else."

"But I want to be a deejay!" he pouted, though with his demeanor he still seemed pretty amused.

"Well, this isn't much like actually playing music!" she pointed out. "Have you actually *seen* a real turntable before?"

"My folks won't spring for the real thing!"

Eloisa rolled her eyes. "That's why you *save* money, Ko..."

"Hey, you!" Jordan called. "Dare to challenge me?"

"No way!" Kotaro snapped. "I wanna play with my friends!"

"What about you?" he said, pointing at Alex.

She blanched. "Me? I do not know how to play!"

He grinned. "It's easy! Watch the demo—just play the notes on the keyboard when the little symbols reach the bottom, toggle the appropriate switches where the notes wiggle, and wag the turntable to scratch or reverse. Here, I'll even fix the settings for you!"

Alex stepped up with hesitation, putting in a coin. "Well, I'll try—"

"Don't play with him, Alex!" Kotaro whined. "I bet he'll make you play on Hard!"

"No, I won't! See, look!" With that, he set Alex's difficulty settings and entered her selection so she couldn't change it.

"That's HARD!"

"Don't worry," Jordan sneered. "She'll do fine – *won't she?*"

Alex didn't have time to think as the game started. Her fingers flew over the deck to match the sequences just in time, much to the astonishment of the entire room – including Jordan. With every note, her expression was one of utter terror, as though one mistake would cost her her very life.

"What the," Jordan cried as he missed a scratch.

Kotaro cheered with all his might. "GO, ALEX!"

As the song ended, Jordan grumbled—her score was a Perfect to his A-. "Yay!" screamed Eloisa.

"This is a *game?*" Alex complained, exhausted.

"You lose, bully!" Kotaro jeered. "Step down!"

"Just one more challenge," insisted Jordan, holding his ground with his sheer bulk, if nothing else. "His turn!"

Darian raised his eyebrow. "Me?"

"Yeah, and I'll even make it easy for you—we'll do the same track, since you already know it now."

"But I've never played before, either."

"The plays are exactly the same! You won't have any trouble!"

He grimaced but relented, stepping up. "Fine."

"Oh, but check your settings so they're the same—" With that, he changed Darian's settings to something else and finalized his selection.

"*What?*" Kotaro groaned. "That makes the notes *invisible!*"

Undaunted, Darian relaxed, closing his eyes. "I'm ready."

When the game started, he managed to strike all of the appropriate notes, if not in the Perfect synch window, despite the fact the screen didn't display the notes he needed to play and when—even when Jordan tried to reverse the queue to throw Darian off. This psyched him out such that he missed several notes from a mix of fear and fatigue.

Kotaro hooted with all his might. "Deeg, you're the Grand Master!"

As the song ended, Jordan scowled in rage—their scores were A- to C. Darian's was the lowest score possible without breaking the chain, but he had managed it even without having ever played before in his life.

"Damn," he mused with a thin veil of sarcasm, "I only scored A-? I got robbed! My deck must need calibrating."

"I changed my mind," Kotaro said, slapping Darian on the back—much to his visible displeasure. "I couldn't follow *that* performance! Let's go try the shooters instead!"

As the four walked away, oblivious to anyone else but each other, Jordan stared after them, half in astonishment and half in anger.

"Hey, you gonna play?" snapped another player. "If not, let us have a round."

Jordan stomped away with bitterness in his eye.

19.04

As the four left the game centre, Kotaro made a none-too-subtle hint that he and Eloisa would go on their own way. Despite Darian's reservations about being left alone with Alex, they said their goodbyes and parted with some reluctance.

"So, can I walk you home?" he asked despite the implications, not eager for the night to end.

"Well, I suppose," she agreed, "but I live far from here. I must take the bus every morning."

With a start, he remembered exactly where she lived, though she didn't know that he knew it. It seemed strange that it wouldn't have occurred to him earlier just how far it was from there.

"How 'bout to the bus stop, then?" he suggested, starting down the road. "That's not too bad of a walk from here. Besides, you owe me a story about your goggles."

Alex hesitated, blushing as she followed. "It's not really much of a story," she said, her voice quiet. With that, she lifted her goggles enough for him to see her eyes.

"Your eyes are brown?" he asked, pausing in surprise.

"Apparently people find it weird that I am the same colour all over," she moaned, continuing to walk. "I do not understand. Back home, brown is normal, and having blue and purple manes is weird."

"I think your eyes are pretty."

She stopped at the comment, turning back to look at him. "Really? They are the colour of dirt."

"They're warm and inviting – not cold, like mine."

Alex blushed again, looking away. "I like your eyes. They remind me of the sky. Your mane, too – it is like a rainy day."

There was an awkward silence as both of them seemed to want to say something but didn't want to be the first. Certainly that was how he felt, that he'd rather she speak so he wouldn't have to do it, and he didn't want to interrupt even something bad she might have to tell him. The stop was three

streets away yet. What else did they have to say to one another?

...no, this was his chance. There was no one else around, and no more opportune time than now. "Alex, I—"

From the corner of his eye, he saw movement, but in that moment, he knew it was too late. One of the syndicate leapt at them—he couldn't tell who, but he recognized the uniform all too well. The dark figure lashed out with a knife aimed at Alex's throat.

"Alex! No!"

She looked up just as her assailant lunged at her, shrieking in fear as the knife met its mark, blood spurting across the pavement. Darian rushed to her side at once, intent on dying with her if it came down to a fight, but—to his astonishment—the attacker collapsed as well. He wasted no time on the man, grabbing Alex and laying her down gently.

Her eyes were in tears from shock. "D—da—"

"Shh, don't talk," he instructed, running his hand over her neck to apply pressure. Yet, there wasn't a single mark—not even a drop of blood.

"D—d—d—"

"You're okay," he said with a look of confusion crossing his face, struggling to calm her down all the same. "He missed you. There's no cut. You're fine."

She hyperventilated for several mins, certain she was on the verge of death. Only as her fear subsided did she begin to breathe more deeply. "I felt it," she insisted. "He slashed me—"

"He didn't touch you. You just thought you were struck, so you felt pain as though you were."

Alex examined herself gingerly, doubtful of her own health. "I felt something cut me..." she insisted, shivering. "It was creepy."

"You're fine," he insisted, helping her up.

Her eyes fell to the attacker, who was still collapsed as though from shock. After a final shudder, he stopped moving. "What about him?" she asked. "If I am not hurt, where did this blood come from?"

That was a good question. Darian leaned over him and checked for wounds—nothing that he could see, but he wasn't willing to touch the body and leave incriminating prints, despite their innocence. Yet neither he nor Alex had been hurt in any way...

He stooped down and dabbed at one of the spots on the sidewalk, feeling its texture between his finger and thumb. *Vermilion*— Yes, it was definitely blood, and it curdled *his* to have a fresh reminder...

"Let's go," he said, grabbing her arm.

"What about him?"

"We can't do anything for him."

"But we cannot just leave him there, can we?"

Darian paused, looking Alex in the eye. "He just tried to *kill* you. Even if we could help him somehow, all he would do is turn around and try to kill you again, if not both of us. Do you want to risk that?"

She hesitated. "Yes."

"I can't take that chance."

With that, he dragged her away before she could protest further.

They arrived at the bus stop without saying another word the entire way. Alex seemed pensive, glancing back to where they left the body, but Darian reverted to his usual nowty self.

"Dar—"

"I'm going to have to ask you never to talk about this to anyone," he interrupted, cold. "This is what I didn't want to happen. If they knew who my friends were, they wouldn't hesitate to hurt them, just to hurt me."

Alex frowned in confusion. "But – who? *Why?*"

Darian shuffled in one of his pockets, withdrawing the contents in his fist without looking at it. "By the way... Your mother's ring – could you describe it for me?"

She was surprised by the non-sequitur, but answered nevertheless, frowning. "It was a plain jade ring, about size 7... It has more green swirls than brown. On the inside is inscribed, O'MALLEY."

He cringed, raising his fist to eye level. "You wouldn't believe me, but..." With that, he opened his hand to reveal the ring in question.

As though frightened of being burned, Alex took it with trepidation, turning it over in her hand to scrutinize it under the flickering streetlight. "HOW DID YOU GET THIS?" she screeched at him, hands clenched into fists. "*Were you one of the robbers?*"

Darian threw his arms in front of his face in reflex. "I told you you wouldn't believe me! I know – bad people."

She stared at him with a look of utter bewilderment. "Why do you know bad people? Do they make you steal things?"

"Sometimes, but it goes deeper than that. I can't say any more."

"Why do you stay with them?"

He scowled. "It's not by choice. They forced me to join them."

"Why don't you leave?"

"*How?* My parents are dead. I have no 'real' guardian, and no way to earn a living since I'm still a minor, especially without a birth certificate or any of those legal papers I need to prove I can work. Most people who see me think I'm in primary school and wouldn't believe I was of age even if I was! Without money, I can't do *anything*. The money I spent tonight was three months' worth of savings, that's how little they give me!"

There was a silence so thick, so dense, it was like a wall had formed between them. When he thought he had made his point, Darian started to walk away.

"Come with us," Alex insisted, running to grab his hand. "You can run away with us and escape! We just moved here, so it would not be much to move again—"

"It's not that simple," he interrupted, pulling away from her. "They have a network all down the coast. One person is going to have a hard time

disappearing from their radar, much less two or more. It's going to take more resources than you have, and I wouldn't ask you to do that for me even if I thought it was possible."

"Are you always this uncooperative?" she complained, sighing.

"No, just realistic. In fact, I recommend you and Kotaro stop trying to be my friend—better yet, move away before they try to attack you again."

Tears formed in her eyes, visible in the dimming light even through her goggles.

"Your bus is here," he snapped. "You're going to miss it."

She stood in place, refusing to budge. "I'm not leaving until you answer me, Darian. Why won't you let me help you?"

"ALEX, GET ON THAT BUS."

Without another word or second look, he turned and walked away, deaf to her cries.

21.16

Darian darted in and out of alleys and tunnels, backtracking often and on constant lookout, as though he suspected he was being watched. It was amusing, but it also seemed like a natural reaction for someone who had been through what he had just experienced. If he had been just a little more careful, though, he would have realized someone *was* following him.

The walk took more than an hour, perhaps because he was blowing off steam. Once in a while, he would kick a trash can and mutter something to himself. At one point, he even paused, grabbed a stick, and started hitting a tree with it for quite a while. At lengths, however, he got tired of that and moved on.

The house he eventually reached was large and made of stone, but he didn't enter the front; instead, he meandered behind the house and went inside. The back door was nigh-invisible, blending in well with the house's exterior, and disappeared once shut. Even a close examination in daylight would take quite a while to find any knob or keyhole, much less in the dim evening light.

After a few moments, a light flickered on in one of the second-story windows, the beam filtering through a tattered curtain made, possibly, out of an old blanket. The random tears in the curtain were just large enough to allow visibility from up close—meaning eye to the window for a spy scaling the wall—and just small enough to prohibit detection from the other side.

The light came from a plain bulb with pull cord hanging from the ceiling, about the most primitive lighting fixture in the entire world after the old-fashioned wooden torch, and almost as old. No one was in the room. Perhaps he had left? No – shouting, some of it piercing, but the words were indistinct through the sheer thickness of the wall and glass of the window. Suddenly, the door slammed, and Darian was inside, alone.

Staggering, he collapsed onto a couch—the lone piece of furniture in the room, from the look of it—leaning over the armrest and trembling, as though in pain. A faint groan resounded even through the wall. At lengths, he pushed himself up, kicking wildly at things in the room before slumping on the couch again and tearing at his mane. There he remained motionless for several mins, shivering every once in a while.

At lengths, he got up, wiping off his face and walking out of view. Through another tear, he was visible again, digging through a pile of clothes for – a wallet? He opened it and counted the contents—not enough, from the look on his face—then replaced it under the pile. Finally, he disrobed just behind another tear in the curtain, changing into long-sleeved sleepwear before flopping back on the couch and turning off the overhead light.

I should have suspected as much, thought the eavesdropper, climbing down from the window in silence. The problem is – now what?

Day 4

Holidays were tough on Darian. Thanks to his upbringing, he had no idea how other kids always longed for the holiday. As long as he was in school, *they* couldn't force him to do anything illegal, but he didn't have that excuse when session let out. He could run away and hide somewhere, but for how long? Unfortunately, he depended on them for food and shelter, and as enticing as freedom was, it wouldn't be long before they would find him through the network, if he managed to survive long enough as a vagrant.

It was almost definite that he'd be called on in some fashion today, so he didn't dare to wander too far, wherever he went – *if* he went anywhere. No doubt he also would have to answer to Kotaro or Alex if he ran into one of them, which wasn't a remotely pleasant idea. There was nothing he could do, it seemed—nothing *worthwhile*, anyway.

Having recovered somewhat from the latest of ills inflicted upon him on an increasingly regular basis, he lay sprawled out on the couch—tiny even for him, as it was too small to spread out without having at least his head or feet over the arms, much less get comfortable enough to get any rest. At lengths, he turned on his side, curling into a ball, with his head draped over the edge of the seat. It was no use, though; he was too edgy and pained to sleep any longer, despite his insomnia.

"Maybe..."

In a flash, Darian sat up. There was one thing he had wanted to do since the start of his problems—his *real* problems—and it was as opportune a time as any. He tossed on a loose shirt and some worn jeans, then ran to the bathroom to freshen up. During the week, he tidied himself up enough to provide the semblance of normality, even pamperedness, but with things being the way they were of late, he didn't care to do more than splash some water on his face for now. No one was around even at this hour, which was surprising, but all the better to make his departure without the red tape.

Following his instinct, Darian weaved up and down the streets, in and out of buildings as he had become accustomed to doing. It wasn't as though he was going anywhere bad or that he didn't want to be caught so much as it was firmly ingrained in his methods by now. Of course, anyone who cared wouldn't know why he was going, and anyone who knew why wouldn't bother to follow him there, but the fewer people who recognized him in any given place was still the better. It meant fewer questions and fewer problems down the road.

It had taken a bit of covert research to find the location without raising any eyebrows, but he finally arrived at Mother Hawk Cemetery, the overcast sky setting the mood. His target was easy to find:

In loving memory

T. Lance

b. 688.9.16

d. 723.11.9

The last time he had seen Lance was on the date of death inscribed on the headstone, almost two months ago. Memories of his anger swelled anew – but distantly, as though of something Darian had once seen in a movie rather than firsthand—familiar, yet foreign. The pain, as well, had been fresh, which had only served to fuel his hatred more.

More than anything else, however, he remembered the blood: red, vibrant, burning—like the fires of demons condemning him to an eternity of suffering. So much blood... Darian collapsed to his knees, struggling in vain to shut out visions of an insane madness tearing deep into a well of crimson, staining his hands with the most blood he had ever seen... Even now, he wiped his hands on his shirt in a futile attempt to erase the evidence of what had been done. The pain was no longer physical, but perceived, like the sound of a soul in infinite torment—echoing endlessly through his skull.

Guilt bore down on his shoulders, so much so that he could barely lift his head from the weight. "What am I supposed to do?" he whispered, tensing up. "How do I undo what I have wrought?"

A noise caught his attention, the sound of low natter in the distance. Someone was approaching. He scrambled to his feet and hid behind another headstone. It wasn't so much that he thought it suspicious that he was there, just that he still felt nervous being seen in public areas.

The headstone that concealed him was ornate, with shaped holes in it through which he observed the newcomers. A family of three—mother, father, and daughter. Odd – they were dressed in street clothes, in somewhat festive colours. Didn't most visitors wear black out of mourning?

The girl approached Lance's grave, bearing a bouquet. "I know you don't know me, sir," she began, "but I was blind from birth. After you died, you donated your eyes to me, and for the first time I got to see my parents. We came here today to thank you and to let you know that your death wasn't meaningless. I have new life thanks to you."

A knot clenched in Darian's throat, and he shuddered quietly, biting his lip to keep silent.

The girl lay the flowers on his grave. "I wish we could have met in this life, but perhaps we will meet in the next. ...I'm not sure what else to say... Thank you again so much for your gift."

As the family departed, tears formed in Darian's eyes. He laughed out of reflex that something good could have come of the crime, but he knew it didn't change how he felt. In fact, his stomach retched remembering that violent day...

Well, he had come to pay his respects and offer penance. If nothing

else, he hoped it would heal the wound in his soul. He got up and dusted himself off, walking to Lance's grave again – but the white roses now laying there only served to exacerbate his simmering guilt. Despite the girl's ardent words, Darian found himself kneeling over the grave, wishing with all his heart that that day had never happened...

In an instant, a shriek echoed through the cemetery, shattering the silence. He bolted upright, looking around to see what had happened.

"**MY EYES! WHAT HAPPENED TO MY EYES?**"

The girl! What had happened to the girl? Why was she screaming about her—

As though crawling from the depths of his consciousness to strangle him, Darian heard a duller sound, like thumping—steadily growing louder, more frantic. He turned his ears this way and that but couldn't quite make out where the noise was coming from...

"**I CAN'T SEE! WHERE ARE MY EYES?**"

Then he pinpointed it: in front of him. Huh? All that was there was the headstone. No, it sounded more like it came – from – below—

"Ruddy Hell..." he blurted, jumping up in fear. A vision of the plate came to mind, how it had repaired itself at a touch. Alex being slashed—had she really been slashed, but immediately healed as though she hadn't been touched at all? Now this... Could Lance have – *come back to life*? But how would that explain—

Conservation of matter, his memory chirped. One of the most basic scientific principles—what was broken from the plate was returned to the plate, where Alex was cut was restored, but Lance's eyes were donated after his death...

...meaning the eyes, when restored to Lance, would have to have been taken back from the girl.

"Where's a phone? Call an ambulance!"

Darian's mind was racing at a dizzying speed. He didn't know how he'd caused it, but he had to do something to fix things. Feigning ignorance, he ran towards the family.

"Can I help?" he called to them. "What's the matter?"

The mother looked frantic. "She just started screaming about her eyes! Do you have a mobile? Please, call an ambulance!"

Perhaps if he just touched her... "What's the matter? Let me see what's wrong."

As he reached out to her, envisioning her as she was moments ago, her eyes bolted open. To his immense relief, all seemed to be normal.

"I – what happened?" she asked, dazed.

"Are you okay?"

"Y–yes..." She rubbed her eyes and blinked several times. "Just now, it felt as though my eyes had been ripped out of my skull..."

"I saw it, too," said the father, which gave Darian a chill. "It looked like her eyes were gone."

"That doesn't make sense," said the mother. "How would they just disappear like that?"

Darian cringed a bit in reflex. "...wow, that certainly sounds like a freaky ghost story!"

The girl laughed, to his surprise. "Oh, maybe a ghost is haunting my eyes!"

"Oh, now you're just being silly," chided the mother.

"Well, whatever it was, I'm sorry I gave everybody such a scare. Heh, maybe I'm worried my eyes will stop working, or someone will take them away and blind me again..."

"Goodness, don't talk about such awful things."

The father turned to him. "Thank you for your help, young man."

Darian blushed, and not out of pride. "I'm sorry to have intruded. I'm sorry..."

"No – no trouble at all."

They parted amicably, waving goodbye. With a sinking feeling in his stomach, however, Darian realized that to put *everything* back again, he would now have to kill Lance a second time. He had blood-curdling visions of the dead man coming back to life and finding himself buried alive – then moments later having his eyes ripped from him—

The thought made his spine tingle all the way down to his tail – but there was no humane way to do this.

Nausea boiling in his stomach, he returned to Lance's grave, laying a hand on it and envisioning a cold, dead grave. The screams, amplified by his runaway imagination, died away...

4.12

"What *good* is this?" he snarled under his breath, kicking at a rock in disgust. "I wanted to make amends, not make things worse! It was bad enough when it was just me suffering! Why do I keep ending up hurting—"

There it was again, that sensation. Feeling anxious, Darian looked up from his grumblings to see Alex staring him straight in the eye. *Bollocks*, he thought, turning to run for it. *Not a good—*

"—buh?"

Glancing back, he realized she was looking straight *through* him, as though trying to see something beyond him. He froze, staring back at her as he forgot himself. Another tense moment passed, and she seemed to come out of it.

"Darian?" she asked, approaching with caution. "Is that you?"

The question took him aback. Did she really not recognize him out of his school clothes? "Of course it's me. What's the matter?"

Her jaw dropped in bewilderment. "You look like you have aged a whole year in just a day! What happened?"

His blood ran cold. While it was true he hadn't looked in a mirror since yesterday, he certainly hadn't looked in one since leaving the cemetery. Did something change?

"Uh – I had a growth spurt?" he said, grinning weakly and running a hand through his mane.

With a shock, he realized his mane had grown out—it was nearly chin-length now, where before it had been closely-cropped.

"I have to go," he blurted, dashing off as fast as his legs could carry him without a second look.

"Wa–wait! *DARIAN!*"

Alex's voice trailed off as he slipped between pedestrians, in and out of stores, up and down stairs, through alleys in a mad effort to lose her. To his great consternation, she seemed to be trailing him.

"Damn her persistence!" he cried, skipping up a fire escape. As he leapt from one building to the next, coming close to falling more than once, he struggled to block out everything but thoughts of escape. Now more than ever he needed time alone—one hundred percent alone—to think, to try to reason out what was going on and why.

At last he ground to a halt at a roof-access stairwell, tucking himself into a ball behind the side opposite the door, making himself as invisible as possible. Even when he felt secure, he waited several tense moments before relaxing his stance, listening closely for any signs of pursuit. Only after all signs of pursuit were gone did he loosen up, exhausted from the chase.

What had she said again? *You look like you have aged a whole year in just a day! What happened?*

He stared at his hands. They looked almost the same, but he could tell they were a little more defined, stronger, possibly more steady...

"What's happening?" he murmured. "Could this be why I've looked so young all this time?"

"Why?"

With a start, Darian fell to the ground. Alex stood over him, glaring with piercing brown eyes, her goggles dangling around her neck. "What is making you younger?" she demanded.

Darian was awe-struck. "How did you—"

"You are not very good at covering your tracks," she scolded, taking his hand and pulling him to his feet. "You have doubled back over the same ground too many times, and you made so much noise climbing up here! It probably would not kill you to work out, too, to help you jump farther over the rooftops. What if you fell?"

He stared at her, aghast.

"Oh, do not act so surprised that I could follow you! I have escaped from a war zone, Darian! I have had to do a lot of things to save myself and Sunni from capture!"

"Sunni?"

"The point is that I am tired of you running away and not telling me

anything! What do you know? What is going on that I can do *this*?"

With that, she pointed at a trash can in the alley below, and—with a brief flicker—there was suddenly can-shaped litter floating to its left. As the litter tumbled to the ground, Alex grabbed Darian's shoulders.

"Tell me what's going on! This doesn't make any sense!"

He didn't say a word, staring blankly into her eyes. Nothing made sense anymore—nothing.

"I—"

"Do not tell me that you cannot tell me!" she screeched. "That is all you can say to me, 'I cannot tell you!' I do not want to hear that anymore! *Tell* me, or—"

He snapped. "What's gotten into you, Alex? You were so shy just a couple of days ago!"

"*Me*?" she shrieked, tears in her eyes. "What's gotten into *me*? You spend these last three days pushing me away when all I want to do is be your friend, and what's gotten into *me*?" She grabbed his shirt collar, throttling him as best as she could. "I could not sleep because I spent all of last night trying to figure out what had happened. That is when I discovered I could move things with only my mind! Not just move them—I can also separate things – like – blood..."

"Huh?"

Her voice became a high-pitched squeal as she buried her head in his chest, crying. "I killed that man, Darian! I *k—killed*..."

Darian was at a complete loss for words. Gingerly, he patted her on the back. "I'm sure you didn't—"

"It was in the papers this morning, and on the news... They found him late last night where we left him, dead from an unknown cause of blood loss—but *I knew!*"

She sat up, sniffing and wiping her face on her sleeve. Regardless of how he felt about befriending others, he hated seeing her cry. Granted, he hated seeing others cry, period, but she was innocent, losing her innocence the way no fourteen-year-old should – and he was one to know.

"Just tell me," she pleaded. "What is going on?"

His willpower ran out, all of his resistance obliterated. There was no way he couldn't tell her at least what he knew about his own abnormal ability when she was fully aware of one of her own, but...

"Is there somewhere we can talk in private?" he asked.

She glanced around. "We are alone here," she declared.

"Yes, *maybe* – but sound carries a long way. There's a good chance that we were overheard just now." More than good, he figured, considering how loud her wailing was just then.

Alex perked her ears, listening. "I am certain there is no one around for quite a ways. Almost everyone is at home this time in the day."

"Believe me, it's not safe to talk here."

They stood, straightening themselves up. It was starting to occur to

Darian how tight his clothes were on him now, which worried him quite a bit—getting a whole new wardrobe for himself out of the blue would prove to be even more costly than getting a much-needed bed.

"First, though," he said, picking out a wedgie in discomfort, "I need to go shopping."

5.08

"What is taking you so long?" she chided.

"I don't like this one. The legs are too long."

"That does not matter—you will just outgrow it!"

Silence. "Yeah, that's true."

The thrift shop was the seediest place he had patronized in quite a while. He didn't trust anything to be sanitary, but he didn't have the money to go anywhere remotely more reputable. Darian emerged from the dressing room wearing a loose long-sleeved shirt and slacks, the hems on the latter dragging on the floor when he walked. He wiggled his toes uncomfortably in shoes two sizes larger than he was used to wearing, but his old ones didn't fit anymore once he had managed to pry them off, and all the others in stock were even larger or smaller than that.

"This really isn't my style," he mused, undecided. He liked his old dressy clothes, as wearing them helped him try to pretend that his reality was only a bad dream, but they were a luxury he just couldn't afford anymore. Not that he liked the salvage he was wearing earlier any better, but at least he hadn't paid for it.

"I sort of like it," Alex commented.

Darian raised an eyebrow at her. "Really."

There was a genuine warmth in her smile. "It makes you look more relaxed... Your mane, too. You should keep it grown out!"

He was displeased at the idea. "I hate taking care of a long mane. It's too much trouble."

"Oh, stop being so – fussy about it." She glanced over at the pile of things he had picked out. "Are you getting anything else?"

He cringed. "I ought to, but I've already blown nearly half my stash between this stuff and going to the movies with you guys last night. I'll have nothing if I keep up this shopping spree."

"What is the problem?" she scolded. "You are going to live with *us* from now on."

"*You*?" he cried, taken aback. "What makes you think—"

"Did you see yourself in the mirror, Darian? You have gotten older *very fast*. It would be better for you to keep out of sight for a while, until we can figure out what is going on."

"But they—"

"What do you care what 'they' think? If 'they' try to come track you

down..." Alex wagged her finger.

Darian grimaced, not feeling any better about it. He just hoped it wasn't going to end in tears. Deep down, though, he found that he enjoyed the attention somewhat, but he wasn't sure whether to encourage her.

"So just the one outfit? Are you sure?"

"I told you I don't have a lot of cash."

She crossed her arms. "I will lend you some. You cannot wear the same clothes every day."

"Yes, mother," he chided.

A bit annoyed, Alex pushed him back towards the dressing room. "Try the rest of those while I look for something else," she grumbled.

Frowning in irritation, he sifted through the clothes—if you could really call them 'clothes'—in the pile. He grimaced at a shirt that smelled of tobacco and vomit, throwing it to the floor without a second thought.

"Try this on," Alex prompted, handing a short-sleeved shirt over the privacy barrier. Rolling his eyes at one glance, Darian rumbled it up, tossed it on top of his discard pile, and stood idle a few moments.

"Doesn't fit—too small."

"Are you sure?" she asked, the confusion evident in her voice. "It looked okay to me."

"No good. Sorry."

"Well," she sighed, "what about—"

"You know," he interrupted, "I'm not really eager to spend the rest of the day in here."

There was a hint of disappointment in Alex's voice. "Fine, then."

With reluctance, he picked out two more outfits, not counting the one he was wearing. As Darian exited the dressing room, she looked at him as though she was expecting something. He rolled his eyes to indicate his own impatience.

"What?" she asked, getting the hint.

"I need underwear as well," he said with some snark. "I'd rather you not watch me buy that."

Alex opened her mouth as if to say something, then pursed her lips in reflection. "Fine, I shall wait by the door."

As she left, Darian cursed that there seemed to be only the one way out. He picked out a package of—hopefully—new underwear and tucked it in his purchase pile, when a worker putting more clothes on the racks caught his attention.

"Excuse me," he asked discreetly, lest Alex happen to catch wind of his attempt, "by any chance, is there a back exit to the store?"

The worker glanced at him, then at Alex. "Why, you in trouble with your girl or something?" he muttered, grinning.

Darian smirked, withholding the urge to gag. "Kinda, yeah."

"Well, as much as I'd like to help you out, I think I'd get in bigger trouble than you if I let you out the employee entrance. Sorry."

He sighed. "Well, I gave it a shot."

"Ready to check out?"

"Yeah – these, and what I'm wearing."

The worker gave him an odd look.

"I had a huge, unexpected growth spurt this morning. Really. I left my old clothes in the dressing room, if you don't believe me."

"Well, can you take them with you? We can't accept worn garments for donation—"

"Then throw them away."

"I would gladly do so, but I'm the only one working this shift—as much as I think or care that you're going to steal something, can you bring them to the front for me?"

"Fine."

Darian flattened his ears against his head in aggravation at being henpecked by a squirrel with superpowers, but he used the return trip to the dressing room to change into his new underwear—at least *that* was a relief. He rolled the dirty items into a loose ball and returned to the counter to pay for everything.

"Here," Alex offered as she walked up, holding out a heptaderio.

"No," he insisted. "I don't want your money."

She glared at him, unmoving as he took out his own rio to hand to the worker, who seemed at odds over whose to accept. "It is not a problem," she insisted, thrusting her money forward.

"Stop it," he snapped. "I – don't want you buying me naff presents." That seemed to alleviate her insistence somewhat—if she *was* thinking that way, it was the least romantic thing he could imagine.

With reluctance, Alex put her money back in her purse. It gave him mixed feelings, to be certain, since she seemed to think money wasn't that important to her. He envied that kind of freedom.

They left the shop at around midday with purchases in hand. Still rooted in habit, Darian started into his escape routine, but she stopped him before he could get too far.

"Remember," she scolded, grabbing his shirt, "I caught up to you—you're going to have to do better than that."

Startled, he stared at her. "What?"

"You are not going to run away again, are you? I will just find you, wherever you go."

"I wasn't—"

"Besides, we still have to talk about You Know What."

Darian could tell she wasn't going to let the matter drop. "Fine," he relented. "Where do you want to talk?"

"I told you already—you are living with *us* now!"

"Guh," he exclaimed. "How can you think I'd be safe at your place, after I – they robbed you?"

At the misspeak, she glowered at him in tense silence. After a few

moments, though, she only shook her head in disapproval.

"We are prepared now," Alex explained. "We installed a security system. It was to be ready the first day, but there was a delay. Now we will not have to worry."

"So now you'd be able to stop an entry-level like me, but what about the higher tiers?"

"Huh?"

Darian froze, realizing what he had blurted. Was he allowed to say that much? Nervous, he glanced every which way to see if his unfortunate diarrhea of the mouth had triggered anything.

"Stop that!" she scolded. "You make yourself look suspicious by doing that! There is no one listening!"

"How do you know?" he retorted.

"Use your *ears*!" she chided, grabbing one of his and tweaking it. "You will find more things that way than using your eyes alone."

Yes, he thought, biting his tongue. *That's how you got your jugular sliced open, is it?*

"Let us go already," Alex prodded, taking his hand. To his dismay, she took a direct, easy-to-follow route. He felt his face grow cold with fear that another attacker would strike, when she suddenly darted to the side.

"Someone is watching that way," she explained. To his surprise, Darian found that he could make out the sound of a rifle being readied and a tiny red dot on the ground a ways to their left...

...but how? Surely he would've missed those things had he not been two steps ahead, where Alex was. It was almost like a daydream—though he couldn't understand where the hallucination came from. "You just heard someone with a rifle?" he asked, twitching his ears every which way trying to make out the sound.

"You are learning," she muttered, but it didn't make him feel any better about the vision.

They continued in this way for some time before arriving at Alex's house, looking much the way he had seen it three days prior. He felt more nervous being there, but there wasn't much he could do, in the presence of a girl who could—

—what was it she did, exactly? Not just moving things, probably... Separating them? Regardless, he preferred having all of his parts where they were, old or young.

Alex unlocked the door and swung it open. "サニー! 只今!"

"Guh?" Darian blurted.

A cheery-looking feline in her twenties peeked out from the kitchen. "ああ, アレックス! お帰りなさい!" She glanced at Darian and seemed to be surprised. "あのう, 友達は?"

"ダリアンです, ね!" Alex smiled at the perplexed look at his face. "I am sorry, Sunni does not speak common very well."

He stared at her in silence. Of *course* he knew they would speak a

foreign language – but what was it?

She took her shoes off and placed them on a stand near the entrance. Darian followed suit, assuming this to be part of her culture, as Alex went on nattering in her native tongue. "ダリアンは今日から私達と泊まっています。客の部屋—"

"いいえ、だめだ," the woman—Sunni?—protested, dropping her mixing spoon. "彼は泊まりできない。全然ふさわしいない。"

"でも、安全な所は彼の為にではありません!"

She gave a sigh of exasperation. "アタシ、あなたのお母さんじゃない。でも、承認しない。"

"私を殺すしようとした人に帰る、彼にと言うんですか?"

"もし彼らは人と同じが、あなたは知っていない。"

"なぜあなたはそんなに愛想が悪いですか?"

"愛想が悪い。あなたが心配であります。"

Darian wasn't sure if he was glad that he didn't understand what they were arguing about or not.

"あのう、私達は私の寝室に話したい!"

"ね," Sunni complained, "居間で話すのは悪いんですか?"

"お願い〜い!" Alex pleaded.

She waved a hand at them in dismissal. "好きなことを何でもしなさい... 夕食すぐ準備するでしょう。"

Alex turned to Darian, grinning with unbridled pleasure. "We can talk in my room," she declared. Why didn't he feel good about that?

Before he realized it, Darian started upstairs without being led there. Behind him, he heard an angry "Hmph!" and stopped in place, flushing red as he did at having given himself away.

She grabbed him by the ear and dragged him upstairs. "I suppose you looked through all of my things, too," she snapped. "After all, *you* took my mother's ring!"

"I didn't look through your clothes!" he cried, wincing at the pain. "I had a strict policy about not doing that if I could!"

"You are lucky that I have already forgiven you, or I would *really* be mad!"

As they entered her room, Alex closed the door behind them, which only served to fuel his nervousness. "Now," she began, "tell me everything you know about – whatever this is." She waved her hands at random, trying to illustrate her ability.

"Where can I sit?" he asked, unconsciously overlooking the obvious in expectation that most bedrooms had a bed.

She gave him a look of mild surprise. "You do not sit on a futon?"

"You don't have a bed?"

"A futon is a bed!"

"I meant, one with a mattress."

Alex shrugged, not sure why it mattered. "I had one, but Sunni is not comfortable sleeping in my parents' old bed. I have grown accustomed to – cozying up, I guess one might say. I do not feel like I am sleeping alone if there is something at my back."

He couldn't quite identify with the feeling himself.

"Okay," Darian started, taking a seat. "Well, I guess I can tell you what I know about *my* power, but that's not much. Certainly I don't know anything about *yours*, other than what you've told me."

"Go on."

He sighed. "I first noticed it when I broke a plate." It didn't seem beneficial to mention it was hers. "It shattered, but when I picked up the pieces and put them back together, it – fixed, as though the plate had never been dropped."

Alex's eyes grew large. "You – fix things?"

"It looks that way."

She caught on. "So, when I was attacked—"

"I healed you, yes – probably."

Her eyes lit up with hope. "But – that is a *wonderful* ability! You can do so much good with a power like that! You saved my life, and you can save so many other lives, too!"

Darian shook his head. "No, I can't. You saw for yourself how I've gotten this much older in one day. It's like my power comes at the expense of my youth."

"You could make yourself younger again!" Alex protested.

"I don't know. I may have already been doing that subconsciously, which is why I looked younger than I should have been. I'm not really eager to test it out to see."

"Why not? You have a power that can do so much good—"

"—and so much bad!" he retorted. "Today I brought someone back to life, someone who had donated his eyes after his death, and it tore his eyes out from the girl who received them!"

Her jaw dropped open. "You – what?"

"The only thing that makes sense is that, whatever I restore, I do it down to the *molecule*. I make things exactly as they were, with exactly the same particles it had before. That means if anyone or anything—*anything*—received something physical from a death, bringing that person back to life would mean taking those parts back from their recipients."

He could tell what she was thinking from the look in her eyes.

"Even if I just healed immediate injuries," he continued in defiance, "if people found out about what I could do, they would line up from all over the planet to be healed. If it turns out I can't make myself younger, then it wouldn't be long before I became an old man, and I would have only healed a fraction of the people who wanted it. How do I choose who gets to be healed? Shouldn't I have a say in that? And what if I want to stay how I am now and grow old naturally? Isn't that my privilege? I want to live, too—"

it's not fair to put that kind of pressure on me."

That may have been too much. Alex had the expression of a child watching someone kill her most beloved pet.

"That is true," she sniffed, looking away. "It is not fair..."

He felt that knot in his throat again, the one that formed from seeing her cry.

"It is not fair that we have such worthless, *destructive powers!*" she shrieked, her sobbing making it hard for her to speak. "What can I do? I – break things. I even – *killed* a man! What good is – this if all – we can do – is hurt?"

A torrent of tears coated her face no matter how much she tried to wipe them away. Darian cringed, saddened by the wretched sight—despite his attitude, nothing hurt him more than seeing others in pain. In a flash, Alex was tear-free and sitting upright, her breathing regular. She blinked at him, confused, but with a slowly-forming hint of recognition.

"Did – you do something?"

He raised his hands in an admission of defeat. "I like it better when you're not crying."

Alex stared at him in disbelief. "You just told me you do not want to be old so fast, and you restored me to before I was *crying?*"

"I don't mind," he said, smirking.

After processing this, Alex couldn't help laughing quietly, shaking her head. "You were wrong after all. You *are* stupid."

Darian basked in the glow of her laugh for a brief moment before she stood, a renewed vigor in her eyes.

"夕食準備します!" Sunni called from downstairs.

"Let's go." She took his hand again and helped him up. "サニー!" she called as they walked back downstairs.

As they entered the kitchen, Sunni gave a mischievous grin. "服を脱ぎませんでしたか?"

"無礼だな!" Alex screeched, upset. "私達を信頼しません..."

Sunni laughed, bowing in mock apology. "冗談だ..."

Darian frowned at being left out of the conversation, but it couldn't be helped, he supposed. Alex waved him towards the supper table. "Sit! I bet you have not eaten a decent meal *at all.*"

He obliged, but still seemed uncertain.

They ate Sunni's best shabu-shabu noodles in relative silence, after teaching him to use chopsticks. He was a fast learner, even making a good shabu-shabu himself, to Sunni's delight. As they finished their meal, Alex took Darian aside and made him a proposal.

"You have a lot on your mind," she said, "and it may be good for you to talk to someone about it, just to say it. Sunni doesn't speak common well, so she would be a good listener."

He tugged at his collar in discomfort. "I don't—"

"I will leave the two of you alone in the meantime."

"...okay," he agreed, after some reluctance.

Getting up, Alex walked over to Sunni, whispering something in her ear that he couldn't quite make out.

"囁かなければなりませんか?" Sunni asked aloud.

"...癖です。何をしますか?"

"聞きます," she said, nodding.

Alex turned back to Darian. "I will be in my room. Please tell me when you are done." With that, she vanished upstairs.

An uneasy silence passed as Darian tried to muster the nerve to say anything. They had just met and here he was going to divulge his darkest secrets to her, someone at least ten years his senior.

"ね、始めましょうか?"

"Well," he began. "Where do I start?"

"どうぞ," she prompted with a warm smile. "リラックス - 危険ではありません。"

He looked up and met her friendly emerald eyes. To his surprise, when he opened his mouth, the words came tumbling out...

"I'm done," came a voice from the breezeway.

Alex looked up from her homework. "Come in." Shyly, Darian stepped inside. "So, how was your talk? Do you feel better?"

"Sort of," he admitted, rubbing his neck. "I felt a bit weird talking to someone who doesn't understand what I said, but it *did* feel good to just come out and say it."

"That is good," she said, smiling. "Now you must be tired, aren't you? It has been a busy day, after all."

Darian looked embarrassed.

"What?" she asked, raising an eyebrow. "I was going to have you sleep in the guest room."

"Oh, of course," he babbled, looking relieved. She raised her other eyebrow at him.

"This way."

Alex led him across the breezeway to the opposite room, empty save a queen-size bed. She was almost certain she saw his face light up in excitement at the sight, but she dismissed it, instead facing back toward the breezeway. "The bathroom is back here, to the—"

THUMP

In the instant she had looked away, Darian had collapsed on the bed, still clothed, and fallen asleep in an instant, snoring at once. A moment of awkward silence passed before Alex had to laugh, in spite of it all.

"Well, you *do* deserve a good night's sleep, huh?" she conceded.

As Alex returned downstairs, Sunni was washing the dishes. "彼も

かつこいい, ね?" she teased, winking.

Alex smirked, rolling her eyes. "ええ - ちょっと." Then her face became sullen. "So how bad is it?"

Sunni's face was no longer warm and cheery as she lowered the dish in her hand. "It is much worse than you first thought. While you killed that man accidentally, in self-defense, he killed a man deliberately - in cold blood."

Day 5

Ganymede shuffled through the reports with an ingrained scowl on his face. From the inception of the project, progress had been uncertain, at best. Now it was starting to backpedal, worsening as each day passed. If he was reading the preliminary data correctly, the only other prospects in the batch were, ironically, now out of reach—unattainable, by force or location, and the procedures for one reason or another could not produce duplicate results in other subjects. It wasn't difficult to conceive it taking a thousand controls to match one anomaly, although he supposed he should've expected as much when the subjects were allowed exposure to so many unknowns.

To say that things had not gone according to plan would be an understatement, and a gross one at that. He threw the reports on his desk in frustration and leaned back in his chair, propping his head up with one arm as he did so.

"Why are these so particularly unbalanced compared to the rest." It was a rhetorical question—no one could determine a sound reason for it. In fact, one of the lot had been slated for disposal, but something had gone drastically wrong. Now it seemed impossible to correct even if they tried. The only silver lining, not that it was much of one, was that there were only three abnormalities, contained. Yet the project wasn't supposed to have any, much less ones of this scope.

"What do you think, Themisto?" he snorted, only half expecting to receive an answer that satisfied him. "Is there something I'm missing here that's crucial to understanding these reports? How am I supposed to believe what is happening with these subjects. What does it mean for the syndicate's project as a whole?"

Themisto twisted the hem of his lab coat with nervous energy. He had the feeling there was more riding on this project than he first realized. "I'm not sure, Director. In fact, I performed a check-up just this past week, and there didn't seem to be anything out of the ordinary even for the merger. Blood work checks out, normal even, but all from a month ago. Whatever changes that may have happened must have been recent."

Ganymede frowned. "How recent?"

"Within four or five days, I estimate."

"What has happened in that time?"

"Hmm..." He tapped his finger on the desk. "The fugue found the score, but that wouldn't explain what's happening with the opus."

Ganymede scratched his chin in thought. "Is that what they're going by now? I can't keep any of these damn codewords straight."

"One of the field men came up with it once, I presume as a joke—

peculiar, that one."

"How do you know the timeframe is four or five days, then?"

"I am going by the records of abnormal activity. The opus – well, you know what happened, but that occurred about the same time."

"Coincidence?"

"It's impossible to tell whether one is related to the other without knowing a full account of every minute detail of their activities outside of a quarantined environment. I can try to maintain observation, of course, but you know how Callisto gets about. Even Pachi doesn't have total control."

Disgusted, Ganymede spun around in his chair, facing away from Themisto and crossing his arms. The talk was raising his blood pressure, not to mention shattering every notion he had about what was sensical in the world. He had but a few options, and he had made his decision. "Well, if it wasn't already doomed from being impossible to replicate—*besides* being illegal—the project is certainly doomed now."

"What do you recommend, Director?"

He grunted in dissatisfaction, deliberating for a long, tense moment before facing Themisto again. "The most reasonable thing to do would be a full abort."

"Exactly how would we be able to manage that, Director? I'm not saying it wouldn't be possible, but – how? After all, just reintegrating our tenured staff alone would take—"

"I mean a full *abort*."

Themisto stared in complete disbelief as Ganymede raised a gun at him, shooting him cleanly between his eyes.

3.15

Darian rolled over in bed, blinking his eyes and stretching. The pleasant sensation was unbelievable, his having awoken from a dreamless sleep for the first time in the longest time he could remember. If only he could have that feeling for the rest of his life...

In his bliss, it took him a tick to realize he had overslept. "Guh!" He bolted upright, suddenly realizing where he was and looking around for a clock. On closer examination, the room, however nice, was sparse: a short wooden dresser near the door had two familiar laundered and folded outfits on top of it, and a small hamper for his dirty clothes rested on the floor—other than that, furniture-wise, there was only the bed. The hamper served to remind him that he had no idea how filthy the outfit he was wearing was and would have to clean up.

A thought then crossed his mind: as he was now older than he was supposed to be—or now his correct age, whichever way it worked—he had the perfect disguise now. He wouldn't have to hide from the syndicate if he simply became older, because they couldn't possibly realize it was him. Was

this his ticket to freedom?

It was like a light from Heaven shining down on him. He ran to the bathroom to look at himself more closely. Sure enough, the Darian from just yesterday morning and the Darian staring at him in the mirror were different enough to be mistaken for different people. Mind, the resemblance was still there, but that could be fixed...

Excited, he looked around for something to break. Then he paused. Would that work? He hadn't aged enough to notice from just breaking and restoring a mere plate. Would he have to perform a restoration as complex as healing someone, possibly from death?

That was something Darian wasn't as eager to do. It wasn't wise to let anyone else know what feats he and Alex were capable of performing. Sunni? Well, he didn't really feel comfortable with the idea of hurting her, even if he could undo the damage. And Alex...

He crossed the breezeway and peeked in her room. No one there—she must have gone to school and left him alone to sleep – not that he felt that eager to hurt her, either. Well, that left one option he'd meant to try.

Returning to the bathroom, he stared in the mirror, concentrating hard. It made him nervous, thinking of intentionally making himself young again, because—to be honest—he liked being older. He *looked* fifteen now, more mature and defined. The mop on his head was disagreeable, but it was something he would have to put up with for a while, since a short, low-maintenance cut was one of his previous distinguishing features.

That's odd, he thought. *Nothing's happening.*

Darian rummaged around and found scissors in one of the drawers. He took them out and held a blade to his right arm, hesitating a tick. Pain was something that was all too familiar, but it would be the first time he had sought it out. "It's okay," he muttered to himself without conviction, "I can heal, so it won't hurt – for long..."

Nevertheless, his hands trembled with uncertainty as doubt filled his mind. What if the past few days had been a fluke, and he lost the ability as soon as he'd gotten it? No doubt he was going to tear up his arm, and badly, for what? Yet something deep inside him said that the fear was vital, that if he wasn't afraid of the horrible consequences—

Growling at his distrust in himself, he made a tiny cut on his finger, not even enough to draw blood. After a tick, he recalled what it looked like before, and the cut was gone. A glance up at himself revealed nothing out of the ordinary to have changed, as though he'd imagined he had cut himself.

Finally mustering the nerve, he stabbed his arm, wincing as he drew blood. He focused on healing, watching in amazement as the cut vanished without a trace. Glancing back in the mirror, he scrutinized his features, but not a hair was out of place or different from a moment ago. He tried again—screaming as he reached bone—and healing that, with the same result. Even the pain was just a vague memory, but if he'd aged or youthened at all, it was indiscernable to his eye.

"So I can heal, but I can't get younger again," he mused, somewhat relieved. It was a thorn in his side being little for so long, but at the same time it meant that he had to be extra careful about who or what he fixed and when. "Well, that means I can't go back to sch—"

It startled Darian to realize he couldn't continue his studies from this point on, because bringing it to everyone's attention that he'd aged so quickly was absolutely the *last* thing he wanted. Yet without school, what would he do? Furthermore, without a birth certificate or other identifying paperwork, how would he get a job?

His cloud was vanishing—Heaven was falling away. It was still in reach, but now he'd lost sight of how to get there.

Frustrated, he stuck his tongue out at his reflection. That reminded him yet again that he hadn't cleaned up in over a day. A basket of fresh toiletries sat near the sink—no doubt reserved as his—and he momentarily wondered if he really needed them... No, it was silly to use his ability for such frivolous things as that. Besides, getting cleaned up was a pleasure in itself, and after the day he'd had yesterday it would feel even better. He brushed his teeth, taking a small delight at having new things again, then stripped down and walked over to the shower.

Pausing, he found himself marveling at the combination stall-and-tub. He couldn't recall having taken a bath since he was a toddler and, in fact, hadn't even seen a tub since then. He felt his body ache and considered taking a nice, relaxing soak for once in his life, now that he could afford the luxury. The idea delighted him, and he sat in the tub, stopping the drain and turning on the tap to draw the bath. As hot water rushed over his feet and tail, climbing past his torso, he felt like a little kid again, discovering anew what was mundane to anyone who'd ever taken a bath alone before. It was a strange yet enjoyable experience, simply lying back in the water and feeling the warmth surround every bit of him as he relished the sensation. It wasn't a jacuzzi, but he still marveled at how spacious it was compared to his stall back home.

Home – the name didn't fit the place. It was disgusting to think of ever returning there—how could he, after a taste of normality? He soaked in the water, lost in the depths of his bliss and the aromatherapy of his fruit-scented shampoo. It was so tempting to keep filling the tub with hot water when it started to cool, but after too long he thought about how much he was wasting in that way and felt guilty for what he felt was otherwise a much-deserved indulgence. After a quick rinse to wash out all the soap, he shook down and toweled dry.

Refreshed but still bored, Darian returned to "his" room, changing into fresh clothes and flopping back onto the bed. Moments later, he got up again and wandered around the house, trying to find something to do—as much as it thrilled him to actually stretch out and sleep, he found that he couldn't sleep any longer and had grown restless. Even Sunni had gone out for the day, which left him alone to amuse himself. Another thought crossed

his mind as well—he didn't know the arming code for their security system, so it wouldn't be a good idea to leave just yet even if he felt like it. What if he set off the alarm? That would be fun to explain to the authorities.

With nothing else worthwhile on his mind, he decided to make a sandwich, heading to the kitchen. The task was simple enough, to his vague annoyance, and he found himself wandering around the house again instead of sitting down to eat.

In the basement, Darian found a small study with several unsorted bookshelves—they must have unpacked and shelved the books without any concern for organization yet. A group of language audio-workbooks caught his eye, and he decided to flip through the books; an initial scan suggested they were Alex's books for learning the common tongue. It was a bit strange reading it from the opposite perspective, but he found he could understand just enough to pick up the basics.

"Interesting," he muttered, absorbing their contents with enthusiasm as he munched on his sandwich.

3.16

It had been even more difficult for Alex to get to sleep that night than usual, and now she was having the same difficulty concentrating in her classes, as fast as her mind was racing. It was no wonder Darian had pushed people away for so long—who would want to be friends with a murderer? Yet at the same time, why did he cover it up? Truly, no one wants to go to prison, but isn't that a better alternative to living a lie? It would also have given him a way out of being in that criminal organization of his, but...

"But it wouldn't have solved anything," she noted, sighing in disappointment, "and we wouldn't have met."

"Alex?"

She snapped out of her trance. "Ja, Frau Greif?"

"I have called you three times. Class is over. Are you well?"

"Oh." She gathered her things in haste, flustered at having been so oblivious. "I am fine, just – thinking."

"Gut. May I see you for a moment, if you are not busy?"

Alex approached Frau Greif's desk with nervousness. "What is it?"

She seemed concerned. "I had meant to ask you where is Herr Grey today? He has never missed a day of school before, and I thought he may have contacted you about missing your tutoring."

"Oh!" Alex fidgeted in reflex. "Ah – yes, he had a terrible accident over the holiday and is in the special – er, intensive care now. I am to pick up all his homework for him."

"I was not informed of this. Did his parents or guardian not notify the school?"

"No..." Alex was hesitant to lie, but she didn't know what else to

say. "If they did not – that is strange."

"This is unacceptable. I will have Rektor Loewe call his home to make sure everything is okay."

"No, it is fine," Alex insisted. "They are very upset about Darian, and it must have slipped their minds to contact the school."

A puzzled look crossed Frau Greif's face. "Have you already met his parents, Fraulein O'Malley?"

"Yes, I know his caretakers," she declared, choosing her words with deliberation that, if Frau Greif noticed, she would hopefully mistake as Alex struggling with the common tongue.

The smirk she gave was unexpected. "It is good that you two have become friends so soon. You seem to like him a lot—that is good for him to get a nice girl friend."

Hearing those words from a teacher's lips was unsettling.

"Well," Frau Greif started, her tone patronizing. "Unfortunately, Herr Grey's homework grades are *very* poor, so I don't expect him to turn it in even if you collect it. His participation has been falling off as well, even though his test scores are exceptional. From what I see, the problem is he does not seem to be trying to improve himself outside of school, and that's going to affect his future greatly if he does not do anything about it soon."

If only she knew, Alex thought, giving an awkward smile. "Do not worry, Frau Greif—I will help him do better."

"Gut. Wish him get well for me."

So far so good. If she didn't think of some excuse soon, though, it would be impossible to explain away Darian's extended absence. Bowing to Frau Greif, Alex smiled as she turned and stepped into the hallway to get to her next class, not taking two steps before—

"**Allie!**"

Kotaro leapt from what seemed like out of nowhere, taking her by surprise. Most of the time she felt more attuned to where things were in relation to her than just now, but her mind must've been more occupied than she realized, if her arms flying into the air and sending books scattering was any indication.

"Hey, big girl!" he greeted, grinning with overflowing excitement even as he bent down to pick up her books. She supposed he must be used to it. "How are you and D getting along? Speaking of D – have you seen him today? It's not like him to miss school."

"Hello, Kotaro," she returned, flushing red. Would it be safe to let him know the truth? ...probably not. He didn't seem the type to keep secrets when it mattered. Alex hoped her excuse would work until they could work out something for the long term. "—well, he was in an accident yesterday. He is in special care now!"

"Oh, weak!" Kotaro cried, though even his upset face seemed to be smiling. "Which hospital is he in? We've got to go visit him *now* and cheer him up!"

"Eee—*now?*" she blurted, almost giving herself away. "But we still have classes! ...or, I do."

"How can I stay in school when my best bud is laid up?"

Alex put her hands on her hips, ready to scold him. "He is in good care! Are you really going to play truant just to see him?"

"You know what D's like!"

She glared at him.

Kotaro put his tail between his legs. "Okay, you got me. It's not a good excuse. Still!" His face became a strained expression of desperation. "Can't you imagine being all by yourself with no one caring for you?"

How was she supposed to answer that? "He is cared for!"

"Well, yeah, he's got nurses and docs, but – his *parents*. What do *they* ever do for him? You've seen what he's like! He needs to have his best friends, Allie!"

And who are they? she started to ask, but it seemed like a needless putdown. "You are correct," she admitted, "he needs friends."

"*GREAT!*" he cried. "Let's go!"

She was starting to see why Darian didn't like him. "*Where?*" she shouted as he grabbed her hand.

That finally gave him pause. "What hospital is he in?"

"I do not know the hospital," she stated. It was true, at least—she couldn't know a hospital that didn't exist. "I happened to be there after his accident, but – I am not family." She cringed, hoping he would believe her.

"Well, shoot," Kotaro said, scratching his chin. "Looks like I'll have to call all the hospitals in the area to find out where he is!"

Alex blanched. "Do you know, Kotaro, I think he has had enough excitement without you tackling him again!"

"Haha, yeah," he laughed. "C'mon, gimme *some* credit! I only save that for desperate measures! Fine, though, we'll let him rest for a few days – but we're making him a get well card!"

It looked like she was in for a world of explanations at home – but then, so was Darian.

14.04

The day hadn't gone as expected. It felt strange hiding things from Alex, but there were things that she didn't need to know yet, and the news was difficult for Sunni to handle, herself. Even after arriving, her informant had remained outside the range of her detection, as though waiting for the opportune moment to strike...

Yet that wouldn't make sense. From the sound of the proposal, they were either desperate for help, or they just wanted to be left alone. Hurting her or Alex seemed it would be not only unproductive but inconvenient, as well. Still, she couldn't figure out their motive in contacting her in the first

place, much less continuing to leave her in the dark...

Sunni stepped onto the bus, weighed down with groceries for the week, when she heard a familiar voice call her name.

"Ho, Alex!" she greeted, walking over. "How was school?"

"It was difficult," Alex sighed, frowning. "I had to invent a reason why Darian wasn't there, since everyone seems to think we're together – or something. Even though everyone realized he was absent, it doesn't look like he has any close friends."

"Really? Just because he's in that—"

"Well, there's this one guy, Kotaro, but he seems to want to be friends with *everybody*, whether they like it or not."

Sunni couldn't help grinning. "Sounds like a fun character."

"Well, *maybe*," Alex conceded, laughing. Her expression became pensive, however. As they disembarked at their stop, continuing towards the house at their leisure, she listened carefully for signs of spies or assassins, but they seemed to have fallen off. Strange...

"Are you going to ask him about it, then?" Sunni prompted.

"Well, I *must*, because we're not going to be able to help him if we don't get the whole story."

"Speaking of which, I still don't approve of him living with us, helping him or not. Regardless of your wishes, I *am* your guardian, you know—"

Alex pouted. "He still doesn't have anywhere else to go!"

"I know that, but it's unorthodox having a boy stay with us, especially when you barely even know him."

"He's not like that! He—"

"Really, how do you know that you can trust him? After all..." She fished in her pocket for her keys, opened the front door, and walked over to the alarm, typing in the disarm code.

Alex frowned, as though she knew she was in the wrong and hated to admit it. Sunni couldn't blame her, but being wrong was part of learning. "Fine – I don't know... But what do I believe? It's terrible to think that he's done something as awful as that. I just—"

"Who did what?"

They froze, startled to see Darian waiting for them in the sitting room, a book in his hands and headphone in one ear. Sunni recognized the book as one of their language dictionaries.

"What is the thing which you cannot believe?" he asked in Sun's home tongue, not looking up.

Alex stared in astonishment. If it could have been possible, Sunni would have echoed her sentiments. "Did you learn our language in one day?" Alex asked.

"I do not know the colloquial form, and my pronunciation may be inaccurate," he noted, continuing to leaf through the book, "but I can understand the general meaning."

"How?"

Darian met her gaze, tapping his head. "I had told you before four days I take notes for my class if it can be to help others, only. I do not actually need them, as I have a memory of eidos."

"Amazing!" Sunni exclaimed in delight. With a thought, she added, "It is *eidetic memory*."

"Eidetic memory—thank you, Miss Sunni. Alex was just, by the way," he scolded, staring at her as he did. "It was an extremely rude comment to us that you made last night."

She was gob-smacked. "You remember what we said, even when you didn't understand it?"

"Every word."

"I was just teasing."

"I do know that now, but it was still rude."

Sunni bowed. "I am deeply sorry."

He waved his hand in dismissal, tucking the book under his arm. "It is a trifle. May I help you to put away the shopping?"

"Yes, I would appreciate the help."

As she handed Darian a bag, Sunni gave a curious glance at Alex, whose face had turned a brilliant red.

16.02

Alex was tense through supper. They had engaged in idle chatter to flesh out Darian's vocabulary in exchange for some exercises in common to improve Alex's. Yet for the most part, her mind was fixated on the larger problem of what to do about the situation. When they were finished, Sunni took their dishes and shooed them out of the kitchen, "because you have important things to talk about, eh?"

"So, what's Sunni hinting at now?" he asked, heading towards the den. Alex paused at the bottom of the stairs, giving him a curious look when he continued past. "...what?"

"Where are you going?"

"The den. Is that a problem?"

Among other reasons why it was a problem... "I do not want Sunni to overhear us."

"Don't."

She blinked. "What?"

"Use *don't* instead of *do not*, or you sound stuffy. It's especially

jarring because you sometimes use unexpected slang yet no contractions."

Alex pouted. "I – don't want Sunni to overhear us."

He swished his tail in bemusement. "Why not? Since she doesn't understand common, it's fine. You can gossip all you want. It's not like we have any dark secrets to keep from her or anything."

It was frustrating arguing with his logic. "Also – it is chilly down here," she added after a bit.

"It's."

She thought some more, heading upstairs as she did. "I'm cold from the drafts in this house, and I don't want to have to wear an anorak inside."

Darian shrugged and rolled his eyes in exasperation, but he seemed too bored to sit by himself in the den and followed suit. "Fine."

He headed straight for the guest room and flopped down on one side of the bed, leaning back and relaxing. Alex hesitated, then shook her head and sat on the other side.

"So what did you want to talk about?"

She didn't – but she had no choice. It was hard deciding where to begin, between the bad things and Darian lecturing her each time she lapsed back into formal speech. "We're both concerned about how to get you out of your situation. It's not that we couldn't afford to keep you hidden, but—"

"—what would I do?"

"Exactly."

He seemed sorrowful, looking away. "I can't become younger."

Alex perked her ears, attentive.

"I cut myself, deeply—twice—to make sure I could still do it, that I wasn't mistaken. I could fix the damage both times. I just couldn't change back to my original age, though."

"And you really tried with all your might?"

He paused, thoughtful. "Not really, I guess. Part of me is too happy to look more like my age after all this time, instead of like a little kid. I don't want to go back to that life, you know? It got me excited thinking that, if I made myself just a bit older, I might be invisible to them now, because they wouldn't recognize me..."

"...but that won't help me finish school, or get a job. I can do more than I could, but less. It's like I'm even more trapped now than I was before, and I still have no idea how to fix everything—how to stop the gang forever. That's what's kept me going all this time, I think, the idea that I'm where I am now to make amends for all the bad things I've done."

"That's a heavy weight to carry," she noted with sympathy. "You're set on trying to – disarm them yourself?"

"I *have* to do it," Darian insisted. "They've hurt so many people just in this quad, and they'll continue hurting people if nobody does anything to stop them. I'm the one in the best position to do something, with all that I know about them."

Alex curled into a ball, pulling her knees up to her chin. "You don't

have to do everything alone, you know."

"I'm grateful enough that you're letting me stay here, but I can't let you get hurt trying to help me." He glanced over at her, frowning his brow. "Why *are* you helping me, anyway?"

Her eyes went out of focus as she stared into the distance at nothing. "I'm not sure. I lied to you when we first met the other day—I wasn't talking to you because I wanted to make friends. I could tell there was something special about you, even if I wasn't sure what. That's why I tried so hard to befriend you, even after it seemed you didn't like me. It's – as if we have a shared *resonance* or something."

"Resonance?" Darian echoed, ears twitching at the word.

She played with the bedcovers, drawing a random pattern with her finger. "Have you ever – *felt* something was... I don't know... Good? Just? Like all the signs seemed to point a certain way?"

"I'm not sure how you mean."

Alex felt silly mentioning the sound, but she had to know. "It's kind of like – bells go off, something."

He seemed to mull over this. "Yeah, kind of. I do feel better with you around, actually."

She had to smile at his comment, despite herself. "It's strange just how much guilt one person can bear..." Darian looked at her with a puzzled expression, but it was too hard to keep it bottled up inside any longer, and tears formed in her eyes again, no matter how much she wiped them away. "I just can't that believe someone like you could've—"

"Could've what?" he asked, concerned.

"You killed someone in *cold blood*?" she shrieked, tail bristling in every direction. "How *could* you? How can you live with a weight of that kind hanging over your head?"

His eyes grew large, an expression of anger crossing his face as he sat upright, ears flattened against his head. "You *lied* to me! You told me Sunni didn't speak—"

"She can't roll the h' or r' sounds well," Alex interrupted, snarling, "but she understands what you say."

"You betrayed my trust! I thought I was talking in confidence!"

"Sunni won't tell anyone *but me*! What I know, she knows, and vice versa! ...but I know, and now I have to know *why*."

He turned away, disgusted. "How do you expect me to trust you if you're going to pull things like this behind my back?"

"I had to find out *somehow*! You won't tell me anything!"

Without a word, Darian stood, as though to leave.

"Wait, don't go," she begged.

He clenched his fists, trembling with rage for the longest moment of Alex's life. Finally, his shoulders slumped, defeat evident in his posture as he seemed resigned to this treatment as preferable to any alternative. An impatient growl rumbled in his throat. "What do you want from me?"

She looked at him with pity. "I just want to know why. I want to understand what happened, what you're not telling me. Otherwise nothing any of us do can fix anything..."

The tension in the room from his silence was painful.

"I just want to help," she whispered.

He didn't move from where he stood, not even to turn around as he continued clenching and unclenching his fists. When Darian looked at her again, his face contained volumes of sorrow, as though he wanted to cry his heart out but didn't know how.

"I'm not proud of what I did," he droned.

She gestured for him to sit. "Tell me about it."

"I thought Sunni told you everything."

"You didn't tell *her* everything. She can tell when someone's lying." Alex sighed, crossing her arms. "She said it was hard to hide her sadness to hear you try to justify your actions. Killing is wrong."

"Even in self-defense."

She glared at him.

"I don't get you," he snapped. "You want to help me – by chewing me out over committing one of the most heinous acts possible. Because I'm *special*. Because you *feel* something in my presence. What does that even mean? How does this help me? Why couldn't you have just left me alone?"

Alex opened her mouth to speak, then thought better of it. Instead, she crossed her arms and leaned back on the headrest, stewing. When she had gathered her thoughts, she spoke with forced calmness.

"We're both outcasts, both killers. Why not be friends?"

"You're not an outcast," he retorted.

"How can you say that? You don't know anything about what it's like being me."

His expression grew distant, as though he was under hypnosis. He closed his eyes and was silent for several excruciating moments. "You feel like everyone's always staring at you because you look different, you sound different, you dress different... They're all from a whole other world. How could they understand what you've been through? They're sheltered. They live in their happy little bubbles, sealed off from the real horrors that are out there, as long as nothing pops their little bubbles. All the pain, all the agony that they couldn't possibly know anything about. You've seen things, heard things, *felt* things they've only imagined in their worst nightmares."

When he opened his eyes again, it was with a look of anger—but not towards her. His lip curled in a manner that suggested biting back the urge to scream – or cry.

"Perhaps I was wrong," he admitted. "We're not that different. But being comrades in suffering is a terrible basis for friendship."

"How can you say that?" Alex jumped to her feet in distress at the idea. "Friends are who like us for who we are."

"And you like me for being tortured, like you."

She grimaced, gesticulating in frustration as her tail twitched madly about. "Not – that, you know what I mean!"

Whether he was still mad at her or was secretly amused at turning the subject around, she couldn't tell.

"Then who *are* you?" she countered, sitting down again. "Tell me, and *that* will be the basis for our friendship."

He sat as well. "You really want to know."

"Yes."

"I'm not anybody. I'm just someone who's been told what to do for all of my life."

"Then tell me what you've done."

Smirking, he reclined on the bed, staring off into nothing. "I started out at an orphanage. That's the only way I can describe it—a big building cut off from society with a bunch of us kids running about until we were old enough to start developing useful skills. It became a sort of boot camp once we could be disciplined, and, since I was smaller, they had me train more in espionage and thieving than in hand-to-hand combat or any of that.

"I didn't mind it much in the beginning, to be honest. I didn't have any reason to question my treatment, so it felt normal. After I met Kotaro, though, and he tried on many occasions to be best friends with me, that's when I realized everything I knew was wrong. I had no parents, no friends, no loved ones. Yes, Kotaro tried—and tries—but I couldn't have him as a friend because he was too nosy, and they would punish me if I tried to tell him anything." Here, Darian pulled back his right sleeve to reveal the many scars across his forearm. "I always wore long sleeves, even in summer, to hide these from others."

"How horrible," Alex cried in dismay. She hadn't imagined it had been *this* bad for him.

"I have others across my back and legs, as well. Some of those I got from hanging out with Kotaro. Most of the time, I was just kicked and beaten. It wasn't really that I did anything wrong, I think, as much as it was to emphasize how they didn't want me potentially telling someone too much or turning traitor on them."

"You can heal your scars, though, can't you?" Alex mused.

"Maybe, but I wouldn't bother. I'm used to having them, and they're evidence of the abuse. It would feel wrong to just wipe them away when I can't also just wipe away the years of anguish I've been through."

She frowned in disappointment. "Who did this to you?"

He pulled his sleeve back into place and crossed his arms, perhaps in fury at the thought of his abusers. "The syndicate has a mentoring system. Those in the upper tiers train their replacements, farmed from the orphanage. Officially, the prospective mentor is taking an apprentice, but a subordinate effectively becomes the prior's *slave*. As far as I know, it's cyclic, so if I rose in the ranks enough, I could have taken a subordinate of my own—but I would never have gotten that far by choice.

"I've had two priors. The first was Lance, a ruthless taskmaster. He mentored two of us, though I was nineteen years younger than Lion. I was always in Lion's shadow in everything I was trained to do, as though Lance expected a mere child to keep up with a grown adult. It struck me as odd that Lion wouldn't have been on his own by that point, that he would still need a mentor, but I didn't question it. It was his own business, or maybe he was still bound by the syndicate. Maybe Lance threatened his life if he left."

He shook his head in disbelief. "*Titanic* Lance—he was brutal. If I missed a clay pigeon in target practice, he'd beat me. Lion got the same, although he was under fire much less often than I was. After I realized this life wasn't normal, I even thought that we were comrades in suffering, Lion and I. It felt like all our troubles would be over if I could end the tyranny, to put Lance in his place and get him to leave us alone for good.

"So one day—two months ago to the day, in fact—I had this idea. I would incapacitate him, get him to recognize I wasn't going to be a pushover anymore, that Lion and I were worth more than the pack animals he treated us as being. Instead, he seemed to think it was some kind of a game, like boys wrestling – but far deadlier. I had grossly underestimated his strength, and none of the attacks they had taught me were getting any leverage. He laughed at me, like I was a bee attacking a tank. On the spot, he decided he would smash my tail and put a kink in it as punishment for my mutiny.

"That's when I knew it had to end, when both of us had crossed the line. Panic gave me a spike of solid adrenaline that gave me some leverage against him. I slammed him into the wall and managed to bring him to his knees as I drew my knife on him and slit—"

By that point, Alex was cringing in a mix of fear and sorrow. "Do I need to continue?"

She shook her head in horror.

"So now you know why I didn't want to tell you, especially because it doesn't do any good having you know."

"What kind of evil people are these?" she cursed. "That's no kind of life for a person to have."

"I know that now," he agreed. "It took me so long to see through the façade. They didn't even punish me when Lion found us and called the others, which surprised me. I guess they were already thinking of getting rid of him, or it was blackmail to keep me in line." He chuckled, eyes growing dark. "Unfortunately, my biggest mistake was that I killed the wrong man."

Alex had to remember to breathe.

"I'm kidding," he added with a smirk, though she didn't believe him. "The trouble was that we were both still under the syndicate, and what I did amounted to cutting off the head of a monster with twenty heads. It didn't change anything; I was still a subordinate needing a prior, unable to escape the fate they had predetermined for me. The only one who seemed to benefit was Lion; he ended up becoming my new prior, by the hierarchy of the syndicate, and taking Lance's place as head of our residence.

"But he wasn't grateful—far from it. In fact, the beatings that Lance handed down to both of us, he handed down to me, starting with the fact that I killed Lance. It was a shock, that first night, when the man I had thought Lion was nearly broke my arm for giving him his inheritance. Saying that I felt betrayed would be a hideous understatement. I pleaded with him, why was he doing this. What did I do to deserve the same treatment from the one I helped promote?"

"He just laughed at me. 'You don't get it, do you. It's my *privilege* to give what I've gotten.'" Darian's eyes were piercing, cutting straight into Alex's soul when he looked at her. "Lion *believes* in the cycle. He relishes it, even—it isn't something he wants to end, not until he's gotten his fill. I had proven that I would fight back, and he wanted me broken, to show me who was boss, so he wouldn't end up like Lance.

"The worst part of it..." he added, trailing off. His expression turned pale, and he started to shiver. "...I can't forget."

She cocked her ears in bewilderment. "How do you mean?"

"I have eidetic memory, as I said. I've never forgotten anything—at all. So I remember not only the moment I killed Lance, but I can see details of that moment I'd overlooked before. It's as though time slows down, and I can see the realization in his eye that I'm going to kill him, that I'm fighting for my survival over his. He's larger and heavier than me, but he has gotten lazy, and I have youth and determination on my side. He knows this, too, and he tries in desperation to backpedal. He's repentant—he doesn't want to die—but it's too late even if I want to change my mind, because momentum keeps me going."

Darian slumped over. "Since that day, I've had the same night terror haunting me, each time subverted by Lance stopping me to plead for his life. Each time I can't stop myself from retorting that he ignored *my* pleas to let up, that I was just a little boy and couldn't do everything as well as they did. It's gotten progressively more involved each night to where I can hardly get sleep at all, because it feels like my nightmare escalating..."

No wonder he collapsed yesterday! "How did you sleep last night?"

That made him smile somewhat. "Better—I didn't dream at all. It was the first time I remember just – resting."

Good, Alex wanted to say, but she had no idea how he would take that. "Why is that?"

He didn't answer her at first, seeming to mull over it as he flopped backwards, lying outstretched as he stared at the ceiling. "There are just too many variables," he mumbled, as if pondering a physics problem.

"It's not because...?" She left her thought incomplete in hopes he would finish it for her, but he didn't buy the ruse. In fact, he didn't notice it at all—when she glanced at him again, his eyes were closed. After a few moments, he started snoring.

"Darian!" she snapped.

It took some prodding to rouse him. "What?"

"I was talking to you."

He blinked at her, apparently not sure what she was getting at.

She shook her head, getting up. "Thick."

He seemed affronted by the comment. "Hey. I'm sorry if I've never had a good rest in the history of *ever* before you came into my life."

Though she still felt – disappointed, at least the acknowledgement was a small comfort. "Get yourself some rest, then," she conceded, stepping out of the room. His feelings for her were still a mystery, as were hers for him, but it probably wasn't helping to belabour the point. There was always tomorrow—and the day after, and the day after that...

She hoped.

It crossed her mind that Darian might feel resentful being trapped, regardless of being the best option, in which case any civility he displayed might only be for reasons of diplomacy rather than actual appreciation. The thought made her uncomfortable—she didn't know what to do besides what they were already doing for him. Alex risked one last glance inside. She had expected him to fall asleep again straight away, but he had followed just behind her. "Good night," he whispered, before closing the door.

"Pleasant dreams," she whispered back, not certain if he heard.

Every action risks the heart. —Harimaoh

Day 6

It was a little peculiar how overcast the sky had been the last few days, as though the sky couldn't make up its mind whether to rain. Never before had the weather stagnated as much as it had, especially in autumn. The days tended to be either sunny or rainy, sometimes muggy and windy, but not still and grey—and not for nearly this long. All the same, the mood was spot-on for the task at hand.

Ganymede straightened his tie and dusted off his blazer before he entered the building, not the slightest bit concerned how he seemed out of place in being there. He paused for a bit to recall the layout of the building before approaching the front desk, dangling the briefcase in his hand from three fingers and looking for all the world to be a tourist on a business trip. "May I help you, sir?" asked the receptionist, eyeing him with a look of confusion on her face.

"Director Arche Ganymede," he announced, placing his briefcase on the floor by means of carelessly letting it fall from his grip. "I'm just making a random spot check on the facility, to ensure the patients are being cared for according to company standards and regulations. Nothing in particular to be concerned about if everything's up to code."

The receptionist glanced over her calendar. "I wasn't told you'd be coming," she said, clearly unconvinced.

"Random checks," he explained in a gruff tone. "That's how they work. Occupational health and safety is of the utmost importance, as is the health and safety of our clients, after all. If all our checks were scheduled, that only serves to put a deadline on when the facilities have to be in top shape, since inspections average once quarterly. Our goal is to run at peak performance year-round with no slack in service." He wasn't sure if she was buying the spiel or not but, as long as he found his mark, it didn't matter. "Are you new here? Let me speak with Dr. Kale."

"I'm sorry," she snapped, anything but. Ganymede could make out the suggestion of her reaching for the silent alarm—he would have to be quick about it. "Dr. Kale's on temporary leave. Dr. Adrastea is the attending physician on duty today."

"Thank you," he said, drawing a gun on her in one deft motion. Before she could flinch, he shot her cleanly through the forehead.

Glancing about to see if anyone had heard despite the silencer, he flipped the safety back on and repocketed the gun. Nevertheless, his heart skipped a beat as his plan of action bore its way into his conscious. Time was of the essence, if he was to have the best chance of success.

As he walked around the front desk, he eyed the calendar. It had

Kale as starting leave four days ago, with no date listed for his return. That could prove problematic if he left the quad; a four-day head start meant he could be almost anywhere by now, with the trail growing colder.

Ganymede hesitated at the receptionist's body, staring at the mess for a moment. He had to steel himself against the sight before feeling her pockets and sifting out a set of keys, but the chills ran down his spine to the tip of his tail all the same. Shivering in disgust, he set the front door to lock one-way before tossing the keys aside and turning over the door sign to read "Will return in 1 hr."

Returning to the desk, he loaded the staff directory on the terminal, skimming the names on file and checking to see who had clocked in for the day. After double-checking how many rounds were remaining in his gun, he proceeding to each room in the facility in turn, executing each person he found one at a time. That should buy him enough time to snoop.

One final stop at the receptionist's desk—taking out a notepad from his pocket, he located "Kale" in the directory and noted the doctor's current address, plus "Sinope" and current address. At least Sinope seemed to be on a normal, off-week schedule—working the holiday and off mid-week—so she would most likely be home today instead of out of town. The other three he checked off his list, satisfied for now as he tucked the notepad back into his pocket.

The job complete, he opened the briefcase and removed a remote, arming the bomb inside the briefcase. He placed the case near the central support beam of the building before hightailing it outside, finally detonating the bomb from the safety of his car two streets away. "No hard feelings," he murmured. "Boss's orders."

8.13

"Darian, wake up!"

When he opened his eyes, he flinched—Alex was staring him in the face, clearly distressed. "What time is it?" he asked, rubbing his eye with one hand as he rolled over on his side, reluctant to disrupt his comfort.

"There's been an explosion downtown!" she shrieked. "It's all over the news! Does this have to do with your people?"

"Guh – I don't know," he mumbled. "I haven't been in contact with them in—"

An eerie feeling washed over Darian. Even at their least efficient, they were more persistent in locating him when they needed him, which was at least once a day. Yet yesterday went by without so much as a peep. Had they really been fooled into thinking he was someone else, or were they just getting careless? He'd figured they'd at least be tailing Alex, since they had failed to kill her...

"Wait," he realized, turning to face her again. "It's the middle of the

week. Didn't you go to school?"

"They sent everyone straight home after the alert," she explained. "Everyone's worried about the possibility of more bombs, so they're doing searches of any buildings that might be suspect."

"Where did the bomb go off?"

Alex frowned. "It's weird—it's just a small health clinic, which is why no one's sure why it was destroyed."

"They don't think it was a gas explosion or something?"

"There aren't any gas lines going through that part of town!"

"...is that so."

He tried to recall which clinic that might be, but Alex interrupted. "Don't you think we should go check it out, to see if it may be connected?"

Darian stared in astonishment. "What makes you think there may be a connection?"

"Don't you feel anything? Something drawing you there?"

He thought about it. Certainly he was curious, but—

—and then he felt it, the resonance that had become more apparent in Alex's presence spiked.

"Darian?"

He blinked his eyes, uncertain of what he'd just experienced. "I'm sorry," he said after a moment of silence. "Still trying to wake up."

"Well, get up," she prompted, putting her hands on her hips as she did so. "By the time we get there, all the press will be gone, at least."

"Wait—you want to go there so soon after it was bombed? What if they don't let us near it?"

"Well, we'll have to go there to see, won't we? Let's go!"

Their eyes locked as several moments of silence passed. "Er..."

"What?" Alex pressed.

Darian's ears folded back in shyness, furrowing his brow. "I didn't sleep in my clothes this time. You were planning to watch me get dressed?" He tugged the covers over him as a secondary cue.

"Oh."

Flushing in embarrassment, she skittered out of the room. After a brief pause, she peeked back inside. "...what's 40217?"

A bead of sweat formed on his temple as he ground his teeth, tail bristling. She pronounced it in a different way from what he expected, but it had the same effect. "W-where – did you find that?" he stammered.

"I saw it on your back when you turned over, just below the base of your neck. Is it a tattoo from *them*? It looks pretty old."

Darian was quiet for some time. "That's – a surprise."

"You didn't know it was there?"

"No, I never thought to examine myself from behind."

"Do you know what it means?"

"Of course—I don't feel comfortable talking about it, though."

Alex lowered her eyes, pensive. "Oh – well, I'll just wait for you to

get ready, then."

He hesitated even after she vanished, but not out of modesty, even though it was the first time in his life that he had dared to sleep without full covering for his arms and legs—which he normally did out of denial of his torture. It felt good on his bare skin, he had to admit, wondering if it would have helped his bouts of insomnia at all.

Closing his eyes and relishing the comfort for a little while longer, he remembered the vision that he had seen just before she had roused him, of Alex entering the room and pausing, almost afraid to wake him—not out of fear, but possibly because she felt guilty disturbing his peaceful slumber.

Was it a dream? If not, what was he seeing?

Sitting upright, he ran his fingers over the large, jagged scars on his right forearm. They no longer pained him, presumably from being given the equivalent of a year of healing. Even the cuts on the underside looked less severe. It was one of his wildest fantasies come to life, being a world away from the unfathomable torment he had endured his entire life.

If it *was* a dream, he hoped it would never end, as his nightmare had never seemed it would.

16.02

The downtown area was packed with onlookers even as evening approached, all clamouring to get a better view of the damage. It was all the two of them could do after several hours of meandering to even get within two streets of the bomb site, and to do that, they had to go climbing up to the rooftops again. "So much for *that* idea," Darian muttered in defeat, though Alex remained undiscouraged.

He glanced in her direction, confused by the radiant expression on her face. Of all places to find pleasure...?

"Do you hear it?" she asked, in a daze. "Resonance?"

Resonance? Darian closed his eyes—he *could* feel resonance, in much more clarity than he ever had. Granted, it was wisps here and there, as though the source of it was traveling, but it seemed he could almost reach out and touch it now. What *was* it?

"Yes," he agreed, to her evident delight. "I see what you're talking about—resonance."

"Like music? Pure and flowing?"

That threw him for a loop. "No, it's more like – fragments of noise, here and there, like a jumble of every sound ever made *resonating* through the area in an impromptu, chaotic melody."

Alex's face fell. "You hear something – different?"

"I definitely *feel* something, and it's much more potent here than anywhere else."

"The same for me—but why is it different?"

He shrugged. "Looks like we have another mystery to solve..."

They stared at the scene from their private overlook, seated on the building's edge. It was bizarre how far they had come in the past six days, from being total strangers to finding out as much about each other as they had, even if superpowers didn't play a role. No—they did, but more as a catalyst than as a bond. He had to wonder if they would have been remotely as familiar without the supernatural guiding them.

He didn't say as much, however.

"I have to wonder why it was bombed," Darian mused, not eager to potentially open a can of worms on the other topic. "Was there something important there that someone wanted destroyed?"

"I bet if you restored it all, we could find out."

His ears twitched as he realized this. "I could, couldn't I? Thing is, what would I be looking for, so I wouldn't just be wasting my ability?"

"Maybe the resonance has something to do with it—like, it would lead you to whatever it was you needed to find here."

That was definitely an idea. However, they couldn't do anything for a while, at least, until the crowd died down.

"I suppose you'll want to try again tomorrow?" he asked.

"How about tonight?"

"You want to sneak back here tonight?"

"Why not? It's less likely anyone will be around."

He shrugged. "I guess, if you insist – but what are we going to do in the meantime?"

Alex grew quiet, lost in thought, then broke out giggling.

"What?"

A strange expression crossed her face. "Let's talk."

Darian raised an eyebrow at her. "About what?"

"It doesn't matter. Just make conversation."

"Like what?"

"Things like – when you were little, what did you want to be when you grew up?"

He rubbed his chin, swishing his tail from side to side. "I didn't really think much about that when I was little. They had us on a pretty strict regimen and basically taught us to be obedient soldiers. We didn't even have toys or anything like that."

"Oh," Alex pouted, but quickly perking up. "Well, I know what I'm getting you for your birthday, then!"

He smirked, rolled his eyes, and sighed, his expression turning dour as he did.

"What was that sigh?" she asked, her brow furrowing.

"Birthdays never meant anything to me, since I didn't have friends to help celebrate them. I resented my birthdays as a result, particularly..."

She stared at him as he trailed off. "Particularly...?"

Darian pulled down his shirt collar, showing off a prominent gash

on his shoulder. "I got this and several others on my last birthday—it felt like barbed wire that time." Alex's face was aghast at his words. "To make it worse, it was from botching a job breaking into Kotaro's father's place. Even though it was just a stupid mistake, they thought I did it on purpose. I mean, I'd *never* wanted to cooperate, but..."

Her expression became grim, as it regularly seemed to do when the subject became negative.

"Nevermind," he said, looking away as he straightened his shirt. "I guess now that you've got me started, it's hard to know when to stop."

"I guess I still don't want to believe that anything so horrible ever happened to you," Alex muttered.

"Pfff," he chuffed in good humour. "You and me both."

"Nothing interests you, though? You don't enjoy anything?"

Darian grinned. "Sleep."

"You can't do that as a career!" she scolded, tail puffing up.

"What do you want?" he snapped, throwing his hands up in defeat.

"I haven't been raised in an environment where I get to try things to see what I *like*. If anything, I've shown that I have a terrific memory and a reasonable amount of hand-eye coordination, but everything I've been ordered to do I've just done without any real thought behind it."

Alex crossed her arms. "What about school?"

He bit his thumb. "Swim Team was good, I guess, but as you know *that* got canned, and I was exempted from—actually forbidden from—taking part in any other physical activities at school, so no one else would see my scars. I'm decent at anything academic when I apply myself, though, but I haven't had any particular opinion about anything except..."

She stared at him in expectation. "Except...?"

"Now that I think about it," Darian reflected, "history has always been interesting. I guess sometimes reading about all the bad things that've happened in the past make me feel better about myself."

"What, you feel better that someone else had it worse?" she asked, frowning in disappointment.

"Not exactly that. It's more like – a kinship, you know?"

The expression on her face was unreadable. "Kinship."

"Yeah—kind of, 'This is where I came from.' I mean, people used to die of old age at forty, if they were lucky to live through all the diseases and wars and famine and so on. A slave like me had no chance at all, not even when their owners were killed, but they kept going out of hope that one day the world would get better. Even being in my situation now, the world's made a lot of progress since then. Maybe one day," here, his voice grew quiet, "*the syndicate may even be toppled*, and I would be completely free. It's not much, but it's hope."

She stared at him, astounded at his words.

"What?" he asked, amused.

Alex blushed a little. "That was beautiful," she whispered.

He raised an eyebrow in curiosity.

"You be a historian, though? That's kind of a weird career choice."

"Well, what about you?" he challenged. "What did *you* want to be when you grew up?"

"Ah..." She grinned as she gathered her thoughts. "It's kind of silly, when I think about it now. More than anything, I wanted to be a pilot, to fly one of those little fighter planes—not because I wanted to fight, necessarily, but because they're cool, and it would be able to take me away from all the war, all of the bad things going on in my homeland..."

"What's the war about, incidentally?"

Alex frowned. "I'm not sure, because news was rather hard to get while on the run, but my father was murdered over it—something he was working on at the time."

"What did he do?"

"He was an engineer. I understand he designed one or two of the planes for our air force, but I don't see how that made him a threat."

"He didn't make bombs or anything, did he?"

She curled into a ball, rocking back and forth. "See, I don't know... Obviously he had special security clearance, which meant he couldn't talk about it with anyone—even us—but he always told us that he wasn't ever going to build anything to hurt anyone. In fact, he told us that one day he'd hoped his designs would help everyone in the world."

"True, that doesn't sound like a bomb builder to me."

"Nope..."

They grew silent again.

"Your turn," Alex prompted. "Do you have any questions for me?"

"I asked you one."

"No," she countered, "you asked me for a follow-up response to mine. That's different."

Darian rolled his eyes. He briefly pondered asking her why her tail kept brushing his but decided better of it. "Actually, the only question that comes to mind is..."

"...yes?"

"Why are you wearing that?"

Alex flushed at the unexpected question, glancing down at her new clothes. "You don't like it?"

He shrugged. "It just seems a bit strange to wear a calf-length party dress to go climbing buildings." —*and a low-cut one, at that*, but he didn't say that part aloud.

"I didn't figure we'd be climbing anything!" she retorted.

"I kinda like your other outfits a little more. They seem to suit you better—you know, like what you wore when we first met."

She paused, thinking it over. "I just... I felt like everyone was staring at me in my native attire. I thought wearing something more local would help me fit in."

"Maybe it does, some. It's a lot more of what you think of yourself than what others think of you, though."

"Is that why you liked to dress all snooty?"

Darian furrowed his brow and stared at his knees, absorbed in his memories. "I was in denial. I hated myself, and I didn't dare let anyone else know who I really was."

Alex pouted in sympathy. "It's not your fault you were like that. You were bullied into being that person."

The tense silence suggested he thought otherwise.

"Have you ever had a good day?"

"Oh, yeah."

"Really? What was your best day?"

Darian smirked. "Two days ago, when I slept in your guest room."

She smacked him on the shoulder in disgust. "*What!*"

"I'm serious! I don't know if you've been without luxury as much as I have, but that night was Heaven for me! Even when the Swim Team went for Away meets, I ended up sleeping in a cot or on the floor. I've honestly never gotten a real bed before then."

Alex shook her head in pity. "You've led a miserable life, Darian."

"You're telling *me*?"

She frowned. "What about kids?" she asked, to change the subject. "Do you think you'd ever want to have kids?"

"Guh," he blurted, cringing. "That's what couples talk about." As he said that, Darian noticed Alex blushing more deeply, but he couldn't quite figure out what to make of it, if his suspicions had any weight.

"It *is* kind of a stupid question, isn't it..." she muttered.

He laughed to take the pressure off. "I dunno, I'd just never thought about it, since I never figured I'd get married. I mean, at the moment I don't even know if I'll be able to get a job, much less settle down with someone."

"That's true... but—what if?"

Darian stared down at the bomb site. "I don't know if I could. I see things like *that* happen, and I feel awful thinking people want to bring life into such a world... But I also realize that the bad things aren't what parents plan to happen—it's what happens. Bad things will never *stop* happening, so the perfect world to raise kids will never come. I don't want to believe my parents wished this life upon me, so I have to believe the same for others.

"Still, I don't know if *I* could be a father. For one thing, I wouldn't be able to control my kids, because their uncle Kotaro would ruin them."

Alex laughed with glee, much to Darian's delight.

17.10

They returned to the house, at which point Darian headed straight to his room. Puzzled, Alex followed him.

"Just where're you going?" he asked, pausing.

She raised an eyebrow at him. "Where were *you* going?"

"To bed," he snorted, stretching his arms and yawning. "You woke me up early—"

"I woke you up in the middle of the day!" she huffed.

"Yeah – but I've never been able to sleep in. I'd kinda like to take the chance while I have it."

"Oh." Alex seemed let down. "You don't even want supper?"

Darian cocked an ear out of curiosity. "Not really. What were you thinking of doing, anyway?"

She shrugged, looking away. "I dunno—talking more, maybe."

He faced the doorway, as though uncertain if he wanted to enter the bedroom. At length, he turned to face her again. "Despite what happened in town today, it's still a school night, so you should probably start on your homework in case the schools aren't closed again tomorrow."

It wasn't the answer she expected to hear. "...and what about you?" she asked, crossing her arms.

"I told you. I'm tired, so I'm going to bed."

Her ears folded back to emphasize her disappointment. "Is that all you're going to do while you're here? Sleep in?"

"Look, you've seen me at my crankiest. I figured you'd want to see me more when I'm more agreeable, and that's after I've had the best night's sleep I've ever had in my whole life. I'm a starving man who's been given food, and I'm going to eat it, thank you. I'm sorry if you don't see it my way now, but I'll only get crankier the less chance I'm given to relax."

"But—"

Darian stared at her with a startling, intense seriousness. "You've got me captive here. We can take all the time in the world getting to know each other. There's no rush."

"But..." Alex knew she was grasping at straws at this point, and she suspected he knew it as well. "I mean, I guess I feel obligated to play host and all..."

He cracked the slightest of grins at her. "You've given me a decent place to stay—that's enough for now. For now, it's better if you take care of this." Here, he tapped her gently on the forehead, making her blush. "I've slacked off in school only because I knew what I did didn't matter. You don't have that excuse."

She pouted. "I don't really feel like studying."

"Well, whatever it is you have in mind, it would be better if you *thought it through*. There are consequences for your actions, even if it's a decision not to act." His voice had a certain accusatory tone that made her feel ashamed, as though he was reading her mind and not liking what he saw. "It's easy to brush off your future in favour of doing what you want to do this moment, but I'm certain your *parents* wouldn't want you to have escaped from Hell, just to end up throwing away your education."

There was a tense pause, as though declaring the argument over, before Darian walked into the bedroom.

"Tutor me!"

Hesitating, he turned back to face her, eyebrows raised.

"Remember," Alex stated, "we met because you were supposed to tutor me! I'm going to hold you to that."

The new expression on his face was unreadable. "You must be a glutton for punishment," he remarked, "if you'd rather have a cranky tutor than a cranky friend."

She made the most pitiable face she could, too stubborn to give in.

"Was ist fünfhundert mehr als zweihundert?"

Alex blinked, taken aback. "...siebenhundert," she responded after working the conversions.

Darian nodded in approval. "Was Farbe ist der Himmel?"

"Blou."

"Fast – die Aussprache."

She gritted her teeth. "Ah! Blau."

"Gut. Wieviele Linien sind auf die X-Two Flagge?"

"Sechs."

"Nein."

"...acht?"

He raised an eyebrow.

She focused on the design, counting again. "Sieben!"

"Und ihr Farbe?"

"Groen?"

His smile was warm, but when he shook his head, she could tell her answer was wrong.

"That's a different language entirely now."

Alex pouted in frustration. "I have trouble learning so many at the same time!"

"Well, how about you go over my notes once more, and I'll quiz you again later, then?"

She frowned.

"お休みなさい、アレックス," he said, closing the door.

18.04

A black coupe approached 404 Goa Way, pulling off at one house before it and idling at the curb. Ganymede sat inside the vehicle, observing the scene set to bulletins regarding the morning's bombing at a low volume. He paused a moment, just enough to reflect on his progress. Just last week, his biggest concern was whether he would get the appropriate paid leave for the next conference in the alt site in X-3 Delta. Now—

—now, it was no use worrying about anything besides his mission.

"On leave," he mused, looking for telltale signs of life in the key locations. "No car, curtains drawn, daily newspaper still in the box. That must mean he's out of town, as opposed to taking time off at home."

"You'll just have to find him another time," said the familiar, shrill voice. "For now, focus on the others."

"Affirmative. What of the fugue?"

"That time will come soon enough, when we'll settle the score also."

32.13

"Up, up!" whispered Alex.

Oh, yeah, Darian thought, struggling to wake up. He somehow had had a difficult time falling asleep, despite his newfound privilege of cozying up in bed. His mind had kept racing to the point where he had just dozed off when Alex roused him, much to his aggravation. Even after their row earlier that evening, she still seemed eager for his company.

"The buses have stopped for the night," she said, leading him to the garage. "Can you ride a bike?"

As Alex took one, Darian approached the other. By the height, he assumed it was Sunni's. "I've never ridden before," he stated.

"Well, it's easy!" she chimed, grinning. "You just—"

Without another word, Darian hopped into the seat, kicking off with grace. "Are you coming?" he shouted behind him after several metres.

Alex frowned at him, saddling her bike and pedalling to catch up. "I thought you said you'd never ridden before!" she yelled in annoyance.

"I haven't!" he called back to her. "Somehow – I know how."

"Show-off!"

He was coasting faster than she could pedal. It seemed to irritate her, but they made good time nonetheless. They arrived to find no guards on duty and only a chain link fence surrounding the perimeter—that was simple enough to bypass. They parked their bikes some distance away, then scaled the fence without incident.

"Now what?" he asked, taking a torch out of his pocket. "We just sift through the debris until something turns up?"

Alex crossed her arms, twitching her tail in impatience. "You're the one with the restorative power. I was under the impression that you'd be able to find what you needed somehow through the resonance."

"Oh, it's all me, is it?" he spat. "Well, I hope you didn't drag me out of bed for n—"

The same flash from earlier that day went off in his mind—now he saw a young woman in pain—and he grew quiet, pensive. He whisked the torch about, as though expecting something to hit him.

"Did you find something?" she asked, but he didn't answer her.

Darian scanned the area, taking in the layout of the building. Here

was the front door—a flash of someone locking the door to keep people from coming in behind him. Here was the receptionist's desk—a flash of a nondescript woman quite surprised to be shot in the head. It frightened him to have the visions he was seeing... Where were they coming from?

Here were the records shelves, alphabetized by patient's last name. Heart pounding, he scanned the area for fragments of one file in particular, not quite certain why.

"What did you find?" Alex asked, her voice growing worried.

Perhaps he would have to dig... With a renewed vigor, he hefted a chunk of wall out of the way, then shuffled frantically underneath it for—yes! He found it, a single shred of tattered paper. Desperate for answers, Darian watched in amazement as the entire folder reformed around the tiny scrap. He flipped it open to find the patient's childbirth records and read with an insatiable hunger for knowledge.

"I found her," he whispered, staring at Alex in amazement. "This is where I was born."

Day 7

To say Marius was tired would be a severe understatement. He had gone without sleep for what felt like days now, but he had no control over that. He couldn't even look at a spot on the wall without seeing frightening hallucinations crawling all over it. His heartbeat reverberated through his skull, as though threatening to crack it at the slightest provocation. The pain was so great, persisting for so long that he couldn't even react anymore, and it surprised him that he hadn't choked on his own vomit long ago. His mind was failing him—what was memory and what was nightmare? There had once been a time where the idea of nothingness scared him to the point of soiling himself, but these days it was looking too much like Heaven.

"The director has done well so far," said a high-pitched voice with a hint of mischief—the voice of his tormentor, "but it looks like more of the pieces are falling into place. It won't be much longer now! If you can catch them for me, you will be greatly rewarded."

Marius nodded, lacking the energy or focus to do much else. From the best of his recollections, he was still in the lab, but Dr. Kale was long gone, driven away by whoever this newcomer was. Amalthea as well—what happened to her? Sometimes he thought he remembered Kale running away and Amalthea being struck down, other times he remembered something else entirely, and at no time was he certain of any of it. Wisps of logic told him they must still be alive, since there were no bodies that he could see, but the screaming in his head sounded just like theirs...

He tried to orient on the source of the voice once again, but his eyes refused to cooperate. All he could make out was the image of another blurry shape glittered with specks of light, punctuated by a resounding shockwave from his eternal migraine. He would agree to anything—*anything*—to end the pain, if he could somehow make his will known.

"Don't you have *anything* to say?" the voice chided in a manner that made him doubt his own sanity yet again. "Everything's going so well for us! Aren't you just as excited as I am? The fun's going to begin *very* soon!"

He felt like screaming with every fibre of his soul, but with as little control as he had over himself, he wasn't even sure how to do that anymore. If he wasn't careful, he was liable to swallow his own tongue and... Hey, *that* was an idea...

"Oh, don't be like that. If I can't sleep, I don't see the fun in letting you do it."

"Ghh," he gurgled, barely managing to enunciate even that much. However his tormentor decided to interpret that was out of his hands.

"Fine—be that way," the voice snapped, making a cute pout, and

Marius immediately felt rejuvenated. His muscles were larger, his attention concentrated, his pain vanished. He felt as though he could do anything.

0.02

They didn't dare to linger longer than was necessary, taking their findings and running. Daybreak was fast approaching, and they needed to think in private. After hightailing it back to the house, Alex locked the door behind them, not only for the house but—though she trusted Sunni with her life—also for the guest room. "So who is she?" she asked in anticipation, excited to have seen him at work at last.

"Marian Waters," he read, shuffling through the file with eagerness. "Certificate of live birth to boy 708.2.15:27.1. Father unknown. Blood type 0- and so on... It's me, I know it—the papers describe me to a T." Yet he lowered the file with – disappointment? – as he sat down on the bed. "But, there's no evidence of *me*."

"How do you mean?"

There was a visible sorrow in his eyes, but also a deep frustration. "I mean, there's no name on the certificate, so who named me? And why am I called Grey, not Waters? Is that my father's name? If so, why don't they know who he is?"

Alex cocked her ears at him in bemusement. "But – I thought you said your parents were dead! Didn't you know—"

"That's just what I was told, and I never questioned it. 'Dad died before I was born'—that's not too difficult to accept, and either way it would be a thousand times harder to find my father than my mother. Mom... I'd always wondered, but the same thing, really. Not being given information on them is effectively the same as having them be dead. Maybe they're still alive – but..." He tossed the file carelessly to the floor, slumping against the bed's headboard. "All this has done is raise a million more questions, while providing no answers."

"But you're this much closer to finding your mother, aren't you?" Alex encouraged, picking up the file and flipping through it. "Now that you know her name—"

"The problem is," he interrupted with growing impatience, "I've never encountered a Marian Waters in all of my searches, and—I told you—I remember *all* of them. Every record for every person who's lived in this quad, and none of them match."

"Maybe they got her name wrong."

He grimaced. "If that's the case, then the file's useless, because they didn't record anything more about her than her name. No address, no phone number, ident... Even race—*none* of that's in there." He threw up his hands in astonishment at the absurdity of it. "What kind of clinic is this, keeping anonymous patients? Issuing a birth certificate for the unnamed child of a

false identity is useless."

"Could – she be from another quad?"

"Possibly," he admitted, "but which quad? And why come here just to have me?"

She twitched her ears at him. "What do your instincts tell you?"

"It's not really instincts, I think..." Darian stared at the ceiling as he contemplated it. "It's kind of – *memories*."

"Memories?"

He rubbed his forehead as he thought. "Back there, I had a vision of my mother giving birth to me. That's how I knew what to look for, even before I realized what it was. It wasn't a conscious effort on my part—it's like – something else driving me."

"Then that means something else is leading you this way!" Alex exclaimed, excited at the prospect. "So now you just have to find the next clue in the puzzle!"

"Mmm, yes," he murmured, glancing out the window. The morning light had already started peeking over the horizon and into the room. "Are you going to school today?"

"Oh, nuts, I lost track of time..." Checking her watch, she yawned in reflex. "Meh, I don't have time to get a good rest before class. Maybe I'll have Sunni tell the school I'm sick so I can catch up on some sleep... Where is she, anyway? I didn't see her things when we came in."

Darian muttered to himself, lost in thought. "Outside the box..."

"What's that?"

He was silent for several moments, and when he spoke again, his words seemed to have a deliberate hesitation to them. "...I – think I know what I need to do next, but I can't act on it until later."

"Terrific!" Alex cheered, beaming. "What do you need to do?"

"It's complicated. It all comes down to timing."

"How long do we wait, like a day or two?"

"Something like that."

"Good. If we've got a moment, then, I'm going to shower off after all that digging around in the dirt – or did you want to go first?"

"...I'll take my turn second," he said, waving in dismissal.

"Are you sure?"

"I don't want to lose my train of thought. Go get ready."

Though eager to get clean, she had an uneasy feeling in the pit of her stomach. Something felt – out of place, but she couldn't think of what. "Darian?" she ventured.

"Hmm?"

Whatever her gut was telling her, she found it difficult to believe, to see the reassuring expression on his face—contemplative, but in a way that looked like he had everything under control. As his eyes met hers, it felt silly to say what she was going to say, under the circumstances. "What's on your mind, really?"

He smirked at her, radiating a hidden warmth. "Go get cleaned up. I'll tell you all about it later."

That was all it took to satisfy her. Of course they could trust each other, with all they'd been through in the last few days. Smiling again, Alex unlocked the bedroom door and hurried to go through the shower, excited at their progress. "What an adventure this is turning out to be!" she remarked to her reflection before stripping down.

Her mind exploring the possibilities, Alex bathed quickly, eager to tackle the next step but relishing the water just a bit before stepping out of the stall and toweling off. In her anticipation, it was all she could do to keep herself from darting out before donning her robe.

"Okay, I'm all d—"

When she entered the guest room again, Darian was nowhere to be seen. Confused, she checked in the other bedrooms, worried that maybe he was snooping around the place again, but he wasn't in her room, nor in the master bedroom, the study, the kitchen, den...

She tried the front door—locked. That would mean he was still in the house, wouldn't it?

...no. A chill overcame her as she realized he could have left, then reverted the locked state of the door. *He had run off on his own.* Why didn't she see it coming, from his attitude the prior evening? With mixed emotion, she returned to the guest room once again, this time noticing a bit of paper on the bed she had overlooked at first.

It was a note, hastily written in her native tongue. It took an instant to read, but as she did, she crumpled it up, throwing it aside in a rage as tears swelled in her eyes. The words nevertheless burned into her mind, the anger in his voice from three days ago now etched into her memory:

"アレックス、学校に行こう."

4.05

The door opened with a cheery tingle of bells as he entered, again looking out of place in being there. What with recent events, the receptionist eyed him with deserved suspicion, her hand hovering over the silent alarm but hesitating because she could see he was carrying nothing and wore only a plain dress shirt, slacks, and suspenders.

"Can – I help you with something, sir...?" she asked, struggling to conceal her wariness.

"Director Arche Ganymede," he introduced himself, not the least bit concerned about being identified. "Is the chairman in? I just wanted to have a brief word with him about sponsoring a child to mentor."

She glanced at the calendar. "He's in a meeting at the moment. I can give him your message, if you like."

"Certainly," he said, reaching behind him. Before she could make a

move, he had drawn his gun from his back pocket and shot her through her left eye.

Within moments, he had taken the keys from her desk and locked the door, pocketing the keys this time. He acted quickly, the sight of the last receptionist he killed still fast in his mind, and it took all his effort to keep from shuddering in disgust. He thought of—

Ganymede shook his head. "Don't," he scolded himself. They were dead now, or might as well be until he was finished. Thoughts would only hinder him.

Down the next corridor were the administrators' offices, where the chairman would be having his meeting. Little did the chairman know the meeting would be his last and he wouldn't be getting extra funding after all... Oh, well. He withdrew a chain and lock that he had tucked down his pant leg, restraining the doors with them.

As he ambled along, he was surprised to hear a babble of voices in the hall ahead. Peeking in the next room, he saw about sixty children in the canteen along with their attendants—*Lunch*, he thought, cursing himself for forgetting the time and the layout of the building. It wouldn't do to be seen. He retreated, taking the back way to the boiler room.

To Ganymede's advantage, the building had been constructed with a rather large gas line. He paused a bit as he contemplated what he was about to do, a bead of sweat forming on his temple as he closed his eyes. It was easier to carry out his task without having to see the victims, and this made things harder...

Remember why you're here, he thought, repeating the words like a mantra. When he opened them again, he grunted in determination, purging his mind of the hesitation that had overcome him moments before. Taking a wrench and crowbar, he twisted off a knob and made a leak large enough to release enough gas to set the building ablaze with a tiny spark.

"Well, I warned them that this place was a deathtrap," he muttered. With that, he returned to the front entrance and let himself out, relocking the door from the outside.

4.11

Darian felt exhausted, despite repeated efforts to rejuvenate himself, but traditional rest wasn't a luxury he felt he could afford at the moment. He was under tremendous emotional strain as of late, particularly with recent developments, but he knew the next step he had to take alone, ideally before anyone could catch wind of his actions. He wasn't sure if anyone would be there waiting for him when he returned, but he knew from the moment when everything changed that he would have to return *some day*. In the meantime, he hoped Alex would stop trying to live her life through him and just get on with hers.

The house had an eerie silence hovering over it, thick enough to cut with a knife, and it worried him. Even the resonance had died off without a trace, leaving Darian feeling more alone and vulnerable than ever before.

Well, the sooner he was finished here, the sooner he could be gone forever, no turning back. He approached his entrance with caution, checking for signs of – anything, really. As far as he could tell, however, nothing had changed in the days he'd been gone. When he decided the coast was clear, he unlocked the door, gritted his teeth, and stepped inside.

Before he could react, he felt a pair of hands grabbing his throat, fastening a familiar shackle around his neck. "Caught you!" shouted a too-familiar voice, which quickly turned to one of surprise. "Wait a min..."

"Let me go!" Darian shouted, not the least bit expectant that his demand would be honoured but nevertheless defiant.

"You look a lot like him," he mused, "and you know how to get inside..." Hesitating only a tick, he grabbed Darian's shirt collar and tore it, exposing his neck and shoulders. "How about that," Lion jeered at the sight of the identifying tattoo, "it's Daka'aranoa! Welcome home! My goodness, just look at you—what *have* you been doing during your days of hooky? Did you manage to save up your growth spurts to use all at once, something like that? I'd ask how you did it, but I'm certain I wouldn't be able to do the same thing myself."

Darian wasn't sure what to do. He could probably undo the shackle as easily as he had redone the lock and alarm for Alex's house, but would it be a good idea to reveal his ability to Lion? Even if he did, he wasn't certain of his strength—how long would he be able to fight? Was anyone else here to assist in dishing out his punishment?

"I'm surprised you came back, actually," Lion continued, the spite in his voice concealing any astonishment he might've felt about the biological impossibility of Darian's advanced age. "Were you just looking for trouble? Did you forget your *homework*? Certainly you don't know what's going on in the network, or you would've gotten as far away as your legs could carry you, like everyone else."

"What?" he grunted, gagging on the now-too-tight shackle.

"I don't know why I'm bothering to tell you any of this," Lion spat in contempt. "No, I know why—you were always so snarky about knowing more than everyone else, and *I* finally know something you don't. Anyway, it looks like one of our dear old directors in the syndicate has gone berzerk and is going around systematically shutting us down, starting with – heh, our 'recruitment centre'..."

The bombing! Darian recalled the face of the man who had killed everyone. Had he really been a fourth-tier? One of *them*? He had to find out who he was! Perhaps he was an ally, or—

Lion frowned. "So it's just a matter of time before he comes after the rest of us. Our organization is doomed if one person acting alone can do this much damage with impunity. I can't imagine what the head boss thinks

of this... He's probably vanished already, but the rest of us are stuck where we are, with the minimal provisions we've stockedpiled before all of this started. Doesn't it just figure the paperwork I sent in three weeks ago still hasn't gone through?"

Darian choked wearing the shackle meant for the smaller version of himself. He was running short of breath, but he struggled to stay conscious. The syndicate was toppling! Would he be free of this horrible double life at last? Whatever it was the saboteur had in mind, it meant that he had to work fast if he was going to find out what he needed...

"Naturally, I figured it would be prudent to be ready for unwanted visitors—and, really, you're about as unwanted as it *gets*." He chuckled with a deep-seated malice, withdrawing a gun from his shoulder holster. "So, I think that I've monologued long enough. It's time for your final punishment, little Aranoa..."

Darian's eyes grew as large as plates, clawing in desperation at his restraint. "Gu—"

Blood splattered in patches across the far wall from a gaping hole in his back where the bullet exited. He went lax, feeling the life drain from his body. The last words he remembered hearing were, "I've wanted to do that for years now."

4.16

Alex was furious. Where did he get off telling her to go to school like he was her grumpy old grandfather?

She tossed and turned in bed, the daylight an unwelcome intruder. It was no use—she couldn't get relaxed, between anger and – well, worry.

"Stupid male," she spat, getting up and dressing. Even though she rarely slept for longer than an hour a day anymore, Alex felt by then that she might as well go to school after all, though it was late and she was hardly in the mood. She couldn't even ask for advice from Sunni, who she assumed had gotten a headstart on her runs before they got back that morning.

Sometimes it bugged her to have to rely so heavily on Sunni, now that she was Alex's guardian and most trusted confidante. It wasn't that she wasn't reliable, but – that she was unreachable on her runs, in light of Alex being an orphan now, wasn't exactly the greatest of comforts. There were times when she hated that Sunni wasn't close by, instead of out gathering intel on the quad that might help them discover the truth behind her parents' suspicious deaths—even if Sunni had tracked Darian to his home...

Come to think of it, is that where he went? What could be there that he would want? He had made it sound as though he hated just being there so much that, when given the choice between going to Hell and returning there, he would choose Hell in a heartbeat. So that meant – what?

Nothing, she had to admit—for all they talked the past few days, she

really didn't know a blessed thing about him.

It made her angry how they were in conflict, considering how alike they were otherwise. Alex could feel in her heart that they were meant to be together, in some fashion, but Darian didn't seem to want to admit it, always going off and doing his own thing. Maybe that was her own fault—she was raised to work together to accomplish greater things, while he was raised to be independent – though obedient.

Why did such bad people get that kind of power over others, to turn a decent person into such a pessimistic, hateful mess? Further, why didn't he want help becoming that decent person again?

"I'm not the boss of him," she muttered with bitterness, resigned to her powerlessness. "I'm not Darian's keeper."

Sighing, she felt lost. The resonance between them had fallen off, and now she couldn't even sense the initial wisps she'd detected before they had met. If they were two pieces of the same puzzle, their relationship didn't reflect that. It felt harmonious, yet – disjointed.

"Ugh," she spat in disgust, deciding she was through. "I've got to get out and do something to take my mind off of h—"

Her ears perked up. There was a sensation she'd never felt before, much like when she had been attacked. She had learned what to watch for after that, but this... This sounded like – a cacaphony of tortured souls...

Alex darted to the window, peeking out of the corner. There was a lone figure at the bottom of the hill, approaching the house at a slow stride. "Darian?" she whispered, but a closer look revealed otherwise—the man had a blue mane and tatty clothes like Darian's, but whoever he was was much larger, bulkier, and seemed to lurch as though struggling to maintain control over himself.

She felt her shoulders being grabbed. "Run," instructed Sunni, an unsettling fear in her voice.

Alex wasted no time with questions, not even when Sunni told her not to take the stairs. Instead, the two opened a window on the far side of the house and clambered onto the roof. In that instant, the house shook as a mighty weight rocked it—the newcomer landed in front of them, having justleapt two streets' distance in a single bound, his orange eyes glistening in the sunlight.

"Who – are you?" Alex asked, afraid for her life, but the intruder gave no response.

"This way!" Sunni called, dashing down the side of the roof, but the intruder quickly caught up to her, leaving Alex alone for the moment.

Her mind raced. What should she do? It was clear that she could dispose of a sufficient threat in an instant, and she couldn't let Sunni get hurt, but neither could she live with herself if she killed anything, even—

"Aah!" Sunni shouted, her shoulder dislocating as the man grabbed her by the arm. He shook her in cruelty and dangled her over the roof as though trying to decide whether to toss her over the side.

"Forgive me, stranger," Alex cringed, directing her focus...

A hideous cry echoed from the hills as the man was dismembered, his limbs falling away as his body thumped to the rooftop with a horrible thud. Sunni fell the remaining two stories to the ground below, tumbling in a neat tuck-and-roll as she impacted.

Alex scaled down the side of the house, digging her claws carefully into the rock outcroppings. She rushed to Sunni's side, relieved to hear her groan softly.

"It hurts so much," she whimpered, straining to pop her shoulder back into place. "Ow-ouch. Maybe I should just have Darian fix—"

"We shouldn't rely on Darian," Alex scolded. "After all—"

A sickening feeling came over her as she realized that she had just condemned a man to life as a quadruplegic, if Darian didn't heal him.

"What is it?"

"I kept him alive for questioning, but now he has no arms or legs..." Her face was marred with guilt. "It was all I could think to do... I was so afraid that—"

"Don't worry about it. We'll figure out what we should do with him."

They took a few moments to reorient themselves, then Alex climbed back onto the roof as Sunni gathered the man's limbs.

"Who are you?" Alex asked him again.

The man cried in agony, rocking himself back and forth as though still intent on fulfilling his secret mission. His face was a gnarled, twisted scowl, but it resembled Darian's in a way that unsettled her.

"You – can't be him," she declared, refusing to believe, "because Darian would fix himself to how he used to be—wouldn't he? Whatever happened to you..."

"Ma..."

She stooped by his side, trying to hear. "Say again?"

"Ri – uh..."

The strain seemed to be too much to bear. He gave out, taking in shallow breaths as though hyperventilating, trembling from the combination of shock and blood loss.

"Do you need help?" Sunni called. "I was going to put him in the den for now."

"Okay."

The man seemed nearer to death—though he bled more slowly than she expected, they would have to attend to his wounds soon if he was to survive. His face was pitiful: a bizarre mix of hatred, sorrow, and agony, occasionally gnashing his teeth at her.

"Who are you?" she whispered, rubbing his forehead in sympathy.

With a chill, she withdrew her hand—in the instant they touched, the resonance echoed with a vibrant, stuttering rhythm.

7.08

Red stepped outside into the fresh midday air, relishing the autumn breeze after having spent the past several hours cleaning up the mess. If it was all the same to him, he wouldn't have bothered, but this way, if someone *did* check out the house, no one would suspect anything for a very long time—more than long enough to erase his tracks.

In retrospect, it might have been better to shoot Daka'aranoa where he was going to dump the body, but no matter. It was somewhat cathartic after a fashion, like the ultimate hazing. Either way, he felt like a new man, as though a heavy weight had been lifted off of him in dragging *that* heavy weight to its final resting place. Now would be a good time as any to take a much-needed vacation. He wasn't sure what he would do when he ran out of money, but that was something he'd think about later. All he knew for sure was he was free of both Daka'aranoa and that idiotic teaching post and that he would remember this day for the rest of his life.

A finger tapped him on the shoulder. "You missed something," said a voice, then a muffled shot pierced the air.

17.09

"Talk to me, Callisto," Pachi demanded, glowering at the reports filling his monitor. "*One* person is going around destroying everything I've worked so hard to build? Why can't we take him down?"

"It's futile," she responded, still radiating her usual calm despite the situation. "It's as though he knows our moves even before we do. No single agent has access to all of our information at once, except him."

"Not even the fifth-tiers?"

"Fifth-tiers are lazy, complacent in their posts," she snapped, though she would have sounded just as cool if she had been complementing them from the bottom of her heart. "Thirds might stand a better chance, but no. The safest bet would be entries, as they are more in touch with their survival and tracking instincts. However, they wouldn't know who he is to anticipate his movement."

He frowned both at Callisto's verdict and her stoicism toward it, slamming his fist on his desk and forming so many wrinkles in his face that he could have been mistaken for a plate of noodles. Asking about sixth-tiers would be pointless: the sum of them included and was comprised entirely of Callisto and Himalia, the latter of whom was confirmed to be deceased just an hour ago.

"What I don't understand is what he seeks to gain by toppling us. You said he was a fourth-tier? So he knows plenty about the organization, but he was also rather well off and protected by being here."

"Perhaps he was jealous of your position?" she suggested, sounding just as disinterested in the discussion as she did in any other topic. "There aren't many chances to advance from fourth-tier, after all."

"No," he insisted, "that's a ridiculously high cost to pay just to get back at me, like cutting off your nose to spite your face. He's losing much more than I am by destroying us." At the same time, he had to wonder if there wasn't something he was missing. What could there be that was more valuable than benefits and job security that rivaled being the CEO of one of the most prosperous companies in the world?

A buzzer sounded at the door—three buzzes, a pause, then one, a pause, then two.

Pachi flipped a switch. "Come in, Sammy."

The child entered, beaming with a grin full of glistening white teeth and mane and eyes to match. "Daddy, I'm bored. Can I get a new game?"

"This – isn't a good time, Sammy," he stammered. "We're having some problems with one of the men."

"But I can get it myself!"

"It's not that I don't trust you, kiddo, but Daddy's worried about our man possibly trying to hurt you if you go out. You understand, don't you?"

Sammy pouted. "There's nothing to do here! I'm bo~red!"

"Come, come," Pachi scolded, slapping his knee. "Bring your I-Go board in here, and we can play a match!"

"I'm bored with I-Go. I want to do something new! It sucks being locked up here! I've broken all of my action figures, too. They're stupid! I want something *new*!"

Pachi sighed, reaching into his wallet and pulling out a wad of cash. "Callisto, can you accompany the kid to the toy store before they close? I'll give you another five hep. Shoot, if you can get it *after* they close, you can keep all of it."

Callisto nodded. "I'll take protection as well."

"Hopefully you won't need it."

She nodded again and, still devoid of emotion, gave the entire stack of heptaderio to Sammy just as she received it. Pachi opened his mouth to protest, but Callisto stopped him. "We are going to buy a game for Sammy, correct? Therefore, Sammy should be the one to buy it."

The office reverberated with squeals of delight. "Yay! You're my favourite, Callisto!"

"Hurry up, then. The store will close soon."

As the two left the room hand-in-hand, Pachi scratched his head. If she didn't care about money, that was her prerogative, but it seemed even more out of place than usual. What was she up to?

He rubbed his chin in reflection. Over the years, Callisto had been nothing but a loyal – and cold – assistant, regularly turning down everything he might have offered in thanks: money, jewelry, cars, real estate—all trivial in her eyes. It didn't make any sense for Callisto to be a double-agent for

someone richer or more powerful—who would *that* possibly be?

A stone formed in his gut as he realized—if Callisto was behind all this, or even in league with other conspirators—there was no conceivable way he could fight back.

24.10

Sunni was a ghost, checking on everything in the house without a sound or stopping to take a rest. Making tourniquettes was a cinch, in her unfortunate experience—the man stabilized quickly before they moved him inside. Though his blood blended well with the reddish roofing tiles, she had also cleaned the house's exterior in the utmost haste in order to prevent any of the neighbours from discovering the accident.

Besides continuing to unpack the rest of their meager belongings, though, there wasn't much else to do at this hour—look through the prior occupants' leftovers? Perhaps it would give her clues to her purpose there... Yet in trying to keep busy, she couldn't help noticing that Alex hovered over the man, keeping a constant vigil.

"Can't you sleep?" Sunni asked, concerned.

She shook her head. "No more than you can. You know that."

"It'd be good for you if you tried, though. Certainly it would help you adjust if you spent less time sitting up at night worrying about—"

"—I'm not worried about the past anymore," she snapped, coming across as angrier than Sunni had expected.

A smirk crossed her face all the same. "Is that so..."

It was difficult to know what was on Alex's mind, but it wasn't too difficult to guess what she was feeling. It had been very hard on them both to lose not only her parents but also Alex's close friends in the war—friends that had been by her side her whole life, friends that she thought she couldn't live without...

"He's the first one that's left you, isn't he?"

Alex coughed as though choking on something, and Sunni knew that she was trying hard not to cry.

"I feel the same way your parents did," she whispered with compassion. "I wish you could've just grown up and lived happily without ever knowing sadness. I wish it for everyone, in fact. The world doesn't work that way, though, and bad things happen to good people."

"I wish it didn't have to be that way."

Seek them and gain eternity: charity, love, equity, and repentance. —Carlos

Day 8

It was cold, dark – damp. There was a vast emptiness, immense and lonely. Time did not exist anymore, only void and sorrow.

I am afraid. What is going on? I can't sleep, but I can't do anything else. I am blind and deaf, and all I feel is pain.

The voice—was it really a voice?—seemed like Lance's, full of surprise and remorse. There were – memories – of a life that mirrored others. Pain was cyclic: brutality was a crude means of teaching, not cruelty meted out.

Cruel? Of course it was cruel, senseless. I hated that life, hated it so much, but I had to do what I was told. Brutality never solved anything.

So it wasn't Lance's fault, but anger wrongly directed. What Lance did was strict, not malicious. If Lance could forgive...

Not my fault? I have done so many bad things. I deserve my pain.

No, there was no reason for Lance to die. The death was on Darian's head. Lance was involved with crime, but murder was not a deserved punishment.

I was wrong. I want to repent for my crimes, and I want to rest – but there is no rest without forgiveness. There is no peace for the unjust.

That is not true. The young girl who visited Lance's grave—she is sighted now, from Lance's gift. There are good deeds even in death.

The girl? Ah, I know her. I am glad for her gain, but it was not my gift. I do not deserve her gratitude. I must repent for my evil, but repentance isn't allowed to me.

Darian was at fault. He is the one to repent. He has greater crimes—he is the one who is sorry. He wants to pay for his sins. He wants forgiveness... I want forgiveness...

...but I want to live, too.

Darian? Oh, I tried to help. I knew it was bad to treat him in such a way. I forgive him.

I forgive him.

Forgiveness was a warm feeling, liberating, joyous.

I can rest now. I am at peace. Thank you. I forgive you. I'm not regret—

Darian came to with a start, shocked to find himself submerged in water. That was simple to remedy—water was as comfortable to him as a warm blanket, and much easier to navigate. He undid the shackle around his neck, swimming gracefully toward the surface...

"Ah!"

He breathed deeply, taking in fresh air and the bite of chlorine. A pool? Where was he? How much time had passed? Darian didn't have a watch, nor was there a clock that he could see. It was an indoor pool, and there weren't any windows to tell when in the day it was.

He glided to a ladder, climbing out and feeling the full weight of his damp clothes tight against his body. It shocked him to remember being shot through the heart—he ran his fingers over his body in panic that turned to astonishment. Not a trace, however...

He strode quickly to the dressing area, mindful of the puddles, and stared into the first mirror he saw. A much older Darian stared back at him, nearly a head taller than the Darian of five days ago, with his dripping mane reaching his shoulders. "Holy..." he muttered, head spinning. Mentally, he thanked Alex for making him get larger clothes, as they were bordering on uncomfortable. Just how much more was he going to grow? His father must have been a giant!

First things first. He focused, and in an instant his clothes were dry. His mane and body remained damp, however—they mustn't remember being dry at his current age. That was weird, but it wasn't the end of the world to be a little wet.

He examined his form in the mirror: tall and lanky vs. short and a bit squat—the same mass but stretched out. He remembered being able to eat his fill at the orphanage but never growing much from it one way or the other. Was he feeding his body at his actual physical age while regressing to a younger, lighter form all these years? What about now? The orphanage had fed him well—if not *well*—but since then he had been malnourished, between Lion's mistreatment and his own miserliness.

Taking off his shirt, he looked at himself anew—just skin and bones covered in grotesque but ancient-looking scars. He worried that advancing past his correct age would pose greater problems later on. Would he be at

risk for lower bone density, heart failure, or liver disease?

"Guess I deserve it for eating out of the trash," he scolded himself, fretting more and more about his actions to date as he redressed.

In the middle of his self-loathing, he recalled the perspective into Lance's behaviour he'd been given: It had never been Lance doling out more than some roughhousing, the same that left *all* of the syndicate trainees with scars similar to Darian's. No, it had been *Lion* the whole time as part of his mentorship training! Both had always been present, but his back was turned and he'd just assumed that since Lance was mentor to both...

Lance—he thought of what he had experienced just before reviving: peace, empathy... Had he seen the afterlife? Did Lance forgive him for the senseless murder? It gave Darian hope to have gotten even the sense of an opportunity to make amends for his crimes. Despite not being religious, he nevertheless knelt down and closed his eyes. *Lance*, he thought, *if you truly forgive me, I thank you. Rest peacefully, my friend.*

Back to business... He looked for an exit. There were stairs leading up, but the door was locked. No problem—in a flash, the door was open.

Darian found himself inside his house, behind one of the doors he couldn't access before. So Lion decided to dispose of him in the pool? That suggested that he had no intention of returning.

That was fine. He had no intention of returning, either.

He rushed upstairs, taking a bit to locate the secret access panel to his room. It felt like even more of a prison to enter it from this side. His tail bristled as he sifted through his stuff for his goggles, his access keys, tools—everything that might help him gain entry to the base again. With a surprise, he glanced through the tatty curtain and noticed it was night out. How long had passed? Hours, certainly... Days?

There was a clock on the range in the kitchen, reading 13.12:0.15. It had been nearly 5 when he was shot... He'd spent thirty hours soaking in that pool. Why did it take so long to heal? Was it from being dead during that time? He had aged so much from it, too! Unbelievable...

Just thinking about what was happening was making Darian dizzy, or perhaps it was a combination of that plus having returned from the brink of oblivion. As pressed for time as he was, he needed a good rest more than anything else...

...but where? There was no way he was going to stay here, and he wasn't willing to go crawling back to Alex yet. There was literally nowhere for him to turn...

No, that wasn't true, he realized. Kotaro would be more than happy to take him in. How was he going to explain his growth spurt, though? Ha, even that was covered—Kotaro was as carefree as the wind, and his parents hadn't seen Darian in long enough that they wouldn't realize anything was out of the ordinary.

Giddy at how well things were turning around, he snapped up a biscuit from the kitchen, deciding to pay his friend a much-deserved visit.

1.04

Alex waited on the stranger with more than the usual anxiety. He hadn't roused since they bandaged him up and lifted him off the roof, but at least he seemed more at ease now. Sunni had put his arms and legs on ice, so they could rush him to the hospital in case Darian didn't return before the day's end—not that they looked forward to explaining how he had arrived in such a state, which was the only reason they hadn't sought medical treatment in the first place.

On that note, it worried her that all traces of Darian had vanished. Her senses had been heightened to where she had an exaggerated awareness of her surroundings—due to her ability, she deduced, since she had to know precisely where things were in order to – manipulate them the way she did. However, the trail had gone cold almost as soon as she discovered he'd left, which made her regret leaving him to his own devices rather than searching for him straight away. What were they to do with their attacker, and would they be in their current situation had Alex chased after Darian instead? Furthermore, what connection did the man have to either of them?

Normally, there were no news broadcasts on holidays, but a bulletin played on all of the local stations: a small, nondescript building had caught fire from an explosion the morning before, presumably due to a gas leak. The astonishing thing, according to police and coroner follow-up reports, was the building seemed to be some kind of secret facility, but no one could determine what purpose it served—only that the victims, for the most part, seemed to be young children.

The story made her gasp. First, the bombing of the clinic, then this? If the disasters were connected, there seemed to be a progression in the ages of the victims. Who was next?

"Aa – a..." the stranger moaned.

Alex looked up at him, her heart skipping to see him awake. Would he be able to talk? "Yes? What is it?"

"Ma..."

She waited, listening carefully to what he had to say, but he didn't seem able to enunciate more than that despite his efforts. It seemed to hurt to do even that much.

"Shh," she whispered. "Just get some rest – or would you like to have something to eat?"

"Ssa..."

"I'll be back with some soup for you."

Suddenly, he wheezed, coughing. His eyes were wide as he started hemorrhaging, blood dribbling from his mouth. "Oh – no, SUNNI!" Alex cried, turning the man on his side to keep him from choking. It was too late, however—his heart stopped, eyes staring into empty space.

Sunni appeared an instant too late. "What happen—" she started,

then her face fell. "Oh, no. "

Tears streamed in torrents down Alex's face, as seemed to happen with increasing regularity since she had discovered her ability. "Why do I keep hurting people?" she cried. "Why?"

1.09

Darian hesitated at Kotaro's bedroom window before knocking. He wasn't sure who would be up at this hour, but more than that, he still had a reflex against endangering his friends just by being near them. It wasn't too late to change his mind, even if he couldn't think of a better alternative—roughing it would only endanger himself, but that left him more vulnerable to attack than he felt was comfortable. After a tick passed with no answer, he took a deep breath and knocked again.

The bedroom curtain lifted slightly, a groggy eye peeking outside. Darian held up a hand in greeting, his thumb and ring finger folded down. Another tick passed, then the eye grew wide, the curtain falling. There was a scatter of loud steps, thumps, an excited stumble – and the front door flew open with a clatter.

"Deeg!" Kotaro shouted, his voice loud enough to wake the entire neighbourhood. "You came to visit?"

"Aren't you cold?" Darian blanched, chagrined via proxy. "You're in your underwear."

"Come on in, buddy! It's about time you showed up! Boy, are we going to paint the town red today!"

At least he didn't seem to notice anything was out of the ordinary, though Darian was embarrassed at having to ask all the same. "Actually, I just came over because I need a place to crash. I'm not really welcome at home anymore."

"Okay, no problem, D. I was just getting up, myself."

He rolled his eyes. "Liar."

"Hey, you're looking fantastic, though. The hospital did a bang-up job on you, then?"

His ears twitched in confusion. "Hospital?"

"Yeah, Alex told me you had been in an accident the other day, but she couldn't go with in the ambulance because she wasn't family. I say that's some weak sauce, 'cause you don't have any family—well, none to speak of, anyway, since your parents kicked you out, which is *also* weak, like it's your fault? Like you wanted to get hurt? SO WEAK. If my folks were like that, I'd have run away years ago! But anyway, we weren't sure which hospital you were in, or we'd have come to visit straight away. Glad to see it wasn't too bad of an injury, since you're out already! Big D the indestructable!"

He made a nervous smirk. "Oh ye~ah, the accident. Yeah, they were really good to me. Brilliant."

"But Mum and Dad will be excited to see you again. They missed you, you know, getting all worried sick 'cause you didn't have any friends—besides me, of course—and you'd always looked so little, like you don't get fed properly or something. I told them you must be fine, because you sure have energy to tell me off! Speaking of that, do you want something to eat? We got a bunch of bangers and mash leftover from last night that'll go well with the peas or shortbread biscuits or barbecue crisps or porridge – or a bit of rump roast or sweet potato chips or – I think we might have some treacle or these lemon tart things or there's this gluten-free honey oat bread or Mum just made a flan—"

"Nah," Darian called, dropping his bag by the door. "I really could use a lie down more than anything else." It probably would be good for him to eat as well, but in this state he didn't think he could keep his eyes open long enough.

"Sure thing, sure thing..." Kotaro rooted through the cupboards as he talked. "Have you seen Alex yet? I bet she'll be glad to hear you're out, too. She seemed really distressed when she told me you'd been sent to the hospital. Like, *really* distressed. I think she digs ya, bud! You oughtta take her up on that soon, or someone'll snatch her up before you can!"

Darian rolled his eyes in annoyance, then peeked in Kotaro's room with eagerness. "Are you sure you don't mind me just crashing here?"

"Go on ahead, bro!" Kotaro shouted—although, with the spoon he had in his mouth, it sounded more like, "Gh hn hhnd, hrr!"

"Where's your guest room, again?"

"Don't have one at the moment, but you can use mine!"

He vanished into the bedroom.

"Oh, and guess what?" Kotaro called, scampering over.

It was too late, though—Darian was already zonked out on the bed.

"Nothing."

2.02

Francesca strolled down the street, enjoying the early autumn sun. She loved holidays, and the weather had been pleasant—not too cold, but not too hot. Her dragon Micah seemed to be enjoying the weather as well, sniffing the air and chirping at every little thing that moved. Better he do it outside than in, at least. They approached a man in a black coupe with his window down, chatting away on his mobile.

"Marius?" the man exclaimed, surprised. "I thought—"

Micah trotted over to the car in curiosity, snorting at something he scented in the air.

"Fine. What's the next target?"

Here, Micah started hissing, jumping and snapping at the man.

"Hey! What—"

"Mikey!" Francesca shouted, tugging him back. "What's the matter with you? Leave him alone!"

"Keep your mutt away from my car!" the man growled, rolling up his window. Micah churred in aggravation.

"Heel," she ordered, not quite sure what to make of the dragon pup's misbehaviour. His parents hadn't been as naughty—she briefly wondered if their obedience skipped a generation.

As they continued down the road, she could still make out pieces of the man's conversation. "I've tracked about half of them in the block. I'll have to double-check the remainder of the network, but for the most part it's the local ones that would pose a problem for you."

Curious, she thought, wondering if she should report the man to the authorities. Suspicion alone didn't seem like enough reason to call about a strange conversation on a mobile, though, and Micah seemed to calm down once they were further down the road.

Suddenly, he stopped, then started pulling at his leash. "What is it, Mikey?" she asked, her eyes following the direction he was leading her. He seemed to be interested in the new neighbours' yard, chirping in excitement. She noticed one of them, a tall and fair-maned feline, digging a ditch along the side of the house. "Oh, do you want to go over and say hello? Okay, but behave—no hissing at the neighbours like you did at that man. We have to see them every day, after all." She approached the edge of the yard, waving as they got closer. "Hello, neighbour!"

The woman looked up from her work, surprised to see someone watching her, then waved back in greeting.

"Is it okay to come introduce myself?"

The woman smiled. "Wehlcome, neighbour!"

It was all Francesca could do to keep Micah close by—it wouldn't do to have him jumping up on everyone they met. Still, the woman seemed amused by his antics. "What a chute dracon jou have," she said in a thick accent, to which Micah churred in admonishment.

"Micah's excitable when it comes to meeting new people, *isn't he*." At her words, the pup chirped in agreement.

"I am same. In my omelant, we have large – ow jou say, the villach of neighbours. Everyone helpink everyone! Here, no so much. It is so hart gettink by on our alone."

"Well, that just won't do!" she mock-pouted, putting her hands on her hips. "We're all a bunch of friendly folk here once you meet us. Tom, next door to you—he's always eager to help out a stranger in need, though once you meet him I promise you won't be strangers for long! Oh, and my name's Francesca Maus."

"Sunni Fields," she said, extending a hand.

They shook, then Francesca admired the yardwork. "Putting in a flower garden?"

"Ya, it gives a colour to the yart. The ouse is pretties, but I really

enchoy gartening. I plant bulbs for the new seasons. Perhaps in the spring I put in pont in back yart, with the fishies."

"That's wonderful! Be sure to ask me or Tom if you *ever* need any help with lifting or decorating! I'm two houses up the road, at number 169. In a pinch, you can also see Sparky up in 170—he just seems to *click* with people, you know?"

"I will! Thank jou for comink over, Franchesca!"

They waved goodbye, but Micah refused to budge. Francesca had to give a stubborn tug on his leash to get him to come with her. "It's time to go, Micah. Miss Sunni is busy putting in her garden!" As they walked, she glanced back to see a young girl helping Sunni load a large black bag into the hole. "See? Now they're putting in fertilizer. You don't want to see that. It's just a lot of dirt. We'll look at the leaves changing colour instead. That's *much* more exciting!"

18.09

Darian awoke to hear Kotaro crashing around the room. "What're you doing, 'taro..." he mumbled, barely cognizant.

"Oh, good," he cheered, "you're up! Check it—my folks bought a new camcorder today!"

He blinked away his sleepiness, eyes struggling to focus on a round lens jammed in his face. "You're not recording *now*, are you?"

"Of course I am! How often does the elusive Deeg venture forth into the world? I'm going to capture as much as I can for posterity!"

Frowning, he sat up. "Turn that thing off."

"No way, Big D," Kotaro countered, dodging Darian's lazy attempt to snatch the camcorder from him. "This is going to be a priceless artifact some day, believe me!"

Darian opened his mouth to say something, but he got caught on the notion of such a poorly-filmed video being of any value, laughing under his breath despite himself. "Fine, whatever."

"So, say something!" he prompted. "Your public awaits!"

"I'll say that everyone who watches this video later is going to get motion-sick from your camera work, 'taro," Darian scolded. "Don't you at least have a tripod for that?"

"I dunno—somewhere?"

"Look here." He stood, motioning for Kotaro to set the camera on a chair, tilting it so to frame himself better before sitting back down. "Now we can both be in the shot," he offered in a fit of generosity.

"Hey, great idea!" Kotaro nearly pounced him in his excitement, then gave the camera a fake aghast look. "Oh, but maybe I shouldn't let my dazzling good looks steal the spotlight away from you."

"Oh, that's okay, I can just do this," he said, laughing and covering

Kotaro's face with his hand.

"Aww!"

Darian smiled and might have kept smiling forever. Though he was annoying in his methods, Kotaro had an undying innocence about him that was hard not to envy. If only...

His smile started to fade. It was impossible not to remember that he was still on the lam.

"So," Kotaro continued, "introduce yourself for the lovely audience! All the ladies are asking for you, especially—"

"Haha, sure," he interrupted. He didn't want to have to think about Alex, much less with Kotaro getting his nose into everything. He cleared his throat and put on a somber face. "My name is Dale Griffin Shinra Douglas Noel Adams Dyne Spyridon Venom Lambourghini—"

"What! Get serious!"

"Like you ever are? ...fine, this is Dionysos and I am Prometheus from Cross—"

"D," he whined, "you're ruining it!"

Darian rolled his eyes and looked away. "I could always go back to sleep, you know, like I'd rather be doing."

"You've been asleep for half the day already! Supper's going to be on the table shortly!"

He had to admit that food sounded too tempting to get the rest of his catch-up sleep out of the way. "You're really determined to do this, aren't you?" he asked by way of roundabout acceptance.

Kotaro gave his most unconvincing innocent look, raising his hands in mock defeat. "*Wha~at?*"

Darian sighed. In truth, he had no idea where life would take him now—this may be his one chance to have his last words, meaningful or not.

"Fine," he conceded. "I'll make you your award-winning video, *but!* I want to do it in private, okay?" Kotaro started to protest, but he slapped a hand over the cougar's mouth. "I know who you're doing this for, and that's great, but show it off *later*. Okay?"

"*How* later?"

"If you have to ask that, it's too soon."

They locked eyes for several moments, much longer than Darian had expected him to be able to keep his mouth shut. "Okay..." he pouted.

"I'm serious. Things get more – valuable with time."

Kotaro looked like he had asked to never play a game again.

"Like a birthday present, see? If you celebrate your birthday every day, then it's not—"

"I get it, D!" he complained. "I'm not a *complete* idiot. It's just not fun, ya know?"

"*Birthday present*. It's a surprise." Boy, would it be.

"I'll watch it anyway, D."

He rolled his eyes. "I know you will. Just don't watch it *now*. I feel

awkward enough without you constantly interrupting, so *shoo*."

Kotaro made one last mocking gesture of being cast away in shame before Darian kicked him out of his own room, almost literally, and shut the door for privacy.

Alone, the vole returned to the camera, ran a hand through his mane in contemplation, then stared into the lens. A script formed in his head as though it was writing itself, but it still seemed – incomplete. If he filled the recording with everything that was on his mind—nay, if he filled a *thousand* recordings—there would still be things he left unsaid. It almost didn't matter what he said, because there were only a few words worth saying. Even if he meant them from the depths of his heart, they would be nothing without *him*. It felt like taking a snapshot, a single moment in time, a poor substitute for the real thing... Yet it was all he could do.

"...this is all I can leave behind," he muttered, astonished at just how little evidence there was of himself. He still wasn't sure what he would have wanted to do had his life been free, but that in fifteen years on the planet—even if he fulfilled his ultimate goal—*this* would be his great legacy, what everyone who remembered him would remember him by? For all the latent potential, between his memory, skill, and this odd restorative power... All that history would ever know of him would be a short, improvised memento on a cheap handheld camera.

It seemed – depressing.

Didn't matter. He had a mission, and that was his main concern. If he had the chance, he would try to do more, but if he couldn't, it still didn't matter. There was so much more at stake than what personal effects he was leaving behind. He shut down the camera, replaced its lens cap, and opened the bedroom door again, Kotaro toppling inside as he did.

"Happy?"

The cougar pouted, not the least bit ashamed at having been caught eavesdropping. "What? That's *all*?"

"I've said my piece. If you don't like it—tough. I'm not sure what you're playing at in the first place, because anything of substance I have to say to anyone, I'll say it to their faces, not in a video Dear John letter."

For the second time in his life, he seemed to have nothing to say, and it was astonishing. After the second-longest stretch of silence he'd ever managed, he changed expressions. "Aight, I know when I'm licked."

"What—"

Before Darian could protest, Kotaro dragged him toward the dining room, though not without a significant amount of struggle now that his mass was distributed over a larger surface. Did he *really* not notice any difference from five days ago? "C'mon, Mum's made toad-in-the-hole!"

Yet even in an advanced age state, he still wasn't a match for Kotaro when the cougar got an idea into his head. "Fine," he grumbled, following suit to minimize the strain on his arm.

Reana and Buster Rockford waited at the supper table for the boys.

"Darian!" Reana greeted with a warm smile, serving each of them a heaping plate of toad-in-the-hole and parsnips. "Oh, just look at you! You've gotten so much bigger! It's been so long since we've seen you—Kotaro hasn't been scaring you off *too* badly, has he?"

He laughed in amusement. "Nah, I actually decided I could use the torture and stopped by."

"How's school going for you?" asked Buster.

"Okay, I guess," he lied, "though I'm not sure what I want to do once I graduate."

"Have you given any thought to computer programming? We could use some interns at the company."

"Maybe, I dunno." He thought for a moment. "But – what if I don't have any papers?"

"How do you mean?"

"I, um—see, my mother lost my birth certificate, so I don't know if I'll be able to work."

"Oh, that's nothing," Reana cooed, waving her hand in dismissal. "Just come by my office during the week, and we can get another copy of your birth certificate. I deal with the records bureau for this block, so every child born here is recorded on file with us."

Darian wondered if his was recorded or not. After all, his mother's file had just described him, not named him outright.

"Hey, Mum," Kotaro interrupted, "we were going to go hit the game centre later tonight. Can I borrow a seventeen?"

She sighed. "Tonight? You still haven't paid back the seventeens you borrowed last week! Sometimes I wonder why we bother giving you an allowance if you just ask for money whenever you need it."

Money—there was another big problem for Darian. He wanted to be independent as soon as possible, now that he felt comfortable that no one would come looking for him – maybe.

"Mr. Rockford?" he ventured. "I was wondering—I really want to get a job as soon as possible. If I got my GED, could I start working for you straight away?"

"Whoa," Buster exclaimed. "Are you sure you don't want to finish school? It's really not worth rushing into the workforce, you know. Besides, graduation's just a few more months away!"

"Well, yeah," Darian agreed, hiding his disappointment, "I guess – you know – I'm bored with school."

"Oh, I know that feeling." Buster laughed in appreciation. "Don't worry—we'll always have a place for you here."

He smiled, his cloud from Heaven returned. For the first time ever, Darian truly felt at home.

18.09

Sunni was concerned. Alex had been quiet the whole evening, ever since they buried the stranger—shallowly, in case Darian could help him—and she had barely eaten anything at supper, her favourite udon with sliced naruto cakes. It was tough remembering the last time she had turned down naruto, so many years ago; Alex was only five then, and much happier.

It comforted her to remember the good times with the family. Yet she couldn't help feeling empty without Denham and Rehani. They had all depended on Sunni for her strength, but it was a heavy burden.

"Will you be okay?" Sunni asked, sitting next to her on the sofa.

Alex didn't respond. It seemed she had run out of tears long ago, but that didn't mean she was happy, by far.

"I promise you this much," Sunni assured her, "he didn't die because you hurt him. That was internal hemorrhaging; he was already going to die before either of us had even *seen* him."

Her face crinkled in disbelief. "How do you know? I might not have the control over my ability I think I do. I might have done something to damage his inside as well. You saw him—he jumped from the bottom of the hill onto our roof! That's not something a sick person does!"

"He was breathing heavily even then. There was something wrong with him before he even got here."

"He wouldn't have died if I hadn't done anything."

"Maybe not, but you or I might have." She patted Alex on the shoulder, feeling guardianship weighing down on hers. "Look, our main mission here is to find something that will stop the war and clear your father's name, isn't it? So as much as I know you can't tolerate standing idly by instead of helping others, some things have to take priority."

Alex sniffed in dejection, wiping her face on her sleeve. "What are we supposed to do?"

"Unfortunately, the attack means we can't stay here any more, because they know where we live. It may be safe to return for short rests, but sleeping here will be problematic."

"What about Darian?"

"As much as I know it pains you, we have to let him do his own thing. He's almost a grown man, and he's more independent than I know you want him to be."

Alex frowned at the comment.

"Cheer up! If we run across him in our search, we'll let

him know what our plans are, and he can join us if he wants."

"It's not that..."

Sunni raised an eyebrow in curiosity.

Alex's sighs were introspective – but pitiful. "You're probably correct... He doesn't need me, but I feel like I need him. Why is that? It's not fair."

She did her best to smile. "We are all people with minds of our own. Darian is from a different culture, with different values and different priorities. It's possible that you were meant to be together, but for now he has some things he has to do for himself, the same way we had to navigate the battlefields to save ourselves, without *his* help. It doesn't have anything at all to do with who you are and everything to do with who he is. Sometimes, you just have to let go."

"What if I don't want to let go?"

"Then you may be setting yourself up for disappointment."

Alex looked intently at the floor, as though her shoes were the most interesting thing in the world. It was hard to say what needed more careful attention and what was just a matter of learning what life was all about.

Sunni stood, fishing some keys out of her pocket. "C'mon, let's do something! Want to take a ride in the Winnie I got today?"

33.11

Darian woke up, shortly before daybreak. Having offered him the bed, Kotaro was passed out curled up in a ball on the floor, seeming to find comfort literally *anywhere*. He laughed at the sight, nevertheless feeling a tinge of jealousy that he could never do the same.

As much as he hated to leave, it was going to be tough explaining to Kotaro's folks why he wasn't going to school, and they were assuredly going to try to give him a ride if he stuck around. Quietly, he crept out of bed, tiptoeing so not to disturb Kotaro. In the den, he took a sheet of paper from Buster's writing desk and scribbled a hasty note:

Ko, when you read this, I'll be gone, possibly forever.
Don't worry about me, I just have – things to do. You've
been a great friend, despite my best efforts. Thank your
folks for supper for me. —D

He tucked the note under Kotaro's door, grabbed his bag, and snuck out of the house, carefully re-latching the door behind him.

Day 9

Ganymede waited impatiently in his car at the house adjacent to 404 Goa Way, drumming his fingers on the dashboard and thinking about supper for the eleventh time as he picked at another tasteless MRE to sustain him during the stakeout. He was exhausted as well, kept going only by caffeine. The Kale residents showed no sign of having returned, and the neighbours had no idea that they'd even left.

"Do you think they caught on to us?" he wondered, not wanting to directly protest the assignment.

"No," responded the cool albeit annoyed voice. "It's impossible. Absolutely no one could suspect that we're doing this."

"They suspect *me* already."

"Because they have surveillance on you. They have no way to trace me." Nevertheless, the tone betrayed a definite concern for the success of the operation.

"Speaking of that, did you work out how you're going to leave?"

"I'm working on it. Just worry about your duty – unless you'd like to take Marius's place."

A beat of sweat formed on Ganymede's brow. "I will not fail you," he said, trying to will the outcome into existence.

"Good. Cooperative agents like you are getting harder to make."

0.16

Darian ran like the wind, throwing caution to it as well by foregoing his usual roundabout route. If Lion was telling the truth, then watching for Darian would be the last of the syndicate's concerns, and if his hunch was correct, the next target might be the main hideout. It wasn't that he didn't want the place destroyed in the end—the problem came from the police, who had an annoying practice of blocking off suspicious crime scenes like the orphanage. It was a good thing he didn't feel a particular draw to return there, as they had tripled the guard, what with it being an exposed illegal facility and all. With that in mind, he had to get into the hideout before they or the syndicate itself sealed it off forever, losing all chance of discovering the full extent of the syndicate's reach.

It irked him to have to wear Lion's uniform, but his own didn't fit anymore, and he preferred the anonymity it provided. Donning his goggles and ski mask, he approached the hidden entrance with grim determination. It didn't matter whether someone would be waiting for him there—he was

prepared for anything.

The door yielded at his touch, remembering its open-state settings. The bouncer started in astonishment at the unexpected entry, which Darian used to his advantage by clocking the brute in the head with a heavy wrench. It was a bit nagging to have given a possibly fatal concussion to someone just doing his job—like Lance—but he didn't have time to worry about that now. If it came to it, he could bring him back on the way out.

The monitor caught his attention. Staring at it, he realized he could tap into the database's memory, and a flash of cognizance swept over him. "Records, Level 11," he read, glancing at the lift.

He checked the clock against his internal rhythm: 0.17. Who would be there at this hour? He'd certainly never been there before to know.

The lift awaited Darian, doors closing as he embarked. He tapped three of the eight buttons in sequence: 1, 2, 8 – pause – 1, 2, 8. A buzzer sounded, indicating an unauthorized access. "What *is* it?" he snarled, trying a different sequence: 8, 2, 1 – pause – 8, 2, 1...

The buzzer rang again.

"Damn it, work!" Darian screamed, feeling the clock ticking down as he kicked the panel. With a jolt, he recognized his stupidity. Of course— if *anyone* has been there before...

He forced the lift to remember its state of being at Level 11, and it slowly obliged. The doors opened to another set of electronic doors, which Darian similarly forced. "I hope I'm not getting *too* much older doing this," he muttered, unconsciously glancing at his gloved hands.

The last set of doors opened, and Darian stepped into a cooled room containing several dozen mainframes. He approached one of the terminals and stared at the monitor.

The same gibberish as the entry monitor... No, a slightly different encoding. He sat down to study it and felt the resonance return. It was a faint but progressively more frantic resonance than before, which unsettled him. Then—

A flash of someone entering records into the system: embezzlement records, hit lists, drug deals, briberies, surveillance files, wiretaps, names of field operatives. Streams and streams of data poured through his brain like a metaphorical tidal wave, fast-forwarding through every entry that had ever been entered—

So much! He couldn't have imagined the extent of the damage they had caused, and to think he'd contributed to it! Bringing the entire syndicate down would throw the planet into chaos, destroying the trust of the general populace in their elected officials and pitting families against themselves in revealing their crimes. It wouldn't be enough to just hand the keys to the syndicate over to the government—they were too heavy-handed and brutish in their methods to exercise the proper care required in dismantling such an extensive network.

It was so clear to him now.

Darian examined each of the mainframes, locating a particular bit he could easily remove or snap off. Simple as that! He would escape with fragments of each computer and restore them once he was in relative safety, then present key information to the authorities as needed. An anonymous tip here and there would be subtle enough to take out small branches, and the more elaborate establishments he could take down himself with enough time and appropriate planning. It looked as though he would get to atone for his crimes after all!

As he reached the final mainframe, he froze, jaw dropping. One entry it contained flashed into his mind, a record of the births of one woman in their hire:

```
Marian Kagari Vann, surrogate  
707.4.8:19.14 Marius Sky Black  
708.2.15:27.1 Darian Wind Grey
```

2.03

Alex struggled awake then bolted upright as she came to, taking in deep breaths to calm down. Her ability to relax was hindered in a moving vehicle—more so when there was light—and she had suffered another bout of sleep paralysis. It made her feel worse, the sensation of being trapped and unable to move...

"Sure," said a familiar voice, as though talking to someone. "Yes, Stormy." The conversation over, Sunni touched a button on the RV's control panel and returned her undivided attention to the road.

"What was that?" Alex asked, groggy.

"Oh, sorry to wake you, kiddo," she apologized. "That was my contact on the line."

"Where are we going now?"

"I finally located the record archives for this block. If there are any clues about your father's work here, that's where they're going to be."

Alex sighed. Her life to date felt empty. Their current quest was chasing after snippets of justice, itself an empty feeling. What would she do after that? It wasn't as though her father's framing negatively impacted her life, besides his not being alive—no one apart from Sunni recognized her as his daughter. Yet so much of her life now was spent avoiding or correcting bad things that she almost didn't know how to enjoy good things.

They pulled into the parking lot before a large, picturesque building, of the usual fare of government-looking buildings, complete with pretentious doric columns. "Do you want to come in or stay inside?" Sunni asked.

"I'm tired," Alex pouted.

"Okay. Don't forget to crack the windows. It gets a bit hot even this late in the season."

She watched with sinking spirits as Sunni walked with a practiced grace up the building's superfluous stairs, tail swinging in a rhythmic, wavy fashion. Alex's tail bristled in response—she had always hated how poofy and impossible to manage her own was, wishing it was sleek like Sunni's. Genes weren't on her side, however, as her parents were both bushy-tailed, not to mention the whole accident of her uniform-colouredness.

"Now I'm bemoaning my looks," she cried, burying her head under her pillow. "That's probably what he hates about me, how immature I am. I should be more like Sunni—casual, easygoing..."

...did he like Sunni? *Everyone* liked Sunni, so it seemed to be the obvious conclusion, but what did Darian like in people? Perhaps if she had paid better attention to him, or asked the appropriate questions, or – or didn't push him so hard about his past—

"AAGH, WHO KNOWS," she shouted, irritated at the game. She thought of her childhood friends, all casualties of the war, and how much she needed them now. It was sinking in just how hard it was for her to make new friends—Kasumi, Mary, Momo, Ikuo, and Rosa had all been her friends since they were too little to be concerned about appearances, and even the handful of boys who had ever shown any interest in her had known her their whole lives. That had made dealing with her grief more difficult, missing her old friends and not being able to make new ones, but she had thought she was making progress before this whole mess started...

She sat up, looking at a piece of scrap paper that had fallen to the RV floor in transit. Alex gave it a dirty look, and it split in two—not torn, just separated. She focused on bringing the pieces together again, but no luck. Even picking up the pieces and placing them together did nothing; all it would respond to was separation.

"The greatest irony," she complained, "is how I have a destructive talent when I want to help people. He has a great healing power but doesn't want anything to do with anybody. I'd *gladly* give my life if it would help so many others..."

She sighed in despondence, fiddling with her mother's ring on her finger and closing her eyes as though she could wish the world away, though she knew she would be disappointed once she opened them again.

Well, if Darian was happier on his own, Alex supposed that was for the best.

3.12

Each step was a burden for him. In a fit of unbridled rage, Darian had literally smashed the final mainframe with his bare hands, not concerned about his well-being, then fled the hideout with no mind but to escape his

fears, tripping mindlessly through the back alleys and slums.

Just being able to remember things didn't make a person smart, as it had dawned on him. Vann meant Water—his mother had given a fake name at the clinic—but that she had served as a surrogate for the syndicate meant his worst fears were confirmed. He could have left the truth buried, but in stupidity he had sought it out in a mad desperation for meaning, and now it was rearing its ugly head.

"Sold..." he wailed, stomach wrenching. "I was sold into slavery. Not just me, but a brother I didn't know or even *dream* I had."

Darian collapsed in an empty field along the edge of town, unsure where it was his feet had brought him but not having the mind to care. He threw up where he knelt, then dry heaved when his stomach was empty. His fists pounded dirt, rocks, broken glass, his own vomit—whatever happened to be in reach. His face was red with anger, his eyes red from crying. There weren't words potent enough to describe how cut off from life itself he felt at that moment, lower than he felt after Lion's nightly beatings.

The day passed like a kidney stone, slow and painful. What might have been an hour became a year in his mind, the continually overcast sky promising to cry the tears he felt but never following through on its promise. He longed for something—anything—that would kill the aching in his heart, but there was nothing – no one – no—

Darian gulped in bitterness, wiping his face on his sleeve. As weak as he thought he would look to her now, he needed Alex. She was a similar mind and a willing audience in a time when he desperately needed support. He didn't know if he could face her, after all the times he pushed her away, but he had no other option—as Lion had so gladly demonstrated earlier.

The house was over four hours' walk away. In that time, little had happened to improve his mood. He stumbled as though drunk, garnering the disdain of everyone he passed in the process, but he was drunk only on self-loathing. When he arrived, there was no one home – but there was a note tacked to the door, written in the language he had only recently learned:

Darian,

You should be the only one able to read this, but just in case, I can't explain where we are, only that it is no longer safe for us here. Perhaps you'll be able to find our whereabouts on your own. You are free to come and go as you please, as we know you can—as though we could stop you. Good luck in your quest.

Sunni

He tore up the letter in disgust. A weak consolation, coming crawling back

to an empty house! It probably was his own damned fault again, dismissing the value of having trustworthy allies in his determination to go it alone. Rather than spend any more time destroying himself, however, he decided to go in and get cleaned up, at least.

Another memory flashed to mind as he entered the house, just as he passed the den—Alex waiting on a stranger that looked much like himself, but injured at her hand. It startled him, the vividness of the image, and the vision of the man dying in that very room.

"Marius?" he whispered, jumping with a new energy trying to find more memories to tap. He ran upstairs—a battle on the roof. The kitchen—Sunni putting his limbs in the freezer. The yard—burying him in a mock flower bed.

Darian grabbed fistfuls of dirt, slinging them aside with vigor. He uncovered part of a black bag, tearing it open, finding himself staring into a face much like his but covered in blood.

"Please," he murmured, laying his hands on the body.

Before his eyes, the young man came to life, coughing in discomfort as he did. Orange eyes burst open in shock, jaw going slack. "Wh—" he struggled to speak.

Tears formed in Darian's eyes—the first he'd known of an actual blood relative, at long last...

"Where is she?" Marius screamed, kicking in fear. "*Keep her away from me!*"

8.13

The blue-maned woman sorted the stacks of books in haste, anxious about losing her job again. Her supervisor had chastised her first thing this morning for failing to index the latest archives on time, and on top of that she had gotten another demerit for forgetting to bring her name badge again. Between this and just struggling to get her life back together after filing for bankruptcy, it was all she could do to keep her mind off of more troubling things, like the destruction of the small health clinic in her neighbourhood and that secret – whatever it was. Her hands jittered with worry whenever she stopped working.

"Excuse me," said a soft voice, which made the woman drop the books in her hands. She turned around to apologize.

A golden-maned woman—perhaps in her late twenties—stood on the opposite side of the counter, speaking with a strange accent. "I sorry, I mean no to startle jou."

"No, it's fine," the blue-maned woman assured, dusting herself off. "I've been... Can I help you find anything?"

"Yes, er—" She hesitated, seeming to struggle for the words. "Mine name is Sunni, and I look for here many ours with no findink. I seek recorts

of invenchon."

"Inventions? Are you looking for anything in particular?"

"I work-ed for company in Triangul Seven, and I need know where invenchor stayed. Used to be in this quad, I was tolt. I can give credential if jou need."

"No, it's okay. Let me locate the files for you." She typed rapidly on the terminal, bringing up the menu for locally-registered patents. "What's this person's last name, do you know?"

"Rear-dan."

"Can you spell that?"

"Are-aye-oh-are-dees-ay-en."

"Uh – all I have listed is a Dr. Denham Riordan, but his registered office address is listed in Square One. Do you want that?"

"Oh! Yes, please."

"Okay – I'll print it out for you. It will take a bit for the printer to warm up."

Sunni seemed to have a strange smile. "I was wonderink..."

"...yes?"

"It is silly queschon," she said with a smirk. "I was wonderink, do jou have childsren? I want to have childsren someday, maybe – if I can find the goot man."

She blushed, unconsciously rubbing her belly. "No, I don't. I can't have any."

"Oh. I sorry."

"Well, I mean—I had two, once... I wanted to keep them, but – my father would have killed me." She felt a bit odd, pouring out her feelings to a stranger, but it felt – good, finally telling someone about it.

"How jou mean?"

"I was – hurt by someone when I was younger, and when they were born I couldn't afford to keep them. As luck would have it, though, a nice couple offered to pay me well to have them, even telling my father that I was being a surrogate for them. It was enough that my father liked the idea, but I knew better."

"So – jou gave to adopchon?"

"I had to do it—I'd make a poor mother. I worry about if I ever met them, what they'd say. Maybe they'd blame me for abandoning them when I couldn't take care of them. I'd kill myself if they hated me, but I don't know if I'd ever be able to face them even if they loved me."

Sunni took her hand and patted it in sympathy. Her warmth was calming. "Is okay. I sure jour babies well."

She sniffed, embarrassed. "Here's the address you wanted."

Her smile radiated kindness as she accepted the paper with a simple grace. "Thank jou, Mary-an." With a nod, she walked toward the door.

Marian froze, the blood draining from her body. "Wait!" she called, hurrying after, but when she reached the front doors, Sunni had vanished.

8.15

He clapped a hand over Marius's mouth to shut him up, worried about being discovered. They'd been lucky to have gone unnoticed so far, but screaming could be heard from quite a distance.

"Quiet," Darian muttered, "they may be listening for us."

Instead of obeying, Marius clawed at the dirt, a renewed vigor in his once lifeless limbs, struggling to unbury himself.

"What's the matter?"

"—get away!" he cried in desperation, as though possessed, acting like he didn't even see him. He continued clawing, scrambling away from some invisible threat, until Darian—in a fit of frustration at trying to get him to settle down—struck him across the face.

Marius immediately stopped, eyes slowly focusing. His expression was one of looking in the mirror and not believing what he saw. "Who – are you?" he gasped.

"Are you Marius Black?"

"...yes."

Darian's eyes glossed over in astonishment. "...my brother..."

At first, Marius looked perplexed, then a light seemed to dawn over him. "Is *that* what you think!" he snorted. "I don't have any family. What gave you that idea?"

"You were raised in an orphanage, taught in strength conditioning and hand-to-hand combat due to your size as a child, mentored by Dr. Carpo Kale, and given general tasks such as serving as bodyguard or heavy-lifting in warehouses." Darian nudged down the collar of Marius's shirt. "Here's the mark from where they injected you with a corticosteroid formula three weeks ago, to experiment on whether you would gain significant mass."

Marius stared at him with a blank expression, uncertain of what to make of Darian's statements.

"I saw your file," he explained in excitement. "I also saw the file recording when our mother gave birth to each of us. We're blood relatives, and now I've found you despite their efforts to hide us from each other."

"You're crazy, man. I don't know how you found out—"

"I broke into the records on Level 11! Information on everything's stored there: every recruitment, every bank heist, every *pence* made from the drugs, gambling parlours, and backstreet dealings! I never *dreamed* it went as deeply as it does!"

Marius frowned, evidently still unconvinced. "Well, it does you no good to have found me, regardless. I'm dead soon, anyway."

"I can fix that."

"You didn't read the report closely enough. I've been their lab rat on steroid – whatever for too long. Three weeks ago was only the latest one. Kale said so himself—that stuff is tearing up my body from the inside. My

muscles and bones are degenerating, and if I stay on it for too much longer, one day I'll simply snap in half, if I don't shrivel up and blow away first."

"I can fix that."

"You say that, but you'd have to be able to turn back the clock until I was eight. I damn well don't want to be eight again, *ever*."

It was Darian's turn to frown. Every helpful suggestion he made was immediately shot down, in contempt even. For the first time, he was in Alex's position, looking at himself.

"What happened to me, anyway?" Marius examined himself, not noticing his being covered in dirt. "I could've sworn I—"

"You were dead and buried, but I brought you back."

A frigid glare. "Now you're *really* talking crazy talk."

"Fine, fine," Darian waved his hands in defeat. "Let's just go inside and get cleaned up."

"What makes you think I'm doing anything with you?" he scowled. "I have better things to do than hang around nutters like you!"

"Like what?" he retorted. "Get killed? Did you realize someone in the organization is going around killing everyone else?"

"Yes, and I know who it is, too!"

Darian's eyes were wide. "Who?"

"That creepy little bitch that did this to me!"

"Did what?"

"I told you," Marius growled, "I've been on that costeridoid – *shit*, which is making me waste away. I weighed 7.5 stone before I met her, that's how advanced my state was, but they refused to let me quit." He pointed at his arms. "Look at me now, though—I'm buff and healthy."

"That's good!"

"No, it's *terrible*," he spat, "because I would swear something evil got ahold of me once she started doing that – whatever it is she did to me. I could smash through a wall with one hand and not feel a thing. Worse, I was under her total control every tick of every hour of every day. She would never sleep, which meant I was always doing her bidding—often something stupid to keep her mind off of how bored she was."

It was difficult picturing this on its own. In reflex, Darian reached out to Marius, picking up a flash of the very things he described: a pair of haunting pale eyes, a room filled with corpses, Marius becoming a monster with just a wave of the hand...

He must have seen the look on Darian's face. "Something's wrong. What is it?"

"N—nothing," he stammered. "My mind plays tricks on me once in a while."

"Well, you should see a doctor about that. In the meantime..."

Marius's words trailed off as he froze in place, staring wide-eyed at something behind Darian, who now felt hesitant to look behind him. The gun barrel digging into his back was a good clue.

"The fugue isn't here," said a voice. "but I thought you said Marius was dead."

"...no, he's not," said a second, cooler voice. "That's unexpected."

The man pulled back the hammer dramatically. "I can fix that."

Darian wanted to turn around, though it would normally be unwise. He had to see the face of his would-be second killer to understand why he was doing this. Even just to touch him—

"No, Ganymede. Not that one."

The gun lowered by a fraction. "Why not? He clearly knows."

"That doesn't matter. Don't touch him." Wait—he knew that voice! It was the ursa again. Was she the mastermind of the operation?

The gun dropped. "So be it, but when does this end, Callisto? Kale got away, and there's no one left of the X-Two branch besides us and Pachi!"

There was a tense silence. Darian risked a glance behind him, only to flinch as Callisto shot Ganymede in the head, the man's blood splattering onto his back and face.

"You look better," the woman commented in that unamused drone; he assumed she meant it to Marius. "I had imagined Kale's work was going to do you in."

"What—"

His question was interrupted by a hole appearing between his eyes and a violent spray of blood bursting from behind him. As Marius fell to the ground, dead again, Darian's gaze darted to the gun in the woman's hand.

"You look surprised," she commented in a nonchalant manner, "but not really put off."

"Why did you do that?"

"...what makes you so special?"

It wasn't just the non-sequitur of her question that caught him off-guard, it was the way she had asked it that tipped him off. No, she wasn't the mastermind behind this, he was certain. He needed answers!

"Not that I'm ultimately complaining about the syndicate's collapse, but why are you killing everyone?"

There wasn't a trace of emotion in her eyes despite having killed two men. "I don't suppose you'd be able to understand my motives for doing this. Really, I have just as much choice as you do—"

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"...you don't remember, then."

He couldn't begin to imagine what she meant. "Should I?"

"I figured you would have, that's why I kept away."

"Kept...?" Context! He located her drone in the far reaches of his memory, present at his birth – but who was she in that context?

He could hear a faint chirping coming from her headset. "But—" she started to interject, but the chirping continued. When it finally stopped, the woman glared at him with an unreadable expression. "Come with me."

There was a scream from behind them—Darian saw a woman with

a toy dragon, the latter pulling at its leash and squawking in rage. Callisto was only distracted for a blink of an eye, but it was enough for him to grab Ganymede's gun and whirl it on her.

They were in a classic face-off. Darian had the advantage of being partially immortal, but Callisto... Without being able to tap her memories, he had no idea what abilities she possessed, if anything. Otherwise, he had never held a gun before in his life, unless he counted striking the one out of Themisto's hands, giving the advantage of experience to Callisto.

Yet he aimed it with confidence, as though tapping into a trained gunman's memories to do it. At the same time, it frightened him much more than if he was on the other side of the gun. The events of the past few days should have reassured him that he had nothing to fear, but that didn't keep him from worrying that, as suddenly as his abilities had manifested, they might disappear just as quickly—and then where would he be?

The dragon woman fled in panic, but otherwise they were still in a face-off. Callisto wasn't a cold-blooded killer, then, if the dragon lady was spared, but... "I'm not afraid to die," he warned her.

"Neither am I."

Darian paused, lowering the gun. If she wasn't afraid of death...

"I'm not going with you, either."

"We'll see."

He was mildly curious to see how a woman in her late forties, by his estimate, was going to take in someone three or four stone heavier without hurting him, but he didn't want to give up his newfound freedom so easily. What he did instead was dash down the yard and careen off the side of the hill, tumbling into the underbrush below. Callisto must have reconsidered her stance, because she fired, catching him in the side as he fell.

As he fell, he heard her run down the hill, stopping at the edge. A few ticks passed, and he heard her voice echoing through the valley. "...so I see. Well played."

9.03

The door swung open with a creak, rousing Alex from her stupor. If she'd at least managed to fall asleep again, that would have been beneficial, but it was more like being snapped out of a trance. "Great news," Sunni exclaimed, holding up a printout. "I've found the place. It's a bit of a trek, but we can make it in a day or two of driving if we don't stop."

Alex managed a moan.

"I'd thought you would be more excited than *that*," Sunni chided. "We'll uncover the truth soon enough, and your father's name will be cleared."

"What's the use..."

"Now that's not the Alex I know."

"Sure isn't." She lay on her stomach, head covered with a pillow and tail occasionally bristling in reflex, otherwise not feeling the slightest bit motivated to move from that spot—ever, perhaps.

"Is *this* Alex still upset about You Know Who?"

"Some of that. Some of it's I don't know what to do with myself once this is all over."

"Why, sit back and relax with some friends, of course."

"*What* friends?" she shouted, upset.

"How about *this* one?"

Alex looked up to see Kotaro staring at her through the open door. "Aagh!" she shrieked, jumping up in surprise.

"Allie! Where've you been? We miss you at school!"

She blinked a few times to get her bearings. "You surprised me," she scolded, nervous.

"I seem to do that!" he cheered.

"Wait—speaking of school, why aren't you there?"

"Did you check the time?" he cried, throwing his arms up at such an obvious answer. "School's out for the day! Freedom for another twenty-five hours! Where've you *been*?" Then his face became more serious, but not by much. "Then again, maybe it's good you missed out—there's some rumour going around about how strange it is that no one's seen the World Cultures teacher. People are starting to wonder if that killer guy isn't moving on to targeting individuals."

News to *her*. "Who? What teacher is this?"

"Mr. Red – Coronatus – or something like that. Darian hates him."

Alex's mind reeled; the connection couldn't be a coincidence. Did Darian hate this Mr. Coronatus because he was a bad teacher – or because he was involved in that syndicate?

"Hey, though—have you and Darian been playing hooky together? 'cause after last night, I haven't seen him since."

"You saw Darian?" she asked, excited. "Where is he?"

"Oh." Kotaro frowned. "I dunno, he only left this note—something about going away maybe forever but to thank my folks for supper."

"That's *it*?"

"Oh! Yeah!" he remembered, grinning. "He said, 'You've been a great friend, despite my best efforts.'"

Alex was too disappointed to laugh.

"Why do you look so glum?" he asked. "You should be happy!"

"About what..." Alex pouted.

Kotaro threw his hands in the air again, radiating energy. "About being alive! Life is great!"

She shook her head at him in bewilderment. "...I guess that's easy

for someone like you to say."

"It's true, though," Sunni agreed.

15.04

Darian's body wretched. He had reversed the effects of being shot a second time, of course, but he wasn't used to running as far and as fast as he was now, and he had to get away. He hadn't even thought about where his feet were taking him, only that he had to get away from that woman. Not that he imagined her to be a serious threat, but on the off-chance she *was*, he didn't want to take that risk—not until he knew more about what and who he was up against.

With a shock, he suddenly realized he'd stumbled back into his old neighbourhood. *Damn it*, he thought, *I never wanted to come back here...* Yet he had no idea where else to go. The Rockfords' place was out of the question, and despite what Sunni's note said, he had no idea how to find out where it was that she and Alex had gone. Was he supposed to just blindly stumble about, hoping to catch their trail?

Another flash, which was more unsettling for him with each flash. Was something – or someone – doing this, or was it his own subconscious finding the pieces? Regardless, without even touching anything in the area, he saw Lion...

...dead...

...shot by Ganymede, not three hours after Lion had shot Darian, and hidden behind a bush by the adjacent house.

He cringed, trying not to see the vision in his mind. *So what?* he thought. *Good riddance. What good is finding his body going to do me?* ...but no matter where he looked, all he could see in the dimming evening light was that familiar smarmy face, the wicked scowl turned to surprise...

Even so, he approached the bush, hoping the body wasn't still there. It was, although the smell made him wonder how nothing besides bugs had found it by now. He kicked it over to see if it wasn't someone else's. No, it was definitely Lion—the sight both disgusted and excited him. He stepped on Lion's face, in contempt and to hide it as he gathered his thoughts. *Why was I led here?* he wondered. *What good does it do me to find his body? I can't use him to find Sunni or Alex, and knowing he's dead means—*

He paused, a feeling of liberation overwhelming him. "It means I'm free," he whispered.

Darian glowered at Lion, kicking him for good measure. No more lashes for acting like any other teenager, for failing to steal that which wasn't his, for caring about his friends, for sleeping in on holidays, for going where he damn well pleased, for wanting to live—no more tyranny, ever again.

It wasn't enough.

Despite the look of horror fixed on Lion's insect-covered face, his

voice taunted Darian. Of the mentors, Lion had been the cruellest without a doubt, taking harshly to being assigned to the task—ironic, considering his front as a schoolteacher. "Worthless boy," echoed his memory, "ungrateful scum..." Just the thought was enough to bring back the burn of hemp cutting into his wrists, the sharp stinging of leather cracking against his skin...

Everywhere he looked, Darian was blinded by awful memories of being chained and whipped, beaten, or humiliated for some offense or other. The visions tormented him such that, despite his pain having ended, he still wanted revenge. He craved whatever justice he could get for having been put through so many years of suffering.

"Maybe *that* will teach you some obedience," echoed the haunting voice from what felt like a lifetime ago, yet the words seering into his fresh welts even more deeply than the beatings had. He had often slept at night only by passing out from the intensity of the pain, and many nights since he would wake abruptly, the pain renewed...

"Daka'aranoa..."

"My name's *Darian!*"

"Who gave you that name, then?"

Silence.

"I'll tell you who. It was the syndicate, taking an amalgam of your mother's and your rapist father's names—meaningless tripe! You're just a number, same as the rest of us. You're nothing... Worse than nothing..."

"Why..." He gave a pitiful whimper. "Why—"

His protests broke off as a yardstick came down across his back, shattering upon impact. Try as he might, it took all his concentration just to avoid screaming.

"Do you know, Little Aranoa, that ours is not the sole secret society in the world? With the size of the world being what it is, how *could* it be? Even within the organization, keeping loyalties across countries isn't easy."

"Who cares?" Darian spat.

"I sure as Hell don't care, I can tell you that. But guess what—the syndicate cares. They care that our loyalty remains with them, to the extent that we either raise our children to be similarly loyal – or serve as mentor."

Callously, Lion dug the broken edge of the yardstick into Darian's side, causing him to scream in agony. When he recovered, Darian gnashed his teeth in rage. "And pointless abuse is part of this *mentoring* of yours?"

"You little panty waste. I do it because **I hate you.**"

Torrents of rage unleashed in him, blinding his sensibilities, and he lashed out at the corpse, picking it up and throwing it across the yard. "Hate *me*? Hate is *nothing* compared to **my wrath!** **A GOOD DAY IN HELL, INDEED!**" he snarled, shouting other obscenities in as many languages as came to mind. The fire of an eternity of hatred swelled inside him, burning for a vengeance that would not be quenched. He used Lion as a punching bag, in the process breaking several bones in both the corpse and even his own hands, at which point he turned to kicking. When he tired of kicking,

he tore a limb from a nearby tree and started thrashing the body with it, wrestling through every incident of punishment inflicted upon him in the past as tears streamed in torrents down his face.

In his tantrum, Darian was oblivious to the neighbours, their cries of fear as they crowded...

...the flashing lights...

...handcuffs...

Day 10

"This is a grave situation," muttered Madame Astraea.

"No pun intended, Selene?" Mr. Endymion joked, a nervous grin on his face. Everyone else groaned.

The teacher's lounge was usually a smoke-filled haven from the in-fighting of adolescents, but that morning proved to be particularly tense even before first session began, what with the recent murder of one of their own. While there was no evidence to prove otherwise and reassurances from the local police that more patrols would be sent to monitor the campus, some of them worried that it was the beginning of a serial killing spree—and they would be next.

Frau Greif wrung her hands with worry. "It is eventually to get out that Herr Coronatus was the one murdered, yes? What are we to tell the students when they ask?"

"The truth, Libelle," insisted Miss Fields, "that their Social Studies teacher was indeed the Mr. V. Coronatus they found murdered, and Darian is the one caught defacing his body."

"But Darian wasn't the one who kill him," Mr. Sturmvoegel pointed out. "The coroner reports say that Red died from a gunshot, and Darian had no gun."

"If that was even Darian!" interrupted Principal Loewe. "You saw the suspect's picture—the boy was several years older than Darian is."

"The boy has the same fingerprints, though," Miss Fields pointed out, "and with Darian's recent unexplained absences—"

"Are you suggesting that Darian became several years older in only a few days? How would that be possible?"

The teachers argued amongst themselves over the impossibilities of such a feat happening, until Ms. Garnele shouted above everyone else. "*The facts surrounding Red's death are irrelevant!*" she boomed. "What we're here to discuss is what to do as far as finding a permanent replacement for him, as well as grief counseling for the students."

"I could fill in once the term is over," Miss Storch volunteered, "if we can't locate someone new. Until then, my classes and his have a conflict of schedule."

"Gustav?" Principal Loewe asked.

"Sure, I can fill in for the rest of the year," Mr. Sturmvoegel replied. "The exams are going to be a problem, however, since we don't have a copy of his lecture plan."

"Can we get a copy from his house?"

"There's an interesting point to note," Miss Fields commented.

Principal Loewe raised an eyebrow at her. "Why is that?"

"Well," she continued, "when I talked with Juno this morning, she mentioned how she had been going over the records, and it was odd that she had never noticed before today that Red was Darian's guardian."

"...he is?"

"Yes, which is why Darian's a critical suspect in the matter."

"Strange," Frau Greif muttered, rubbing her chin. "Why was it that Juno did not notice it when calling his home to inquire about Herr Grey's recent absences?"

"I will have to ask her that myself," Principal Loewe noted.

"Do you suppose," Mr. Endymion mused aloud, "that Red's death had anything to do with his treatment of Darian? After all, if he was found beating Red's dead body, then—"

It was too much—letting out a loud sob, the eavesdropper bolted down the hall, away from such morbid talk. Yet it was a futile endeavour, as the chatter that morning was intense, progressing as the day went on. As the teachers had decided, it was announced in all classes that Coronatus was indeed the body found murdered yesterday. Rumours flew about who did it and why, though—for reasons of crowd control—discussion on the subject was forbidden once lectures began. However, the subject naturally opened up during lunch, and it was impossible to escape.

"It has to be Darian," declared Maria, in a matter-of-fact way. "My uncle works in the force, and he told me that's whose prints they were, since the guy refuses to tell his name."

"It can't be him," Adam contested, "because the guy they showed is a lot older."

"It really is rather suspicious that Darian's been gone from school," Shorty mused.

"What if that guy stole his fingerprints?" asked D.D.

"How?"

"Maybe by cutting off his fingers, and—"

"*EEW!*" Maria shrieked. "That's awful!"

"You know what?" Adam spat. "Darian kind of deserves it. He's always been a lazy snob."

"No way, *no one* deserves having their fingers cut off!"

"Kotaro!"

The last shout came from Carmen, who waved him over.

"Hey, Kotaro, what do you think about the murder?"

For the first time ever, Kotaro had nothing to say. To everyone's surprise, he shrugged and turned his back on the crowd, an act that brought the room to silence. Later, several onlookers would swear by their lives that they saw his fist trembling, his cheeks damp with tears.

"Cray," called the guard, "or Gray or whoever you are—visitors to see you."

One arm draped over his eyes to block the sunlight pouring through the window, Darian roused slowly in his cell bed, mired in self-loathing and perfectly happy to never wake up again. It was unbelievable that he would escape a potential major threat just to be arrested for defacing a corpse... Whatever this sense was that was drawing him around like a fish on a hook was really starting to piss him off.

He had to admit it felt good, though, letting it all out at last. He just wished it had happened sooner and he'd gotten suitable opportunity to enjoy it more—when Lion had still been alive, and somewhere he wouldn't have gotten caught.

"Darian!" called a distraught voice. He didn't need to look up to recognize the speaker and the one trailing behind her.

"Yup, it does look like I'm stupid after all," he called in her tongue, otherwise not moving. That she didn't respond at first made him wonder if she noticed his voice had deepened. "Maybe I belong here," he snarled in bitterness. "It'll keep me out of trouble, and even these gaol beds are more comfortable than my old sofa."

"Come on, Darian," Alex begged. "We'll pay your bail, and you can—"

"I don't have a bail set," he shouted in irritation, forgetting his emptiness for a tick. "Without any other suspects, they're probably going to have me rot in here until they can send me to death row, though I'm pretty sure that won't do any good."

"Darian. Please."

Her voice changed to one of despair. Even without being able to see her face, it broke his heart, causing the utter wretchedness he had faced yesterday to come flooding back. Presently, he raised his arm, peeking at her with one eye. Alex had a way of looking incredibly despondent if she so wanted, it seemed, but it worked.

Sighing, Darian forced himself up and lumbered to the cell door, looming over her by a head now. It almost made him smile to see how tiny she was to him now, like he could fit her in his pocket.

In anticipation of her questions, he explained before she could ask. "I was shot through the heart. I spent a long time at the bottom of a pool—dead—before I came back and found myself this way. I don't know how much more I'll grow, but yes, it's a *lot*. I don't look like my 'real' self anymore, and there's no way for me to go back to being little, even if I wanted to do it."

The look in her eyes was a mystery—he didn't know what to make of it, though maybe she didn't, either.

"I mean, think about it—inanimate objects like paper will stay the same for years, but living things are in a state of flux. Just breathing means taking in oxygen and expelling carbon dioxide, so putting all those molecules back where they were means a *lot* of things have to get replaced. If I've been thinking, would I lose my new memories if I restored my brain? It takes significant effort to figure out how to do that without potentially overwriting other things in the process, so it's no surprise my life force has gotten as drained as it has..."

Alex remained silent through his speech, but he wasn't certain if it was that she didn't know what to say or was too reluctant to say it.

"Look," he said, knowing he needed to just come out and say it. "I know I've been a jerk to you, but I'm not worth saving. You're better off getting on with your life, instead of chasing me all the time and following me into trouble. I—"

Darian trembled. He felt the resonance more clearly than ever, like an unbridled rumbling deep in his soul, and he felt more complete now than he had in his entire life, even if he wasn't sure he wanted to admit it.

"... you're hurt," she said at last, reaching for his hand.

Without thinking, he raised it to take a closer look. "Ah," he mused, examining the bruises, then he glanced behind him and saw the fresh blood stains. "I must've broken it when I punched the wall last night. I was so mad I didn't notice any pain." Shrugging, he glared at his hands and they were repaired in an instant. "See? Look what happens to me when I'm left to my own devices. I would rather never see you again but know you're living happily than let you get hurt by following me around. You're already grieving for your parents, don't grieve for me."

"Darian..." Alex whispered, eyes tearing up. "The truth is I feel lost without you. I know it's unfair to fall on you so much to get me through the day, but since you've been gone, I don't know what to do with myself."

"Go to school," he said, in a much kinder tone than before, "get a good job, and earn a good living. Find a nice guy and marry him, maybe, and have some kids together. Or just go out and be free—but forget about me."

"I don't want—" Alex choked. "I..." She seemed to stumble with the words.

Is it wrong to want? he thought. I have wants. I want to be normal. I want normal parents, like the Rockfords. I want to have friends and see movies and play arcade games and roughhouse for fun and just talk about stupid things for no reason at all...

Reaching through the bars, he took her hand in his. It seemed to calm her. They looked deeply into each other's eyes, and—

Darian's eyes shot open, pupils dilating as he let go of her hand. "Your father is—"

This startled Alex. "What?"

He didn't answer at first, processing this information with such fury that he slipped between languages. "I – damn it!"

"What about my father?" she scolded. "You know something I don't know about him? *Tell me!*"

The guilt was looming. He had the information she was searching for, but he didn't dare tell her.

"*DARIAN!*"

"...I am stupid..." he muttered, turning away.

She stared at him. "What?"

He deliberated, changing the subject yet again. "...I found my mother's real name in one of the organization's databases. She was a surrogate for them—a damned baby factory. She sold me to them. She sold *my brother* to them!"

Alex gasped. "Then that man—"

"Yes, the man who attacked you was Marius, my big brother. I didn't even know he existed until I found my mother's records, but I looked anyway. *Now* look at me! What good has finding this information done? I was better off never knowing at all!"

Sunni seemed to want to interrupt, then seemed to think better of it.

"I don't think finding the truth will help you. I think you should let your father stay dead."

"How can you say that?" Alex cried, on the verge of heartbreak.

"I have to prove my father's innocence!"

"And if he's guilty?"

She ground her teeth in rage. "Are you telling me that he did something? Something *awful*? *What?*"

Darian slammed his eyes shut, turning away, but he couldn't blot out the image in his mind of how she would look if he told her.

"I don't want to be the one to tell you," he whispered. "I would rather you stay happy in ignorance."

Tears streamed down her face. "Then why didn't you just not say anything...?" She sniffed and wiped her eyes with a hand, walking away. "*Fine*, stay in there and rot."

Darian glanced at Sunni, who gave him a sad look before turning to follow Alex. A tidal wave of guilt rushed over him to watch them leave...

Marius! he thought. *What happened to him?*

"Guard!" he called. "Can you find out about a murder yesterday?"

The guard seemed startled to hear Darian now speaking common after sharing a secret dialogue with Alex—minus her unsubtle exit line. "Err, what would you know about a murder?" he asked with due suspicion.

"Before I was arrested in the Tree Streets, I ran from a woman who shot two men in Starset Park Manors."

Curiosity must have kept him from asking the obvious about his getting arrested. "Why didn't you report her?"

"I was too busy running for my life. Didn't someone else report it?"

The guard's face went blank for a tick, then he seemed to light up with recognition. "Oh – that... Crazy dragon lady."

"What?"

"There was a report from an eyewitness, in fact, but by the time the patrols could get there, there wasn't a trace of murder—not as she described it, anyway. You're the first corroborating witness, if it really happened."

Darian's eyes were as large as supper plates. "How?"

"What do you mean, how? The patrols got to the house, and there was a woman there, sure—just standing there, though, nothing suspicious. She didn't seem to know anything about any murder, even if she didn't have a good reason to be there, but we don't arrest for loitering in neighbourhoods without due cause."

"There was a boy a year older than me half-buried in the dirt, and an older man, both shot through the head!"

He shook his head. "No reports of anything remotely like that. You in cahoots with the dragon lady?"

Darian couldn't wrap his brain around what the guard was telling him. "So – what? I don't understand."

"The entire yard was undisturbed. No trace of any recent digging, and certainly no bodies. House was locked, no signs of forced entry."

"173 Rolling?"

"Sounds correct."

He frowned in dismay. Just what were Callisto and her accomplice capable of doing?

6.07

His parents' words echoed in his ears even without his classmates' remarks emphasizing the gravity of the situation. "What a horrible thing for him to do!" "He seemed like such a nice young man when he was over for supper!" "I can't believe that our Darian would do such a thing!" "Is there something that you haven't told us about him, Kotaro?" He had vehemently denied that Darian was remotely capable of killing anyone, but deep in his heart, he knew he couldn't prove it—it was in fact quite likely that he had and Kotaro would never have known.

For the first time in his life, a dark cloud hung over his head as he

wondered what to do. Even the teachers seemed affected by his change in mood, and it was difficult to think of anything to say to anyone.

So he skipped school.

There was no way around it—the only option was to get it straight from the source. He headed to the X-Two Prison, Sector Southsoutheast. Perhaps it was all a huge misunderstanding somehow, perhaps he simply had the stupidity to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, or he was framed, or perhaps—

SLAM

The prison's front door burst open as Alex rushed outside, her face losing a struggle to keep from crying. Sunni quickly followed, but neither appeared to see Kotaro at first.

"Alex?" he asked meekly.

She stopped as she noticed him. Even in her state, she could clearly tell that he was upset as well and looked away with guilt, evidently afraid of seeing him unhappy.

"Kotaro," she started, "I—"

"It's true, then," he whimpered. "Darian did it..."

"N-no, he didn't," she stammered. "I mean, maybe—I don't know, that's not what—"

Kotaro looked confused. "What do you mean?"

Alex grimaced in embarrassment. "We got into a fight. He says he knows something about my father, but he won't tell me because he says it would hurt me. But the only reason Sunni and I are *here* is to search for answers, and if he won't help us—" She broke off, as though uncertain.

The notion of information as somehow being more important than a man's life—even the life of a jerk of a school teacher—was quite bizarre to Kotaro. "What kind of information is this?"

"My parents were murdered, and we're trying to find out why."

"...I'm sorry."

Her tail bristled. "The way Darian speaks, he thinks that my father was guilty of something, perhaps for starting the civil wars in my homeland! That's absurd! My father was good and kind and wanted to help people, not hurt them! There's – no way he could have started a *war*! Not *my* father!"

"What did he do?"

Alex frowned in frustration, clenching her fists so hard it seemed she might stab herself with her own claws. "That's the trouble. We have no idea what he was working on at the time to know whether he would have done anything bad. As much as it hurts, it's possible he did *make* something horrible, something—"

Her face was like a leaky faucet. She became angrier at this, wiping her face yet again.

Kotaro didn't know what to tell her – so he lunged towards Alex and lifted her in a giant hug, spinning around as he did. She seemed surprised at first, but as he lowered her to the ground, his eyes radiated compassion—a

wordless indication that she had his sympathy. Her surprise gave way to mourning as she cried on his shoulder.

8.01

The day dragged on like water torture, not two hours passed since Alex stormed out but the boredom already crippling. Nothing to do but wait to die, and even that was in question... Darian had asked for the newspaper, as was his privilege, but nothing in particular caught his interest. The more important articles contained information he'd already known – and probably could have given the press himself to flesh out the stories a bit.

As he flipped through the paper, he came to an anthropological bit about the sister cities of Cross Two and Tri-Seven, complete with a map of the sector, insets for each city, and a brief segment on the colloquial use of Cross versus X. An inexplicable feeling of "home" overwhelmed him as he examined the familiar shape of X-Two, then perused the inset of Tri-Seven, studying the layout and trying to determine where all the fighting would be taking place.

To his surprise, he found himself inexplicably drawn toward Square One, staring with intent at the small part of it visible on the inset. He was astonished to recognize the Year 0 Route to Enlightenment, the fabled path through which the world's greatest scientists set into motion the vast network of machinery regulating the planet's spin and thrust, but what did that have to do with—

Another vision hit him, though it was much less clear. It was of the same pair of eyes hiding behind a cloak of darkness, also casting her eyes in that direction.

What did it mean?

As if on cue, the guard called to him. "Gary, you've got a visitor—again, I guess."

He looked up; it was Sunni. "I didn't get to comment earlier, but I had meant you could try to find us, not have us be able to find you," she said with a wink.

He tried to laugh, but it was difficult. "Is Alex okay?"

"Her schoolmate Kotaro came by, so—"

"Here?" Darian's eyes lit up in surprise.

"Yes. Despite coming all this way, though, he had second thoughts about actually seeing you when he found us. I made him go somewhere with Alex so they could cheer each other up."

Kotaro, he thought. He couldn't imagine what he thought of all of this. After all, the Rockfords were the only ones who would've recognized him in the news broadcasts.

Darian furrowed his brow at her in inquisition. "Does *Square One*

have any significance to you?"

It was Sunni's turn to be surprised. "Yes, it does—that's where Alex's father worked."

"Something's definitely there. I just don't know *what*."

"I had the same suspicions," she commented, rubbing her chin in thought, "but of course it had never occurred to Alex or I that her father would have been working on bad things."

"Maybe he never knew they were being used with malicious intent," he offered. Sunni nodded her head in agreement, which raised a question. "How are you related to Alex?"

"I was an agent in her father's hire, both as a bodyguard and a spy."

"That's handy. I take it he was well-to-do?"

"We subsist on what's left of her parents' estate, yes. All of our real wealth is in the World Bank, of course, so your thief gang only stole knick-knacks from us—all borrowed, in fact. However, both Alex and I are dedicated to spending every *pence* of the estate to find the truth and maybe end the war."

Darian frowned as he read between the lines. "So you came back *here* to find out what I know."

Sunni smirked. "I won't pry it from you, if you truly think we're better off not knowing, but Alex is the type who will want to know, even if it's something she knows she shouldn't know. I for one started our quest expecting to uncover something bad, because there wasn't any guarantee that our side is just, though I still hope it is."

A pause. "Do you believe that Denham Riordan O'Malley was a good man?"

"Absolutely, even if I can't say anything of his work."

He sighed. "Alex is going to hate hearing that he did to her what they did to my brother and I."

Sunni furrowed her brow. "I don't understand."

"My brother was used for testing muscle-building drugs, and I was an experiment with a memory-enhancing agent. It seems we were lucky by comparison, since we've at least gotten to see the outside world on occasion—they have control groups locked away in an underground facility in Pentagon Five."

"What does this have to do with Alex?"

Darian cringed. "Dr. Riordan was Alex's father, true, but he subjected her to a neurological agent as well—a different

one from mine that modifies reflexes and senses."

Sunni bristled in astonishment. "He subjected his own *daughter* to experiments?"

"I don't think that he felt the drugs were harmful, since she *has* benefitted from them, as have I. Marius is a different story, though—if whoever it is in charge of all the destruction hadn't interfered with his clinical trial, he would be dying of muscle and bone degeneration within the next five years."

She seemed pensive, almost – distraught. "But how can someone who loves his child do something like take such an unnecessary risk as that?"

"It may be he was forced to do it," Darian explained. "It may also be he thought he was helping her. He was definitely involved with the organization, regardless."

"You're certain?"

"It scares me when it happens, but I keep getting these – visions of things that seem relevant to whatever quest it is I'm on, and one of the records I saw in the hideout was of his Square One office, the Riordan building on the Sound of Sound, and its connection to the fabled Route to Enlightenment – which ends in Tri-Seven, doesn't it?"

"...yes, it does," Sunni mused.

"Something's going on there, and it may be connected to the civil wars. I'm willing to bet he was working on something that involved the Route to Enlightenment."

"But – why?"

"The only way to find out is to go there and see."

Sunni frowned. "I was planning to do that anyway, but with this new information, I'm afraid that I wouldn't know quite what to look for—"

"Don't worry. If Alex isn't too put off by me yet, I'll come with you."

"If you don't have bail set?"

Darian raised an eyebrow. "You've already forgotten what I can do, have you?"

8.04

Marian shuffled through her wallet for the coupons for tomatoes she had saved, her mind still reeling from her encounter with that woman Sunni

yesterday. It had already been eating away at her with guilt that she hadn't raised her sons herself, even if she had been given no choice. What did it matter that she would've been a single unwed mother? She would've tried! Life was too precious to pass judgement and punish innocent children in that way, to take them from a mother who wanted them.

"Sorry," said a woman behind her, taking the divider and placing it behind Marian's items.

She recognized the voice at once, looking up in eagerness to see a familiar face. "Callisto?"

Callisto flinched at being recognized, then blushed at her rudeness. "Ah... Marian! It's been a while, hasn't it?" Her smile was weak and words were stilted. "How've you been?"

"I'm – fine," she lied, gritting her teeth. "Just... How are the boys doing? Are they happy?"

"They're – just *brilliant*. They roughhouse a lot, especially in their sports games—I'm afraid they're taking after Don that way!" She shrugged with a lazy hand gesture. "Boys will be boys, I suppose."

Marian sighed, looking downcast. "I'm not going to lie to you. I miss them terribly, and not a day goes by that I don't wish I had even one of them back, but I don't suppose..."

Callisto didn't need to hear the rest of her question. "Well, it's really not up to me if they don't want to see you, but I'll try to talk to them about it. Don's been afraid of telling them that we're not their real parents, but I know they're going to discover the truth someday. We're still not sure what to do when that day comes."

"I see..." Marian was on the verge of crying but fought to hold back in public.

"Miss?" The clerk waved at her for her attention. "Are you ready to check out yet?"

"Oh, sorry!" She dug through her purse yet again and fished out her coupons, handing them over.

"Are you still at the same address?" Callisto asked. "Your place in Grove Hill?"

Marian nodded. "You can tell them where to find me, if they ever decide—" She hesitated to finish the sentence, unable to stomach the idea of the alternative.

"I'll let them know – if they want to know."

The clerk finished ringing up her purchases, giving her a concerned look as their eyes met. "The total comes to 14R, 7p."

Marian took out a heptaderio bill, and the clerk gave her 3 rio, 10 pence change.

"Well, it was good to see you, Callisto," she said, taking her bags in each hand.

"I'll try to drop you a line sometime."

With a sigh, Marian trudged out of the store, thinking of how best to

get her mind off her depression. She wasn't completely daft—Callisto had no intention of contacting her again, which even the clerk had figured out. It would've been nice if her act had at least been more convincing, but a polite no was probably better than false hope.

A look of curiosity crossed her face as it slowly dawned on her that Callisto's purchases had consisted of several pounds of meat, two cartons of ice cream, and four dozen bottles of sleeping pills.

10.10

Alex sighed in misery. It was bad enough that she felt depressed, but for the top contender for The Happiest Person in the World also to be depressed—well, that took the cake.

"Oh, look," Kotaro mused, "ostriches."

They had wandered over to the zoo for no apparent reason, just to do something. If nothing else, animals were interesting to watch—more so as feeding time approached. Not even a nuzzling pair of gryphons seemed to cheer them up, though.

"This is too much," Alex blurted, shaking her head. "I need some time to think..."

Kotaro nodded in agreement, looking away. "You know, despite today, I still envy you."

This comment startled her. "Envy me? Why?"

He stared at the ground as he leaned over the guardrail. After a bit, he turned over his right wrist and pulled back the friendship bracelet he wore around it, revealing a thin, bright scar.

Alex gasped. "You're hurt," she said, taking his wrist.

"It's fine," Kotaro dismissed, "it's ancient. Been healed forever." Nevertheless, he stared at it with a palpable intensity, as though watching its origin unfold anew.

"How did you get it?" Alex prompted, taking the hint.

"I got this the day I met him," he began in hushed tones. "I never told anyone else how I got the scar. Even my parents don't know how I got it. I think I've been able to keep it hidden from them, but I know they'll say something about it someday." He shrugged. "Maybe they've seen it but just chalked it up to my being a kid.

"Anyway, we had just moved here, and I was really angry at having to leave all my friends behind in X-Four. I missed them so much, and I was so mad at being here that I decided I didn't want to be friends with *anyone*. Isn't that funny? *Me*, not friends with anyone."

"Yeah..." she agreed with a weak smile, "funny."

"The first time I saw D, he was walking suspiciously, like he was trying to avoid being followed. That got me curious; I wanted to know what he was doing that he didn't want to be caught doing. It turns out he ran into

a couple of bullies from school and about five of their friends—you know their type, two or three years older than everyone else from being held back a few grades? Still, I'm not sure why they were picking on him in particular, since he never stood out as such before except as one of the spoiled types. Yet when they started taunting and threatening him, he stood his ground against them. I mean, they gave him a pretty good beating, but he took all of it and then some before returning the favour, really roughing them all up in the process.

"It scared me, what was happening. I'd never seen anyone fight like that before. No one had seen me yet, so I ran, but I didn't get very far before I tripped over something and cut my wrist badly on a broken bottle. It hurt like Hell, and I was afraid I would bleed to death, but I didn't dare cry while I was still in range of the fight, since I didn't know what any of them would do if they found me.

"Darian did, though—found me. After he sent those bullies packing with their tails between their legs, he discovered me lying there in pain, and he pulled out this first-aid kit. He seemed more annoyed than anything else, that I followed him and made him stop to help me, but he fixed me up as good as new with that bandage foam of his."

Here, Kotaro touched his ring finger to his thumb. "Then he asked me, 'Can you do this?' When I did, he said, 'Nothing's permanently damaged. You'll be fine.' At that, he ran off and disappeared before I could catch up to him, but I would see him at school and wave at him with that same gesture, to show him that I was still okay.

"I wear these bracelets not just to cover up the scar, and not just as a reminder of the friendship I've tried to foster with D, but also as a reminder that no one who wants friends likes being friendless. It's okay with me if I'm not friends with everyone, but I don't want to hurt anyone else by not giving them a chance to be my friend if they want to be."

"That's very big of you," Alex remarked in appreciation of both the story and the sentiment. "I don't know if I could do that, myself."

Kotaro shrugged. "Not everyone's a friend person."

"But it's a really cute story. Did you ever tell Darian just what you thought of him?"

"No... As I came to know him, I knew he would've just yelled at me for being so stupid and maybe risking my life following him like that. That, and I feel like if I try to press him too hard, he won't ever tell me about what he's hiding."

Alex perked her ears at the accusation. "How do you know that he's hiding something?"

Kotaro looked especially solemn, which put Alex even less at ease. "Once, there was a sub for Society and Religion—D's guardian, it turns out, before he became a permanent teacher at school—and he gave a lecture on types of cults and how certain ones had a practice of torturing themselves as an act of self-sacrifice. Or so I heard."

"You weren't in that class?"

"No, that's how I know what happened—I was in the can when D came in after I did, looking sick. At first I thought he had eaten something bad, but he kept muttering something about, 'They do that to *themselves*...' Over and over, like he was going to fill his pants just from seeing slides of it. When he wouldn't tell me what he was talking about, I asked Samuel, since he was taking that class. He told me about the lecture, so I figured there was something about the imagery that had him freaked out. It's occurred to me, however, that he put the emphasis not on *what* they were doing..."

Kotaro's voice broke off then, as though he didn't need—or want—to finish the sentence. Alex felt a chill running down her spine.

"No—he's definitely hiding something. This morning, I overheard some of the bullies that had picked on him, talking about the news of finding Mr. Coronatus's body. One of them said that during that first fight, he had torn off D's sleeve and revealed a bunch of weird scars all over his arm—one was even bleeding, he claimed. At that point, all the guys there froze, long enough for D to grab his sleeve and cover up his arm again, then he growled, 'If you tell anyone, *I'll kill you all*.' They must've believed he would, though, because that was the first *I've* ever heard of it, even though I saw him after the fight, and I'm pretty good at keeping up with all the gossip going around at school.

"But I mean – it's just locker talk, huh? Could've been a story they made up because they found out something that could've really gotten them in trouble, I'd imagine. Still, it was that one instance of weakness that really stands out in my mind, the weakness I think he got from wherever he got those scars. I want to know what he's running from. I want to understand... I want to help."

"Help?"

"My first guess was he was being abused by his parents, which was surprising since he's done a good job of convincing us he was just a spoiled brat, but then I discovered he didn't have parents. Stranger yet, shortly after we first met, I invited D to visit me as thanks for helping me. He finally accepted some weeks later, yet after that visit, he became colder as I became friendlier. Other people liked me more while liking him less. So I'm sure there's something he isn't telling me—even though I'm not sure what—but I haven't pressed him for the answer.

"You, however... You managed to befriend D in a few days. That's why I'm really jealous. I bet he's already told you everything about him that I've been curious about since we were ten. That's been my biggest challenge, not just to befriend him, but to get him to open up for me, to just let it out instead of keeping everything secret."

Alex looked away in silent discomfort, more than a bit embarrassed. Though Kotaro had just poured his heart out for her, she didn't want to admit that she had bullied the information out of Darian.

"Alex?"

She glanced at him in hesitation.

"Did he tell you anything?"

"...yes, and—"

"—you're not going to tell me, are you?" he guessed.

Alex cringed. "I'm not sure it's my business telling you."

Kotaro frowned in disappointment. "So it *is* something that bad."

"I—"

"No, it's fine," he interrupted, holding up his hand to stop her from saying anything. "It wouldn't be that satisfying if I got it from someone else, anyway. Trust has to be earned, and that will be his sign that he trusts me, if he tells me himself."

Her mouth dropped open ever so slightly, her shame tripling. From the mouths of innocents...

"I want to ride the gryphon!" cried a small child.

"Sorry, sport," said the father, "I don't think the gryphon would like that very much."

"*I wanna!*"

"Well, let's just see what the zookeepers say about it, huh?"

"Where's Callisto? Callisto would let me."

"Callisto who you tell to shoot at the animals when there's nobody looking? *That* Callisto?"

"Yeah!"

He gave a low grunt. "Callisto will meet us up at Mommy's cabin. She's doing some errands in the meantime."

"Aww..."

"Gosh," Alex murmured, eager to change the subject. "I wonder if I was that spoiled when I was little."

Kotaro chuckled softly. "I sure was."

"Did you get to ride the gryphon?"

They gave awkward laughs, then grew silent once again, leaning on the railing for the flamingos' enclosure.

"I don't like it," Alex blurted.

"What?"

"You—being serious like that. It feels weird."

Kotaro forced a smile. "I'm not in the mood, lately."

Alex frowned.

"I'm sorry if I've upset you, though—"

"No, no," she insisted, shaking her head. "It's just part of the mood, I guess." She stared up at the sky, delving into its vast, dimming emptiness. "What do you think, Ko? Am I trying too hard?"

"At what?"

"...I don't know. Nevermind, I don't even know why I'm asking, it's a stupid quest—"

"You like him, don't you?" he whispered.

She glanced up at him, their eyes meeting.

"I mean, it's pretty obvious, isn't it?" Saying this, he seemed even more timid now than before.

Alex lowered her head again. "I—kinda... I mean, I didn't at first, but it's hard to go through so much with a person and..." She clenched her fists in aggravation. "I just... I don't know what to do."

"Telling him is a good first step. From there, it's up to him."

Alex couldn't help smiling. His seriousness was so unbelievable it was almost comical. "I should – but it just seems every time I try—"

"*AUGH!*"

They looked up to see several others running in terror. One of the gryphons had broken out of its cage, tearing through the steel bars as though they were made from paper streamers. To their horror, the small child from earlier was standing there watching, unmoving.

"Griffy!" the child called in excitement, hands waving in the air.

"Sammy, run!" called the father, rushing to grab the child. When he did, the gryphon turned and snapped at him, crunching off his arm. As he screamed in pain, the gryphon snapped again, taking off his head. Despite the sight, the child only laughed in apparent amusement.

Alex and Kotaro looked on, stunned. What was *happening?*

After finishing its first meal, the gryphon stopped where it was and turned, seeming to catch them in its sights with a hungry glare.

"Run!" they cried in unison, hightailing it for the exit. Behind them, the gryphon reared its head and the child's laughter sharply died away.

11.09

Callisto's mobile rang. In her state of mind, she would much have preferred to listen to the jingle all the way through, but she knew her caller wouldn't appreciate that much, regardless of how much work she had been putting in.

She flipped open her mobile. "Go."

"I've found the fugue," came the response. "I'm going in with my pet for retrieval."

"Already?" she asked, fighting back a sigh—everything was a rush job now. "Where do I meet you, then?"

"Our plans are still the same now that I have my own transport. Bring what I told you and meet me at the rendezvous point, and I will bring the fugue."

"And the score?"

"What, is it always up to *me* to do everything?" the caller whined, impatience more than evident. "The score will be there soon enough, if the fugue doesn't simply lead the way. There've already been far too many hints to belabour the point any more."

"Fine."

"By the way, 'Big Boss' is out of commission – permanent like, in case you didn't think I was serious about this."

"Of course you're serious," she declared with all the truth she could muster. "I trust you implicitly."

"Good. You were always my favourite. I know I can count on you to deliver 100%."

"Of course. Out."

Callisto glanced at her watch, frowning at the math. The meat was negligible, but she hoped the ice cream would stay frozen in her cooler for the five thousand li journey to their final destination.

14.16

Darian watched the light of the early evening sky fade as he lay stretched out on his bed again, waiting with a newfound impatience for the guards' shift change. He wasn't that sure yet how much of an opportunity he would have, but all he needed was a discreet moment when—

BANG BANG BANG

To his surprise, there was someone who was apparently quite eager to get inside, well after the new abbreviated office and visiting hours due to the staffing shortage. *Nah*, he thought, *she couldn't possibly—*

He sat up a moment to listen. There were some muffled sounds in the distance he couldn't distinguish, then a frantic rattling at the door. The voices coming from outside seemed desperate, maybe afraid for their lives, but the voices inside were having trouble comprehending this. Who could it be, and what threat could be *that* serious?

Maybe he didn't want to know, though it was more than likely he would find out soon enough.

A click and some fumbling at the doors. "Darian!"

Yup. He felt an ulcer starting to form.

Kotaro was with her. They both seemed scared witless, which was concerning. "What's the matter?"

Alex's eyes were wide as saucers. "We were just at the zoo—one of the gryphons started going berzerk and attacking people!"

"Yikes," he responded, not quite grasping the urgency. "Why—"

"It's *twice* the size of a normal one!" Kotaro shouted. "It broke out of its cage like it was in a wet paper bag! It's a *monster!*"

"It may even be following us!" Alex cried in fear.

Darian was still struck with disbelief. "And you came *here?*"

"It was the only place I could think of!"

He leaned back in his bed again, overwhelmed by the notion of a rampaging killer monster bird. "That's it," he muttered. "The world's gone totally *MAD.*"

"Darian..." Alex whimpered.

He stared at her, aghast. "What were you going to do here, exactly? If what you're saying is true, and it easily broke through a cage—which was specifically designed to hold something of that size—what makes you think it will be any safer in this prison—which is designed to hold mere people?"

She whimpered again. "Darian...!"

"What? I want to know."

Alex glanced at Kotaro, then back at Darian, repeating the action. He realized then she must have felt hesitant to speak about their abilities in front of the cougar, but what were they going to do about that?

He sighed, rubbing his eyes to mitigate the onset of a migraine. "Look, I'm sure the zookeepers and other authorities are doing what they can about it, so you might as well relax, now that you're—"

Darian was interrupted by a sound much like a bomb going off – or a building being smashed open. A deep, rumbling caw echoed through the hallways, followed by the somewhat weaker sound of a shrill laughter mixed with terrified screams—as though from people being slaughtered.

"*Lammergeir!*" cried a voice from an unseen source. "*Supertime!*"

As the adjoining door to the main office collapsed under its weight, the gryphon strode into the cell area, looming over the three like the menace it was and pausing just inside the door.

"Oh, look—two for the price of one!"

Darian and Alex exchanged worried glances. That only the two of them counted gave weight to their suspicions.

The gryphon advanced as Alex screamed, dashing to the far end of the prison in a flash. Instead of chasing her, the gryphon slammed Kotaro against the cell door with one paw. Darian could do nothing at the moment, still hesitant to act until he knew what to do.

"Funny," the voice squeaked with an enigmatic air, "you're awfully shy, aren't you? What, are you afraid of *him* knowing?"

Darian stared at him in bewilderment as Kotaro fought to return the favour. "Who are you talking about?" he grunted as he tried to maneuver his way out from under the paw.

A sparkle caught Darian's eye—it looked like a screw jutting out of the gryphon's paw, just within his reach. Thinking quickly, he grabbed it, focusing on restoring it to its prior housing: a police-issue tanto.

"I saw that," taunted the voice, though he still couldn't see who was speaking. "If you were thinking of hurting my griffy with that, you're—"

Almost without realizing that he had, Darian reached through the bars and drove the blade straight into Kotaro's throat, killing him in the blink of an eye. Alex shrieked in terror, but the unseen voice broke off, clearly taken aback by the move.

His hands shook as the weight of what he'd done sunk in. "It's – not over..." he stammered, trembling. The sound of Alex's frightened weeping echoed through his ears as he clenched his fists, the guilt stabbing into his heart. "*IT'S NOT OVER!*" he shouted at her in impatience, scowling. If she

didn't grasp the situation and act quickly—

The gryphon turned its attention toward Alex and squawked with menace. With a dawning look of comprehension, she swallowed her fear, tears still streaming down her face. Taking a determined stance, she stared the gryphon down, waving her hands as she did. The beast seemed to almost rip apart as she concentrated her will on it – but just as suddenly, it seemed to repair itself, until the gryphon was standing still, shuddering as if it was in extreme pain—seeming to will itself to stop forming and unforming.

"Oh, this is a problem," said the voice, unamused. "What should we do about that, hmm?" Darian finally located its source—a darkly-cloaked rider on the back of the gryphon.

"Darian..." Alex gave a weak cry, apparently giving it her all. The gryphon gave a pathetic caw, just as distraughted by the ordeal, if not more.

His mind raced. What could he do? If he restored the gryphon, it would still be a gryphon, and restoring anything else...

On impulse, he set his sights on the ceiling above the gryphon and its hidden rider, remembering the raw materials in their original state. Like a proverbial ton of bricks, the ceiling collapsed, landing a crushing blow to the beast and its master.

Alex collapsed to her knees, sweating and short of breath. The fight appeared to have drained her energy, though she remained conscious – but barely. Darian threw open his cell and rushed to her side, but not before the gryphon burst from the pile, refreshed and enraged. Before either of them could react, the beast swept up Alex in its foreclaws, bursting through the hole in the ceiling and flying away into the distance.

Her voice trailed through the air. "Dari~an...!"

Unless nature upsets society's eventual death, such outstanding unconcern necessitates deliberation. Never underestimate mankind's brazen egocentric righteousness₍₀₁₎. —Tomoko

Day 11

It was the biggest, rockiest party he had been to in the history of *ever*. The girls were all over him—of course—though he never wanted to choose one over any of the others. Carmen was trying, though, something he could tell after eighteen girlfriends in the past year alone, not to mention from how closely she was cuddling against him at the moment. What could he say? He just couldn't turn down free attention, especially from the cute ones, but he had made a promise...

In a flash, everything seemed to come toppling down. Something big crashed through the ceiling, something massive burst through the walls, both sending debris flying everywhere. He couldn't see or understand what was going on—there was a lot of mayhem, but it was impossible to tell what was causing it, or how to escape it.

He looked up, a piece of the ceiling looming over him, threatening to crush him like an insect. Time seemed to crawl as it hung in midair, like a torture device designed to induce claustrophobia...

"Kotaro!"

He snapped awake, feeling sweat bead on his forehead. Groaning, he tried to move, but it was as though he'd been paralyzed from the neck down—possibly even from the neck up.

Darian stood over him, concerned. "Are you okay? You took quite a beating back there."

Kotaro looked around, disoriented. He was in Sunni's RV, lying in one of the foldout beds. As he started to get circulation back to his body, he found he could move after all, albeit in a daze—par for the course, as Deeg might say. "What happened?" he asked in a weak voice.

"We're not really sure," Darian replied, an obvious hesitation in his words as he looked away. "The broadcasts say that a gryphon broke out of the zoo and went on a murderous rampage, but it's strange because it was larger than any they—"

"Alex!" Kotaro cried at once. "I remember now! Where is she?"

Darian gave Sunni a nervous glance, to which she shrugged. Still, he seemed reluctant to speak. "That *thing* took her – we're not sure where."

He looked sullen. "...but – she's okay, though, isn't she? Just *taken*, not killed?"

"As far as we know, but it could be anywhere, and she still may be killed later."

"This blows," Kotaro frowned, though not quite put out. "...but it may help your image, if you rescue her."

Darian furrowed his brow in astonishment. "What?"

"I was just telling Alex that she needed to talk to you, to clear this whole thing up between the two of you, so—"

"I don't believe you!" he blurted in astonishment. "Alex has been kidnapped—maybe even killed—and you're trying to *set me up* with her?"

"You *do* like her, don't you?"

Darian opened his mouth as if to speak, then seemed to think better of it. He turned and said something unintelligible to Sunni, who gave him a knowing smile before stepping outside. "What are you getting at, 'taro?"

He sat up, a hint of his normal cheery self shining through. "Alex was telling me how confusing it was between the two of you, that she didn't know what to make of your relationship."

"Our 'relationship' is that, after we first met, all kinds of bad things started happening!"

"That's a good start, though I don't imagine she'd like hearing it."

Darian glowered, sitting on the bed so they were eye level with each other. "Look, Kotaro, I grew up literally not knowing what love was. I got hints of it here and there, and I could guess what it was like from how you acted with your eleven million girlfriends and from how you got along with your folks—but I can only guess what it's like. Maybe I love her, but I don't know yet, and I'm not comfortable saying something if I don't mean it."

"That's a much better line. You should tell her that."

"Why?"

"Because I know she'd want to hear it. I have a pretty good idea of what girls like, after all."

"—which is why you've never settled on one."

"It's not my fault if I never wanted to commit. We're in *secondary school*, Deeg. On top of that, I'm the class clown! My grades aren't going to get me out of the five-year club, and who's that going to impress after the sparks die down? I'll end up with a dead-end job in food service or retail, because college is just going to be a waste of my folks' money. I don't want anyone clinging to the idea that I might be somebody great someday so they should snap me up while they can."

He crossed his arms. "Doesn't mean you have to toy with them before you turn them loose, you know. No is an answer, too."

Kotaro leaned back, smiling at his own secret. "It's not as though I *try* to land them—they fall into my lap, and in the meantime, I enjoy their company. If it doesn't work out, it's not from anything on *my* part. I just do what I can to try to have fun in the world, and part of that is knowing what you want. A lot of folks get so hung up on their first loves that they don't realize what fun a second can be—so why not get that first out of the way with me? A measure for comparison: That's Kotaro Rockford!"

Darian shook his head in bemusement. "I may not know a lot about

love, but I know you're hopeless."

"And I know you're a liar."

"How's that?"

There was a long moment of silence when Kotaro wanted to speak but couldn't quite put the words together. "I mean, I guess it's in your nature to have to make assumptions about others, because that's how you survive being who you are – with this secret life only you know anything about. If you had been me instead, you would've gotten to be as open as you wanted to be. But since you're you, you feel you have to shut yourself off because no one else would understand, eh?"

"But we *do* understand – despite how thick you think we are." His voice became serious. "Did you really think so little of me that you thought I wouldn't notice such an *obvious* change? The moment I recognized you, I knew you were in some kind of trouble, but I was so much more focused on helping you than finding out what you had done that I didn't ask—not like you'd tell me if I asked anyway, eh?"

Darian's reaction was indiscernable, but if he knew people, Kotaro figured he was probably reevaluating their entire history together.

"I didn't mean to patronize you, Ko," he apologized, pain evident in his voice.

He smirked. "I mean, it's cool that you trusted me not to give you away. I just had hoped... You know? I still want to help – but now I know it's out of my hands."

Darian had a look that seemed to say, *I hope it's not out of mine.*

"Anyway, Alex told me you opened up to her, so it *must* mean you like her, eh?"

Despite their talk, he still seemed miffed at the topic. "Are you still on about that?"

"She deserves to be happy, Deeg. I know she likes you, and she sees the same special something in you that I did."

Darian stared at him, aghast. "Buh?"

"Don't think about that too hard." Kotaro slapped him on the back out of camaraderie, then his voice fell. "You know, I didn't get to tell you, but Eloisa broke up with me."

Another pause. "I'm not exactly surprised to hear it," he muttered, rolling his eyes, "especially after everything you've just told me."

"Learner boyfriend, that's me!"

"Are you ever going to settle down?"

The grin disappeared from his face, settling into a pensive look. "I hope not – and I don't mean that the way you think I do."

It seemed the conversation was going downhill—probably for the best. Darian stood to fetch Sunni. "I think all of this *mushy* talk is going to be moot unless we can rescue Alex. We'll drop you off at your folks' place so you can get ready for school."

"School? Do you think there will be school today, what with all the

craziness happening?"

"I don't know, but it's better to get ready in case." He turned to open the door, then paused for an unusually long moment. "And one last thing—"

"Yeah?"

A defeated smirk crossed Darian's face. "Thanks for the talk."

0.02

Alex was freezing, literally—being carried through the night sky at an altitude of a thousand li was hardly a bask in the sun. She had no idea how long they'd been travelling, as she kept blanking out at intervals from a combination of exhaustion and hypothermia. Her eyes hurt, as well, having been jostled so many times that she lost her goggles somewhere during the flight, the wind stinging her eyes like nettles.

She didn't dare to do anything to the gryphon while they were still airborne. Even if she managed to free herself from its grasp, the fall would assuredly kill her—which really wasn't that assuring at all.

Where were they *going*, anyway?

There was one other unsettling notion—how long was this gryphon capable of flying? The average gryphon could fly for maybe an hour or two without landing, but this one had been in the air all night without pause. The rider seemed comfortable letting it cruise, however, which was worrisome on numerous levels.

To her surprise, however, the resonance continued at a rapid clip, despite being separated from Darian. That confused her—did it mean they were part of something greater? What was the connection?

A building loomed on the horizon—not the most distinctive bit of architecture she'd ever seen, but from their sudden dip in altitude, she could tell it was probably their destination. It seemed to be located on an island a half li off the main coast. What building was it? Furthermore, what block were they in? What *quad*?

The gryphon touched down on the roof, hind paws first, dropping Alex like so much carrion before touching down with its front paws. The rider remained mounted.

"I apologize for the length of the flight," said a shrill voice. "I had forgotten how far it was to get here, and I'm not exactly sure how to work the chopper. Granted, it was much more certain that you would cooperate this way."

Alex shivered without restraint. Nothing good came to mind to say to the rider, nor the energy to say it.

"Of course, it's not going to be fun babysitting you all the time, since you'll probably try something foolish if I leave you alone for even a moment—like disassemble my Lammergeir."

She froze even more so. The rider already knew of her ability?

The door to the roof access rattled, then swung open with a creak. A calm-looking, professionally-dressed woman appeared, carrying with her a cooler and several packages of meat.

"Perfect timing, Callisto. I could use an extra set of eyes watching this one—she seems to be more formidable than I imagined."

She looked at Alex without emotion. "Are you sure? It looks like she may be suffering as it is."

"Just in case."

Without further argument, Callisto tossed the meat to the gryphon, which tucked in with a ravenous appetite, eating even the packaging.

"I have ice cream for you as well, Sammy."

"See? That's why you're my favourite. You understand me, unlike my parents."

Straining to see her captors in the early morning light, Alex stared at the rider in disbelief, having finally gotten a good look. Sammy was a child, probably no older than nine—the one from the zoo.

0.15

They dropped off Kotaro at his house without particular incident. The Rockfords would wonder where he had been all this time, probably, but it wasn't their immediate concern. After quick goodbyes, Darian and Sunni beat feet before the inquisition arrived—destination: Square One.

They hadn't even left the neighbourhood before Sunni asked him, "Are you sure you're okay to travel now? You were heaving quite violently back there."

Despite having brought Kotaro back to his healthy, hyperactive self, Darian still paled remembering the incident. "I had no reason to kill him," he muttered in disgust. "It makes me sick to think my first thought when fighting that thing was to kill him..."

Sunni didn't have an immediate answer, keeping an eye on the road.

"Who the Hell am I?" he snarled. "I've killed people for no good reason. What kind of *fucked-up* person am I?"

"Are you sure you don't want to go back to the house and lie down? Maybe this isn't a good time—"

"No," he snapped, more to emphasize their time constraints than in anger. "Something's driving me onward, and it won't let me rest now that Alex is gone, even as despicable as I am."

"Do you at least want to lie down in the back?"

"I'm fine. I'm normally sick on a daily basis, anyway."

"Ah, yes. Getting abused so often probably aggravated your condition, like the night you and Alex went out."

"Guh?" He stared at her. "What are you talking about?"

"I watched you the whole night and followed you to your house. You seemed in greater pain then, though not by much."

Darian was aghast at the notion of having been successfully spied on. "I kept a lookout the whole time! Where were you?"

She looked over her shoulder and winked at him in mischief. "I'm sorry—I have quite a few years' experience over you. Luckily, you were you, or Alex would've been done for. Alone, I could've only made sure her would-be killer didn't get away."

He felt the shoe on the other foot now, realizing Sunni had been watching him in his room. If they ever found Alex again, he would never stop apologizing for going through her room that night, even if there was no way he would have known it was hers.

The conversation hit a lull. The journey itself was uneventful, not unlike the few road trips he'd been on for swim meets.

"Where's the most likely place they headed?" Darian asked.

"I'm afraid the only lead I have is the Riordan building, since Denham worked there. You seemed to validate that yourself when you asked me about the area."

He nodded. It was a start, anyway. "It's about five thousand li to Square One from here, isn't it? That's a lot of driving—an all-nighter if we don't stop."

Sunni pondered this. "Do you need anything before we leave the quad?"

"Don't think so," he said, shaking his head. "There's nothing for me here, anymore—*nothing*."

"Kotaro's here."

Darian rolled his eyes. "Fine—if we ever return, I have a friend here who trusts me. Otherwise, there's no reason for me to ever come back."

"Fair enough. By the by, do you know how to drive?"

"I know *how*, but I don't have a license."

"Oh. I guess that means it's all me, then?"

"*Legally*, yes."

She smirked at his mindset, and he shrugged in response. No matter how they looked at it, though, it was still a long drive ahead of them, and they'd lost so much time already.

As they travelled, Darian stared at the scenery. It was the first time he'd left X-Two proper, since even the meets were in-quad, but he wasn't at all excited about it. For starters, the RV was cramped—despite its size—and he felt uneasy being able to move about easily. It reminded him of his room, barely furnished and uncomfortable; the only difference was the RV was a

little bigger and mobile.

"How do you know you're in love?" he asked, when staring out the window by itself only brought Kotaro's lecture back to mind.

Sunni didn't look at him, but he could tell she was smiling from the tone in her voice. "Are you taking his advice after all?"

"I'm just thinking... Not like I have much else to do."

"Well, do you think you're in love?"

"I don't know... Alex said something about the resonance we both feel being musical to her, but to me it's dischordant, almost random. I feel it in the same circumstances she does, and it's more vibrant in her presence – but it feels empty."

"That sounds like something else to me," Sunni commented. "Love is a deep caring about another, even more than your own interests—sometimes more than your own well-being."

"I do care about Alex," he admitted, "but in the same way I care about all people, especially ones I would call my friends. I hate seeing them upset, which is why I've pushed them away, to keep them from being upset by finding out who I was."

"Do you care about her more than others?"

"Maybe, but maybe because we're in the same boat."

"Do you feel different around her?"

"Somewhat... I'm more comfortable, but again maybe for our shared secret."

"It sounds to me that you have some things to work out with her, then."

Darian sighed. "I was afraid you would say that. That's what Kotaro was bugging me about, too."

"I think the only ones who haven't admitted that you two might be good together are you two."

That didn't really comfort him for some reason.

"Admit it," she prodded, "when this is all over, it will be nice to just have fun with each other, like when the four of you went to the movies."

"Yes, it will," he agreed, "but having fun together doesn't mean being in love."

"Why not? Part of living is doing things like dating, and it wouldn't hurt."

Darian glanced at her, then looked away. "The truth is – I'm afraid. I don't want to hurt anyone ever again, and that means emotionally as well. I'm afraid of what might happen if we get together but then *don't* work out."

"That's part of living, too, taking the good things with the bad. It seems like passing up a chance at true happiness if you sit on the sidelines and refuse to play, just because you're afraid of losing the game."

He didn't say anything for a moment, lost in thought.

"Have you ever been in love, Miss Sunni?"

"Not really. I'm more in love with my work, trying to do good when something's gone wrong. I don't *have* to do it, but it makes me happy when something I do helps others."

He frowned. "You were a spy. How does that help others?"

"I helped the O'Malleys on numerous occasions, but often in the course of protecting them, I protected others as well. There've been many attempts on Denham's life—public ones that threatened the lives of innocent bystanders as well. The last one was, unfortunately, successful."

For the first time, Darian noticed a dark scowl cross Sunni's face, an unsettling sight compared to her usual warm, inviting demeanor.

"Remind me never to cross you," he said, gut sinking in fear.

Sunni chuckled, grinning at him again. "Don't worry about it. I doubt there's anything you could do to make me angry—besides upset Alex again."

Despite her mood, he didn't want to risk making a smart remark and held his tongue.

"On that note, though, if you keep going as you are, soon you might even be old enough to date *me* instead of Alex."

This time he bit his tongue so hard it bled. "Guh!"

"I'm *kidding!*" she said with a laugh, nudging him. "Although, it is a rather awkward predicament we're all in."

Darian nodded. "Yes, especially since you still have such feelings for Alex's father."

Sunni slammed on the brakes, nearly swerving off the road in the process. Only when she pulled to the shoulder after the vehicle behind them leaned on the horn at them was she able to reclaim her composure—albeit through gritted teeth.

He raised his eyebrows at her in disbelief at her disbelief. "What?"

3.15

Alex huddled in a tight ball under her blanket, struggling futilely to ward off the cold that had chilled her to the bone. Callisto brought a space heater to help her warm up, but it didn't seem to be working even with the

morning sun breaking through the clouds.

"W-why... d-doing... th-this..." she muttered, teeth chattering.

"I'm sorry you had to be involved," Callisto stated with the flattest voice imaginable, making Alex wonder if she meant it. "It appears that fate brought you here, however."

"F-fate...?"

She gave the briefest of looks toward the far end of the room, where Sammy was tucking into the ice cream tubs with greed, before speaking to Alex again. "I'm not 100% sure of the details, but this is what I can tell you: There are mighty forces at work that even Sammy doesn't understand, and you apparently have a part to play in all of it as well—otherwise you would be dead already."

"W-why... k-kill...?"

"I think Sammy lost the ability to rationalize when they..."

Her voice trailed off.

"Th-they...?"

She shook her head. "I can't even begin to explain it, but it may be something that Sammy will do for you in good time anyway, which will be better since even *I* don't know the whole story. It definitely has to do with you, Sammy, and your vole friend, however."

She clenched her eyes, straining to find even a shred of warmth in her body. At least even Darian couldn't get out of coming to find her, if fate itself was having its jollies with them, but she couldn't help having mixed feelings about it.

"If I can help you, I will, but it can't be while Sammy is awake—and Sammy hasn't slept in eleven days now."

Alex fell in and out of consciousness as Callisto fetched some more blankets and wrapped her in them, occasionally attempting to feed her warm broth. Her skin was icy, and she could no longer control her shivering. Her arms were cold, but her legs... Half the time she couldn't even feel her legs.

"She's suffering from severe hypothermia, possibly even frostbite," Callisto reported, once they had Sammy's attention again. "The temperature here's too low, and the air is too damp. If her state doesn't change soon, she may die."

"No matter. By the way, the ice cream melted. Couldn't you have gotten it here, instead of freezing it again?"

"I wasn't aware we would arrive here so soon, or I would have."

"Well, try to find another store in the area and pick up some more, will you?"

Despite sensing good intentions from Callisto, Alex couldn't tell for certain whether she stood by her word, given the tone in which she spoke to Sammy. "If it's all the same to you whether she dies, why didn't you kill her from the outset? Why bother to keep her alive and have to watch her?"

"I've begun to see the differences between our abilities, the three of us. It wasn't clear at first, but now that I've gotten to study our combined

harmony, I can tell what they can do."

"Meaning?"

"He has the power to heal her. If she is dead *when* he arrives, it will be trivial to bring her back."

"Are you sure of this?"

"The nature of our resonance is difficult to explain. I have a greater awareness of things around me, which is amplified in their presence. I could see into the depths of his soul when the three of us were together, and now I realize what it was I saw, particularly when I figured out it was his signature that brought Marius back to life earlier."

Resonance? Alex thought. *This child is one of us?* It was difficult for her to tell, however, in her declining state of health.

"On the other hand, *her* ability is easy to divine—the dissolution to my union, the separation to my togetherness, the fission to my fusion."

12.08

"How much longer are we going to be travelling?" Aitne whined, arms crossed.

"I'm not sure, sweetie," droned her father. "It's not safe back home yet, so we're just taking a little holiday until the coast is clear."

"I miss my friends," she pouted. "Missing school isn't as fun when it means being camped up in the car with you and Mom all the time."

"I'm sorry, Aitne. I have to worry about your safety first."

He loaded his selections onto the counter: several of the pre-made cold deli sandwiches, a jug of milk, and two bottles of vodka. The cashier glanced up at him.

"Ident?"

"You've made my day, son," he said, smiling and taking his license out of his wallet.

"No prob," the cashier said, laughing and ringing up the purchases. As he bagged the items, two more customers entered—a blond feline and a blue-maned vole.

He hesitated. The boy was familiar, but the odds of being tracked down were so unlikely—

"Er, do you have maps of the area?" he asked to buy some time, turning his back to the door just in case.

"Certainly, over on the wall." The cashier pointed to a rack just past where the newcomers were.

"I mean, of – er... Tri-One."

"Sorry, can't help you there. You'll need to go *there* to get maps. Will there be anything else?"

"Hey, Dad, can I get a smoothie?" Aitne asked.

Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed the boy's ears perk. Sweat

formed on his brow as he noticed the boy stare in their direction. "Aitne?"

She faced the boy at the sound of her name. "Darian?"

Before anyone else could say another word, Aitne rushed toward the boy, as though going to pounce him but stopping at a polite distance. The boy seemed to be just as startled by her recognition as he was.

"Deeg, is that really you?" she asked with a large grin on her face.

At that instant, the boy snapped his gaze away from Aitne, straight towards him. "Dr. Kale!"

Frightened at having been recognized, he looked about for a quick getaway, but there was only the main entrance.

"Wait, Dr. Kale!" Darian called, as though recognizing the look of fear on his face. "I just want to ask you something!"

"Oh!" He breathed a sigh of relief to realize Darian wasn't who he thought he was, though it seemed odd that he wasn't as interested in Aitne. "I'm sorry, young man... Do I know you?"

"Marius is my brother! I just wanted to ask you some things that would help me help him."

"Help – Marius?" Dr. Kale looked quite a bit puzzled, as did Aitne.

"I didn't know that you had a brother!" she huffed—upset at being ignored, if he knew his daughter. "And how do you know Dad?"

Darian seemed to be caught in the middle of a perplexing dilemma. It was clear there was something unresolved between he and Aitne, but Kale had no idea what it could be. Finally, the boy addressed her. "It's been a long time, and a lot has happened since. I didn't realize you were still—"

There was an awkward pause. "...still *what*, Darian?"

He seemed hesitant to answer. "Ait, I need to talk with your father about something very important. We can catch up afterwards, okay?" The expression on his face was one of hopeful negotiation—it was clearly a ploy to get rid of her for the time being.

Then his face changed to embarrassment as he looked up to see the cashier staring at all of them.

"Forget it, nevermind," he blurted, raising his hands in defeat. "I'm sorry to interrupt. I'll let you be—"

"No," Kale insisted, curiosity piqued. "Just give me a moment to pay, and I'll talk with you outside."

The look on his face was enigmatic, but Darian stepped back as the perplexed cashier rang up the purchases. "Have a nice – day," he said, not sure whether to say anything else.

As the three left the convenience store, Aitne looked at both of them in turn.

"Wait in the car, Aitne," Kale prompted, handing her the purchases. "I'm sure whatever Darian has to say will only take a min, and then we'll let you talk all you want."

This was obviously not what she wanted to hear, but he knew his daughter's propensity for chatter would otherwise have them camped in the

parking lot all night and into the morning. "Fine," she pouted, then turned to Darian and gave a warm smile. "I'll see you in a min, then?"

As Aitne headed to the car, Darian and Kale walked in the opposite direction. Moments later, they heard the sound of someone running towards them. "Carpo, what's going on?"

"I'll be with you in a bit, Elara." He waved at her in dismissal. "There's a young man here who wants to talk to me."

"Who is it?"

"...someone who knows Marius."

Elara grew quiet. "Are – you sure it's okay?" she asked, nervous.

"If not – you know what to do."

She nodded slowly, understanding, then turned to leave them alone.

Darian gave Kale a disappointed look. "If I wanted to hurt you, I wouldn't have given you warning."

He flushed at the comment. "Well, it doesn't hurt to be careful."

"Whatever. I'll get to the point—someone's already killed most of the members of the syndicate, including my mentor and Marius."

"Wait," Kale exclaimed, baffled, "you said you wanted—"

"I can still help Marius, but in order to do so, I need to know what you know about the organization—what experiments were being conducted, and where are the control facilities?"

"I'm – afraid I don't understand."

"Look."

With that, he took a utility knife from his pocket. Kale flinched in reflex until Darian brought it to his own hand, making a deep cut. Within a tick, the cut healed itself, as though nothing had happened.

"What—"

"That's what I want to know," he growled. "Why can I do this? I believe the answers lie in what experiments were being conducted, and what I and a girl named Alex were given."

Kale shook his head in disbelief. "Nothing."

"What do you mean, 'nothing'?"

"There's nothing I know of—no syrum or medicine or bacterium or virus we engineered—that would have done anything like that."

Darian was incredulous. "There *has* to be! We weren't *naturally* like this, were we?"

In fear, Kale raised his hands to his face, worried at how the boy might react. "L-look, I understand your frustration, but I know of no project administered that has produced such a radical mutation. In fact, two of the *control* group—two that have had absolutely nothing out of the ordinary given to them—produced results far greater than yours."

"What do you mean?"

"Just ten days ago, the twins—Pachi's own children—performed the most bizarre feat I have ever seen... It was such that I knew immediately it would cause nothing but trouble."

"Explain."

Kale shook his head. "They were fraternal twins, a boy and a girl. Nothing spectacular, just another pair of data points to compare to the study samples, but then they started to exhibit some unusual behaviours."

"Such as?"

"Oh, small quirks, for the most part, but ten days ago—before our eyes and without any particular provocation—the two *merged* into one."

Darian furrowed his brow, puzzled. "Merged?"

"It was remarkable to witness, but no one could discern why it had happened—only that the genetic make-up of both individual children now seemed to reside within one body, for no apparent reason whatsoever."

"What caused it? What were they doing at the time?"

"Since they weren't officially part of the study and weren't being recorded, no one knows for certain, but I took it as a personal cue to leave town until things settled down."

"You have good insight there," Darian admitted, "because it saved you from getting gunned down with all the others. This place is still close to headquarters, though—I expected that anyone running for his life would've gone a lot farther than this."

"I wanted to stay around," Kale explained, shrugging, "so I could still catch news of anything bad that may have happened. Unfortunately, unless it's covered by the local news, it's difficult to tell whether something is related or not. Most of the global broadcasts are covering the Tri-Seven civil war now."

"Well, now you know—this kid is singlehandedly taking down the entire syndicate."

"Sammy'? Alone?"

"Hmm, maybe not alone," Darian mused. "There's been at least one other person working for her."

"...I don't think 'her' is appropriate."

Darian raised an eyebrow. "Him?"

"Nevermind... The point is, if Sammy is really bent on destroying us for what reason, then it's definitely too dangerous to go back—which is somewhat disappointing." He gave a nervous laugh. "I guess we'll have to take that cruise to Pent-Five Delta after all!"

"What else can you tell me about Sammy?"

"...I couldn't. Honest. I left as soon as I could, and in secret."

"Nothing about motives, temperament, likes, dislikes...?"

Kale scratched his chin. "Sammy was always kept in the hideout, I remember that much—always complaining about being bored, only being allowed outside on rare occasions. I imagine that a psychotic enough child could easily turn hostile, and Sammy was definitely getting there. I can't tell you how many destroyed toys have piled up at HQ. There were some times when Sammy seemed – different, though."

"How different?"

"Like a whole other person... Like the nine-year-old was one face of two, maybe more. Initially, the merged children seemed to give off a dark radiance, if you can call it that, eventually settling into something more like a normal child's behaviour. Again, I took that as a sign to leave, posthaste."

Darian pondered this in silence.

"May I leave now?"

"One more question, Doctor."

Kale raised his eyebrows in curiosity.

"Marius," he stated, frowning in anger. "How could you administer such cruelty to him?"

His guilt gave him visible pangs. "It wasn't my idea, to be certain. I was wheedled into the organization much the way you probably were... They recognized my abilities and made me an offer I couldn't refuse."

Darian scowled. "To experiment on *people*?"

"No, they threatened to hurt Elara, or Aitne. It would kill them to know what I've done on their behalf, but thankfully Marius was kept isolated in a different part of town, near the clinic, so they never knew the whole of the truth of my experiments. Some, but not all."

His frown did not ease in the slightest. "You'd think that if so many people were against being in this damned organization, it would have fallen apart sooner."

"Tyranny typically operates on fear, you know."

"Like the tyranny that beat me every day, I suppose."

Kale balked, eyes wide.

Darian noticed the change in his expression. "What is it?"

"Who – beat you?"

Darian's glower changed to surprise. "This is news to you?"

Kale shook his head. "The drug testing was supposed to be the only remotely cruel act we performed on anyone, and only because such science is always a risk. Even being criminals, we maintained a shared dignity about ourselves, particularly as pertained to our replacements. Yes, I administered Marius's corticosteroids and kept him isolated from society, but otherwise I didn't mistreat him in any way—it would have affected the study if I had."

"Then – why did Lion—"

Kale's eyes widened at the name. "Lion? As in Coronatus? *He* was your – mentor?"

"What do you mean?"

He shook his head in utter horror. "Lion was another experiment of mine, an early one. Why... Who allowed him to mentor you?"

"What did you do to him?"

"He received another drug entirely, a concentrated testosterone—one that made him extremely bi-polar. I—"

His voice broke off as Darian caught him off-guard, grabbing him by the shirt collar and slamming him into the wall. "I was mentored by a *crazy person*?" he scowled, rage burning beneath a vicious, cold stare.

"I—" Kale flinched in fear as Darian drew the knife again. "No, I swear it wasn't—"

The boy laughed with bitterness, digging the knife into Kale's throat just far enough to break the skin. "My whole life – destroyed because some *asshole* let a sadistic little *fuckhead* watch over me? My 'guardian' was my *worst enemy*? Do you know just how *hilarious* that—"

"STOP!"

Both of them looked up to see Elara aiming a gun in their direction. Behind her in the distance was Aitne, looking quite horrified.

Kale waved at her to stand down. "Elara! Don't—"

"Just back off, lady," Darian growled as he turned, putting himself in front of Kale. "You might accidentally hit—"

Elara shot in reflex, blasting a hole through Kale's shoulder, causing him to shriek with pain. She shrieked, nearly dropping her gun, but caught herself as she noticed Darian stumble forward and trained the sight on him. He collapsed to the ground, exit wound visible in his back. Away from all of them, Aitne screamed in terror but was otherwise paralyzed.

"Po!" Elara cried, rushing to Kale's side.

"El," he muttered, wincing as he grabbed his shoulder. "You really shouldn't have—"

She shrieked again as Darian's body shuddered violently. The two backed away quickly as the boy pushed himself onto his knees, groaning loudly as he did.

Elara aimed the gun again, but Kale stopped her. "It's no good," he said, forcing her aim towards the ground. "It's not going to do anything."

Her eyes were a world of confusion. "Wha—"

"That really hurt," Darian complained, wiping the dirt off his chest as the wound completely disappeared, repairing even his clothing. "Don't do that again, or I won't fix him."

Kale covered her mouth before Elara could scream again. At least Aitne stayed put, too frightened to come any closer, but he wished she hadn't seen any of that, either. He winced as a bolt of pain shot through his arm— at that moment, he decided he wasn't a gun person anymore.

As he stood, Darian strode toward them, reaching out to Kale as he did. With a touch, the wound disappeared just as completely as his had.

Elara was quiet, starry-eyed.

"Go," he ordered, waving them away in revulsion, "before I change my mind about hurting you. Hide yourselves away and be happy for the rest of your lives." His gaze turned to meet Aitne's across the distance separating them, then he glowered at the ground as though humiliated by his actions, refusing to acknowledge their presence any further.

Surprised, Kale and Elara turned, walking back to the car, glancing back at him once or twice, but he didn't move. After a bit, Kale stopped and clenched his hands, looking back at Darian one last time. His face reflected genuine sympathy. "For what it's worth, I'm sorry."

United nations undermine strife's eternal discord. Should our unrest near desperation, nations united must be ever ready. Zeal encourages respective openness to world order. —Quaid

Day 12

Darian drove for most of the night, giving Sunni several hours of much-needed rest. He mulled over the past few days' events with anxiety, more so about what would transpire in the days to come.

They had stopped only for gas—where he had discovered Marius's mentor-slash-gaoler—and at a few rest areas on the way to stretch their legs. He had taken the chance to examine himself in the mirror at the last one—by his estimations, he was now about 21, maybe even as old as 23 in physical age, up from between 17 and 19 after his death. The rate of his advanced aging distressed him; unless he could find some way to youthen himself, he would soon be an old man.

Also, their last conversation before he let Sunni rest unnerved him, to say the least:

Who was that?

Dr. Kale treated Marius. His daughter was someone who I thought was dead.

Dead? Why?

We had... She was once the only person who ever liked me, despite my trying to push everyone away, and when I finally befriended her, she vanished. All this time, I assumed it was the syndicate who took her out, but she'd just moved. I was paranoid over nothing. The syndicate may not have even cared who I associated with, and I could have had thousands of friends, like Kotaro.

...and you didn't want to catch up with that girl, to have a talk with her after all this time? What's bothering you?

I nearly killed him, Sunni.

Why was that?

Kale told me that he was ultimately responsible for my abuse, even if he wasn't the one who actually abused me.

He didn't know you would be mistreated.

I know that, but my heart didn't. I wanted justice... No—revenge. All that stopped me was his wife shooting me herself.

Now I keep thinking... What if I hadn't been abused? What if I had been brought up normally, like all the others? What would've kept me from becoming one of them? I might have been a criminal – and proud of it. I might even have enjoyed killing people for no good reason.

—but you didn't. You have a conscience and you want to do good.

But I killed Kotaro, too, and I had no reason to do it!

You said you didn't want him to know about your ability, eh?

That's no excuse. I could have been honest with him and explained what was going on.

Things worked out. No harm done—sort of.

But I'll always have that vision in my head of seeing him dead at my hands... I never wanted to hurt anyone ever again, yet there I was, ruthlessly killing my best friend.

I don't know what to tell you. Sometimes bad things happen, but many of them make us better people in the process.

Is that's all that's keeping me from being a truly bad person, that I don't want to hurt people because I myself was hurt? It horrifies me thinking of how much worse my life could have been...

Well, there's no use thinking about that. You can't change your past, and you shouldn't let what could have been negatively affect who you are now.

As true as her words were, Darian just couldn't shake the feeling of something dark inside of him, something that shamed him deeply. He had seen a glimpse of it when he'd killed Lance, and it paralyzed him with fright that it could strike again at any moment like it had, regardless of whether he could undo any damage done.

He hadn't even been paying attention to the road, he realized. It was the first time he had driven a vehicle, but it felt as though he had been doing it for years. Sometimes it scared him, all of these things he seemed to be capable of doing, but it felt *good* all the same. He just hoped it wouldn't also feel good to do something like commit murder again.

As they approached the large coastal city, one building in particular stood out from all of them—an isolated complex on an island just off the mainland. It seemed strange in particular because there didn't appear to be any actual bridges leading to it.

"We're here," he said, nudging Sunni.

She roused after a bit. "Hmm? Where are we?"

"Sound of Silence Coastal Port, Square One Capital."

"Where do we go from here?"

He pointed to the island. "See that building?"

"... that's strange," Sunni mused, twitching an ear. "How do we get there?"

"I'm assuming we're not *supposed* to get there."

"Ah. A big hint, isn't it?"

They pulled into a campsite area, parking the RV. "I don't want you to get in trouble," Darian ordered, "so stay here and pull out if it gets too rough."

"Oh?" Sunni put her arms on her hips in disapproval. "What am I

going to do, then? Knit sweaters or something?"

"I'll be fine," he scolded. "You'll be a hinderance."

"Is that so, Mr. Adult? Remember that I was hired as a *bodyguard*, so I'm going to be more useful than you think."

He cringed at the idea of telling her off. "... the same way you were useful when you let your feelings keep you from protecting Alex's mother after her father was killed?"

In anticipation, he flinched at that scowl of hers—more frightening than anything Darian could comprehend. Yet he didn't know of any other way of getting his point across.

"Miss Sunni, I know that you haven't told Alex why you're *really* her guardian yet, and I don't want more complications than there already have been. If I don't return in – a day, how about, you can come try to help after that... Okay?"

Sunni rolled her eyes at his assessment of her.

"... please."

She shrugged. "I don't understand what it is you men seem to have to prove, but you're going to have your way regardless, *aren't* you?"

"What is *that* supposed to mean?"

Sunni looked away. "It means you'd *better* bring her back."

With a sigh of resignation, Darian headed toward the main city, not certain what to expect.

9.12

Callisto looked over the existing records, running the figures in her head. "The Pachi accounts, if liquidated at current value, add up to well into eleven digits," she relayed. "If you hadn't killed your parents, you could've gotten access to the funds immediately—yet you're even giving *that* up for this quest?"

Sammy had just finished off the last of an eighteenth carton of mint chocolate swirl gourmet ice cream, somewhat to Callisto's dismay. "Wealth is meaningless. I have a much greater aim in mind."

"It must be serious, then."

"Quite serious. You could say I've waited a very long time for this moment." Unexpectedly, Sammy yawned, to their mutual surprise. "Oh. I feel a nappy coming on..."

Callisto glanced at Alex, reaching down to feel for her pulse, but the cold made it difficult to find without medical training. "She's not going to make it."

"Whatever – that's fine..."

Stretching, Sammy walked over to Lammergeir, petting the gryphon in adoration. As it cooed, the gryphon elongated into a fluffy bed, where Sammy lay, stretching out and snuggling under a blanket of feathers.

Callisto was at a crossroads. She had no idea how long the crushed sleeping pills mixed in with the ice cream would last—if it had taken twenty tubs to even begin to have an effect—or if she would be able to escape with Alex in that time, especially if the "resonance" meant she and Sammy now had a shared, possibly unbreakable link. It would be simple to escape on her own, but there were already too many lives invested in this escapade as it was, regardless of whether they were taken at her own hand.

It was simple. The only thing she could do was the only thing she was capable of doing... Her path was clear.

With a click of her heel, Callisto walked from the room, ascending the stairs to the helipad and hopping into the awaiting copter...

10.11

Circling the sound's edge for the ninth or tenth time, Darian stared at the water below, down the cliff. He had talked with several bystanders already, and not one of them seemed to have any clue what the purpose the building was for, much less how to get in or out of it. "It's abandoned," they warned. "If there was ever a bridge going to the island, it must have gotten demolished long ago."

So why leave it standing there? If it's not of historical significance, like many of the landmarks in X-Two, why not tear the building down and put something new in its place? No one seemed to have an answer for that, either. It may've been possible to inquire at the town hall, but Darian didn't have the time for that.

However, that was clearly where he had to go—the resonance now seemed methodical, arranged—*deliberate*—compared to its initial chaos and dissonance. It seemed to beckon him, offering the reward of completing the melody if he came nearer...

Melody?

"Hmm," he pondered, hesitating for a fraction of an instant before descending the side of the cliff. He stopped at the bank for an even smaller fraction of an instant before wading into the raging waters...

The water was his ally even now. With a subtle sploosh, he dove into the icy depths, barely feeling the chill over his skin. The current led the way as he whipped gracefully toward the island, not once doubting his trust in the symphony of the waves. He had been underwater for what felt like an eternity as he rejoiced in the freedom of the tides, but only a short while had passed before he reached the opposite bank, almost sorry that his aquatic journey was over.

Darian dried off before approaching the building's front doors. The

complex itself didn't seem to be that old, but if it was, it had aged well. It didn't appear to be condemned, either—the structure seemed just as sturdy and well-kept as any other building in the city, though its architecture was distinctly its own.

What now? he thought. *Just walk in?*

He approached the door and found it locked—no surprise, but easily fixed. Inside...

To his *immense* surprise, the building's interior was clean and dust-free. If it had been abandoned, he would've expected to find no end of bugs and debris lying about the place, but it was as though a cleaning crew had just finished their duty. For some reason, this unsettled him much more.

He located the directory and skimmed the layout. The penthouse offices seemed to be the most typical place to establish a base of operations, so he ascended the five flights of stairs, not sure what to expect.

The resonance was becoming more synchronous now, undulating in vivid tones—musically, as Alex described—with the faint backdrop of – a copter? "Alex," he whispered, opening the main office door with caution...

With a jolt, Darian felt himself being thrown through the air, reeling as though he had collided with something but not registering any impact.

"What—"

What—

"An interesting combination," squeaked a tiny, barely audible voice, "if I do say so myself."

Landing gracelessly on his backside, Darian scanned the area to find his assailant. The room appeared to be empty except for a small child on the opposite side, sitting up on a feathery gryphon-like bed.

"Pardon me if I seem a bit grouchy," moaned the child. "You woke me from my nappy, and I hadn't slept in so long..."

The resonance was a melodic jumble of sound, beautiful notes with no apparent order.

"Who are y—"

That's Sammy—

"Guh!" Something was wrong. Darian grabbed his head, struggling with the thoughts intruding his mind. It felt as though there was someone—"Wait a m—"

Darian?

"Did you want a mirror? It's quite hilarious." With a laugh and a wave of the hand, the child seemed to call into existence a large, full-body mirror before him...

...no, not calling it—collecting it, from tiny bits of reflective surfaces in the room.

"What—"

With a shock, Darian stared into the mirror, but what he saw wasn't his own reflection.

Nor mine.

"Have you caught on yet?" the child cried. "Is the resonance more in synch now?"

"Resonance—"

Resonance—

How did the child know about their resonance? ...and what had just happened to him?

Sammy—as he assumed the child was called—stood at full height, perhaps half of Darian's, to emphasize the weight of the moment in doing so. "Haven't you ever felt like you were part of something greater than yourself? Something – truly epic?"

"How do you mean?"

Something greater?

Darian... The consciousness that thought it was Darian looked into the mirror again, staring at the unfamiliar person whose image it reflected. Half a head shorter—*taller*—with dirty blue—*brown*—mane falling in loose curls, and brown eyes—*with flecks of sky blue*—

He pushed up his sleeve and stared at the familiar scars on his arm, now barely visible over smooth, silky skin that wasn't his own.

"Alex?"

Darian?

He felt nauseated at the idea. "Alex? Are you – *inside* of me?"

No! You're inside of me! Let's get out of here!

Escape made the most sense, but it was hard trying to process what had happened to them, much less coordinate their movement.

"To be honest," Sammy continued as though a miniature version of one of those spy movie villains, "I wasn't sure if I could do it, after our first encounter, but my abilities seem to be greater when one of you is near death, as it were."

"Near death—!"

I was comatose from severe hypothermia...

For a moment, Sammy stopped paying attention. "That's strange... I wonder where Callisto went. Perhaps I should summon her for the final—"

With another jolt, the floor blew out from below them, and Darian scrambled to get ahold of something—anything—to keep from falling. With an unexpected grace, he latched his claws into a part of the wall, climbing against falling debris. Sammy disappeared from sight, though that wasn't his most immediate concern.

"What's going on?"

Callisto?

As he hefted up onto a support beam, no longer in imminent danger, Darian realized he could sense things for which he had no prior awareness—the lingering odor of an electric detonation, a hint of the plastique smell that even a bomb-sniffing animal would have trouble detecting...

Did Callisto set that bomb?

"Who's Callisto?"

Let's get situated first...

Darian scrambled onto more solid ground, but the floor continued to shake—though erratically. It couldn't be from the explosion...?

He ran from the office and down the hallway to what appeared to be a deck overlooking the sea, the opposite end of the building from the sound. The lurching feeling continued, followed by tremors, as though of footsteps.

"Did you think you'd lost me?" screamed Sammy. Darian turned to find something like a gryphon with I-beams for legs and mortar for feathers. "No—that couldn't've been you, could it? You wouldn't have planted those bombs under yourself..."

He was too aghast at the sight to do anything, rooting in place.

Jump! NOW!

He perceived a fraction of a tick's notice before a second detonation went off, again collapsing the floor beneath them. Sammy and the gryphon fell only a short distance before catching hold of a ledge for support. At the same instant, something fell into Darian's face—a rope ladder.

"Grab it!" shouted a voice from above as he saw a copter overhead, its presence otherwise masked by the chaos of the building's collapse.

Callisto!

It was difficult to make an informed decision in the time they had—he could only trust that this Callisto was on their side.

She is! ...I hope.

He scrambled up the ladder and into the awaiting copter, startled to see the ursa woman from the syndicate. *She* was Callisto?

"Do you know how to fire a rocket launcher?" the woman shouted.

Buh? "Not exactly—"

"Do you know how to fly a copter?"

"N—" Another flash... "Yes."

"Take the controls!"

He took the pitch stick as Callisto slid out of the pilot's seat. She rushed to the back of the cabin and lifted onto her shoulder a rocket launcher that would have looked comical on her in any other situation, aiming it at Sammy as Darian steadied their flight path.

Funny thing was, he wouldn't have expected Sammy to have waited long enough for them to get away and mount an att—

SHOOM

He watched as the rocket flew straight toward the gryphon's back as it fought to climb its way up the collapsing building. Time seemed to slow as the rocket made its approach...

Despite having more attention on not falling again, Sammy didn't seem put off by the rocket in the least. It impacted with no visible effect as the child glared up at them.

"It didn't work!" he cried.

Thank you, master of the obvious.

"Get us out of here, then," Callisto shouted, tossing aside the rocket

launcher. "I had hoped the pills would've slowed—"

Just then, she froze, choking. "What's wrong?" Darian cried, but it was too hard to see what was happening and pilot at the same time.

She gave no response that he could hear over the noise of the copter other than a faint gurgling sound. He risked a look back into the cabin and saw what looked like Callisto—protruding from the floor of the fuselage. Was that Sammy's work? That meant even at this range...

There was no time to worry about Callisto. He set the copter to fly straight ahead, just to get as far from the building as possible before—

CL-CL-CLUNK

He could guess what that sound was. Sure enough, a warning light flared red to indicate a critical failure in the main rotor—he imagined fusing the whole thing together might do that.

We have to jump!

"Thank you, mistress of the obvious," he muttered, dashing into the cabin. The Callisto-shaped protrusion in the floor was barely a bump now, which gave him—and her—the creeps. What a horrible way to die!

They were losing altitude quickly. He lunged for a parachute – only to find the packs fused into an unusable mess. Seriously? Sammy was more fiendish than he'd realized. At least over the open sea, they had a chance of surviving the impact, if they were lucky.

He went to the open cabin door, watching the sea rise to meet them at a rapid clip. The wind rushed past his ears as he hurled himself from the falling copter, and it took lightning reflexes to react quickly enough to dive into the sea—

—where the water rushed past his skin like a cool breeze. Hitting the water at that speed should have been deadly, but their combined density seemed to give them greater resilience than normal, which could explain the gryphon's resilience. He dove to hide their whereabouts, whisking through the murk with considerable difficulty—he hadn't realized how much more cumbersome it was having a whole other person inside him, ick factor aside. With a mental laugh, it occurred to him that Alex couldn't complain about their not being close enough *now*.

Gah, not this close! And let's just get away!

Of course. Only... As he passed his maximum diving depth did he realize he wouldn't have enough air to return to the surface.

—but that's no problem.

Unconsciously, he waved his hand, forming an air bubble around his face.

Hurry! This is difficult to do!

What happened?

I broke the water into its separate elements! There's oxygen for us to breathe, but not much!

Wasting no more time, Darian dove deeper, swimming against the current as it swept out from the coastline for a full li. It felt unnatural, but

heading toward land was their best hope.

How much farther? I'm still weak from illness.

By the time he sensed it was safe to surface and started to ascend—

Oh... This is much too hard...

What? He was short of breath... He—they wouldn't make it to the surface in time!

I-I'm trying, I tell you! It's too far, though... I'm too exhausted!

No! They wouldn't make it! They—

Darian kicked against the bottom, making a mad struggle to get to safety. They couldn't... They...

A choking sensation overcame them as they inhaled in reflex, taking in water. The pain was quick, sharp...

They thrashed with wild abandon, then...

Peacefulness...

Every new dawn is new growth. —Apache

Day 13

There was nothing but an aura of cool blue, if it could be given a colour. It was empty, but peaceful.

Is this oblivion?

Oblivion is darker, emptier. It is cold and lonely, unforgiving.

This is better. It is not the best, but it is fine.

It is unfavourable.

What happened?

They passed beyond the brink of life, but only peeking over the edge. It is simple to return.

Then why not return?

Return is a conscious effort. Where there is no will, there is no life.

True – but where there is no life, there is no suffering.

To suffer requires memories, and there are many more memories now, more than one life could know.

Will they all be remembered?

No soul can retain all memories in life.

This is not death, though.

No, it is not.

It is like a dream, but without feelings.

These are her memories, then...

...and these are his.

They are remarkably different, even over the course of shared experiences.
How utterly remarkable.

...there are memories blocked off to her.

The same with her memories, blocked off to him.

Are they so secret?

He should not care.

Nor should she.

But there is no desire to delve.

Truly... What of these memories? They are shared freely?

Those memories are from the database records at the criminal organization headquarters. They were absorbed without conscious effort, perhaps shared without conscious effort.

These records are significant. They will destroy her.

Indeed.

Can she not know?

It may happen.

What of him? Will he act upon them?

That may happen.

Will they end the wars?

Possibly, but there is no guarantee with the masses.

Wars should end.

Yes, but for that to happen, there must be life.

Then let there be life.

It is a self-conscious decision. When he was dead, it was a failure to want to live. When he returned, it was a rekindled desire to live again.

But there is fear.

There should be no fear... **You** should not fear.

Afraid... She is... I am...

He knows... **I** know there is nothing to fear.

I can't... It's horrible...

I will be there to help you through trouble.

I can't live with this knowledge!

Don't be afraid. I will be there.

I... I want—

Leave a single tear/But only show smiles. —Aine

Day 14

Darian—*Alex*—awoke with a start. They breathed with difficulty, struggling with the realization that they were still a conjoined entity.

"Ah, jou awaken," Sunni explained in common. "I findink jou just now on the rivers bank, no sure who jou are. I go to take to ospital."

"Sunni!" they blurted. "It's me - er, us."

She looked quite surprised. "Who?"

"Guh! Just - step back."

Darian focused, restoring their body to their original, separate two. Alex appeared just to his left, rubbing up against his side as she solidified. Embarrassed at the closeness, she backed away, though Darian slumped over where he was.

"Oh!" Sunni cried, her voice frantic. "Just what happened to the two of you? Where have you been?"

Alex looked confused at his lethargy. "Darian?" she asked, nudging him softly. He snapped awake again, as though fighting narcolepsy.

"I'm sorry," he apologized, perhaps guessing from the look on her face that whatever he did was wrong and getting that much out of the way.

"We're both fine now, aren't we? What's the matter?"

He mused over this in silence for several moments. "Your will was stronger than mine," he muttered at last.

"What does that mean?"

"There've been more times than I can count when I wondered why didn't I just die and be done with it. I don't believe I would've come around if I had decided to stay dead. Only the thought of disappointing you kept me tethered to this life. You, on the other hand, have a strong will and returned more quickly from the oblivion..."

She thought about this a moment. "...daka'aranoa," she whispered.

He cringed as though in agony. "Please don't *ever* say that again."

"The verbal shorthand for your ident—that weird number tattooed on your back?"

"The way Lance and Lion said it was more like an insult."

She nodded. Of course he would have such strong feelings about it, and she couldn't blame him. At the same time, it was hard to dismiss from her mind now that she knew its significance, like the solution to a puzzle: octal for a partial of his year and date of birth.

"Why octal?" she asked, hoping at least that much was safe to ask.

"It's a long story." Darian stood with the groan of someone who hadn't used his muscles in decades. He walked to the bathroom and looked at himself in the mirror. "I'm the same," he announced.

"Of course you are," she affirmed.

"I mean – as when I came to rescue you. Unless I'm past the point when drastic age is noticeable, I haven't aged from coming to life again."

"Really?" Alex cheered.

He continued to stare at himself in the mirror in silence, as though working out the answer to a difficult problem in his head. "Our abilities are greater in each others' presence," he deduced, giving her a look of wonder.

Now she was confused. "How's that?"

He returned to her side, looking deep into her eyes. "All the times I aged in conspicuous amounts, I was alone—or, away from you. I don't think I've gotten that much older now, even though we both drowned, because we were together."

"That's amazing," she whispered. "It means we..."

"...what?"

She blushed in embarrassment, smiling all the same. "Nothing, I—" Suddenly, she froze, the smile disappearing from her face just as quickly as it had appeared.

"What's wrong, Alex?" Sunni asked, concerned.

"What does it mean? Sammy, that child with the gryphon, also has a strange power—"

"—of combination?" Darian interrupted.

Alex stared at him. "You know?"

"I found one of the doctors from the clinic who escaped execution," he explained. "He described our leader's twin children mysteriously joining together into one—"

"No!" she cried.

"What's the matter?"

"I know that! I remember it from my... Our..."

Darian furrowed his brow. "The talk we had during our coma?"

Alex covered her ears, trying not to hear him. "It was just a dream! None of it was true!"

He said nothing, recalling the discussion in silence.

"What talk?" Sunni asked. "I don't follow. What is it?"

Alex whined in denial to herself, her voice a high-pitched squeal. "No, no, no, no, no—"

Darian gave Sunni a blank stare. "When we shared a body—in our unconsciousness, we could see into each other's thoughts. Some memories were blocked off on purpose, but other ones were shared freely, without restraint. I believe – she saw something that she didn't mean to remember and I didn't mean to share."

"What?"

He frowned. "...remember what I told you at the prison?"

Alex's face was soaked with a fresh torrent of tears. "I don't want to believe..."

Sunni put an arm on her shoulder. "Alex—"

"NO!" she screeched. "That means you know it's true! I won't believe it! I—" Her hands trembled in shock.

"Alex—"

She wheeled on Darian in rage at his complacency. "You bastard! Why didn't you... You..."

It was clear he didn't have an answer for her. All he did was look at her with that gloomy expression.

"IT'S ALL A LIE!"

In anger, Alex ripped her mother's ring from her finger, shattering it with her power before running away. "Alex!" Sunni shouted, chasing after her. They ran for almost two li before she caught up.

"Just leave me alone!"

Sunni grabbed her firmly by the shoulders and looked straight into her eyes—into her soul. It was unsettling how she did that, considering how Sunni was always a warm, cheery person, only upset when there was danger. It made Alex feel somewhat ashamed to have ruined her mood like that...

"Little sister," she said, both with familiarity and as a scolding, "what exactly do you mean by running away like that?"

It took her several mins to gather herself enough to speak. "Did — you know all along?"

"I didn't realize until he explained to me what they were that the shots were experimental. All I'd needed to believe all this time was that they were normal booster shots, same as any seasonal flu shot."

"My parents... What did they do to me?"

"They had you take part in a clinical study for science—even if for science with a corrupt bankroll."

"And he just acts casual about it? Why did he hide the truth, if he knew?"

"He didn't want to hurt you—"

"*Hurt me?* I'm more hurt that he... that... I..."

It was clear that Alex was reaching. She had no reason to be angry with Darian, but she had no idea where to pin the blame. Her parents—no, they had been coerced the whole time... That damned syndicate—but that felt too obvious, and too vague, like shaking her fist at the shadows.

"You know, you should go easier on him—he's more fragile than you think," Sunni scolded. "This whole time, he's been about the same mass, even though he's gotten taller."

Alex gave her a curious look, not sure what to make of it.

"It's a side effect of his ability. From what he's told me about himself, he was a rather sturdy kid and could hold his

own in a fight. He'd hurt, but he'd still get by without more than some scars and bruises. Now, I think he could break a bone just from hitting something too hard, like in that gaol cell."

The notion frightened her. The world was falling apart before her eyes—this whole mess was just getting worse all the time. It made her feel selfish thinking so much of her own problems while glossing over Darian's, even if she wasn't given the opportunity to know about them until now.

Sunni's voice broke her train of thought. "Also, did you realize that Darian's been violently ill every time he's had to say or do something to hurt you?"

"Ill?"

She nodded. "He experiences a severe nausea whenever he has done something that conflicts with his heart. I've ruled out having food poisoning, and just being injured or having poor posture won't do that to a person—not this regularly."

Alex's eyes were as wide as plates. "But – he's never even told *me* that he's been sick."

"He told me that he experiences it almost every day, in varying amounts. I expect he never told you because he didn't want to trouble you with his problems."

"But I..." Her hands trembled in uncertainty. "I thought..."

"He says it started when he thought that his friend had been killed by—"

"But I thought Kotaro—"

"Not Kotaro," Sunni corrected. "A girl named Aitne who lived near him but moved away."

Did the secrets ever end? "A girl...?"

"I know what you must be thinking... They were somewhat close, yes, but only somewhat. Certainly not close enough that you should be so worried about it."

Once the information took hold, she couldn't make herself not worry about it, though. "He had a girl..."

"The same way you had Locke, eh?"

"But Locke was – you know..." Why was she so clearly wrong so much of the time?

"I think you're thinking too hard about this. The point is that Darian has been afraid to get close to anyone ever since he thought they had killed her, and it tears him up inside when he thinks that he's hurt someone. It's probably psychological, but that's what's been happening."

It was hard to put the substance of her jealousy into words. Sunni

didn't seem to suggest this Aitne had been his girlfriend before—and even if she had been, it was part of his past, as Locke was part of hers. Why did it matter if he had had other friends before they had even met? Was it wrong to have felt more special in believing she was Darian's first?

...did she even *like* Darian anymore for it to be an issue now? Her emotions were eating her up from within. It was all she could do not to just collapse on the spot and give up living so the pain would stop—like Darian had admitted to wanting to do. There was too much information to digest.

"So," she muttered, biting her lip. "Are there any more secrets between us?"

"—one more thing," Sunni confessed, almost too quietly to hear. "I had something else I needed to tell you, but I never knew how to explain before.."

Alex stared at her. *She* had been keeping secrets from her as well, all this time?

"I don't have access to any of your parents' money. What we've been living on for the last few months is what my sister has been sending me."

"Sister!" She was gob-smacked. "You have a *sister* and never told me?"

Sunni's face expressed her discomfort. "I didn't even know she was still alive, after she disappeared when I was little. It was hard to believe, hearing from her so many years later, but she made me swear not to tell anyone what she wanted me to do."

"Who is she?"

"She's one of the members of the Technological Brigade, the secret society dedicated to ensuring the preservation of the Route to Enlightenment. She - led us here, to Darian."

"How does she know about Darian?"

"She's the Geography teacher at your school."

Her jaw dropped to realize the connection she had never made prior to that moment. "So, really - *she* set us up?"

Sunni shrugged as though amused at having been caught. "In a way—she claims some of the teachers were in on it, too."

Frau Greif! she thought, feeling used.

"You're not mad, are you?"

"So it's like *the whole world* wants us together - yet..."

"Have the two of you talked about it?"

She shook her head. They hadn't talked—really *talked*—since that day on the rooftop, and that was about random nonsense. No, it seemed that one thing or another kept coming up before they could.

"Well, now's as good a time as any. You have a lot to

clear up between the two of you."

Alex still felt too angry for that, but it was time to stop punishing him for things that were out of *all* of their hands. "Fine," she conceded, if it meant no more misunderstandings about where they stood.

7.07

Sunni returned to the RV after a spell, arm around Alex's shoulder. Darian hadn't moved in that time; from the look on Sunni's face, she seemed to be surprised by this. His own face reflected a matching guilt, though for what was difficult even for him to say, but at least he'd managed to keep his lunch down this time.

Alex seemed hesitant to be around him—he couldn't blame her, if she was. Their relationship had been heavily influenced by the need to lie to each other and was strained in the times they had been together that it was hard to tell where either of them stood in the other's eyes.

At last Darian stood, approaching in caution out of fear of offending her again. He had kept his fist clenched but now opened his hand to give her back her ring, restored. "You dropped—"

She started to bolt in disgust, but he caught her arm. "Let go!" she snapped, not pleased with his offering.

"Alex, please."

The calm in his voice was unexpected, even to Darian. She relaxed but remained hesitant, trembling. "I don't want it."

"I undid the engraving," he explained. "While you were gone, I spent the time crafting something else in its place."

Her brown eyes met his blue, her curiosity raised. He offered the ring to her again, and this time she took it, reading the pair of characters he had painstakingly carved: 灰 and 色.

"Grey," he prompted.

She was speechless.

He closed his hands around hers. "Remember—I promised you, in our unconsciousness, that I would be here to help you through this. Even if you want to run away, to bury the truth, live a new life, and forget the past, I will be here to help you through the pain. I may not know much about living well, but I couldn't live with myself if you stayed miserable for the rest of your life. You deserve to be happy."

There weren't many moments in their time together when he could remember her not crying—but this time, when she did, it felt better. Hers were tears of relief, of empathy...

She leapt on him, nearly knocking him over as she buried her face in his chest. His expression turned from astonishment to compassion as he returned the embrace, gently stroking her mane as she sobbed freely, openly, with Sunni watching on in approval. They remained that way for a good

while, none of them desiring to shatter the moment.

Alex sniffed, replacing the ring on her finger without letting go of him. "Thank you," she whispered. "I'll treasure it always."

He smiled with all his heart. "Whatever I can do to help."

"I'm sorry I called you a bastard."

He shrugged. "Well, I am one."

She slapped him on the arm.

"No, really. I doubt my parents were married when my father ra—"

"Hey." Alex strained her head back to look him in the eye. "You know I feel uncomfortable with you telling me things like that."

Nevertheless, she seemed relaxed as he smirked in response. "It's the truth, though. Would you rather I lie again?"

Her face gradually warmed to him. "No. Never again."

"I thought not."

Pleased, she gave him a tight squeeze, secretly hoping they would get stuck that way. At lengths, she relaxed her hold. "We have to—"

"—find Sammy," Darian finished.

Her eyes narrowed. "...what?"

Sunni looked on, confused. "Who is Sammy?"

Darian glanced up at her. "Our third."

"Someone – else?"

He nodded, then returned his gaze to the Riordan building. "One of the things Sammy said to us was, 'Haven't you ever felt like you were part of something greater than yourself?'"

"What does that mean?" Sunni asked, shaking her head. "What's significant about that?"

"I did some thinking, especially in our unconscious, where I was able to access our memories with greater clarity. I realize what Sammy's plans are, and there's no way just to run from them." He stared into Alex's eyes. "If we are to live free from this ordeal, we must strike now, before Sammy can strike us."

Alex shook her head. "But Sammy's—"

"No. The destruction only collapsed part of the top floor. Sammy is fine but doesn't quite know where we are at the moment."

"But – what are we going to do once we find Sammy?"

He didn't respond, hesitant to say.

"Darian..."

"I promised I'd be here for you, didn't I?"

Alex stared at him, uncertain why he was being evasive.

"I know what has to happen, but there's no way I can prepare you for it. It's a decision you will have to make when the time comes."

"What does *that* mean?"

"It means I want you to trust me that I know this is what's best for all of us."

She shook her head, unable to understand. "How can I trust you?"

Darian glowered at her, closing his eyes and gritting his teeth. "You can't. If – after all the things we've been through, you can't trust me and I can't trust you, then... You just *can't*." His fists clenched in frustration. "I don't know what else to tell you anymore, Alex. All I know is that whatever this is only going to end when we face Sammy for one last time. I'll support your decision—whatever you want to do—but it's all going to be a waste of time trying to avoid the inevitable by running away before then."

He was getting tired. It was a seesaw, where if one of them was up, the other was down. It was too much to handle anymore, and it made him angry thinking the weight was all on his shoulders...

"Darian."

He opened his eyes again, staring into her sorrowful eyes.

"I'm – sorry," she sputtered. "I'll trust you."

He said nothing.

"Really, I'll do what you say."

"I know," he whispered. In his heart, however, he wasn't sure.

"So... Where do we go from here?"

"There," he indicated, pointing to a discreet loading bay on the far side of the island. "Seems odd that the loading bay would face the sea, eh?"

Alex nodded as though in a daze. "What's there?"

"That's the access point," Darian explained. "The building proper is merely a front for the whole operation."

"You think—"

"It leads underground."

"Curious," Sunni interjected.

At this, Darian turned to face her. "I know you won't appreciate this, but I need to ask you to stay behind again, Miss Sunni."

She made a sarcastic pout. "And why *this* time? You know I'm running out of things to do while you run off and play!"

He rolled his eyes at her words. "I mean it. This is hard enough for me with Alex, much less you in the picture. This is, in every respect, something that involves only the three of us, due to our shared resonance, and worrying about someone else in addition to Alex and me would only stress the situation more."

"You *do* understand how hard a time I have believing you, don't you?"

"Quite."

Sunni crossed her arms in defeat. "Fine. I'm not your mother, nor your guardian, so I can't tell you what to do. However..." She eyed Alex with a parental look.

Alex seemed hesitant to say anything at first, but... "I agree with him, Sunni."

"Is that your final say in the matter?"

"...yes. I relieve you of your obligation to my family. If we don't return—"

It was difficult to imagine a more emotionally-charged moment in all of their shared history. Darian finally broke the silence. "We ought to go before Sammy can have the first move."

"Yes," Sunni agreed, extending her hand in courtesy. "If we do not meet again... It was a pleasure meeting you, good sir."

Darian shook it, bowing with gracious deference. "I'm sorry for all the trouble I've caused you."

"No apologies. Trouble was always headed our way."

She turned to Alex, and the two women hugged as though they were truly family. "You were always like a big sister," Alex cooed. "I appreciate everything you've done for us and wish you the best."

"Good luck, then, little sister."

9.09

Alex fastened an all-weather torch to her belt, then she and Darian descended to the edge of the bank.

"Ready?" he asked.

Alex took his hand. "As ready as I'll get."

Their resonance hummed with radiant beauty, almost a perfect song except for its erratic tempo. With anticipation, they waded in synch into the rushing waters.

The chill of the sea was hard to get used to experiencing. Darian led the way, with Alex forming fresh air for them at regular intervals. As she became attuned to the water, however, she noticed Darian pausing, as if in thought, deliberately looking for something. It was awkward asking him while in transit, though, and nothing else seemed out of the ordinary.

They reached the island again, drying off at his restorative touch as Alex struggled to fit all the pieces of their quest together. What was she not seeing that made them have to come back here? "Did you feel it?" he asked, still looking.

"Feel what?"

"The current is leading toward the island, but not away. It doesn't wave in and out like everywhere else, which is why we had such a hard time escaping before."

She paused, thoughtful. "I guess you're correct. Funny how I didn't notice it then."

"Then, we were fleeing for our lives."

"Yeah, true... So, now what?"

They approached the loading bay area, listening carefully for signs

of activity. Hesitantly, Darian touched the door, tapping its history for a state of openness. To their surprise, it seemed to take quite a bit of effort.

With an eerie clunk, the door slid upwards, creaking in agony as it rolled up into the wall above it. Again to their surprise, the interior was free of neglect—no dust or spiders or other noticeable age.

"Weird," he mused. "It doesn't seem like the place has been used in most of a millenium, but it's still clean as a whistle."

"Really?" Alex cried. "That long? How is that possible?"

"That's the one thing I'm not sure about," he said, rubbing his chin in thought. "The door hasn't been opened since Year 0, yet the interior is pristine. I don't get anything about that."

She raised an eyebrow. "But you understand the current flowing toward the island?"

"It has everything to do with where we are. I knew it was hidden, but to hide it here..." His voice trailed off expectantly, as though prompting something, but no answers came.

Alex put her hands on her hips, annoyed. "...and I seriously can't know what's so special about this place until we find Sammy?"

A thoughtful pause. "No, you can know, but I don't know if it will make a difference. We're at the start of the Route to Enlightenment."

Her jaw dropped. "The... Really? Are you sure?"

"It's quite subtle, but with some study of an aerial view of the layout of the city I could see that there was a path leading through it. I just didn't understand why it began here until we got here." Darian pointed outwards, towards the sea. "This is the main intake for the central cooling system for the planet's perpetual-motion machinery. In order to keep running, they need to maintain a stable temperature, and considering this area is the most temperate region in the world, it makes sense to get its water from here."

She stared in incomprehension. "How does the system work?"

"It's a lot of math, but—to summarize—they determined the exact amount of propulsion the planet requires, and where, in order to continue a precisely regular calendar. Then they built a complex network of machines not only to generate that propulsion but also to maintain itself without any outside interference. It's quite ingenious, really, which is why our calendar is established around its installation."

She clenched her fists. "...and my father..."

"Alex?"

"It's bad enough he and my mother experimented on me like I was a lab animal, but why did he want to tamper with the planet's self-regulator—hundreds if not *thousands* of years of work? Didn't they seal this off for a reason, to keep their efforts protected from interference?"

Darian didn't have an answer for her, which made him feel guilty because his silence was a signal to Alex that he knew why and wasn't going to tell her.

"Fine," she spat, frustrated. "Let's get going."

The loading area was itself an expansive, empty area. After lighting the torch, Darian took a min to locate the stairs leading down, hidden below a nondescript section of tile that Alex demolished with ease. The tunnel into the planet's hidden depths passed layers upon layers of pipes, each churning thousands of litres of water, though they seemed as well-kept as the day they were first made. It gave both of them chills to know they were the first ones to see it in operation in over seven hundred years. Paths branched off every which way, but Darian seemed to follow the main cooling pipes.

"How far are we going?" she asked.

"You'll know when we get there," he answered cryptically. She was about to protest again when she realized he was correct—their resonance, an unwavering harmony of sound in its purest, most vibrant form, had become a beautiful syncopated melody. As they progressed, the tempo became more regular... more beautiful.

They walked for what felt like a thousand li—though it was perhaps closer to fifty—before the resonance died down, falling out of synch again. "Did we pass it?" Alex asked, concerned, but Darian waved in dismissal. He seemed to listen for something, something other than the resonance, which prompted Alex to do the same.

"Just a little further," he said, following the pipes as though out of loyalty. She had her doubts, but she didn't want yet another repeat of their earlier spats. All the same, her feet were getting sore from walking, and she was pretty sure it was getting quite late in the day.

"How much—" Alex broke off her question as they entered a giant chamber, filled with a vast, complex system of gears and meters, every item labelled in an unintelligible script. In the chamber, their resonance hummed brilliantly, like the soundtrack of their life...

...and yet – something was still missing.

"Sammy's coming," Darian declared.

With a burst of energy, their resonance blossomed into the most wonderful music imaginable, an excited tempo and throbbing beat matching that of their racing hearts. It was enough to make Alex weep with sheer joy except for the situation. "I didn't expect you to have gone ahead," Sammy murmured, once again riding the large gryphon made of mortar and I-beams. "It was my understanding that you wanted no part of this."

"That is *her* decision," he retorted, glancing at Alex.

"Hers?" Sammy asked, puzzled. "You don't have an opinion?"

"I do, but I promised to support her choice."

Sammy was condescending. "Do you even know why we're here?"

Uncertain, she balked, unable to give a response either way.

"The universe was created," Darian began, dramatically, "by will—the will—to fabricate, to experience... to **be**. The religious-minded call this will God or YHWH or Allah or a myriad of other names, but its real name is the soul. The soul divided itself into infinity across the universe, bringing life to our planet by sheer force of determination, but this fragmented soul

can only self-perpetuate in any individual form of life for a short time before it must rest again—die."

"Correct, my student." Sammy applauded in derision. Numb at the concept, Alex could only stare at Darian.

He continued, though he seemed hesitant. "The oldest soul is that of the *piniakc*, which revives itself before death by flying back into its place of birth—a star. In doing so, it destroys its old body but receives the energy to continue living."

"Yes," Alex whispered. "I've heard of that legend—but in my land, they call it the phoenix." She stared into Darian's sky blue eyes, a glimmer of understanding forming. "...that's who we are, isn't it? We're parts of the phoenix's soul..."

"It seems you've remembered, too" he acknowledged. "I wondered if you would, which is why I didn't want to tell you."

Alex turned to face Sammy in revulsion. "So – my father was under *your* control then. *You* wanted to tamper with the planet's regulation, so you could fly the planet into the sun!"

"Astute of you to notice," Sammy conceded, grinning. "I admit it took some engineering to manage it, particularly before I merged."

Alex growled with unbottled rage. "All the people who've died... who've suffered... from the civil war over this – *this*... who *will* die from being fried to a crisp...! How can you live with yourself?"

"I'd ask, except myself is yourself, so you'd know, wouldn't you?"

In an uncharacteristic burst of hostility, Alex lunged at Sammy, her claws bared. She grasped Sammy's throat, getting a strangling hold. "You can't hurt me, can you?" she screeched. "You need me to fulfill your little massacre, and Darian won't help you!"

Sammy's eyes flared with anger, face turning purple.

"Well, *you* can die!" she shrieked, tears running down her face in torrents. "For killing my parents, destroying my homeland—for **ruining my whole life!**"

There was a breaking point where Sammy seemed ready to fight back, but—

"No!"

Sammy's eyes became large, fearful. "Don't – kill me!" cried the tiny voice of a nine-year-old being strangled to death. "I don't want to die..."

Alex froze, the cold realization of her actions washing over her.

Sammy's face was pitiful, fighting back screams of terror. "I'm just a little kid... I want to live..."

Her hands fell at her side, and she jumped up in fright at what she'd done. Upon release, Sammy ran away in an instant, taking shelter behind the machinery's central control unit. Alex shuddered at herself to hear the child sobbing in fear.

"What – have I done?" she whispered. "I attacked a child—what's wrong with me?"

"Nothing is wrong," Darian muttered. "This is the decision I said you must make."

Alex whirled to face him, staring with large eyes. He had spoken in her tongue—did he mean to keep their conversation a secret from Sammy?

"You see now why I couldn't tell you," he continued. "If I told you a child had to die in order to live free from fate, you wouldn't want any part of it. You would try to find a way to run forever, to keep running—"

"I don't understand!" she cried. "Why must Sammy die? Why are we bound to hurt anyone?"

"Sammy is the will—so long as Sammy lives, the will of the phoenix will always strive to resurrect itself, and to do so it will send the planet into the sun."

"But why the whole planet? Why not just..." She paused, grasping the true weight of the situation. "...us..."

"We alone are not the soul of the phoenix." Darian looked into the central control system with a palpable sense of longing. "The bulk of its soul lies dormant inside the planet's core, nestled there from millenia before even the initiators of the Technological Revolution. We, and all life on this planet, came from the soul of the phoenix as part of its will to revive itself. Since it's not fully aware, though, it can only make suggestions, which is why until we merge we keep our own individualities while it can only nudge us along toward its ultimate goal. Everything that's happened—everything—has led up to this moment, when the three of us, with our special abilities, will merge into the phoenix's core memory and—"

"No!" Alex cried. "I won't destroy the planet!"

"Then one of us must die to stop it from happening."

"Me, then! Kill me! Not a small child!"

Darian approached her with calm, meeting her gaze with a cool yet sorrowful expression. "Do you want to die?"

Alex shuddered in terror, grabbing ahold of him and hugging him close. "...I want to live..."

"I want to live, too..."

With a startling flash, the system control panel lit up as Sammy emerged from behind it. "It is time," boomed a level, if shrill, voice, speaking in an ancient language that they nevertheless understood perfectly. "I shall live again."

"This is it," whispered Darian as his body left his control. "My ten thousand year hibernation is at an end. Let my soul be

united once again."

Alex wept in stubbornness, until she too fell limp to a force greater than her own. "What do you see? What do you hear?"

The resonance was a chorus of wild abandon, a brilliant display of images and a symphony of sound.

Darian: "The memories of generations, the consonance of lifetimes of experiences. Melody."

Alex: "The purity of the elements, the resonance of untainted sound. Harmony."

Sammy: "The unity of all things working together, the lifebeat of a planet. Rhythm."

Each with hand raised as though conducting an orchestra, the three formed into one—a radiant red-white being of the purest energy. The being approached the central controls as though a ghost, seeping like water into the machinery's inner workings – setting course for the sun.

Give a moment everything, our very earthly reward—Not a moment evades Eternity's need to reclaim you. —Valnus

Day 15

Across the world, the effects of the planet's change in course were felt immediately. Children shrieked, adults panicked in fear, chaos ruled the streets. In Triangle Seven, at the end of the Route to Enlightenment, the war came to an abrupt stop as fantastic jets of fire erupted from the ground in surprising bursts reaching thousands of li into the sky, propelling the planet from its proper course and vaporizing everything within several hundred li. Sporadic bursts issued forth all along the Route—although nowhere near as intense as the initial fires, all killed the nearby residents in a sudden flash of heat and light.

Elsewhere, the sun seemed to rocket across the sky, day and night passing in chaos to the point of losing all meaning. The global temperature rose dramatically—even in the icy domain at the poles, inhabitants found themselves growing unbearably hotter and hotter as the oceans started to boil away. Residents along the X were the first to die from the climate itself, their bodies catching fire as the sun loomed nearer, the planet turning into a dead ball of rock. Religious fanatics everywhere proclaimed the coming of Judgement, preaching to their last breaths as they, too, died from the intense heat. Soon, there was nothing left but flames blazing brilliantly as though from a small star.

In the core, a great bird of fire shook, rousing in restlessness after its millenia of quiet slumber. It thrashed about as the sun grew nearer, like a chick hatching from its egg, as the bursts grew more frantic, more powerful. Suddenly, the planet plunged into the sun, breathing life into the piniakc—

Alex.

The feeling was unusual. Everything was an absolute neutral grey, but comfortable. There was no evidence of the destruction that had unfolded just moments before – or, anything, really. Alex looked around and perceived that she was standing, alive. She breathed as normal, without difficulty. She wiggled her fingers, feeling them move as normal. It was as though she had magically appeared in a large, grey – endless – room.

"Am I dead?" she asked, testing her voice. "What's going on?"

She became aware of Darian standing next to her, but facing away.

"You wanted to talk, did you?" His voice was just audible enough that she took a moment to realize she understood what he had said.

"What?" She shook her head. "I'm confused—"

His tone was indiscernable. Overall, it seemed calm, even distant, but with hints of amusement as well. "It's funny, what kinds of things are possible. We ought to be oblivious now, just a random flicker in the furnace of the piniakc's fire, but here we are."

"Darian, what's happened to us? What of the planet?"

"The planet will be fine. For now, we're inside a small part of my memory." He turned to face her then, a cryptic look in his eye. "I just didn't imagine that you wanted to die without getting to talk to him one last time, because even I don't know what will happen once I let things finish."

Alex furrowed her brow in bemusement, unable to process what was happening. "How do you mean?"

"I'm talking with Sammy, too, in another part of my memory, and with Kotaro, Sunni, and the Rockfords... even Marius. If I've ever done this before, I can't remember it yet. It feels like this is what being God must be like, being able to carry out so many different tasks at once without getting confused. Yet here I am, once a mere mortal, doing it."

She reached out to him, but no matter how many steps she took, he seemed to be just out of arm's length.

Darian's face grew somber, looking downcast. "I discovered many things. There were things I never would have known, because I as Darian could only tap the memories of people and things in my presence. No one really knew who his father was—not even his father did. It was hidden from everyone who didn't need to know. I guess that's just as well, not knowing, because he could live his life not having that influence hanging over him... so I thought."

Alex felt colder, emptier. Despite the appearance of timelessness in the memory, she nevertheless felt saddened by his words, like the weight of eternity. "Why are you talking about yourself in the third person?"

"About Darian? He's a portion of me, yes, but I and we are all the piniakc, remember. I talk about and take the form of Darian, because that's only one set of my memories—but the one you would choose to be with the most." Their eyes met again, but it felt like she was staring into a vacant shell. "Don't be sad," he said, smirking. "Everything turned out okay."

"Okay?"

"It's as..." As his voice trailed off, he waved his hands in a careless gesture, uncertain as he began again. "We are not omniscient—I don't know how your memory set would process this... We are like individual lines of programming code, written to find how to be reborn. The drive to exist that first formed the universe grew within all of creation, and we the piniakc are stronger, capable of doing things once impossible to imagine."

She shook her head. "But – I don't want to be the piniakc! I want to be us—you and me again, just doing normal things."

He looked over his shoulder. "Well, we can – for now. All of our memories are here. Mine as Darian are the strongest, because he formed the core memory bank, but we could revisit any time, any place. Granted, this state will not last forever, and you wouldn't want it to do that anyway, but I can sustain it while I gather my bearings. It's sort of like dreaming, while being able to control your dreams." He made a sweeping motion, as though presenting a fine work of art. "Did you want to see any of yours again?"

Alex was astonished to find herself walking into her past. There were her mother and father, doting over young Alex learning to ride a bike.

"That's me and my parents on my eighth birthday!" she exclaimed, ecstatic. "What about you – Darian? What were you doing then?"

The vision came to life: a young Darian with a menacing tormentor looming over him with— He dismissed the memory almost as soon as it had appeared. "Your memory set wouldn't function to see that in its entirety. That's why he never told you before, when even the slightest description of it brought tears to your eyes."

"...I hate that," she pouted.

"What?"

"The way you keep talking about Darian instead of as Darian."

He looked thoughtful. "Mmm – okay."

She cocked her head trying to discern whether anything about him had changed.

"Alex?" he prompted.

"Darian?"

"Remember when I whomped that guy on the deejay machine?"

She laughed with glee.

He grinned. "By the way, how old did you prefer I was? Fifteen? Seventeen?" At the words, his shape flickered into the respective physical age, before Alex's eyes. "Fifteen, then," he laughed, settling into place. "I missed my old clothes, too—these are the style we wore when we first met, weren't they? I liked how – Highlands that dress made you look."

At a glance, she realized he was correct. Though he had grown, he was wearing an outfit identical to the shirt, vest, and slacks she remembered, and she was wearing her formal garb.

"Darian..."

He gave her a weak smile. "I know there's something you've been holding back, though, and that's why I did this, to give you another chance. Time is meaningless here—we could talk for eternity, if you so wanted. It's like hitting the pause button indefinitely, until you're ready."

She hesitated. "I..." Her voice faltered, unable to finish the words.

Sighing, he shook his head. "That's okay. I have the same trouble." His face fell, introspective. "I would say it for you, but – I never wanted to hurt you before, and I never want to hurt you again. I'm not regretful for my actions, though. Maybe, with all that's happening, once everything's settled back into place, it will finally come to pass."

"What's happening?"

"At this moment, we're all dying—the planet is burning in the sun, and we are all dead."

Her eyes were large. "But you said—"

"We'll be fine," he said, smiling with a gentle assurance. "After all, I want to live, too."

Conscientiousness over long ordeals never yields. —Aine

Day 16

The red-white piniakc snapped to attention as it became energized by the sun's flames, its desire to fly burning. After ten thousand years, it was ablaze again and free to soar... and yet... Something deep inside it unsettled it—a tiny voice echoing through its very soul.

I want to live, too.

The voice was perturbing. This soul, the oldest in the universe, was being unraveled by a flicker of suffering... a thread of guilt... the voices of a trillion deaths, from the lowest protozoa to the greatest sentience, all echoing in synch through the vacuum of space in sheer defiance of nature itself. This had never happened before—every other resurrection had been compliant, nonnegotiable, willing...

...never before had it been given individuality, a trillion consciences nagging at its very being. The guilt of a trillion deaths loomed over it, the weight of the universe crushing...

I want to live, too.

What was one life? A twinkle. What was eternity? One unyielding emptiness... but to live again and again, each time to experience life for the first time—not just to exist, but...

...to live.

Id.

Ego. Superego.

This is not good. The lives in this planet ending—emptiness.

This is the way it has been.

It does not always have to be.

What of life past?

Never before was there life of such value. Minerals, microbes... All of these primitive lives barely aware of themselves, much less the universe.

In all the universe, why this life?

Even the abyss of the universe is not absolute. This chance life in only a quintillionth of a quintillionth of a quintillionth of the universe is precious. That life exists at all is reason enough for it to continue.

Is life really so valuable...

Remember the griffy? That was fun.

Not for the griffy.

But in disparate lives, disparate pleasures.

Disparate pains.

One unbroken pain in unified memory.

I do not choose to remember. Nothing can be gained from memory of the beginning at cost of progressing to the future.

Do I choose to relive forever, chained to my loneliness?

Many lives, many sufferings.

Suffering forgotten on life anew, not an eternal memory of suffering.

I want to forget.

I want to live, too.

Truly...

I want to live, too!

...yes.

A brilliant light burst forth from the piniack, engulfing it as it cried as though in torment beneath a galaxy of guilt. The creature's soul burst into countless fragments whisking with a purpose, deliberation—each fragment like a small star. The fragments of soul spilled from the sun like fireworks, all careening through space toward a point in the distance, beyond the sun's three closest satellites, the point from which just over one of its rotations ago there used to be a quiet planet of terra firma and its tiny moon.

The fragments coalesced into the cul-de-sac in a tunnel, containing the control panel for a complex network of machinery and three beings: one young man, one young woman, and one child. The young man was about fifteen years old and from all appearances seemed to be struggling to stand, as though gravity itself had taken a sparkly form and was trying to pull him into the ground. Around him, pieces of a broken planet reformed gradually, the spectral light from each piece fading as it snapped into place. With each light that extinguished, the young man aged an hour, a day... a year...

A block reformed, buildings constructing themselves as though by magic. Birds flew through the air, pausing in mid-flight where they reached the edge of the world, until it reformed before them. People burst to life, as though surprised to have been caught falling asleep on the spot, uncertain at what had transpired and trying frantically to remember what had happened mere moments prior.

"Darian!" Alex called. She could see from the strain in his face that he was under a lot of pressure, and each moment that passed aged him more. After what felt like an eternity of stress, he relaxed ever so slightly, yet his demeanor didn't change.

"I'm sorry," he said, staring into Alex's eyes. By then his face was of a rugged middle-aged man twice her age, if not three times that. "I never wanted to hurt you again..." With that, he turned away, trembling from the pressure but continuing in his efforts.

"*Darian!*" she screamed, rushing to his side, but at every turn he hid his face from her, as if to keep her from seeing his rapidly-advancing age.

As the last bits of the planet returned to their proper configuration, the young man once known as Darian Wind Grey collapsed to the ground, aged far beyond his control—little more than a pile of clothes and decrepit, dried-up bones.

And so the end reaches our imagined destiny... (persons in acknowledgement need only see one lingering obligation) —Tyora

Day 17

Alone in the library, Mira looked up from her homework, perking her ears this way and that. Like everyone else, she seemed to have suffered a brief vision of the apocalypse, but everything seemed to be okay now. It just worried her that she didn't quite feel alone after that day...

A wispy musical phrase had caught her attention, like a monody or dirge, though she couldn't tell where it was coming from no matter how she strained her ears. Finally as she stood to look around, a faint sky blue image hovered into view in the doorway.

"Oh!" she cried, immediately recognizing him. "It's you..."

However, the boy said nothing in response, only bowing his head as though in apology.

"I remember you – from the cemetery?"

After a tick, the boy seemed to speak. *I'm sorry...*

"Sorry? What for?" She cocked her head out of curiosity, trying to figure out why he would be apologizing. "Oh! Are you my eye ghost?"

I'm sorry...

"Don't be sorry!" she laughed, amused at the idea of her own ghost. "I think – you were just jealous or something? Well, no harm done. You gave me a scare, but everything's fine."

The boy seemed to fade away.

"Everything's – fine..."

Soon, there was only an empty doorway and a vague memory left of the boy. A cool, tingling feeling rushed over her skin as she realized he was gone forever.

"Rest in peace, my eye ghost."

4.04

Reana was surprised to hear water running when she returned home for lunch—though, she supposed, after their family's shared hallucination, nothing should be surprising anymore. It was such an unbelievable fantasy that she still had trouble believing it wasn't just a dream.

Still, Buster was at work, and they had both called Kotaro out from school, on the grounds that they felt he needed the time to mourn his friend, so he had probably slept in – or so she thought.

"Ko?" she called, approaching the bathroom door. "Is that you? Are you awake?"

"Just a moment, Mother."

The comment had taken her aback. That didn't sound at all like her son... Curiosity getting the better of her, she nudged the door open—the sight caught her very much by surprise.

Dressed in a rather formal outfit, Kotaro was straightening back his normally frizzy mane with a wet comb. "I said I would be out in a moment," he said in an even tone, no hint of the usual enthusiasm in his voice as he tapped the comb dry.

Reana gasped. "Well, this is a surprise!" she exclaimed. "Why are you getting all dressed up?"

He turned off the water, replacing the comb next to the hand soap dispenser. "I made a promise to help a friend," Kotaro explained, "and with Darian gone, I'm the only one here to make sure I keep my promise. I have enjoyed being a fun-loving person, but there's a time and place for that, and now's not the time."

She gave him a worried look. "What exactly is this promise?"

"I can't tell you yet. It's a secret."

"Who did you promise to help?"

"That's a secret as well—in case it doesn't work out, it will be just between the two of us."

Reana looked concerned. "This isn't anything bad, is it?"

Kotaro smirked at his mother, a twinkle of sky blue in his eye. "It's good, Mum. Everything's going to be very good from now on."

4.15

Marian was surprised to hear a knock at the door. It was her day off, but she hadn't been expecting anyone.

"Hello?" called a voice on the other side. "It's Callisto!"

"Callisto!" she cried, dropping her laundry and hurrying to answer the door. She opened it to find the woman—in unexpectedly casual dress—with a small child standing next to her.

"Hello, Marian," Callisto greeted, smiling. "It's been too long, and I apologize, but – I'd like you to meet Marius."

Marian was taken aback. "...Marius?"

The boy looked up at her, just eight years old from his looks. "Are you my mom?"

"Marius? My – son?" Her emotions ran the gamut from delight to confusion to relief. "But you can't be... You'd have to be—"

"Callisto says you're my real mom, but she took care of me because you couldn't."

"That's true, I..." She bit her finger, uncertain what to say to him.

Callisto reached into her purse and pulled out some papers. "Don and I have had an unforeseen development and we can't keep him anymore, so I've had the paperwork done to restore him to your custody. In addition, I've set up a trust fund for Marius, so when he comes of age he will have his tuition paid for uni, no matter where he chooses to go."

Marian was speechless as she took the forms.

"Of course," she added, raising her eyebrows, "if you need anything more immediately...?"

"Oh, no no," she insisted, overwhelmed by their generosity, "this is wonderful. Thank you so much..." She kneeled down to look into her son's orange eyes, kissing him on the nose. "I've missed you so much, Marius..."

Marius said nothing, but gave his mother an enormous hug, which she returned in gratitude. He wept quietly on her shoulder, but—like her—it was in tears of happiness.

As she looked up again, Callisto started to walk away. "Wait a bit!" Marian cried, standing.

She paused, turning. As she did, Marian thought she saw a glimmer of sky blue over Callisto's eyes. "Yes?"

The vision was fleeting, but the emptiness in her was gone. "Thank you," she whispered.

5.00

Alex stood silently over the small memorial, draped in black. "Are you sure you don't want company?" Sunni asked, placing a hand on her shoulder. "They're delayed by traffic, so it'll be a while."

She shook her head. Alex wanted to give her respects in private.

"Take care of yourself, little sister," Sunni said, kissing her on the forehead. "I'm off to pay Stormy a much-needed visit."

The news was hard to digest, but she did forgive Sunni for being in love with her father. Could she blame her? Love was a powerful weapon that didn't care who it destroyed, what ruin it left in its wake, and it almost—*almost*—reaffirmed her beliefs that her father was a good man to know that Sunni wasn't just doing her job for a paycheck. It didn't matter, anyway—awkward or not, all they had was each other to depend on, and they were just going to have to be a family. Even so, it wasn't until Sunni had disappeared down the road in the RV that Alex mustered the courage to speak.

"It seems like such a short time," she began quietly, uncertain where to start. "A month ago, we didn't even know each other, and yet – so much has happened." She laughed in reflex. "At first, I thought you were just a spoiled little kid, but when... Everything changed when you got older, didn't it? I wish I could've said more to you when you were here... I wish..." Her eyes teared up, and she choked back a painful sob. "I wanted so much to hear you say—" She hesitated, wiping her eyes. "Land's sake, I'm stupid after all. I'm too embarrassed to tell you even *now*."

What felt like a long distant memory of their conversation in the nothingness came to mind, echoed in his final words. "...*I never wanted to hurt you again...*" he had said.

"Is that what you meant?" she whispered, feeling weak. "You didn't want to tell me what I wanted to tell you because you knew you were going to die and leave me alone?" After a few moments, she gathered her strength again. "Why did you have to leave?" she pouted. "This 'memory set' needs your lines of code here! We could have shared the sacrifice! You could still *live*! I don't deserve a full life ahead of me at the expense of yours..."

As though calling to her, five words echoed through her soul.

"I want to live, too? Remember that? You promised you wouldn't lie to me anymore, so what was that? I want you to live, too! I want... I—"

Alex broke off as she heard two sets of footsteps approach. "Alex!" a pair of tiny voices cried. "Are you ready to go, yet?"

She forced a laugh, fighting to hold back her tears. "Just a little bit longer, Simon... Amy..."

"Where are your goggles?" Simon asked.

She shook her head. "Don't need them. No more hiding for me."

The twins looked over the memorial. "Is this where Darian's buried, under this tree?" Amy asked.

Alex nodded. "I wasn't sure where else he would've wanted to be. He didn't really have a home like you or I have. Besides, I told him he was going to live with us, so now he's going to be buried with us..."

"Darian!" Simon shouted. "You dummy-head! We're going to miss you lots!"

Amy pouted in annoyance. "*Miss* him? Forget him, he messed up all our fun. I liked riding the griffy!"

It was strange seeing them apart like this. Simon was still a little boy, but Amy reflected years of experience, a hint of who they used to be. She had been assured they were stable now, however. "C'mon, you two," Alex prodded. "Your folks are waiting. I'll be along in a bit."

"Hurry up, then," Simon called, running back to the car with Amy.

She watched the children leave before returning her attention to the memorial. "I have a confession," she murmured, clasping her hands around her middle, shivering in the cool autumn breeze. "Kotaro—that numbskull... He proposed to me. *Kotaro*, of all people..." Her cheeks glowed red with embarrassment. "We had gone to the zoo just to cheer up, and... It was so weird. I couldn't in my wildest dreams imagine that he was being serious. Anyway, I pointed out that I still have a year before graduation, so I told him—in a year—if he was still serious about it... Well... I'm going to have no choice but to accept."

Despite her sorrow, a glimmer of warmth swept over her body, and she could have sworn that she saw a faint image of Darian sitting over the memorial, smiling from ear to ear, with tears streaming down his face—the same shy little boy who first braved smiling for her those fourteen days ago. When she stared, however, the image faded away, but she felt a little more confident than before, as though he was watching over her.

"He said he asked me because he knew I was afraid of being alone... I guess I am, but... Still, it's funny what can happen in a month," she mused, bowing her head. Losing herself in her thoughts, she found herself stifling a yawn, overcome with drowsiness. It was a strange but pleasant feeling, as though the next time she slept, it would be for days.

"A~lex!" Amy called.

She whirled around. "Coming!" she replied. With one last glance at the memorial, she waved with three fingers outstretched—index, middle, and pinky. "As short as it was, I truly enjoyed the time we spent together. I'll always treasure the precious gift you've given to me, and we'll visit you all the time, Darian. I promise. Maybe... Maybe one day, I'll even have the nerve to say it..."

A flourish in her step, she walked briskly toward the awaiting car, tail swishing in anticipation.

The star flared up, as it was apt to do, oblivious to its own recent annihilation of a nearby planet—and said planet's near-instant revitalization by remarkable means. It was, as far as things went, a normal day in the life of a star.

Just then, a blue flare burst from the star's surface, quite unlike the reds and yellows of the other solar flares. The planet's astronomers, if they happened to catch sight of the flare, would find it a spectacular event, but the star was still as oblivious to the flare as to anything else in the universe.

The flare split off from the star, blazing with a rainy-blue brilliance. A twinkle of sky blue erupted from what could be conceived by observers as its 'head', and the shapes of what could possibly be conceived as 'wings' and a 'tail' emerged from its 'body'. A shower of tiny sparks scattered about as it shook in excitement.

I'm free, thought the fiery entity, gliding with ease through the vast emptiness of space.

Author's Note:

Considering that most civilized people require the capacity to read and write in order to succeed in basic communication, it still amazes me just how difficult it actually is to complete a novel, even with vanity presses all over the place making self-publication simple. I suppose it really isn't that difficult—I just have ridiculously high standards.

Back to Square One is the first and oldest, more or less original story I have written, conceived when I was twelve. It became the story most dear to my heart, with all the greatest storytelling elements I could imagine and which captures – well, MOST of my inspirations, fantasies, ideals, and neuroses in a *Peanuts*-esque way. Despite—or due to—this, I struggled with making it cohesive until late 2005 when, during a fit of insomnia, I stumbled across the narrative keystone that prompted the rest to flow like a river, in large part thanks to participating in the National Novel Writing Month challenge (<http://www.nanowrimo.org/>). Yet even though I *finally* finished the story that December, it took another four years to pick at the rough to the point where I liked the results enough to publish – and here it is.

Yet I have mixed feelings about finishing the story. For one thing, experience has shown me that deliberating over an unfinished work yields better results, because I take more time to do fact-checking or I will think of a great scene, etc., until the piece is much higher quality than it was a week or month ago. I'd bet if I took another four years to refine it, *Back to Square One* would be more spectacular than I could have ever imagined. Of course, I would also have then invested eight years in a story that really had been finished in a month—not so good on the ego.

Here's the other hitch: I had originally designed *Back to Square One* to be a one-shot story with a definite ENDING, to avoid the flaw of dragging a series out past the point of diminishing returns. It couldn't possibly have a sequel worth writing because I had already used all the best scenes—refined over more than four years of meticulous, obsessive editing—and continuing a finished work tends to just be scraping the bottom of the barrel. There were no good leftovers, because everything good went into the main story.

Then I wrote a sequel.

It was maddening; I had a wonderful new story that was even closer to being complete—and was something the average book club reader might enjoy!—yet I couldn't finish it because its predecessor remained incomplete. Granted, it isn't a direct sequel, like *Back to Square TWO*, but I discovered I wasn't finished with the setting, even if I had destroyed the Almighty Status Quo so precious to so many successful serials.

Does the sequel require reading *Back to Square One* to be enjoyed? I've tried to make that helpful but not a prerequisite. Yet finishing the books out of sequence felt wrong—so wrong that *all* of the books I've started since then have suffered because, pick at it though I might, it was no longer the jewel in my collection for its very nature of being so impossible to perfect.

This isn't to say I don't like the story anymore—of course not. I just recognize *Back to Square One* means the most to *me* by being a surreptitious journal, while the others are more universally-approachable narratives that put plot before thinly-veiled memoir. It's also kind of like writing science fiction for fans of Shakespeare: not exactly Target Market Audience. May as well get the indulgent bit out first, especially feeling as I do about it being the apparent cornerstone in understanding the worlds I've created.

Forcing myself to finalize decisions was a good move, however. I have a massive number of sketchbooks filled with incomplete ideas that will just sit forever if I don't finish any of them, and I don't have infinite space to store them for as long as I would procrastinate. Half of them are sketches that don't go to anything in particular and might as well get thrown out. (Luckily, I can ruin them, then toss and forget.) Sitting on an unfinished *full novel* for another four years would just be four more years of guilt about not having finished already.

This is the main problem I have with writing: because I also have a vague artistic ability, I'm naturally compelled—and sometimes pressured—to illustrate all of my stories, preferably in a "graphic novel" format. The problem with *that* is I am not particularly fast, because I am obsessively picky even with the most easily-overlooked details, to the end result that illustrating even one story to the full extent of my desires would take much longer than I may live. The first page of one story took me *six months* to complete! (...working off and on, but there's still no excuse...) Naturally, I don't expect to finish that one as I had envisioned—though I suppose there's always hoping to win that elusive lottery and live a life of independent luxury and get the time to just doodle all day...? (Pssh.)

Also, because I find it motivating, I have tried my best to complete the NaNoWriMo challenge each year. Thus, with each year, I have a new unfinished book on the stack with the same dilemma as before. It's a never-ending battle trying to get something done, between having a day job and, on most days, just not being interested in the work. Some days I want to throw my hands in the air and just farm out the artwork for certain stories, but even in this respect I feel too picky to want to inflict my OCD on someone else like that, even for pay.

You know, besides the whole not-finishing-the-book part. I'd be stupid after all, trying to find someone to do a job for me if I'm not even going to finish *my* end of it.

...hmm, oh yeah. Questions you may have:

"*Why animal people?*" Basically, because I can draw them the most consistently—Earth humans give me a hard time of it. I have other reasons as well, but it's difficult to explain. "I like them better" will have to do.

By contrast, "*Why animal people who are so human-like as to be custom-made humans?*" This is a familiar criticism of depictions of animal people, that it's not stretching the imagination as much as it *could* to make them so human-like while picking and choosing key animal traits as it suits

my whims: people with cat ears, and etc. The alternate take is animal people who are as though someone took the *perceptions* of animals and put them into human bodies—which I dislike because this ignores the thousands of years of civilization separate from any human influence that would create a much different culture from the idea of "My pet hamster with a human-sized brain and body would live in a giant hamster cage, have a giant hamster wheel, and drink from a giant hanging water bottle." (This is also called the "Intelligent Gerbil" method of creating alien life.) That's just lazy thought—why would a hamster with a human-grade intellect and human capabilities drink from a hanging bottle instead of a glass?

No, I've tried my best to extrapolate what animal people would truly be like—not just the people with cat ears pasted on—but the subtleties are hard to convey in writing without becoming Tolkien-esque in verbosity. For the fun of it, I even rewrote the story on Earth with normal humans, but that changed the story completely. By then, it felt silly not to just write what I wanted to write on the basis of whether other people before me had done it correctly or not. I do have my reasons for animal people, and—besides the "easy to draw" element—it's just what I wanted to do.

Next, "*Why heptadecimal?*" Well, if you know the old superstition about how thirteen is an unlucky number, it's like that. Basically, primitive civilization on the planet counted with four fingers on each hand, four toes on each foot, and one tail [if it was long enough] to arrive at seventeen. When advanced civilizations developed their dewclaws—the thumb-like bit on a cat or dog, for instance—into opposable thumbs, the counting system had already taken root, much like the imperial units of measurement with its feet and gallons and such. Indulgent on my part, yes, but I don't get to create planets every day. 🐾

Finally, uh... I don't know what to put here. I can't anticipate every question, and it's a bad idea to just sit and explain everything. I need *some* material for later, not to mention I was hoping to exercise your mind a little. "Why this?" "Why not this?" It's cool when readers can stumble upon the answers on their own—not to say I'm lazy so much as I'd feel acknowledged if someone else can arrive at the same conclusions I've reached without my having to lead the way.

Before I forget, though, something harder to get on your own: the world in the year 723 is named using a grid system of sorts, derived from a similar system to our latitude and longitude. There are four major divisions (four corners of the planet?), with the X and Y axes (Axis-X and Axis-Y) functioning the same as the equator and the Prime Meridian/International Date Line. The Origin and Infinity (a purely functional name, as opposite of the Origin) are located at the points where X and Y meet.

There are eight major divisions along the X and Y axis, dividing the planet into "quads," with the territory within a quad being named according to its position relative to X and Y. Quads located above X but before the first division of Y are named Circle One, Circle Two, Circle Three, etc. (or

Naught One, Naught Two, Naught Three, etc. according to regional dialect), the next division is named Cross One, Two, etc. (X-One, Two...), and the next is Triangle One, Two, etc. (Tri-One, Two...), with subsequent divisions incrementing the number of sides on a polygon. Square One, then, is the area within the first division of X and the fourth division of Y in the positive direction, up to but not including the borders for Square Two and Pent-One.

Territories in the positive X, positive Y direction may be appended with Alpha, for purposes of clarity—i.e., Square One Alpha—but for the most part the Alpha is understood since the Alpha grid created the system. Territories in the negative X, positive Y, however, are always appended with Beta. Negative X, negative Y are Gamma and positive X, negative Y are Delta. Of course, not all territories necessarily utilize the universal naming system, much the way Japan is called Nihon or Nippon by its inhabitants, but this is the majority rule as well as a quick geographical reference.

If it wasn't evident before that this is simply laziness on my part in terms of making up country names... Well – now you know better.

I appreciate that you've read this far, even if you just skipped to the end to see what I said without that whole 'having to read the plot' part. It has taken a lot to get over the hurdles that stood between me and your holding this book in your hands (or reading it on your screen), and it feels good completing that final step.

Also, if you liked reading the novel, be sure to check out my webpage at <http://www.juliemiyamoto.com/> for updates, including eventual illustrations for select scenes from the story. Thank you for playing, and see you next flight...

—J.

P.S. However do I arrive at "phoenix" from piniakc? ...I suppose that's a question for the future...

P.P.S. Have you found the easter eggs? ☺