

LAURA GENN

BETWEEN SUN



AND SHADOW

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PEACHTREE
Teen



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To Leigh Bardugo, who believed in
fourteen-year-old me before I did.
And to my mother, who believed in me
before I could hold a pen.

—L.G.

PROLOGUE

Once upon a time, the planet Pagomènos stopped spinning. An asteroid—massive, merciless, over a mile in all directions, gleaming with a distant galaxy’s heretofore unknown power—lurched free of its belt. Whether by idle fate or by the thoughtless hand of a cruel god, the rogue rock struck Pagomènos, rapidly pursued by the tongues of its sun. All at once and forevermore, the planet’s spin lurched to a near halt.

Tidally locked, Pagomènos’s rotation synced with its solar orbit, and the planet was split into light and unrelenting dark. Days, nights, seasons, and a lifetime tracked in seconds and minutes and hours became confined to a distant past.

This cosmic change bore natural disasters: vicious wind storms at the intersection of night and day, and unwavering pressure from either extreme heat or cold on the the planet’s far sides. In time—though it would become impossible to track how long—the people would find that the meteorite, which had embedded itself in the planet’s surface,

bled power and poison. Their world had been irrevocably changed, and with it, their bodies.

Preternatural energy warped every living thing it touched, transforming it to be as fierce as the increasingly hostile planet.

Even before the physical changes revealed themselves, the Pagonians were terrified. While core memories—identity, recent events, simple tasks like food and sleep—remained untouched, the people found their broader understanding slipping through their fingers like so much sunbaked sand. Where had they come from, before they settled Pagomènos? How had the technology that enabled such interstellar travel been built? History crumbled to ash in their minds with every passing moment. They feared their very senses of self would soon dissolve alongside it.

In the daylight, the people fled belowground. They gathered their wisest inventors, their most advanced technological prodigies, and constructed a memory-storage device for every survivor: a simple microchip, surgically installed as a ward against eventually forgetting all they had ever been. Aboveground, where the remaining animals achieved ever more alarming new forms—evolving at an impossible rate, fueled by the asteroid's unimaginable power—the daylight people never dared to tread without armor. Apocalypse be damned, they would not join the ranks of Pagonian mutations. And they would not forget what it was to be merely human.

In the darkness, the people scraped and clawed for purchase, but they simply could not prioritize invention when utter sightlessness loomed supreme as a challenge. Cut off from Pagomènos's sun, they sought the gleaming asteroid itself, and their exposure to it accelerated their mutation beyond even the planet's animals. Soon there were people who could move objects with a thought, others bearing wings to carry them through the frigid wind currents. There were even those who could produce azure energy, like the asteroid's own, from their hands—with which they would build a looming torch for their shadowed home.

The people of the light had worried that, absent microchip installations, they would forget even their own names, deteriorated by the asteroid's energy, becoming ever less and less. But the people of the night, embracing their invader as one might a godlike visitation, found instead that in fully giving themselves to its power, they became much more. Their knowledge of extended history, former technology, and the like were laid like sacrifices before their intergalactic interloper. Of events yet to unfold, they would keep meticulous records. And unlike what the daylight people had feared, they never forgot themselves entirely.

After the cataclysmic impact, Pagomènos should have been a graveyard for human life, sentience erased from its surface as surely as if an Earthside starship had never landed. Instead, as the asteroid's energies permeated everything, the dead planet became undead, its people walking monuments to purgatory. In the daylight, there were armored, sheltered beings, still clinging to technology, constructing ever more advanced methods of living somewhat as they always had; but in the nighttime, wings and claws and teeth overtook the land, lit by impossible fire conjured by hulking, powerful creatures who hardly recalled what their bodies had once been.

Once upon a time, half of Pagomènos descended into eternal night.
Once upon a time, half of Pagomènos ascended into eternal day.

Once upon a time, a whole world slipped and fell out of time as they had known it.

CHAPTER 1

KORI

I came to the Morpheus Market to buy a memory, but instead, it seems I'll be making one I'd rather forget.

I'm only partway through my transaction, trading a pilfered memory of a starship crash for a useful nugget of firsthand mech-repair knowledge, when everything goes sideways.

Every joint in my right hand stings from 45P3C7—better known as Aspect, my own personal mech—anxiously gripping my fingers, a stark reminder that I've instilled an alarming amount of humanity in what was once a hollow machine. Memories are meant for human experience, not installation into a synthetic. But making friends is next to impossible when your mother rules your entire society—which, unfortunately, also includes every detail of your life. So I took friendship matters into my own hands. And nuts. And bolts.

Hopefully, buying this new memory will only broaden my (mildly to severely illegal) modification possibilities. One step closer to sentience. One step closer to Aspect truly seeing me.

In my left hand, my comms tablet buzzes, insistent. I glance toward its message from my mother, sliding across the screen in electric-blue text.

CHLOE: KORI, WHERE ARE YOU?

Licenses to trade in the clandestine Morpheus Market aren't as simple to acquire as standard settlement rations or a freshly printed set of clothes. Chloe didn't grant me market access so I could trade for whatever memories I liked. She definitely didn't do it so I could build simulated neural pathways in a government-issue mining mech. Usually I would hurry through a personal transaction like this, do my best not to raise any inkling of suspicion, but the seller won't stop haggling.

The mechanical hand in my own squeezes hard. Twin optical processors meet my eyes. No eyelids—just twin bulbs, like headlights on a starship, flashing on and off as the gears and servos whirring behind them process my undoubtedly frustrated expression. “Message—for Aspect?”

“No, message for Kori,” I mumble under my breath, trying to focus on the transaction. I give their hand a reassuring squeeze back. A standard mining mech has limited touch sensors, primarily to identify either extreme heat or a total system malfunction. I took the liberty of enhancing Aspect's hardware long ago, to the point of practical pain sensors—so while a hand squeeze may not be enough to calm them, at least I know they can feel it.

I can't see the seller's face through the full-body anti-radiation gear that all dayfolk, myself included, wear outside our settlement, but I have a very vivid imagination. In my head, he has beady black eyes, with hardly any whites to speak of, and a profound, judgmental outcropping of jaw, like a cliff's edge about to collapse into an avalanche.

“You can't provide more than a single flight memory in exchange?” the seller draws. The sign above his crooked booth displays **MECHANIC MEMORIES**, the neon light on the second *M* rapidly blinking.

Dayfolk masks flatten emotion and tone, but even so, I can tell he's not annoyed with me. He's amused. Hagglng is a hobby for this man. He's not arguing with me; he's toying with me.

I suffer enough of that from my mother.

But I school my voice into unmistakable neutrality, even as the message from Chloe buzzes again. "Two-for-one trades are commonplace only for rare or classified memories."

"Message—for Kori—important?" Aspect chimes, gesturing to my comms tablet with one elbow.

"Not now," I whisper. This time I grip their hand less as a comfort, more as a plea. *Please do not decide to develop full-blown anxiety before I've even installed a proper personality, okay?*

The seller scratches his head. I doubt he can actually feel his nails through his helmet, which means he's stalling for time I don't have. "This is very high-level mechanical insight you're buying."

It's one I could easily learn from Hyrra if my stomach didn't do somersaults every time she and I made eye contact at the repair station, but I swallow my frustration. "I showed you what I'm offering. Take it or leave it."

The seller releases a deliberately dramatic groan.

"Or I could report you to the Coalition," I press, "if you make a habit of raising prices after receiving an offer."

It's a low blow. We both know it. The entire Morpheus Market functions always and only at the whim of the Coalition. When you break the Coalition's rules, your Morpheus Market license goes bye-bye. Sometimes your known whereabouts along with it. Maybe a few fingers and/or toes. Your average citizen isn't even supposed to know the Morpheus Market exists, unless an insider recommended them for a license. Getting kicked out of the market often means getting kicked off this plane of existence, too.

Memories also can't be stored on a remotely accessible network. Early in Morpheus tech's development, settlement records report attempts,

but the memories went sour like forgotten rations; they turned strange, wrong, like waking nightmares when accessed. So, even if you escape a ban from the Morpheus Market with your life, getting kicked doesn't just make it *harder* to obtain new memories for sale. It makes it *impossible*.

Aspect's head bobs. "Kori is mean—when Kori has—maybe important messages—not for Aspect."

Aspect's insistence on always calling me by name—even here in the Morpheus Market, where everyone only uses codenames—is also a security risk if anyone connects that name with the monarch's daughter. If Chloe ever realized this was happening, she'd probably have Aspect reduced to scrap metal. I try not to think about it too often, or else I can't breathe. If Aspect ruins this trade, I'll have only myself to blame. I'm the one who couldn't settle for a mining and general maintenance mech like every other dayfolk citizen. I'm the one who tried building a friend out of wires and metal.

The seller releases the longest, fakest sigh I've ever heard in my admittedly short life. Finally, blessedly, he says, "You have a deal." He presses a shiny Morpheus sphere into my palm.

Somehow, even though we're both wearing gloves, it feels slick and sweaty. I wince a little as I tuck the sphere into my belt pouch, before handing over my own in exchange. Thankfully, the armor we all wear includes an extensive array of pockets and pouches, primarily concentrated at the waistline, for carrying items. I've been told that at one point, the men's armor had more pockets than the women's, but the public complained so much, the government officials eventually standardized everything regardless of body type.

The comms tablet buzzes a fourth time.

Aspect raises their free hand to get my attention, but I quickly nudge it back down to their side. Multiple messages shimmer across my tablet.

CHLOE: KORI, WHERE ARE YOU?

CHLOE: I SENT YOU ON ASSIGNMENT, NOT VACATION.

CHLOE: I NEED THAT MEMORY ASAP.

I huff out an exasperated breath. Once again, just like every previous trip to the Morpheus Market, my actual assignment is cutting the visit short before I find a memory I'm confident can begin prying Aspect's possible self-awareness open. I suppose it doesn't help any that I don't know what I'm looking for. A sentient mech has never been—*should never be*, if you ask the government's engineers—created. Nor are human memories supposed to be installed in a machine. I haven't the slightest idea what sort of memory could jar Aspect into being more person than science project, kicking their servos into something more akin to neurological synapses, but I'm determined to keep looking. I will always keep looking. Somewhere in this bundle of bolts, I know there's potential for the truest friend I have to feel what I feel, to choose me back.

But every visit to the market, without fail, ends with a flat, unfeeling reminder that I'm on a schedule, my mother impatiently awaiting my return with her merchandise—without any knowledge of why I *really* want to be here.

CHLOE: I MIGHT JUST FIND EXTRA HOMEWORK FOR YOU IF THIS MEMORY ISN'T ON MY DESK WITHIN MY CURRENT SLEEP CYCLE.

Briefly, I tab over on my comms tablet from the messaging module to the hourglass. There's hardly any sand left in the upper half on my display, and Chloe tracks her sleep cycles more religiously than most, always turning in when the hourglass turns over. My margin for error is rapidly shrinking if I'm going to make it home before she wants to sleep, and I haven't even picked up my assigned memory yet. In my defense (not that my mother would care), Aspect's detour became a full-blown digi-game side quest.

I want to ask why Chloe needs her own memory delivery so urgently, or what the memory even is, but I've learned the hard way not to pester my mother with questions. It never leads to answers. And it usually leads to an even more watchful parental eye monitoring my every move. Not to mention extra homework.

I stifle a groan. If I see one more math sheet in my next ten sleep cycles, it'll be too soon.

Another squeeze of cold metal fingers on mine. "Aspect is—"

"Leaving," I interrupt, tugging them away from the Mechanic Memories booth. "Kori is leaving, and so are you." The second *M* on the seller's sign sparks and dies entirely as we depart.

We're immediately sucked back into foot traffic.

The Morpheus Market is a hub of constant motion, but it's confined to a limited space. To evade notice by unauthorized dayfolk (or too-curious nightfolk), it's miles beneath the planet's surface, with a singular elevator entrance connecting to four narrow, stacked floors.

Each floor is piled with vendors in a very literal sense. It's a strange, metal vegetation gone wild, booths overlapping like shoddily stacked teacups. Every wall blossoms with merchants, each of their spaces encroaching on one another's territory. Walking at all means asserting yourself through an ever-shifting horde of bodies, everyone here for their own glimpse of someone else's life.

No two vendors are the same. Some stalls offer secondhand tastes of rare cuisine, others a recollection of advanced education few can access, and so on—the embrace of a lover like you've never had; the thrill of victory in a contest you'd never dare to enter; an understanding of depression's bleakest depths.

Neon signs hum at varying frequencies. Voices chatter, mumble, and curse all around. Aspect locks one cold, metal hand around my wrist and doesn't let go.

I check my tablet again for Chloe's specific instructions. Per usual, she's provided coordinates for a certain booth and the salesperson's code name, but nothing else. Because the universe hates me, the person I'm looking for resides on the fourth and bottom floor, while I'm currently on the first. I break into a sprint, Aspect in tow, spiraling back toward the central elevator units, various vendors' setups passing rapidly through my peripheral vision in jagged sweeps of color and

light. An elevator is bound to be faster than running multiple flights of stairs down to the fourth floor, and I don't want to risk losing my hold of Aspect in the dash—or gamble the integrity of my finger joints from how tightly Aspect grips back.

It's impossible to really memorize a route through the Morpheus Market; the ecosystem of buying and selling is practically a living organism. Every time we visit, vendors have shifted, maybe merged, maybe swallowed up smaller ones in a power grab, maybe begun actively fighting over a particular corner of shop space. But despite the ever-changing layout, I travel like a heatshot rifle bolt, straight and true, to the elevators—undeterred by the haphazard pressing, pushing, pulling of so many bodies.

Eventually, we reach the booth where Chloe's vendor is waiting.

"Echo," I say, by way of greeting.

It's a clever code name. What is a memory, really, but an echo of a person?

"Monarch." Echo inclines their head, having obviously been expecting me.

I can't help but grin at the moniker, which is why I chose it in the first place. Even black markets have unspoken rules. If you want to sell, trade, or buy a memory, you need a licensed alias. Mine is Monarch, ostensibly like one of the orange-winged creatures native to the former Earthside world; it's also a pun for obvious reasons, me being the heiress of the Daylands and all.

I'd love to blame Aspect for my terrible sense of humor, but the nickname precedes them. I'm just like this.

I have only the most basic details for my first impression of this seller: a narrow set of pinched, birdlike shoulders; arms akimbo as if in a confused first flight; a voice high and clipped, even through the mask's filtering.

I slide Chloe's provided memory from my waist pocket. I could've snooped on this sphere, too, I suppose, but I haven't bothered investigating Chloe's trade materials in ages. They're always the same self-referential

snippets: The architecture of Chloe's quarters when she first assumed the throne. The settlement's meeting chamber, as seen from the dais from which she gives her speeches. An agonizingly slow, panning shot of her jewelry, or her library, or her damn crown, which she only ever wears for the most painfully dramatic formal appearances.

Everyone wants to know how the queen of the Daylands—the last celebrity on our far-flung, interstellar settlement—lives. *Might as well monetize it*, Chloe says. But I gag when I think about it, recoiling as if from curdled soup. She's nothing special, really. It's all gilded trappings for an ordinary woman.

And her ordinary daughter, who will be expected to uphold the illusory legacy.

Echo climbs onto an overturned crate, rifling through another container somewhere above us. Spare Morpheus spheres clatter and roll across the floor. Aspect winces, repeating, "Mess, mess, mess," in a low whisper.

Great. The mech 100 percent has anxiety, courtesy of yours truly.

With a self-satisfied snort, Echo careens off the crate, sphere in hand. We authorize each other's code names as users via voice commands, so that the respective spheres can now be verbally opened by their new owners, and exchange the goods wordlessly, barely a nod passing between us.

Aspect tugs at my elbow. "MESSAGES—FOR KORI—"

I swallow a scream. "I know, Aspect. I know."

Chloe's memory in hand, we slide back into the crowd. Aspect's unwieldy tension always spikes in a throng, hence the death grip on my hand, the low hum they emit like a radio tuned to a dead channel.

But I love the untamed collision of people that is the Morpheus Market's open floor. I wish I could slow down and enjoy it, rather than feel my heart climb into my throat as I slip between buyers and sellers, struggling to maintain speed. Here, body to body, sharing subterranean air, legs tangling together like so many rogue vines, voices fighting for territory like so many wild beasts . . . Here, I am simply part of

the everyone. A code name, a passing breeze of a girl, unburdened, unnamed, all expectation revoked.

Here in the Morpheus Market, I could be anyone.

But if I don't get back to my starship now, what I'm going to be is royally screwed. And swamped with unnecessary math homework.

Aspect and I all but sprint to the exit lift. It's a compact cylindrical chamber, barely large enough for both of us, almost akin to an escape pod—but instead of ejecting us into the world below, it projects us rapidly toward the realm above. We rise, lightning fast, to the surface from which we came. If there's a memory in the market that could activate self-awareness in my metal bestie, it's farther away with every passing instant, and my stomach churns, nearly sick, at the nagging thought.

My ears clog from the lift's rapid ascent; I force a yawn to clear the eardrums. "Goodbye, Monarch," the lift's automated voice intones as the lift doors slide open, reintroducing us to Pagomènos proper.

Despite the planet's light being much gentler in the Passage than in the Daylands, it's always a jarring transition from the artificial underground illumination of the Morpheus Market to the actual sun that defines our world. Tears wet my vision, and even Aspect, with their entirely mechanical visual processors, raises one hand to shield said processors from the brightness.

When my vision clears, the vastness of the Passage once again sprawls before me: Dunes rolling into still more dunes, viciously blown to and fro by the Passage's wild winds. Assorted outcroppings of heavily worn sandstone. Chunks of wrecked starships from the Territory Wars, when the nightfolk attacked the dayfolk and were driven back across the Passage and into the shadows for good. Now-lost weaponry and tech blasted some kind of massive explosive that tore through everything in range and formed the wasteland: uneven rock formations, pieces of starships, and odd hills and dips throughout the landscape, amidst the unending sand.

The Morpheus Market is basically right on the planet's terminator line, directly between the Daylands and Shadowlands. It's a striking visual contrast depending on where I look. To the west, there's even more blinding brightness where the Passage becomes the Daylands, the sky going from semi-twilight obscured by sand to a brutal, nearly cloudless crimson. To the east, after the beautiful miasma of reds, yellows, and purples that is the eternal sunset, the Shadowlands loom—a line of dark, jagged peaks, partially cloaked by cloud cover, their accumulated snow and ice chaotically lit by an unnatural blue glow. What animal life persists in the Passage is either heavily armored and hunkered down or simply underground like the Morpheus Market to escape the wind and sandstorms. I'm the only living creature I can perceive, as far as my eyes can see. Aspect's hand in mine, though chilly and robotic, helps steady my breathing as the inescapable eeriness of the Passage again sets in.

A field of parked starships would quickly expose the Morpheus Market's existence in the Passage, so visitors usually let their transports fly free until it's time to depart. I tap the summoning signal on my helmet, just above my left ear, and my starship's autopilot voice chirps just beside it: "COMMENCING RETRIEVAL."

Charon waits for me. It may have more scuffs and scratches than most, given my frequent Morpheus Market runs across the Passage, but thanks to my mother's insistence that I focus on bettering myself instead of bonding with my peers, I have plenty of time alone with the ship to keep it spick-and-span. Its surface, battered as it is, gleams like a mirror. I'm sure it would reflect my mounting panic over my pending lateness if I weren't wearing my mask.

Few dayfolk have access to one of the remaining Earthside starships. Most are collectively owned by branches of the settlement's government, used for ferrying mechs out to do mining aboveground, offering classes of schoolchildren brief opportunities to see natural sunlight, or checking tech functionality like the sonic-wave deployments around the settlement that keep predators at bay. As the Daylands heiress,

I'm one of the privileged few to have my own. And having this ship, my beloved *Charon*, may be one of the only "perks" inherent in being Chloe's daughter that doesn't feel more like a bedazzled set of shackles.

Charon could be a standard-issue starship from when humans first settled this planet. It could be a military vehicle. It might have originally been intended for something as dramatic as ferrying diplomats or something as simple as delivering mail. Nobody actually knows what any of our remaining Earthside starships were first meant for. But to me, *Charon* is more like home than anything else in the actual dayfolk settlement. *Charon* is one place where, even if only for a brief moment, I'm out of my mother's reach.

She tries to track me, of course. She hired a security detail at one point—five grizzled soldiers of varying genders, all very "cut to the chase" and "don't make this harder than it has to be." I tormented them with all manner of pranks until, one by one, they all abandoned their posts with such passionate exasperation that my mother decided hiring another security detail would be a total waste. My personal favorite prank remains when Aspect feigned a software glitch, in which they were forced to sing the same obnoxious song over and over and over, for multiple sleep cycles in a row. I nearly lost my own mind by the end of it, but I laughed so hard, I nearly peed myself at the increasingly pained expressions of my unwanted supervisors, all desperately trying to pretend they weren't bothered.

The security detail having proven pointless, my mother decided instead to install a tracker in the one thing I would always, always have with me—Aspect. But my mother failed to consider two things: One, Aspect would happily let me tinker with that newly installed tracker. And two, I would inevitably find a way to hack it. That tracker is now spoofed with semi-randomized, totally believable routines that can override my actual location as needed. Like when I need to make unrequested stops in the Morpheus Market. (Or if I don't particularly care for my mother to know how long a bad serving of rations kept me confined to my quarters one morning. Curse you, artificial chicken!)

My mother never really sees fit to enter *Charon*. If she needs me, she sends a message to my comms tablet or, if she *really* wants to grind my gears, sends another person to retrieve me under her orders. But she can't really be bothered to trek all the way from her luxury quarters to the private hangar where I dock *Charon* in the settlement. She has the ship periodically inspected to ensure my safety, but I don't think she's ever actually been in it. And that makes it feel more like home than anywhere else.

Charon descends from orbit, its silhouette primarily an X with two additional vertical bars reinforcing the shape near the center on either side. In the center sits a long horizontal space where its occupants actually enter. While I may call *Charon* homey, that doesn't mean it offers extensive room.

The boarding ramp drops from its center and brings me and Aspect through a closet-sized decontamination chamber, where we're blasted with a chilly surge of dense white smoke and rapid scan of neon-green laser sensors, confirming the outside radiation has in fact been purged from us before we move to the inside.

It's a single space that I collectively call the cockpit, even though the pilot's chair, passenger chair, and assorted controls occupy only about the front quarter of the area. The rest of the room is a cramped dome, with assorted storage units on basically every wall to make the most of it. There's a rectangular table and accompanying bench (both a little rickety but still securely attached to the floor) where I've eaten meals, done homework, or simply tinkered with Aspect. Since we're in the Passage, basically the entire viewport dome above us is transparent, allowing the sun to naturally illuminate the cockpit. In the Daylands, where the sun rapidly becomes too much, I can close an outer shell and switch to the same harsh, fake white light as the Morpheus Market's secret halls.

Now that we've been through the decontamination chamber, it's finally safe to collapse the various segments of my armor. Aspect absently whistles to themselves while they wait. My helmet peels back like a cocoon from my face, the rush of fresh oxygen intoxicating.

The bunched, stretchy compression rings around my gloves and boots loosen, no longer needing to protect every joint from potential radiation poisoning, and allow the armor plates to roll back to my shoulders and hips respectively. I'm wearing a full standard outfit beneath, but at least now it isn't clinging to my body.

Ripping off my gloves for a better grip on the controls, I collapse into *Charon's* pilot seat. "One memory delivery, coming up."

Aspect pokes one finger into the small of my back. "Memory—for Aspect?"

"Not this time. I just picked up some more info about how your memory core works, so I might be able to do a more intensive installation next time."

"Extensive—how?" I can hear an eyebrow raise in Aspect's voice, even though they don't have any eyebrows.

My shoulders slump. "I . . . don't know." There's no template for any of this. I'm hoping that a deeper understanding of mechs' deepest mechanisms will enable me to install a memory that takes . . . a deeper hold, I suppose? Has a more potent, noticeable impact on Aspect's potential ability to self-determine, inspired and empowered by directly understanding how humans do it every day? But I don't actually know if the memory I just acquired will accomplish any of that, or anything at all. "But I can promise you we'll come back for more memories, Aspect. For you next time."

Aspect doesn't have facial expressions. They have bright-to-dim optical processors, a visibly obscured vocalization box, and a crudely carved mouth that I scraped into existence with a spare screwdriver. Aspect is perpetually attempting a smile regardless of the circumstances. But I swear to the stars, right now, they look sincerely . . . disappointed. I would feel bad if I weren't currently in a panic about making this delivery to my mother ASAP.

I pull *Charon* into takeoff, hard. We launch with such force that I won't be surprised if my shoulders bruise from jamming back into the

pilot's chair. Aspect staggers, sliding on their heels. The earliest mech designs for mining the newly hostile Daylands had wheels, but it became quickly apparent that as the world turned to sand, wheels would only get stuck and wear down far faster than artificial feet, which are what Aspect has. They're a prime example of (modified) Mech Model V5.30, per settlement records.

Aspect's feet squeak across the cockpit floor, and I sigh to myself. "Literally why are you not strapped into the copilot's chair right now?"

Aspect half shrugs as they rise from the floor. "Surprise—for Kori."

"Is the surprise you losing a limb? Because this is going to be a bumpy ride. Strap in, now." I sigh, hating the Chloe-like edge to my voice. "Please?"

Aspect rapidly shakes their head. "SURPRISE—FOR KORI."

"Aspect, this is not the time," I fire back, tapping away at *Charon's* controls. Normally I'd use the autopilot to get back to the settlement's singular aboveground entrance, but *Charon* likes to beep at me when it judges my flying as too high, too low, too fast, or too close to me having any measure of fun. So, instead, I engage *Charon's* secondary thrusters (without disabling the primary) via a small lever on the side of the square steering wheel.

I need all the firepower I can get if we're going to reach home while Chloe is still awake. The woman barely rests. She's too busy running the entire settlement (and micromanaging my entire life). We have precious little time to make it back within her sleep cycle. Having changed Aspect's tracker to feed fake location info won't do me any good if my mother expects me at a specific location personally.

A harsh buffet of wind and sand hits the side of my ship. *Charon* lurches, threatening a nosedive. I pull it back into a smooth flight path, simultaneously reaching for an overhead switch to activate its full shell. We're getting closer to the Daylands—something that the onboard positioning system indicates, but the increased sunlight makes very obvious regardless. The intensity is rapidly becoming difficult to bear

without my helmet to reduce it. Segmented armor plates slide into place around *Charon*, cylinders of artificial light activating all around me. An additional layer of glare protection descends over the remaining transparent viewport.

Out of the corner of my eye, I notice Aspect remains on the move, banging and bouncing their way to the tiny storage closet. My knuckles go white around the steering lever as I spin in my chair to face the mech. “Aspect, what are you—?”

That’s when the dessert platter slides up the floor, catapulted by my metal friend. It comes to a stop right beside my pilot’s chair, wetly squelching. I blink once, twice.

Back when Pagonians used the old ways of tracking time, we held gatherings called birthdays to mark a child’s age, but I’ve never wondered how many times a set number of “days” and “nights” have passed since I entered the world. Now all we have is the massive hourglass in the settlement’s center, ever flipping to indicate approximately when it’s a good idea to take a sleep cycle and start anew. The hourglass is also digitally linked to a universal application on dayfolk comms tablets, so anyone can check how close the hourglass is to emptying at any time. By this measure, I’m older than a child, but not quite an adult. We simply accept life as it comes, cycle by cycle.

But I must’ve programmed one of those historical remnant memories of a proper birthday into Aspect and then forgotten, because I don’t know how else to explain the goopy nightmare concoction resting on my floor, crudely labeled *CAKE* in swirly purple icing. A single wax candle sticks crookedly out of the center.

How long has it been since I cleaned *Charon*’s cabinets? How long has Aspect’s monstrosity been festering and melting together in there?

Why does it smell like gasoline and old shoes?

It’s becoming increasingly difficult to pivot my attention between my navigation and diagnostic stats at my fingertips, and the slow-motion culinary disaster happening behind me. My neck is already cramping

from the rapid swinging back and forth. Nothing prepared me for this when I decided to turn a robot into a friend. Probably because, by any logical law of nature, I'm not supposed to be turning a robot into a friend.

"Your watch shows—it has been—5,840—hourglass cycles—since you first began—sleeping and waking—Kori," Aspect announces. They toddle back up to the front of *Charon*, lean one arm on their copilot's seat (while still refusing to strap in), and elaborate upon the specifics of how long I've been alive.

Of all the things for Aspect to seize upon and obsess over in an installed memory . . . Apparently, 365 "days" was a "year" which was a "birthday," so by that logic, my watch—which has been tracking sleep cycles since my birth—does mathematically indicate that this sleep cycle is my existence anniversary. When Aspect checked that digital total, I have no idea. Were they looming over me while I slept, ever-so-gingerly tapping my watch to check when a long-abandoned method of time tracking dictated that they take up baking immediately (and badly)?

I want to vanish into the floor. "I'm . . . touched," I say, with as much sincerity as I can muster.

That's when the full-blown, pay-attention-to-me-right-now alarm goes off, scarlet lights reeling in panicked pinwheels all around the cockpit, bouncing off the domed ceiling and Aspect's metallic surface alike. It could be for anything from a mechanical failure to a detected incoming sandstorm to a fuel leak to a landing gear weakness, but whatever it is, the ship has deemed it high enough priority to scream at me from every angle that now is the time to check my text display, with full attention, rather than be distracted by the so-called dessert's menacing approach.

Gritting my teeth, I spin back around in my chair to view the specific diagnostics. Blocky fluorescent-green text scrolls rapidly across the central panel: *GROUND FLUCTUATIONS DETECTED. HIGHER FLIGHT PATH IS ADVISED.*

I swear under my breath. Ground fluctuations while in flight across the Passage can only mean one thing—predators just beneath the sandy surface, ready to spring from the ground and swallow *Charon* whole.

“Aspect, love of my life,” I say, not turning my head, my every syllable deliberate, “for the sake of my sanity, please put your seat belt on.”

Aspect wiggles their head in refusal, which I know even without turning around from the distinct creak of their neck movement. Their voice arches, grates, and I realize they’re attempting to sing. Aspect doing a mechanical whistle is endearing; Aspect singing is enough to make me question every single life choice that led me to this moment. I don’t know the song, and based on Aspect’s unbearable keening, I sincerely wish I’d never learned it. “Happpppy—biiiiiirthdaaay—to Koriiaiiiiiii—”

This should, put simply, not be a thing that ever happens to anyone. Mechs are made, not born, and they have no concept of existence preceding them. They have no concept of anything, really, but what their programming dictates—except, in Aspect’s case, also whatever scraps of humanity I’ve illegally installed into their mainframe. Morpheus spheres can instill only so much sentience. But they sure can create problems that nobody in their right mind would be prepared to handle.

My ears burn almost as severely as my face.

“HAPPY—BIIIIIIIRTHDAAAAY—TO KOOOOORIIIIII—”

At the edge of *Charon*’s front window, where I can still see out across the landscape, a flash of color—a massive serpentine head lunges out of the sand. Twin fangs slash from its reptilian mouth, framing a forked, thrashing tongue. I scream, tugging the steering lever back. *Charon* jerks into a near-vertical ascent, its rear end bonking the serpent’s face on the way up.

Sun serpents are blind, directed entirely by scent and sound. That’s why sonic signals successfully deter them from our underground settlement. Hopefully the hard smack against its head causes some disorientation.

“HAAAAAPPY SIXTEEEEEEEEEENTH—FROM ASPEEEEEECT—”

Per the navigational instruments at my fingertips—which represent *Charon* as a tiny, blinking green dot on a massive green grid—we’re already at least halfway back to the dayfolk settlement. Pagomènos’s sun, directly above us, now shines directly in my face. I squint, tears springing to my eyes, and try to realign the ship by feel without sending us back into a jerky descent where the serpent lurks, fanged and hungry.

When the burn behind my closed eyelids becomes mostly neutral again, I finally force my eyes back open. *Charon* has returned to a stable, albeit bumpy, flight path. I lean toward the left side window to see that the serpent, despite its massive size, is now far too low to possibly reach us.

That doesn’t mean it isn’t going to try.

Aspect’s voice keens on a dramatic finale. “HAAAAAAAAAPPY BIIIIIRTH—DAAAAAY—TO—KORIIIIIII!”

Curling into a knot of muscle and scales, the sun serpent launches its entire body into the air. It’s at least three times *Charon*’s length, the head alone long enough to swallow me in one greedy bite. Lidless black eyes soar closer and closer to the window. I flinch despite myself, even as the wyrm eventually collapses to the ground, thanks to gravity’s inexorable pull.

We’re alive. And in one piece.

The stench of smoke fills my nostrils. I turn, eyebrows arched, to see that Aspect apparently also commandeered a lighter from the closet. The cake’s single candle burns in defiant, irresponsible celebration of a holiday that no longer exists.

“Happy birth!” Aspect proclaims, clapping. Little puffs of smoke blow into my face from the motion. “Happy sixteenth!”

It was almost an unhappy death. I groan, rubbing my temples. “How are you still not wearing a seat belt? How is the cake not plastered on the wall? Where did you even—? You know what? I don’t want to know.”

Laughter, absurd and violent, bubbles up and bursts from me, hard enough to blow out the candle. The important thing is we’re still alive,

we're almost home—and I may not have a birthday, but if I did, Aspect cares enough to celebrate it. To celebrate *me*.

“Happy birth!” I cackle, clutching my ribs from the force of my laughter.

Aspect lifts the platter with both hands. “Would Kori—like—a slice of cake?”

It smells like a melting trash chute. Nose wrinkled, lips pressed tightly together, I shake my head. “It’s so . . . it’s just beautiful, Aspect. It’s too beautiful to eat.” It looks like if a dessert could hate you, and absolutely wanted you to know about it. But I’m not about to tell Aspect that. “Why don’t you sit down, put your seat belt on, and hold it? So I can get a better look at it for the rest of the flight home.”

Maybe it’s silly to feel guilty, given that Aspect can’t even eat, but I swear those visual processors widen into pleading saucers when they look at me. “FORK!” they shriek at an unholy volume, opening one mechanical hand.

Aspect, being a mech, is understandably disallowed from the settlement’s dining hall. Part of the reason I so frequently eat meals in *Charon*, instead—Aspect is better company than most anyone else. Apparently, their solution sans dining hall access was to pry a piece of armor from their own shoulder and fashion it into what I suppose could be mistaken for a fork, if I had a concussion at the time and had also never seen a fork.

“FORK! FOR! KORI!”

I don’t think Aspect is programmed to understand mockery, but I’d rather err on the side of caution. I bite my lip on a laugh. “Oh, what a wonderful fork! Why don’t you put it by the candle and have a seat?”

That finally seems to satisfy Aspect, who finally buckles into the copilot’s chair. It’s a good thing that mechs have a basically humanoid design, or traveling with Aspect would be a much more complicated affair that likely involved stowing them in one of the storage compartments like so much luggage. I admire the cake for a prolonged moment

to satisfy their apparent pride. Then we both turn to *Charon's* windows and watch the last of the Passage travel by far below. I've seen more than enough action for one sleep cycle, so I switch to autopilot, letting my thoughts drift and swirl alongside the sprawling sands.

There's nothing quite so strange and intoxicating as interim stretches spent in the Passage, the only place where the Daylands' light collides with the Shadowlands' abyssal dark. It would be a far better place to live than either of the strictly divided sides of Pagomènos, if not for the Territory Wars that ravaged what habitable land remained.

The Cataclysm took much from us—our technology, our history, even priceless fragments of memory—but it didn't take the entire planet. We did that ourselves. We finished the asteroid's work with our own weapons, our own overzealous repulsion of the nightfolk assault. As surely as the Morpheus Market is a gallery of alternate lives, the Passage is a graveyard of all that might have been.

A human friend might see the flicker of grief on my face, but Aspect isn't human. Instead, they search their archives for whatever applicable mortal memory applies. I can practically see the gears turning behind my clumsily drawn attempt at a smile. At length, Aspect stands again, leaving the cake on their chair, and lays a mechanical hand on my shoulder. Scavenged visual processors hold my gaze. "There," Aspect says, monotone. "There."

"I'm fine, Aspect."

"Kori is—prettier—when Kori—smiles."

I groan. I don't remember programming an obnoxious man's memories into Aspect, but I suppose any of the memories I've scavenged and integrated could be from an unpleasantly biased source. I push a stray lock of brown hair out of my face, tucking it back into the tightly coiled braids I always wear. "I'm not trying to be pretty."

"Under—stood." Aspect nods, then turns back to the squishy, half-melted "cake" that clearly isn't very concerned with looking pretty either. "Kori—eat cake now?"

I swallow a surge of bile. “Sure.” At least I’m not wearing my gloves, so I won’t stain them with purple goo. Aspect plucks the fork from the “cake” and extends its crooked tongs to me, hopeful.

Clearly waiting for me to start eating.

“Oh, Aspect, can you do me a favor? Go run a diagnostic on the helical engine. I want to make sure it’s still dysfunctional, just in case there’s a shot at getting this delivery done even faster.”

Helical engines, once a method of hyperspace travel between planets and galaxies, haven’t worked since the Cataclysm. The radiation subsequently permeating the planet caused some kind of decay in the mechanisms, and any memory of how to repair it was lost before Morpheus chips came into play, grounding Pagonians to this tidally locked planet forever. *Charon*’s engine is no exception to the rule, but Aspect doesn’t question my instructions. Mechs are designed to obey.

“Under—stood.” Aspect waddles around the cake, out of the cockpit, and into the polished silver main bay. I should really fix Aspect’s slightly lopsided gait eventually, but honestly, the perpetual wiggle is so endearing that unless the mech requests it, I might just leave them be. Frankly, I should’ve considered the consequences more before entertaining Aspect by reading a record of an Earthside “fashion show” a while back. Their permanent poorly mimed runway walk is 200 percent my fault. “Aspect will return—in three hundred clicks.”

“You don’t have to be *quite* so specific,” I say, but Aspect has already begun tracking the time, their beeping diminishing as they wobble farther into *Charon*.

Aspect has been hyperfixated on tracking elapsed time ever since I installed a particularly old memory relic into their mainframe. Now I’m afraid that if I remove it, they’ll start smoking at the joints. Apparently, the memory belonged to someone whose career had relied on highly specified arrivals and departures, back when that sort of thing mattered. Immediately upon installation, it became Aspect’s favorite memory for whatever reason—probably just good old-fashioned bad luck—and

now, unless I remember to specify that timing is irrelevant, Aspect stubbornly clings to the old way of things, before the Cataclysm.

Earthside units of agonizingly specific time tracking have no meaning on this planet anymore, and Aspect's insistence upon it is damn annoying. But beyond their base programming—harvesting runs, identifying low-charge symptoms, simple greetings for interacting with sentients—everything Aspect knows is pilfered from an illegally installed memory.

For a mech to truly have being, to become a person instead of an increasingly complex algorithm, they'd require an entire human's worth of consistent, unified memories squished into their mainframe. I'd have better luck trying to grow a third arm than I would finding a willing volunteer for a proposition like that. It's so incomprehensible on the face of it, I don't think the government has thought to make it illegal. And even if I could do it, the mech person—or person mech?—would surely blow every gasket at once from the stress of such a transition.

Until I can get my grubby little gloves on a memory that counteracts the presently installed one's love for Earthside time management, this is who—or what—Aspect is. And I really have no one to blame but myself, so I try to lay off the complaining. I'm a good robot parent that way.

The beeping eventually becomes distant enough that it stops ringing inside my skull. I take the fork from the cake, lick an icing glob from the too-sharp tongs, and immediately wince. It tastes like the baker's foundation was oil, which it probably was. It's Aspect, after all. I toss the cake and fork alike down *Charon's* disposal chute, to be later dumped and consumed by the lava below *Pagomènos's* surface. This planet has been messed up on every layer since the Cataclysm. Miles beneath the Daylands surface, there are pockets of roiling magma; above that, a thick layer of rock only sparingly mined to gain access to the magma pockets without creating a volcanic situation; above that, the sunbaked sand within which the dayfolk settlement is nestled; and aboveground, depending on where you are, either the savage sunlight of the Daylands

or the deadly storms of the Passage. At least the magma's existence, while alarming, makes object disposal a lot simpler. I toss the so-called fork down the chute only when I'm certain Aspect isn't looking.

Somehow, some way, I'm going to raise Aspect to proper sentience. I'm going to bring this little haphazard mech just a little bit closer to being, well, more person than science project.

At the edge of my awareness, just loud enough to be heard over Aspect's enthused counting, my tablet dings again. A message in electric-blue text slides across the screen.

CHLOE: ALMOST HOME, KORI?

I bite my tongue on a curse before politely texting back, *ALMOST HOME*. I can nearly feel shackles click back around my wrists and ankles, holding me fast at my mother's command. I wish I could tell her about evading the sun serpent, about tinkering with Aspect, about anything but what she wants to hear.

When I'm flying far above the planet, the sprawling cluster of stubborn sub-settlements spread below like a paper Earthside map, I feel infinite. But every message from my mother (or one of her enforcers) is a reminder that I am finite, and so are my choices. When your mother is Chloe, monarch of the Daylands and leader of the last proper Pagonian colony, constant poking and prodding from fellow Important People comes with the territory.

The tablet flashes again.

CHLOE: EDNIT WOULD ALSO LIKE TO RUN A DIAGNOSTIC CHECK-UP. HE'S WAITING.

I groan. She thinks she's slick, blaming Ednit, but per usual, I know the checkup was my mother's idea. If she were here right now, she'd tell me to be grateful for dayfolk doctors, but that doesn't make the constant appointments any less unbearable. I feel more like a rare species of pet, too valuable to lose, than a daughter sometimes. But I could never hate Ednit. He's known me since . . . before I can recall. Even more so than my mother, he's someone I couldn't bear to disappoint. He may not be

family, but I don't remember my father, who passed during my infancy, and Ednit has always cared for me. Sometimes in a more tangible way than my mother ever could.

I blow out a breath through my nose. "Aspect?"

The mech spins on their heel. "Kori has—interrupted—my—counting."

"I'm sorry. But I forgot I need to do something. When we get back to the settlement, I need you to stay on *Charon* for a bit."

"Aspect—go—with Kori."

"No, Aspect finishes checking the helical engine."

Aspect's optical sensors gleam. "And Aspect—will watch—the cake."

"Actually, I—I already ate it," I stammer, grateful that Aspect probably can't detect the shiver in my voice. I haven't obtained any Morpheus spheres that introduce the concept of lying yet. Even memory smugglers are often loath to admit untruths in their pasts, via business transactions or otherwise. "It was delicious. Thank you, Aspect."

"Kori is—welcome. Back soon?"

"Back soon," I promise, flashing a quick smile at the mech before steeling myself, shoulders squared.

Once we get back to the settlement, it's just one appointment with Ednit. One brief stretch of smiling at my mother, dutifully present, perfectly happy, as the Daylands heiress should be. I lift my jaw, tighten the brown braids at my back, poise the arch of my spine. I can do this.

Reaching down to my hip, I retrieve the latest Morpheus sphere, tracing its seamless edges with a fingertip. "What are you?" I mutter to myself, curiosity sparking.

I'm not supposed to view the memories that Chloe requests from the market. I'm the delivery service, not privy to such things. But whether it's my apparently chronic lack of sleep or my fresh annoyance at another medical appointment, my wonder overwhelms my good sense. Looking left and right as though I might get caught, despite such a thing being impossible, I roll the Morpheus sphere in the palm of my hand.

“Test,” I whisper.

A red light shifts to green on the sphere’s surface.

“*IDENTIFICATION*,” the device chirps.

Since I was the smuggler assigned to retrieve it, it’s set up to permit access to my code name, triggered by my registered voice sample on the marketplace. “Monarch,” I say, as clearly and crisply as possible, though my voice shivers with anticipation.

“*ACCESS GRANTED.*”

The entire sphere exudes a faintly blue light. Eyes shut, I press an open palm to the surface, knowing what to expect, but the initial lurch of entering a stored memory never ceases to be jarring. And amazing. White light overtakes the darkness behind my eyelids as my eyes fly open of their own accord, wide and unseeing, doubtless more pupil than white.

I plummet like a wounded butterfly into someone else’s memory.

CHAPTER 2

ADRIA

The Shadowlands are ensconced in absolute, unrelenting night, pockmarked by winking stars to which we can no longer travel. In the center of my family's fortress, on the highest of its towers, elevated like a fallen celestial body to light our world, a massive torch burns brilliant azure. Visible from any of the smaller surrounding structures, and reignited by the torchbearers every time its fuel dwindles, it is the only way we nightfolk deign to track time's march. The only fixed, final indicator of when one ought to lie down and when one ought to rise.

It's completely invisible from the Depths.

When the asteroid Diakópei first collided with Pagomènos, it seemed like a thoughtless force of nature. But it was, in fact, a borderline sentient thing—a stone that exerted will, whose sediment shimmered with intent. The twisting, underground labyrinth whose entrance looms just ahead of me was built not by nightfolk hands, but by the explosion of energy from the impact site.

The Cataclysm site should've become a crater. Instead, by the sheer force of its far-flung, interstellar power, the Diakópsei fashioned itself a home. A cathedral, if you ask the Elysian cultists who live here.

The Elysium cult, dedicated gatekeepers of the Depths for generations now, are the only ones who are supposed to come down here—the only ones who abandoned a system of time tracking altogether, their labyrinthian abode perpetually lit by the pulsing indigo light of the asteroid itself. It's the same blue as our blood, the same blue as the undercurrents of our people's skin, the same blue as the Diakópsei's unique gifts to its people. If I could see the sky as it once was, set afire by Pagomènos's sun as the Daylands are, I imagine it would be this blue. This impossible, endless, unflinching blue.

Yet the color feels purer here, undiluted, when it emanates directly from the asteroid. The light is to my eyes what swallowing a spoonful of raw spice powder would be to my tongue. Even at the Depths' entrance, still a while away from the Diakópsei itself, my vision stings and waters. My throat twists as if on a withheld cough.

The Diakópsei raised us nightfolk from our merely human origins and imbued us with alien magic.

Uplifted. Empowered. Transformed.

Monstrous, the dayfolk say, but their minds are rotted by the endless sun. Or so I've been told.

The subterranean Elysium cult worships the Diakópsei for obvious reasons. So why, at the threshold of beholding it firsthand for the first time, do I feel cold all over when I should be thrilled?

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Father says, laying one of his four clawed hands on my shoulder. "Soon, my child, with our own eyes, we will behold that which made us what we are."

It doesn't escape my notice that, per usual, he calls me *child* and not *daughter*. For all my parents' attempts to evade any mention of the truth, it's been glaringly obvious since my earliest memories: They wanted a son. But asked to choose between a childless future, absent of

heirs, and accepting the miracle (or perhaps cruel joke) that was their daughter's birth, they chose the latter.

And dedicated their lives to hardening every soft edge, leashing every threatening emotion, and training every cell of my being into an heir worthy of the Shadowlands.

I incline my head toward the waiting Depths, its alien light glinting off my horns. It shines faintly through my wings as well, making their bulk shimmer like gossamer. Said entrance is a straight vertical drop—no ladder, no visible indents for climbing down. The presumption is either wings or telekinesis. “Why have you brought me here?” I ask.

“Not only you,” says someone behind me.

I pivot almost instantly, my wings lifting my feet just above the stone ground, to lock eyes with Mother. Her mutations are more akin to the ones I inherited. She has only two arms and two legs, but altered enough by Pagomènos's radiation to enable natural travel on all fours, as she approaches me now. Unlike Father, who was graced with a second pair of arms, Mother's spine twirls into wings like my own, and the horns crowning her head curl and arch away from the skull, whereas Father's are smaller, smooth cones. My horns are somewhere in between the two, arching through the short dark curls of my unkempt hair.

Trailing Mother, the new arrival is closer to a standard humanoid height than her seven feet or my own eight; she has a foot and a half on the stranger, at least. It's possible the stranger will hit a dramatic growth spurt later in life—the radiation affects every nightfolk in a unique way—but he looks to be more boy than man, more child than soldier.

And the stranger has neither wings nor arms; in fact, he has no arms at all, only legs, and stands straight as a metal rod, head in the clouds above despite being dramatically below everyone else's eye level. I would wonder what gift the Diakópsei bestowed upon him, but the absence of arms makes it obvious. He evolved beyond the need for nature's former designs; he's a telekinetic.

I incline my head to the stranger. A steep incline, given his profound lack of height for a nightfolk boy. “Adria,” I say, by way of greeting. It’s not really an introduction, as we’re both well aware.

“I know who you are,” the stranger says. A high voice, ringing with youth. Definitely a child, then. I may not quite be an adult myself, but I’ve been on this planet far longer than he.

I shift my eyes to Mother. “You told me one of your soldiers had volunteered for today.”

Her answering smile doesn’t reach her eyes, the corners struggling to lift as if under unseen weight. “Isek’s father is one of our lead generals,” she explains, laying both hands on the stranger’s shoulders from behind. “He entered training for the service early.”

“I’m s-so very grateful to be here,” Isek stammers, “P-Princess Adria, inheritor of the Shadowlands. My lord.” Unlike my father defaulting to *child* over *daughter*, there’s no hidden jab in Isek calling me *lord*; to the nightfolk, any ruling party, queen or king, prince or princess, can bear the title. Without hands to wipe sweat from his brow, Isek gives his head a little shake. “My liege. My—”

I raise a clawed hand for silence, and he trails off before the next title. I’m tempted to take a knee so that we’re eye to eye, so he can see there’s no threat behind my gaze, but there are standards for leaders, even with youths. I swallow, throat tight. “*Adria* is fine.”

Normally, I’d feel a thrill in my stomach at Isek’s deference, knowing I’ll someday take my parents’ mantle. But this stranger, this Isek . . . this is a *child*. He shouldn’t be so afraid of anything, least of all me. Fear is a tool like any other to keep the powerful in line before their rightful master. It shouldn’t be at all needed with this small, shrill boy, even if he is a telekinetic and a respected soldier’s son.

My father points toward the entrance before us with both left arms. “Shall we proceed?”

Mother whispers something to Isek. Isek’s amber eyes shut tightly, his forehead crinkling with concentration. Simultaneously, my wingless

father ascends above the ground and surges forward, hovering above the waiting chasm. A moment later, eyes still shut, Isek rises to meet him.

So I was right. I know a telekinetic when I see one.

Mother and I spread our own wings, keeping pace with Father and Isek's slow supernatural descent.

The drop is a seemingly interminable blur of jagged rock and azure light. A ways down, I glance to Mother. "Is this the part where you tell me what's happening?"

She laughs. A slick noise, like spilled oil. "Are you suddenly so eager to understand the intricacies of rule? You could pay better attention in your studies, you know."

"You're deflecting. You always brief me on my mission. Usually it's so the nightfolk can see their next leader's face, but the only subject here is a child."

"Some things are better seen for yourself than foretold."

Heavy cold always blankets the Shadowlands, but pure ice shoots down my spine now. I don't like not knowing. And I especially don't like being kept deliberately ignorant. "What sort of bargain did you strike with Elysium, that we haven't already been attacked? Why would they—?" But my mother's stern gaze and upraised palm are enough to silence the rest of my sentence. No one will respect me as queen one day if I cement myself as a thickheaded princess who never listened to counsel.

Eventually, after a nearly unbearable stretch of silence broken only by wingbeats and pluming white breath, my feet touch the ground. Isek opens his eyes and sags from the effort of having sustained such prolonged telekinesis, nearly bent double, forehead close to his knees, breaths rasping and uneven.

"Well done, Isek," Mother says, but does not reach to steady him.

If they're going to treat him like a soldier, I'm expected to do the same. "On your feet." I force the command too much, injecting it with undue harshness.

Isek straightens, panting. Still almost-imperceptibly shaking.

“Come,” Father says, motioning forward with two of his four arms again.

Isek’s fiery eyes meet mine, seeking understanding. I can almost hear him say, *Why are we here?*

I wish to the Beyond that I had an answer.

Like all nightfolk, I know the events of the Cataclysm as surely as I know my own name. Once, when time yet mattered and the planet yet spun, the asteroid Diakópsei struck the planet Pagomènos. Its surreal power, beyond human understanding, rewrote the very nature of the planet and its inhabitants.

The dayfolk fled from it, fled even from the light of their own sun, burrowing like vermin to live beneath the surface. But the nightfolk embraced this present from the Beyond, their bodies reformed into something new—wings, multiplied limbs, height once uncommon. They and their children were also graced with gifts. Telekinesis. Telepathy. Summoning and manipulation of the planet’s own energy. Superhuman healing.

Within a generation, they were hardly human anymore. They were better.

The Diakópsei is our maker and remaker, our greatest strength and heaviest burden as a people. Every nightfolk knows it. But none have seen it in generations, save for the Elysians who worship it.

And yet an Elysian in the flesh greets us around the next bend. “Er,” he says, by way of greeting, offering no more than his name. He’s a telekinetic like Isek, without arms, and where the aboveground nightfolk wear loose, flowing robes that somewhat portray the architecture of the bodies beneath, the cultists wear thick, heavy, draping things, with raised hoods. So it is a nearly faceless, subsequently silent Er who leads myself, my parents, and Isek through the labyrinth and toward the Diakópsei’s central chamber.

Stalactites and stalagmites sprout, toothy and jagged, above and below us, as though we are walking, like so much foolish prey, into a massive beast’s waiting maw.

It isn't as though the aboveground nightfolk have never cooperated with Elysium. Beyond those who are born Elysians, nightfolk occasionally join from aboveground, including my father's little brother, my uncle Azarii. But Azarii went rapidly from newfound believer to religious fanatic, convinced that proximity to the Diakópsei had elevated him beyond his brother, bequeathing to him a right to rule the Shadowlands aboveground, too. The Elysians collaborated with my father to stop the subsequent coup, and Azarii has been imprisoned somewhere in this labyrinth ever since.

Preventing (and punishing) Azarii's coup is the last time my parents and the aboveground nightfolk's government willingly worked with Elysium, and I was a small child at the time. So I can hardly fathom what may be unfolding now. Ever since Azarii's betrayal, it's not as though my father is overly fond of Elysians. For him to partner with them . . . there must be larger stakes here than I can fathom.

The Diakópsei's blue light gleams brighter and brighter as we near its central chamber. I watch in barely leashed awe as Mother confidently proceeds, clearly feeling none of my lingering trepidation. The chill in this chasm is crisp, pure, welding my feet to the floor like twin blocks of ice, despite the powerful wings at my back. I flap them hard to force myself forward.

Isek, duty bound, is already several steps ahead of me, my father at his back, urging him forward with all four hands. Briefly, the brightness is too much. My eyes sting, racked with tears, desperate to close. I force them open. My vision shifts.

We enter the Diakópsei's chamber, and I can see everything.

The asteroid itself is here before us, in all its rumored glory. When it first collided with Pagomènos, our records indicate it was miles wide. But it broke apart on impact, leaving this core piece as the Diakópsei we know: a jagged oval perhaps twenty feet long, large enough that even if a massive nightfolk lay upon it, their arms would reach not even halfway around. It resembles an immense slab of obsidian at first, but

upon further examination, it pulses and shifts like an organ, veins of deeper azure flickering through it like savage lightning. The beating heart at the center of my world.

My own heart races at a strange rhythm, like music brought to heel in a foreign key, harmonizing with the asteroid's resonant power.

This chamber holds the Diakópei's surviving smaller shards, too—those that didn't simply shatter into so much dust on impact, that is. Twin sconces, only accessible by a cultist's Elysian key, bookend the asteroid—each filled to the brim with palm-sized spherical gems like fruit in a bowl.

I'm so caught up in staring that I don't notice Isek until I hear the crunch of his knees meeting the ground. If he had hands, they would doubtless be uplifted, palms open and pleading. "My lords, my lieges, my king and my queen, twin scythes of the Shadowlands—"

"Spit it out," Father snarls, not even deigning to use the child's name.

I flinch, somewhere else for a moment. A girl much younger, chastised not only by her father but by her king, taught a lesson not only by words but by wounds.

Isek shakes his head rapidly, as if forcing some cerebral sediment to settle. His voice rattling on every word, he asks, "Will I ever see my mother again?"

"Perhaps, if you honor his calling and our summons," Mother says, wings spread so wide that they actually cast a shadow amidst the surrounding blue glow. "But certainly never again if you fail upon the threshold."

My own voice bursts out of me like an animal cry, against my own will. "What in the Beyond is this?" I wheel upon my father, both pairs of his arms defiantly crossed; I turn to my mother, whose visage betrays no emotion. Er, the Elysian, hovers behind us at the door, wordless. "You tell me nothing of what to expect. You greet me with a stranger's son, more boy than man. And you ask me to watch as you threaten him ever closer to the planet's forbidden heart?"

My chest aches. I look at them, the people who raised me, the leaders whose legacy I will someday be asked to preserve, and I'm not even surprised by the lack of compassion. I've seen that stony apathy before, in moments I've tried and failed to forget. Claws against my face. Cruel words scraping at my ears, burrowing in forever.

I never stood up for the girl I once was. But I can speak for this shuddering boy who pleads to see his own mother.

Mother glares. "Adria." It's not an admonition; it's a command. It means, *Sit and watch, my child. Remember who you are. Do not force me to mold you into a leader with my own hands. I take no pleasure in it.*

"Answer me." My chest heaves, breaths coming too fast. "Why bring him here? Why bring me here? What have you done?"

"It's not what we've done," Mother says, "but what we've come here to do." Before I can react, she drives one powerful foot between Isek's shoulder blades.

I hear a scream, tortured, faraway. I don't recognize it as my own, but my throat burns from the force.

Isek staggers forward, sobbing now—without arms to catch his fall, and too startled to telekinetically break it. He lurches headlong toward the asteroid. The impact of his forehead on the rock is a wet, fleshy sound, followed by a heavier booming one from the rock itself, like a primordial response to the contact.

The light down here was already ferocious, but now it flares beyond belief. Even the inside of my eyelids is blue, blue, blue. I hear Father's and Mother's exultant shouts, Isek's faint weeping, my own uneven gasps for air. When the rush of light recedes to the Diakópei, Isek is still there, curled into a ball, like a child in the womb. But that ball is much larger than it would've been mere moments ago. He's taller, thicker, corded with muscle that threatens to swallow his frail, developing bones. His mouth is a grimace, graced with fangs. His face looks generations old.

"Isek," Father snaps, a call to attention. "Look at me."

Shaking, Isek does. When his eyes slide open, they're the same electric blue as the asteroid itself. He opens his mouth on a scream, and the very ground beneath us shudders, splits. Cracking open. Telekinesis is supposed to demand a specific target, visible and defined, but Isek seems to be molding the planet's very surface to his will like pottery clay.

Mother is wordless, her gaze wide with wonder.

"What have you done to me?" Isek howls, earsplitting, as the ground threatens to devour us all whole at his command.

Only now does Er, the Elysian, peel himself away from the entrance, sauntering toward us, his bootsteps heavy on the stone floor. "So we see, it is as the Elysian scholars always predicted," he half snarls through his teeth. "The Diakópsei graced us with visitation, but its divinity is beyond us. It is to be beheld, not crudely *held*. Not violated with mortal flesh." Telekinetically, he pulls his hood back, at last revealing his face. Yellowed, sulfuric eyes. Wrinkled black-blue flesh. Long, dutifully polished horns. He is an old man, set in his ways, those ways now as validated for him as ever by the horror that deviating from them has produced. He wheels upon my father. "You will fix this." It's neither a question nor a request.

The splintering ground worsens. I stagger as a new crack opens between my feet, nearly knocking me down to one knee. Isek keens and cries and howls. Understanding eludes me. Why go through all the trouble of convincing the cultists to run this experiment? Why sacrifice a child, of all people, to science? How will they possibly soothe his torture now?

He's suffering, I try to say, but my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth, no sound forming at all.

"You've done well, Isek." Father smiles at the child, the way I've always wished he would smile at me. "You've honored your people, honored your father."

I am the inheritor of the Shadowlands, a warrior in my own right, the only inhabitant of Pagomènos who could possibly hope to stand

against my father. But when I see that smile I've craved for years, that explosive joy spread across his face, I resent every bit of the longing in my body. Whatever I do, whoever I become, I hope to the Beyond that I never, ever make him proud.

I fear I'm making him proud now, my strength brought low in his wake, very nearly the deadly, deferent daughter he always wanted—my feet stuck to the rumbling floor, my jaw slack, my voice caged like a domesticated beast. I can't find the will to move. I can hardly breathe.

Isek recovers himself for the briefest instant. The ground stops splitting, though it does not reform. The surrounding dome of the chamber rattles but doesn't threaten to entirely collapse and bury us. Not yet, anyway.

Isek straightens, teeth gritted, shoulders drawn back, and pleads in the steadiest voice he can manage, "I want . . . to see . . . my mother." Flames flicker in his newly blue eyes. "She . . . will be . . . so proud."

"Indeed she will," my father says.

Two of his four hands seize either side of Isek's head. The child stares at him, irises blazing with indigo power but watery, shimmering, a baleful plea beyond language. Father doesn't break their locked eyes, doesn't so much as blink, as he twists, and *twists*, like tearing a weed out at the root. The first twist isn't enough. The sound, forever seared into my memory, is one of breaking, but not ending. A life dangling by a frayed thread, swinging loose from the tapestry, still fighting stubbornly against a merciful release.

"*Finish it,*" says the Elysian.

My mouth tastes like sick. Father adds his two other hands, all four on the child's head now, and twists, twists, *twists*, until Isek's skull snaps clean off the shoulders.

CHAPTER 3

KORI

A mirror's surface, clear as crystal. I observe my own reflection: pitch-black hair in an unhindered cloud of curls, framing my deep-brown eyes and deeper brown skin, my teeth absently worrying at my lower lip. "I am Jelza." My breath fogs the glass. I say it again, willing steel into my veins, calling courage into my knocking knees. "I was chosen for a reason. I was deemed worthy. I am Jelza, and I can do this." I turn on my heel, away from the mirror. The monarch of the Daylands is waiting. I refuse to disappoint her.

I jerk, nearly losing my footing as I boomerang back into myself, but I've entered foreign memories enough times that I recover my balance. Thankfully *Charon* has been on autopilot during this entire memory dive. I've never seen that woman before, but clearly, she knows my mother. She was selected for an honorable role that elevated her own sense of self. But what sort of role? Why remove this memory of her initial hesitation? And why, after the removal, buy it back from the Morpheus Market?

The questions gnaw at me, but deep down, what settles in my stomach is disappointment. I was hoping for an entertaining dive, at

least, as a reward for daring to break the rules. This memory couldn't possibly have been more innocuous. At least now, if I'm asked whether I interacted with the merchandise, it won't be difficult to lie. This memory . . . it's hardly worth remembering at all.

My tablet blinks and vibrates again. I curse under my breath. I don't even want to look at the digitized hourglass and see how little sand remains in its upper half.

The dayfolk settlement's surface entrance is coming into view—a single elevator, not unlike the Morpheus Market, but broader and more prominent, even from a distance. I switch *Charon* to a landing sequence, already feeling Aspect's impending absence at my side.

"I'm coming, Mother." I sigh, slipping the Morpheus sphere into my waist pocket.

Like an Earthside dog on a leash, at its master's beck and call. *Coming, Mother. Always. Wouldn't dream of anything else.*

Here's hoping, sun serpent be damned, that I'm not too late.



The walk from the docking bay to my waiting mother is long, but I know every step by heart.

The Daylands colony is a complex network of underground tunnels and sub-settlements, but it's also the only location most dayfolk see in their lifetimes, so we memorize the layout in early childhood. When the Diakópsei struck, the Cataclysm forever altering our planet, most aspects of Pagomènos were infected. Altered.

When the planet stopped spinning, radiation spread, and every surviving animal or human who was left unprotected mutated into something new, something strange and unfathomable.

Our surviving society retains only scribbled snippets of what our ancestors wrote—the ones who predated Morpheus tech's invention—and lost an unknown breadth of broader knowledge that will never be

recovered. The records we have are . . . sparse, but not without value. Enough to know that we came from Earth, powered by helical engines, and that we settled unpopulated Pagomènos as the first interstellar human colony. We also have simple knowledge of Earth's inhabitants, both human and animal.

But communication with Earth was severed when the Cataclysm stalled the planet, destroyed the helical engines' functionality beyond repair, and began the creeping process of irreversible mutation. Countless pieces of Earth-linked technology exploded when the asteroid hit, torn apart by the first wave of radiation even before it affected organic life. And when memory slipped away, so did knowledge of how to ever restore or rebuild the helical engines.

Earth is a thing of the past; we're all purely Pagonians now.

If, on the other side of the infinite unknown, Earth retains galaxy-spanning travel capabilities, Earth's citizens seem to be in no rush to use them. Nobody ever came for us. We are a world to ourselves now, severed from history, slowly shifting beyond recognition.

After the Cataclysm, our ancestors sought a threefold solution. For the sun's brutal heat, the dayfolk escaped to a colony beneath the earth, deliberately far enough from the magma pockets to draw on them as needed without simply being flambéed alive. But a few layers of sand and stone weren't enough to protect us from the radiation, and it took the most precious thing we had: the extended reach of memory. In response, we developed a new metal, uniquely equipped to resist radiation. And for our rapidly fading memories, we created a neurological implant to serve as extended storage: the Morpheus chip, now mandatory for all dayfolk.

It's the only reason any of us know who we are.

It takes careful application of both the Daylands' heat and lingering radiation to craft Pagonian plate, the new metal that forms the exoskeleton of our colony, interweaves with the armor we wear to venture out, and more. The layer on mechs is the thinnest, since every mech—including Aspect—is powered by the radiation itself.

Since only mechs can craft Pagonian plate at a reasonable speed, it's a painstaking process, the mechs risking damage by the environment or its predators whenever they venture beyond the colony. So our underground home grows, but slowly. I've never been surprised by a new hallway or additional room. I know this place's layout as surely as if it were programmed.

Ednit waits for me after six halls, two left turns, a right, a U-turn, and a ride down one of our reliably chugging escalators. My mother, Chloe, stands beside him, comically tall and pale beside the squat brown doctor. I hear her talking before she notices my approach.

"She needs to focus on her studies, Ednit, and her health. I'm tired of her endlessly tinkering with that mech. A hobby is one thing, but not at the expense of her well-being—"

I see the moment Chloe spots me. Her lips press into a tight pale line, her jaw setting firmly, locked. Meanwhile, Ednit's expression betrays no emotion.

"Kori." Quiet and dutiful as ever, Ednit doesn't even tell me off for arriving inefficiently late, the last specks of sand in the upper hourglass reduced to flickering pixels on my comms tablet display. "Good to see you well."

"Ednit." I incline my head in greeting. Despite my resentment for these overly frequent medical appointments, a smile stubbornly spreads across my face.

It's impossible to dislike Ednit. He's only doing his job, and he's beneath my mother's sway as surely as I am—as surely as everyone in the colony is. And frankly, with the rest of my spare moments occupied by either fiddling with Aspect or attending to my academic studies (for fear of parental retribution), I don't have many people close to me. Certainly nobody who has known me even half as long as Ednit. Certainly not *boys*.

Chloe has always been adamant about keeping boys away from me, since she "knows what they think about" and I "deserve so much better."

I've been getting lectures about denying "the pull" (usually stated with her fingers curled into actual quotation marks) to boys for as long as I can remember.

The joke's on Chloe, really—I feel *the pull* all the time anyway. My heart skipped when bulky gym rat Brett slid his thigh close to mine and asked if I'd ever attend "real school" and sit with him, as surely as my breath caught when Hyrra from the mechanics division demonstrated how to oil a malfunctioning mech and I couldn't take my gaze off the deft movements of her hands. But in both instances, I promptly tripped over something (a fallen homework sheet with Brett and a discarded wire with Hyrra) and spat out a distinctly unladylike four-letter word through the pain.

No *pull* has a stronger hold on me than gravity. Chloe has nothing to worry about.

Chloe nudges her shoulder into mine, almost playful. The unexpected tenderness brings me back to the moment, but deep down, I know she's all business. Passionless isn't just her default—it's her only setting. "You have the merchandise?"

Normally, given the sensitive nature of my assignments, she wouldn't dare mention them in front of anyone else, but Ednit is practically her left hand, far more pliable and obedient than her right (which would be me). I'm not surprised he knows everything. Probably knows more than I do.

"Of course." I slide the Morpheus sphere out of its compartment at my waist, before pressing it firmly into Chloe's waiting hands. "One memory, fresh from the Morpheus Market. That'll be thirty-five credits."

I'm joking (mostly), and she knows it (probably), but Chloe sighs, "I raised you, Kori," and slides the sphere into her own hip pouch.

I've never been paid for these monarchy-sanctioned memory-smuggling runs, unless, of course, you ask her. My mother will gladly list everything she's ever done for me, presumably starting with my conception and including every moment of parental obligation since

then, from clean bedsheets to healthy meals to a monarchical inheritance I never asked for.

With the Morpheus sphere handled, Chloe turns her attention back to Ednit. “I know I don’t have to tell you to take good care of my daughter.”

“You don’t,” Ednit says, “and yet you do.”

She laughs at that; it’s a high, thin noise, fragile from disuse. There are so few people who can easily joke with my mother. Most of the time, I’m not one of them.

“Come,” Ednit says, waving me forward with one white-gloved hand, and I follow, leaving my mother blessedly behind.

There’s a pregnant pause. My boots click on the synthetic floor, while Ednit’s surgical booties squeak and shuffle.

“She worries,” Ednit says.

“She does.”

We walk to the examination room in silence, for which I’m grateful. It’s a compact cubicle of a room, made even more claustrophobic by Ednit’s tendency to collect more medical posters than he has actual wall space. They overlap all over the wall—a diagram of a human knee here, an analysis of how mech anatomy was inspired by evolution’s work on our own kind there—interspersed with punny science cartoons that only a middle-aged doctor would find funny. *That’ll only cost you an arm and a leg*, one doodled doctor says, holding up prototype replacements for both after an apparent amputation surgery.

The cool-white countertops feature assorted medical devices, both for human bodies (a stethoscope, a blood pressure cuff, a thermometer) and our mechanical alterations (namely, assorted probes and prods for installed Morpheus chips).

I leap up to the familiar exam table in a single deft movement; as a little girl, I once needed a stool or a helpful lift. At least, I think so. When I think about my childhood for too long, it starts to get fuzzy, like static on a comms tablet, like staring out into the Daylands without a helmet’s visor to dull the glare.

Chloe says most people forget their childhoods to make more room in their Morpheus chips for important adult things. I wonder what else I'll be expected to discard someday, when I take over the monarchy—when my mother is long gone but her ghost's lingering weight drives me to accept the title.

"Lie down." Ednit gently eases me back on the table with soft, careful hands. He's so good at being a paragon of health that it's almost infuriating. Only the best for the Daylands heiress, I suppose. I can smell fresh, minty toothpaste on his breath. He straightens the collar of his white coat. "Do you still experience unpleasant subconscious Morpheus chip malfunction?"

My face burns. That's one way to say *whack-ass dreams*, I suppose. I've been having nightmares whenever I close my eyes for . . . well, a long time. But I don't talk about it anymore, not unless I have to. Not even to Aspect, whose simulated concern nevertheless makes me feel guilty for sharing the imaginary horrors in the first place. The nightmares worry Chloe. She worries enough, and when she worries, my life's options narrow to a medical needlepoint. "Yeah, I am."

Ednit clicks restraints around my wrists, ankles, and throat. "For your safety, Kori."

"Of course." I'm quite used to my mother and her lackeys enforcing unwanted restrictions for my safety. What's a cuff while I'll be asleep anyway? I don't have it in me to protest. But my heart gallops in my chest.

"The exam will be quick. I only need to confirm the functionality of your Morpheus chip. As always, it will be performed remotely, but it is best done while you are thoroughly unconscious." Ednit reaches for a long, thin needle. "I am going to give the injection now."

I laugh dryly. I haven't slept in ages; I avoid it like Chloe tells me to avoid distracting relationships, and idle time, and most everything that makes me happy to be a person. I should really consult the Dreamgiver Devotees or the Old Seekers eventually, consider the wisdom of both

spirit and science regarding my troubling dreams, but thinking about them for too long gives me a headache.

I'd rather stay conscious for as long as I can. It's easy in a world without nightfall, which means that when I can get away with ignoring the digitally omnipresent hourglass, I get more done than anyone else in the commune. And no one notices if I conduct another Morpheus Market smuggling run when I'm presumed to be asleep.

I regard the syringe. It hovers over my wrist. "Go ahead, Ednit." I close my eyes.

Exhausted to my bones, I'm gone before the needle pierces skin.



I fight sleep like a grappler in the ring, condemned to death in a public spectacle, but there's no one to observe my subconscious struggling. So my mind, detached, floats like a corpse abandoned to deep space. Unreachable. Undone.

Visions split like fractals against the back of my eyelids.

Faces don't form correctly in my sleeping state, but I think the shimmering outline of a person, hovering nearby, is my mother. I know that militantly shaved curve of blond hair, the relentless gaze of those deep-brown eyes, even when I fail to truly see them.

I'm lying supine, stomach up, staring into nothing. I can't feel the bed beneath my back. I can't feel my lungs; it's like I'm not breathing at all. I smell antiseptic, cloying, choking.

Where am I? My voice seems to come from someone else. My tongue tastes like salt, swollen against the roof of my mouth.

My name is Chloe, my mother says, her warm fingers brushing my forehead. *Do you remember me, Kori?*

A rogue shard of certainty pierces my consciousness. I try to jerk upright, but metal restraints pin me to the bed at my wrists, my ankles, my throat that's closing up, swallowing my voice.



I wake, sweat-soaked, on Ednit's examination table, jerking as much as my restraints will allow, my head slamming back into a pillow I don't even recall Ednit placing on the exam table. I boomerang back into my body. My neck aches, despite the restraint below my chin. Numbly, I try to reach back to tighten one of my braids, which slipped loose from its pins with the sudden motion—but my hands remain locked.

"Welcome back, Kori." Ednit's minty breath shakes me fully awake.

"Hello," I mumble through the sleep haze.

"Your Morpheus chip is as functional as it has ever been. I made some minor quality-of-life adjustments to ensure ongoing positive results, but you needn't worry about your capacity for memory." Ednit flashes a smile nearly whiter than his coat. "You will be a well-educated, fully optimal leader of the Daylands when your time comes."

"Lovely." I meant to inject some semblance of enthusiasm into my voice, but it sounds more like I accidentally stepped in something squishy while speaking. "Can I go?"

"I'll walk you out. Where to?"

"*Charon.*"

Ednit arches a disapproving eyebrow. "I hope you don't plan on launching it anytime soon. You ought to take it easy for a while, recover from the sedative."

"Oh, I will." I lurch to my feet, ignoring the delicate spinning of my vision. "I like to sleep aboard my ship. More privacy that way."

"Really." Ednit sounds utterly unconvinced.

"If more dayfolk had starships, I think it would be a common practice. I'm very blessed to be the monarch's daughter. I have so many things that the laypeople do not."

Ugh, I hate the sound of my own voice, donning this pompous air of superiority, but I have to convince Ednit so that he convinces my mother

I'm still a rule follower to the letter. Not the sort of girl who buys unsigned memories in the market, let alone installs them into a mech.

In reality, I need to get back to the Morpheus Market ASAP, this time with more focus on my own mission: a new sphere for Aspect. If I can convince Ednit and Chloe that I'm asleep, all that's needed is to set Aspect's tracker to stationary mode, reporting that I am in fact unconscious on *Charon*, and I'll be home free. Worst-case scenario, if someone in the records department notices that *Charon* and Aspect were logged as leaving the settlement, I can weave some story about wanting natural sunlight when I woke, having put the ship into autopilot on a safe loop.

I've kept Aspect waiting long enough. I can't afford to accidentally sleep even more. Not now.

I watch the discomfort slide off Ednit's face like sand from a window. "Very well."

He leads me from the office by the hand, as he has since my childhood. I'm older now, but I think it's more for him than for me. It's not his fault that Chloe would rather I spend my days studying fractured Pagonian history than making literally any friends. It's not his fault that my political destiny squashes my interpersonal aspirations like gravel beneath a boot.

I squeeze his hand back, and together we leave the examination room. In my eagerness to get away from here and back to Aspect, I stumble directly into the line of Ednit's other waiting patients. A woman collides with me forehead to forehead with a near-comical crack. I stumble away, catching my balance against the wall.

"Stars above, I'm so sorry," I sputter, but whatever the woman says back is drowned out by the sudden rush of white noise in my ears when I meet her eyes.

Rich brown eyes, their hue like the old Earthside foundation, set like gemstones in a round face. Deep copper skin, older than my own but nevertheless smooth and well cared for. A dark, tightly coiled afro blooming naturally around it, lightly frizzing at the edges. It's not just that she's beautiful, though that would've caused my lungs to

malfuction anyway before I recovered myself. It's the woman from the memory. Jelza.

It feels obscene to have been inside Jelza's head, to have seen through her eyes and known firsthand her racing heart, when she has no clue who I am. Like running into a one-night stand in a formal context, trying to pretend you haven't seen them without their clothes.

I fade back in. Jelza is apologizing to me, too, talking with her hands, so I catch the gist even over my roaring pulse in my eardrums.

"Please watch your step, Kori," Ednit admonishes without missing a beat.

"I know, I know, I'm so sorry," I stammer, giving the woman her space bubble back.

What is she doing here? She was chosen for something significant in the memory, something her insecurities told her she didn't deserve—was it access to Ednit, the Daylands' best doctor, reserved for only the highest of government officials? I've brushed shoulders with countless stuck-up compatriots of my mother, and Jelza was never among them. Have we just coincidentally never interacted before? But why conceal the memory I so recklessly pried into? Is she government or not, and if she isn't, then what the hell is happening here?

I shake my head just to clear the thickening smog within it, then sigh, "Be well, Jelza."

I only realize what I've just done after the words leave my mouth.

Jelza arches an eyebrow. "I'm sorry, have we met?"

No. No, no, no, no, no.

"I—I saw Ednit's patient list on the way in. I have a really good memory. The patient after you was, uh . . ." I glance at the acne-flecked redheaded boy behind her. I'm fairly certain he's the grandson of a government advisor I met, but both the advisor's and grandson's names are completely escaping me right now. "You know what? I should definitely get going. Come on, Ednit, you have other patients waiting!" I force a fake laugh. It may be the most annoying sound I've ever heard, and it came out of *me*. I resent that.

Ednit leads me away from the line of patients and back toward the reception area. Only when we're out of earshot does he catch me by the wrist, more forcefully than ever before. I don't know how his lean arms, half a lifetime older than my own, carry such strength.

"Kori, Kori. There are things you cannot know, for your own good. Listen to me, and more importantly, listen to your mother." His grip makes the bones of my wrist sting. I feel itchy all over, desperate to pull away. "There are consequences that even the heiress of the Daylands cannot be protected from."

I'm under no illusions that he believes me about the patient list. I've exposed my illicit dive into the delivered memory. That's what we're talking about, even if he won't dare to voice it directly.

"Just . . . don't tell Chloe. Please." I force my eyes wide, hoping for a sign of tears. I think about everything sad I can muster. Aspect's present absence of sentience. My inability to maintain eye contact with remotely attractive peers of any gender. The bizarre dreams that torment my patches of fitful sleep. These constant, inescapable medical appointments at Chloe's insistence. Come to think of it, my life is actually quite sad all on its own. "I'll be good. I swear, Ednit."

He waits just long enough for my stomach to drop into my shoes. Then he releases my wrist. "Then be good," he says, and continues leading me to the reception area.

Chloe briefly interrupts us, flinging her long, lithe arms around me in an embrace.

I would return it, but my arms feel pinned to my sides. I grin awkwardly. "Healthy as ever, Mom. Nothing to worry about."

She looks to Ednit for reassurance because of course she does.

He nods. "Your daughter is in peak condition, my lady. She assures me she'll be lying down for a while in the examination's aftermath."

"And then studying, I hope." Chloe clicks her tongue. An innocuous sound, to be sure, but one that drives me absolutely nuts. I'm half convinced she does it on purpose.

“Studying,” I parrot.

Thank whatever gods are out there, Ednit isn’t going to rat me out.

“Any subject is all right,” Ednit offers, deliberately keeping my secret. I could crush him in a hug right now. “Whatever you think you can handle so soon after a Morpheus chip exam. I would stay away from heatshot target practice for a bit.”

“I will.”

“Be good.” Chloe presses a fleeting kiss to my forehead. My heart stumbles. I want so badly to feel something other than nagging resentment, but I feel more like a mech than a dutiful daughter. My heart of stone slows, wearily, against my ribs of steel. “Be safe.”

“I’m always safe.”

“And when you’re rested, Kori . . .” Her voice drops to a conspiratorial whisper. “There’s another package I need you to retrieve from the market. Sorry to send you back so soon, but I wasn’t aware of the second when I gave you the first assignment. Monarchical duties have been . . . hectic. I’ll send the details to your comms tablet. Whenever you’re ready.”

I nod, this time with real instead of feigned enthusiasm. Doing her dirty work is the same burden as always, but a formally sanctioned visit to the market means another opportunity to buy memories for Aspect. I remain ignorant of what exactly I’m looking for—something that will finally raise Aspect from a consumer of thoughts to a creator of their own—but I’m consumed with the countless possibilities, all the angles of human experience I have yet to offer them. I can hardly wait to get back to the market. And if I’m brave (or foolish) enough, I can also investigate what other memories Chloe wants me to retrieve, and why.

I follow Ednit to the hangar and dismiss him at the threshold. Then I run, full sprint, casting exhaustion aside like a too-heavy jacket, all the way to *Charon’s* boarding ramp. Whatever else happens here in the colony, far below Pagomènos’s surface, I still have the skies.

I still have a world’s worth of memories to explore.

CHAPTER

4

ADRIA

Overcharge. That's what Father calls it after Isek's body has gone cold, after the severed head rolls abandoned across the stones and comes to a lifeless, wide-eyed rest. Father carries the dead child with two of his four arms like a sack of supplies, like a *thing* and not a vessel for *being*—shattered far too soon. Er uses his own telekinesis to levitate Father out of the Depths and back to the surface, while Mother and I use our wings. Mine feel impossibly heavy at my back, almost too much to move them at all.

The Elysian and my parents exchange reassurances that I hardly hear over my mounting headache, my heartbeat roaring through my entire skull. Only when Er is long gone, completely swallowed back into the Elysian labyrinth, does Father turn to me, his gaze wide with wonder where it should be deathly serious. "For so long, my child, we've approached the Diakópei with open hands, waiting to receive. But we've grown stronger since the Cataclysm." He seizes either side of my face with his free pair of hands, the ones that aren't carrying the murdered child. Forces me to look at him, and I glare, unblinking,

back. “Now we can take that power for ourselves, seize it in a closed fist. Become more.”

I don’t know how to tell him that I can’t imagine anything worse than being more of what he is, of what I’m expected—maybe biologically destined—to become. Forget *more*. I would settle for *other*, for being anything or anyone but the sort of leader who prods a child into the Depths, knowing full well that they’ll never see the surface again.

“That isn’t what you told the cultist,” I say, in a terribly steady voice that seems to come from someone else. “You said this was a mistake. That this would never be repeated.”

“A child could not be trusted with such power. Even a soldier’s son.”

“Why use a child at all?” My throat cracks, splintering the edges of my words. “You have how many loyal soldiers? You could’ve sent any one of them. Hell, even the boy’s father would’ve been a willing volunteer—”

“What if the experiment had failed?” Mother interrupts, brow furrowed gravely. “A grown soldier is not so easily replaceable.”

I turn away in a rush of wind and wings, my pulse pounding. “Do you think his father considered him replaceable?”

“His father knows his betters,” Father snarls at my back, “unlike certain children.” My stomach roils. “There will be a ceremony,” he goes on, “that both yourself and our most revered soldiers shall attend. And together, they will witness their lords’ ascension to a higher state.” I barely hear him through the pulse in my eardrums.

“We won’t be confined to the shadows anymore,” Mother breathes, voice rich with awe, devoid of regret. “With this sort of power at our command, perhaps also gifted to our most trusted warriors, we can seize the Daylands, too. At long last, after generations of lost history, we can take their archived memories for ourselves—and so honor where we came from, even as we grow far beyond those origins.”

I swallow a thousand curses, instead saying only, “Elysium will never allow it.”

“Elysium,” my father says, even as he slams Isek’s corpse to the ground with a horrible, wet, fleshy sound, “will have no choice in the matter.”

“You mean to go to war.”

“Not a war,” Mother says, arms and wings both folded, poised. “It will be a *purge*. The Elysians provide nothing to the Shadowlands. They cower below ground like accursed dayfolk, grovel before a power that would elevate us all if they only had the boldness to claim it. They will concede before our proper nightfolk army, or they will be consigned to the annals of history, where they belong.”

Father takes one knee to retrieve Isek’s body, now even more mangled just so he could make a point. I don’t know where they intend to dispose of it, but surely the boy’s family will never know what happened here. They’ll be fed a false story of some fashion, then made to march into the Depths and execute a merciless genocide, goaded by promises of the Diakópei’s power—which was clearly never meant to directly touch mortal flesh.

How many will lose their minds upon overcharge? Will their fellow soldiers snap their necks, too, leaving only the most resilient to return to the surface and rule less evolved nightfolk with unholy strength? How many lives are my parents willing to trample underfoot to secure leadership beyond challenge, to prevent someone like Uncle Azarii from ever daring to raise claw or freezeshot rifle against our dynasty ever again?

Words claw their way from me without my consent. “And then what?”

“Then what?” From Mother, the echoed words are a laugh. “Anything we want, Adria. At long last, as it always ought to have been, the planet will truly belong to the strong—to the ones who fully embrace what the Diakópei gifted.”

I tense against a full-body chill as the realization dawns. “You mean to invade the Daylands.”

Father nods as though I were merely commenting on the weather.
“Yes.”

“With an overcharged army.”

“Yes.”

“To do what?” I’m fighting a scream so fiercely, my voice is barely audible at all. “Assert absolute planetary authority? Enslave them? Slaughter them all?”

“That will depend on how well they concede defeat,” Father says mildly, as though he were merely commenting on wind patterns or the current strength of the timekeeping torch. “Adria, the opportunity here cannot be understated. Surely you understand that.”

I shake my head, which does nothing to lessen my pounding skull, but he keeps talking.

“The dayfolk have further-reaching historical records than the nightfolk. Locked away to rot, useless, in their bunkers underground. We have a right to that knowledge, to fully understand where we came from—that we may fully embrace all we can now become. If they turn it over without heatshot-blazing resistance, then perhaps we can arrange something of a truce.” Two of Father’s hands curl into defiant fists. “But they will finally, fully, know their betters.”

My blood could freeze solid in my veins right now. Dayfolk haven’t interfered with nightfolk business in generations. They may be disgusted by our mutations, even terrified of us, but nobody could say they’ve aimed for armed conflict. Invading the Daylands would be an unprovoked act of war. If the dayfolk are unprepared, invading them will be an extinction-level event, wiping them out entirely. All in the name of asserting our superiority—and seizing the Daylands’ historical records for ourselves.

My tongue feels like a lump of sand in my mouth. I choke out a single dry word. “When?”

Father’s voice is venom. “When what?”

“When do we return to the Depths? Blaze a path through Elysium? Overcharge the army?”

“Soon” is all Mother says, through a smile that makes me want to keel over and be sick upon the stone underfoot.

“You’ll know.” Father’s voice, but I don’t look at him. Refuse to see what Isek’s body looks like now. So small held against my father’s bulk. Mangled, wasted. Tortured in his final moments, only to be tossed aside. “We will summon you, Adria. It would be a terrible shame,” he says, “to miss the final stage of our evolution.”



Father leaves us to dispose of Isek’s body—where and how, I am too horrified to ask. Mother and I leave him behind and complete our flight back to the fortress together, the distance between me and her nevertheless cavernous. When we arrive home, the torch has burned nearly to azure cinders, signaling the cycle’s end. Mother and I part ways to our respective chambers.

The fortress consists of layered rectangles, shrinking in size as the levels increase in height, with the torch burning at our home’s highest point, giving light to both the fortress and the civilian areas beneath it. My room is on the fourth highest of seven levels, so it would necessitate ascending multiple stairways, were it not for my wings.

The fortress also features towering cubic parapets at its four corners, with one additional parapet along each of the walls. As the current shift of guards knows my face and questions me not at all, I alight on the southmost parapet, the one directly above the building’s looming entrance gate. Then it’s only around three levels down and a turn west to reach my chambers; not too much of a difference, I suppose, but at least it’s downhill instead of uphill. My legs feel like lead, impossibly heavy to haul up and down, even with the help of my wings. I could roll like a stone down these stairways, if I allowed myself. Crash through the wall into my chamber, propelled by gravity alone, and simply lie there, waiting to disappear.

Eventually, I do reach my chambers, though not by careening into them like an avalanche. Where most nightfolk have just enough space to call a home, I could lay four or five of myself lengthwise in any direction around this jagged, unevenly circular room that houses my relentlessly racing thoughts. I hardly even register my surroundings, opulent as they are for the overlords' only heir. Glimmering, ever-polished mirrors on the walls, perfectly reflecting how the blood has entirely drained from my face. Metal shelves installed cleanly, embedded in the otherwise-stone walls, but not strong enough to hold the weight I now carry.

I collapse onto a vast double bed and stare, eyes heavy, up at the domed ceiling, painted like a brilliant twilight where the Shadowlands meets the Passage: swaths of hand-brushed purples, blues, and emeralds, hues befitting honored royalty soon to violently subjugate their own people.

When she lays her head down, I suppose Mother dreams of victory this cycle—of blue light flooding her veins and her eyes. I see only Isek's severed head, eyes wide and blind, spirit flayed clean of the flesh; but its mouth still moves, blue lips working, awful groans shuddering out.

It asks me why I did nothing.

I wake drenched from horns to toes in sweat, burdened with hideous knowledge: As the sole heir of my family's dynasty, I am the only one who can stop this. The only nightfolk strong enough to resist my parents' cruel rule. Likely the only one who even fully knows what's coming.

The last person to resist my parents was my uncle Azarii. Somewhere in the Depths, behind a wall of freezeshot, in a solitary hovel of the larger, labyrinthine Elysian structure, he's shriveling into nothing, imprisoned forever. Abandoned to the dauntless passage of time, which endures even beyond the old cycles of night and day. That could be my fate, too. A cell would be a mercy, really.

For Father's brother to betray his authority was one thing—first by defecting to Elysium, then by staging an armed rebellion—but Father's

daughter? His only offspring, bearer of both his legacy and his shame that I was not born a son? I could face public execution. I wouldn't put it past him to tie me to the timekeeping torch and let all the Shadowlands hear my tormented screams as I burned down to memory and ash.

But if no one resists my parents, they'll lead us headlong into senseless slaughter. Destroy the planet we all call home in a cursed quest to fully claim it. If I don't act soon, it will be altogether too late. And the nightfolk will paint new borders for our kingdom with the blood of innocents.

I'm still struggling to breathe without escalating into a full-blown panic when there's a knock at my electronic door.

"My lord," says someone from the other side. "Your king has summoned you."

You mean my father, I could say, but more than that, first and foremost, Father has always been my king.

I press the heels of my hands into my eyes, groggy. "And who bears this message?"

"Isek."

All the breath rushes out of me in a single gust.

General Isek. The murdered child's father, not the child risen from the grave to confront my inaction. His voice drips apathy, colder even than the ice and stone that comprises the Shadowlands. I wonder if, beneath it, he yet grieves. Where is Isek now? Did Father honor his sacrifice at all, or is the mangled body in a ditch somewhere, abandoned to the creep of ice, the decay of time?

I promise myself it will not be for nothing.

"I'm on my way."

I throw on a fresh outfit, a traditional cloak of the nightfolk, allowing for ease of movement with varying limbs and wing structures. The Shadowlands leadership has no need for a fashionable signifier of status or power. The blood dried beneath my father's claws is enough; the quiet, razor-sharp threat on my mother's tongue is enough.

General Isek is shorter for a nightfolk, not even seven feet, but carries himself with poise that could never leave his dignity in doubt. His wings are folded neatly at his back like a fresh set of clean clothes. Everything about him in this moment portrays carefully constructed serenity. Beneath, I know in my heart that he must be screaming and screaming for his son until his voice, too, lies in an early grave.

I follow General Isek through the labyrinthine fortress's halls, despite knowing every path by heart. Where I imagine the dayfolk's underground hovels must be narrow and cramped, our obsidian halls are broad to accommodate nightfolk height and breadth. Banners of the same twilight shades that adorn my ceiling hang vertically at intervals, occasionally interrupted by braziers of blue flame conjured by our own gifts, tended periodically by the lowest-ranked soldiers.

Windows, though they would let starlight pervade the fortress, would simply be too great a security risk. To leave this place, one must either take flight from a parapet or exit through the main gate, to which we proceed now. The higher-ranked soldiers patrol on rotating cycles; we pass several on our way outside, though I don't make eye contact with any of them. I feel like my body is proceeding of its own accord.

I don't fully process what's happening until we're completely outside, bathed in refracted starlight from ice and stone, and Isek unfurls his wings, taking to the sky, nodding in the direction of Elysium.

The invasion is now. The execution of the cultists, the overcharge of our army. *Now*. No time to prepare, no stretch to consider the most effective way to stall or interfere, no readily available opportunity to plead with my father to reconsider. Rather than being gifted by the light, he is determined to consume it, to become it, alongside my mother. Together, they will inflict the full breadth of its barely contained wrath upon the dayfolk, for the sake of their own insatiable appetite for conquest.

"It's happening, isn't it?" I look to General Isek. I don't even have to say what.

Isek's eyes slide almost imperceptibly away from meeting mine. "I only wish my son could've seen it."

My throat constricts. "Did my father tell you what happened?"

"He died a hero," Isek says, onyx eyes faraway. "Pushed himself to the absolute limit of his youthful strength. Proved it was possible, but the Diakópsei overcame him."

I could tell him of the severed head, the squishy noise of its bounce, the strange angle at which it finally came to rest. But I won't take a hero's death from little Isek. It's what should've been; it's the only comfort his father has.

"I've planned a moment of honor for your son. If I'd known how soon the rest of the army was to be elevated, it would've been well prepared, but alas, this all happened too quickly. Would you forgive me if I flew on ahead, to make final preparations before the overcharge takes place?"

Isek's eyes flick sharply back to mine, pooling with what I can only read as barely repressed hope. Surely, even being ignorant of his son's true fate, Isek can't fully support this heinous escalation. Surely he wouldn't be the only soldier to stand against my parents' decision, if he knew others were willing to fight.

Isek finds his voice. "Does the king know?"

"Actually, it's to surprise him as well. I know he loved your son, too." The lie tastes like filth, but I swallow the revulsion just long enough for General Isek to bid me farewell.

I fly so fast that my wings sting with every beat, stretched thin as old parchment. Desperate to beat my parents to their intended prize, I plunge like a stone at the first sight of the pit. I land with such force, wings and arms splayed, that the chamber's walls rumble. Aboveground nightfolk were not expected here again. At once, hooded cultists materialize from the shadows, some bearing stone daggers, others armed with more advanced freezeshot pistols and freezeblades—all with shadowed eyes locked on me, wordlessly demanding an explanation.

“They’re coming,” I say.

“Who?” says a cultist, fingers hovering over their pistol’s trigger.

I raise open palms toward the ceiling, a signal of peace. “My parents. The army. They were never going to be satisfied with one evolution, with one body. They intend to empower the entire army. Wipe out any of you who resist. Take that army to the Daylands, exert absolute authority over the planet. Please, you must understand—”

“So you came to warn us?”

My teeth worry at my lower lip. “A warning wouldn’t be enough.”

I hear the clicks of countless triggers ready to snap and unload freeshot into my body, dropping me like a batbeast for this ill-advised intrusion. One Elysian lifts her voice. “Then what are you proposing?”

Briefly, I pause, considering what I’m about to do. There’s no turning back from this. If I go through with my plan, I’m seizing my parents’ title—and these Shadowlands—for myself. For little Isek, for the innocent dayfolk, and for every nightfolk soldier who would otherwise throw themselves into a useless war for endless conquest.

I don’t want to hurt the people who made me. But I can’t let them recklessly hurt everyone else. Molding our people into killing machines. Slaughtering a society that has left us in peace.

I suck in a deep, cold breath. Fill my lungs to bursting before I let it go. Then I summon every ounce of azure energy I can muster, a starburst of gifted power exploding out of me, blinding every cultist—and myself, too. I lunge sightlessly forward, barreling through shouting Elysians, hoping to the Beyond that my memory of the path to the Diakópsei is correct. More Elysians materialize out of corners and angles as I sprint, full throttle, but no one here was prepared for visitors. If my parents and the army had gotten here first, they would’ve made quick work of everyone. But I merely crash through every obstacle, slamming every cultist to the floor so that they might not pursue me. Some of them shriek when they land. I hope I haven’t broken any innocents’ bones,

but I can't afford to be gentle right now if I'm going to reach my goal without being restrained.

No, what gentleness I have left in me, that which even my parents' harsh hands could never kill, has come here to die.

At long last, following the radiant asteroid's light, I stagger into the Diakópsi's host chamber. I stride forward as if confident, my gait unbroken, palms open, wings folded in resignation against my back, heart pounding through every inch of me. Only one thing can overpower a monstrous king.

A monster all the worse.

A scream in my throat, my own blood salty on my tongue, I throw my entire body upon the Diakópsi, embracing it with both hands, calling its power into myself. Blue light floods my vision. I collapse, and sharp rocks bite into my knees, but I barely register the pain. Impossible, supernatural strength courses like poison through my veins, the kind of cold that brings with it a vicious, cleansing burn. It burrows into the marrow of my bones, pumps my muscles to absurd proportions. I think there are Elysians behind me, terrified, shouting, but all I can clearly hear is my own voice, unmoored, screaming and screaming and screaming. The Diakópsi hears me, extends to me the purest gift, one my body can no longer refuse.

To save my planet, I will become even more inhuman than any nightfolk ever were.

*Once upon a time,
the princess of shadow
became darkness itself.*

CHAPTER 5

KORI

“Ready to—progress into—the Passage?” Aspect shrieks, as soon as I return to *Charon*. “The cake—gives strength. The cake—fuels—ADVENTURE!” Aspect waves their arms, violently enthused, before apparently recalling a contradictory memory from someone else. Their whole body freezes mid-flailing. “The Passage—dangerous—must exercise—precaution—”

I remember installing the memory in question. During a smuggling run, *Charon* flew above what I thought was a stranded Daylands traveler whose starship had malfunctioned. Instead, it was a recently deceased body.

Even through my anti-radiation gear, I felt waning warmth where blood had recently pulsed. It was an old man, pale, grizzled, with white-gray stubble scattered across a face that looked stern even in death. Quickly, and only with my hands, so as not to draw undue attention from sun serpents, I buried him in the sand, offered a moment of silence. But I also took his Morpheus sphere, where he'd deliberately stored his final memories.

I'd hoped to determine the man's cause of death via his last recollections, but what I found was that he'd done the unthinkable, even to

a memory smuggler. He'd deliberately fled the Daylands, fixated on a supposed better life in the Shadowlands, where dayfolk are forbidden to tread. Above all other rules, licensed members of the Morpheus Market never fraternize with the denizens of the Shadowlands. Children of the light do not deign to dip even a toe into the dark.

Honestly, though, there are moments when I've wondered what it would feel like to be cast into boundless blackness and left to define yourself—absent your heritage, your settlement, even your former name, if you so willed.

This man died in the Passage as an enemy of the state, a potential shatter point for a fragile peace that has remained for generations. My mother, by necessity, would have branded him a traitor and seen the body incinerated, tossed into a trash chute and served to the magma like so many half-eaten ration sandwiches. Better for him to have gone missing. Better for his family to mourn whatever idea of his passing gave them the most peace.

But I kept the Morpheus sphere, if only for the flicker of purest fear that the man felt in its final recording. Aspect had leapt from an impossible height the day before, nearly snapping both their legs like ancient driftwood. I needed to teach them some degree of hesitance.

Apparently, all I'd taught Aspect of humanity was anxiety. I suppose that makes two of us.

"Hey," I say softly, the way Ednit speaks to me when I wake from frightening dreams on his examination table. I do a one-eighty with my spinning chair, before taking Aspect's metal hands in my own. "When I found that man in the Passage, when I scavenged his last moments for building you up, I did it to teach you caution. Not to make you afraid. You have nothing to be afraid of, Aspect. Not when I'm with you."

Aspect's visual processors flicker now, accompanied by a low whirring—another memory slotting into place.

"Kori will be—with Aspect—forever, correct?"

My flesh will decay. Aspect's mech body is quite literally fueled by Pagomènos's radioactivity, built to withstand the Daylands' savage heat waves and the inexorable passage of time alike. But I give their hand a squeeze. Their visual receptors hold my gaze without the slightest flicker. "Forever," I say.

"Affirmative?"

"Affirmative."

Briefly, I expect a human thank-you from my mechanical companion, but Aspect remains only a hodgepodge of pilfered human experiences. They straighten, whirring and beeping, and return to duty, at once a machine again. "Is Kori ready—to depart—into the Passage?"

I grin despite myself. Aspect isn't wrong about the dangers of the Passage, but I live for those moments between the two worlds of our divided planet. They're my only chances to make memories of my own.

"Lock in," I say, snapping my pilot's harness into place over my head. "I have a few new flight maneuvers I'd like to try today."

Another memory flickers across Aspect's body, indicated by a disconcerting collision of creaks and whirs. "If *Charon* spins—upside down—again, Kori—Aspect may—vomit—all over the shiny—cockpit."

Mechs don't vomit, and I installed that memory to excite Aspect about the thrills of aerial tricks, not the discomfort of stomach trouble. That's one memory I should definitely uninstall. But I don't tell Aspect that.

Instead, I imagine oil all over *Charon's* viewport and laugh. "If you do, you're cleaning it up."

Then I reach forward to the main control panel, pulling the launch lever tight to my chest. In response, *Charon* seizes beneath me like a fossil drawing breath, twin engines bursting light against my mirrors, even brighter than the never-ending sun.

Aspect screams like a disconcerted microwave, frantically locking into the copilot restraints. A fraction of an instant later, the ship blasts into the stratosphere.

Storing my journey through the Passage as an autopilot path is risky, I know, and has the potential to expose my Morpheus Market membership to those other than Chloe and Ednit if ever my ship were investigated. That could create a whole convoluted mess for my mother to clean up, both burying knowledge of the Morpheus Market from the general public and concealing my own involvement in it. But no one looks twice at me. They look at my mother, resplendent in her governance gear, her outstretched arm like a promise to the dayfolk that we'll continue to survive.

So I leave the Passage route programmed, because at the halfway point, when my starship nearly breaches the planet's atmosphere, I can't resist the urge to look down at the graveyard of half-understood history.

The Passage isn't like the Daylands or the Shadowlands. The temperature is neither searing nor freezing; the light isn't blinding, but darkness's cloak doesn't reach this far. Really, in a better world, the Passage would be the ideal place for dayfolk and nightfolk to live, or at least to convene, in harmony. But that's the thing about limited resources. The nightfolk demanded it all for themselves, and now everyone has nothing.

Starships from before the Cataclysm lie beached, half buried in the Passage's endless sand, their paint slowly fading in the admittedly temperate sun. A wing juts free from the ground here; a stray control panel abandoned there; a shattered cockpit, its remaining transparent viewport like a monster's jagged teeth.

I gaze out the viewport and marvel at the skeletal remains of our once-mighty civilization. Thanks to the Territory Wars over the Passage, instigated by the nightfolk, Pagonians collectively wrecked our hopes of peacefully living in the only fertile land left. And our tech, whether lost in the war or destroyed at the Cataclysm's impact, will never be recovered, the recollection of its construction also subsequently lost.

Helical engines for hyperspace travel. Interstellar, galaxy-spanning comms for signaling Earth. Laser cannons, rifles, and pistols. Maybe even sentient AI. All sacrificed to our pride, our vanity, our insistence on being better than the other. Now we're trapped on a far-flung world in an unknown galaxy, unreachable by the planet our ancestors left, unable to venture beyond our atmosphere, left to struggle and squabble over what fragments of tech remain.

What I wouldn't give to go back in time, even for an instant. What I wouldn't offer to whatever distant deity watches over us, all for a chance at a world where possibilities still bloomed. I would leave this divided planet. I would leave my ever-watchful mother.

I don't know where I'd go, but I'd never come back.

In the copilot's seat, Aspect beeps cheerily. "Almost in—the dark place—Kori. Where the monsters—live."

"Don't say that," I say, my hands tightening around *Charon's* controls, even though autopilot is engaged.

Aspect's optical processors blink. "Kori doesn't—fear—the shadow people."

"I have a purely scientific interest in them, alongside appropriate caution. I don't *feel* anything. Not even fear."

"Scientific—interest—in Aspect, too—Kori?"

I shake my head. "I care quite a bit about you."

"Who else—does Kori—care for?"

I take a sharp breath. This is why programming sentient AI is so strictly forbidden. Mechs exist to mine resources, traveling where humans fear to tread, serving as passionless emissaries between light and dark. A mech questioning my interpersonal relationships is unthinkable. I don't know if Aspect even knows what they're saying. But the question smacks me upside the head all the same.

"My mother." It tastes like a lie, sour, sticky sliding off my tongue. "I care for my mother."

"Why?"

I sigh. This will be the first of many questions. Grasping at human memories for the first time, Aspect is sometimes more like a toddler than anything else.

“Because she’s my mother.”

“Why?”

“Because she made me.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know.” I stare out at the waves upon waves of abandoned sand. “Maybe because she was lonely.”

“Like Kori—made Aspect?”

“Yes.”

“Was Kori—lonely—before Aspect’s making?”

I press my shoulders squarely into the back of my seat. “You ask too many questions.”

Aspect leans back in their own chair. Their laser-like gaze flicks about the cockpit. “Aspect does not—compute—this caring. But Aspect thinks—if Aspect did—have caring—for Kori—it would not—be—because Kori—made Aspect.”

I swallow a sudden lump in my throat. Maybe Aspect is closer to human intelligence than I’ve dared to hope. Either that, or their ability to mimic the remembered emotions I’ve implanted is becoming terrifyingly on point. “You don’t know what you’re talking about. Clearly I need to reboot your vocal box.”

Aspect vigorously shakes their head. As if I hadn’t spoken at all, they continue, “If Aspect—had caring—it would be—because—Kori had caring—for Aspect first.”

“My mother cares for me.”

“How?”

“In her own way.”

“How?”

Words bubble up, unbidden, clogging my throat. My mother loves me by keeping me close to her chest, like an heirloom piece of jewelry.

My mother loves me by welding my feet to the floor. My mother loves me by ensuring that no one, least of all a dayfolk commoner, toys with the monarch's daughter's heart, even with platonic affection. My mother loves me by teaching me to love her back.

"Enough with the damn questions!" My own volume rattles me, quivering against my ribs. I smash my fist on the control panel, grateful that autopilot already disengaged the manual buttons. "She cares. She does."

Aspect holds my gaze with their visual receptors for a long moment. Then they spin the copilot's chair away from me. "Affirmative," they say to the wall. Their voice is always an inescapable monotone, but I swear it sounds more drained of feeling than ever.

I let out a long breath, shaking the sting out of my fisted hand. "I'm sorry."

The words feel utterly ridiculous as soon as they leave my mouth. This is what my life has come to, apparently. I've built a mech, originally meant for mining minerals or delivering packages, that instead wants to know about feelings and families and birthday cake recipes. And now I'm apologizing to it.

"What is—sorry?"

"Depends on who you ask." My mother, it would seem, believes that *sorry* is the salve that heals all wounds, no matter how many times the scab is torn back open. "I'd say it means I won't do it again."

"Raise—the volume—of vocalizations?"

"Yes."

"At Aspect?"

"Yes."

"For no—fault—of Aspect."

Now it's my turn to spin my chair away from the mech. "Rub it in, why don't you."

"Affirmative."

"When did I install a sarcastic memory into your mainframe?"

Aspect attempts a mechanical laugh. “Ha. Ha. Ha.” They spin their chair back around, leaning forward to force eye contact. “Aspect learned—that—from Kori.”

“Lovely.”

“Affirmative.”

A bright blue text message scrolls across *Charon*'s viewport. *NOW APPROACHING DESTINATION.*

I've missed my chance to lose myself in the ruins below, wondering what everyone's old lives were like. But it's probably for the best. I switch *Charon* back to manual control.

In the distance, beyond the deserted expanse we've just traveled, loom the stark black mountains and towers of the Shadowlands, their edges gleaming an eerie azure. Here, the radiation that drove the dayfolk underground thrives, unchecked. There, what my people call the kiss of death has imparted an unnatural, new sort of life.

But directly below us, well concealed by the ever-shifting sands, visible only to the well-trained eye, is the entrance to the Morpheus Market.

Easing onto the landing pedal, I simultaneously tap out the code for a dispersal signal and pull the release lever down from above my head. The dispersal signal is a sonic wave, beyond the pitch of human hearing, enough to at least briefly repel any nearby mutated predators of the Passage.

The ground rumbles as nearby sand serpents scatter, their bodies even longer than *Charon*'s wingspan. I hear howls, snarls, and snuffling as various misshapen beasts flee, their heads like Earthside dogs, their bodies mostly limbs like overgrown insects. The viewport briefly darkens as winged creatures also take flight, their guttural cries rumbling through the ship. Their open beaks are packed with teeth, and though they lack seeing eyes, I swear their milky-white pupils lock with mine before they vanish along the horizon.

Charon settles soundlessly, set to autopilot a simple orbit as soon as we disembark. I cut the engines and nod to Aspect, who knows the drill.

“Armor, Kori,” they say, reminding me to activate the collapsed pieces around my body, from the heavy filtration helmet to the ribbed boots.

This armor protects me from so much more than the surface’s high temperatures. If the atmosphere ever touched me, through even the slightest fissure in my gear, I’d be infected with Pagomènos’s radiation, never to be the same. With exposure that direct, I would be doomed to die, possibly mutating along the way into something not unlike the toothy birds or oversized snakes of the Passage. An animal, without thought or conscience.

Unlike the colony we call home, the Morpheus Market doesn’t purge all radiation despite being so deep underground. No one is entirely certain if it’s because the expense would be too great or because requiring protective gear further ensures anonymity of buyers and sellers.

Absently, I feel for the heatshot pistol at my waist. Once initial laser weaponry was lost to the Cataclysm, the Pagonians had to improvise. Dayfolk designed heatshot weapons to be continually powered by the Daylands’ brutally hot atmosphere, rather than relying on bullets. More advanced than Earthside weapons, but weaker than what ought to have been. Quite the metaphor for life on this forsaken planet, honestly.

Charon slows its movement, the exit ramp extending to release us before the starship enters patient orbit around the lift. Aspect follows me to the ground and toward the faint circular outline of an entrance. I slip one hand into my pocket, retrieving my coveted individual-access card, and wave it over the silhouette. The ground shudders and bucks. Aspect stumbles, but I stand tall, smiling behind my helmet, never so alive anywhere else.

If this were any other rote assignment, I would chafe against the concept of returning so soon after my last visit, but this is the Morpheus Market. My memory runs may be sanctioned by Chloe, but this is one place where she has no control over what else I do. What I learn. Who I meet. What I allow myself to imagine I become.

Somewhere amidst these competing vendors, hidden innocuously amidst forgettable wares, there must be a memory that can awaken Aspect's sentience. I may officially be here on government business, but that boring chore isn't what accelerates my heartbeat to a gallop as the door in the floor hisses open, unveiling the market's entrance lift. I take Aspect by the hand and step onto the panel, squaring my shoulders, taking and holding a deep, deliberate breath. *This time.* Surely this time, I'll take one step closer to achieving my real goal: finding the right shard of human experience to imbue a robot with a soul.

If only I knew what to look for.

For an instant, as the lift lowers us into the elevator shaft, we're coated in complete darkness. Then circles of lights illuminate all around us, blinking from top to bottom of the elevator chamber.

"Welcome, Monarch," the security voice intones. The elevator drops into an immediate descent so fast that my stomach threatens to hop into my throat.

The elevator then stops almost as sharply. "Welcome to the Morpheus Market." The door slides open, and Aspect toddles after me as the hustle and bustle of memories bought and sold absorbs us once again.

I never know what memories for Aspect might catch my eye. Or Aspect's simulated eyes, for that matter. On one memorable journey, I had to practically drag Aspect by one leg away from a booth dedicated to, shall we say, *adult* memories, as Aspect riddled me with unwanted questions about intimacy and bondage.

This robot has more than enough idiosyncrasies without introducing queries like, "Kori, what is *horny*?" The question very nearly made me trip and fall on my face at the time. I very nearly said something about Hyrra's careful hands tinkering with the mechs. But I caught myself.

On this visit, on the second floor, Aspect fixates on something else entirely. A shimmering pink sign that says, SEA MEAT. Being a mech,

Aspect can't taste or smell, so the prospect of recalled food carries much more significance for them. The memory carries a low credit cost, too; the dayfolk colony breeds fish in an artificial environment without much difficulty.

I can't imagine who, besides Aspect, would consider this memory valuable or notable. Seafood definitely won't be a human experience that rattles Aspect's artificial brain into realizing they are a person having an independent, autonomous, meaningful experience of being alive. But I can't say no to those pleading optical processors, so I scan my card and make the purchase with standard credits, hushing Aspect all the while.

Bringing a modified mech for security or assistance purposes is normal in the Morpheus Market. The mech personally requesting a simulated experience with seafood is . . . not. Better not to draw undue attention to ourselves, and better to entertain Aspect while I keep my eyes open for the truly right memory.

Like bribing a toddler with sugar, I promise Aspect they can access the sea meat memory when we return to *Charon*, but only if they behave. That means no more loud questions about human mating rituals in public, not gripping my hand tightly enough to threaten the integrity of my fingers, and staying close at all times, ridiculous runaway gait be damned.

Aspect nods eagerly as we turn away from the booth. I can't help but sigh and shake my head, even though my frustration isn't with them. "Always the same," I mutter to myself, under my breath. "Food. Fistfights. Songs. Sex." I pinch the bridge of my nose. "I need something *else*." But I have no idea what, not in the slightest idea.

For all I know, the barrier to Aspect's awakening could be not the absence of something, but the *presence* of a memory I've already installed. And what would I do then? Uninstall it? Deprive them of an experience I already offered as a gift, which has become their own? That would make me no better than the planet's radiation.

And I've tried—oh, how I've tried, on every ill-fated visit here—asking vendors for something weird, something different, something positively *odd*. But it always results in obvious discomfort and confusion from the vendor, who often stares at me like I tried to order a sandwich at a memory store. Sometimes they believe that I'm seeking rightfully illegal, exploitative, or heinously violent material, which I most definitely do *not* want (and have reported to the Coalition when necessary). Once the hopelessly awkward conversation is over, I have to run along, before I raise so much suspicion about my true motives that I get *myself* reported.

"Something *else*." I grunt, my footsteps unnecessarily heavy as we trudge away from this useless, useless Sea Meat booth.

At the corner of my eye, at the very edge of my peripheral vision, I think I see . . . a smudge? A splatter of ink, forming and re-forming. But as soon as I look, the shape is gone. My exasperation is veering into hallucination at this point. Is that what it will take to awaken Aspect? A final step over the edge, into a proper evil scientist?

Our path to the elevators and down to the third floor is a blur, my mind elsewhere. Eventually, we reach my mother's memory vendor. Aspect tugs pleadingly at my elbow throughout the entire transaction. If their optical processors could widen, they'd be round wheels of hope right now. "Sea meat soon, Kori?"

"Soon." I pat them on the head briefly.

My attention is painfully split. After the odd recollection of Jelza I experienced, I can't help but wonder what this new Morpheus sphere contains that my mother could want. I'm also half-feral with the desire to find a properly unique, mechanically significant memory to install in Aspect. And mild annoyance at this entire sea meat diversion still simmers underneath my skin.

I pocket the Morpheus sphere for my mother, waving Aspect away from the vendor's booth.

That's when another shadow moves.

It's distinct this time, far from an imaginary ink splatter. My peripheral vision distinguishes something akin to limbs. With my pulse pounding in my temples, my hand flies automatically to the heatshot pistol at my waist. "Who's there?"

A voice like oil speaks from everywhere and nowhere at once. "Not here."

A whirl of . . . fabric? The wave of a hand? Something directs me toward an accidental alleyway, wedged between two memory booths—just barely wide enough to allow two or three bodies to squish in and have a less-than-public conversation.

"Kori . . .?" Aspect's voice is an uncommon squeak.

Against my better judgment, I take one of their hands between both of mine, lean close to their auditory processor, and command, in the firmest voice I can muster, "Stay close."

Together, we step backward into the alleyway. One step from the crowd, two, three. The miasma of conflicting voices from the crowd steadily shrinks. Even the light from the competing booths dims, distancing. Everything tunnels. I keep my eyes firmly on the main market, ready to bolt back toward public view the instant it's necessary, but even so, almost of their own accord, my legs keep carrying me farther back into this accidental wedge of space, farther and farther from the sales floor.

A secret place within a secret market. Only I could get myself into a jam this absurd.

"Further in," the oil-slick voice says, somewhere close. "Further up, and further in."

Back and back, farther and farther, my legs lead us. My heartbeat is an emergency siren, nearly splitting my rib cage wide open. I should have a hand on my heatshot pistol, but I can't bear to let go of where Aspect's metal fingers are squished securely between all of mine. Back and back and back. The market is a faraway smear of color. I know we've reached the complex's wall only because it's terribly cold when it presses against my back.

“Here,” hisses the voice, and if I squint, I can just barely make out the spidery outline of a person.

Hunched, slightly shivering, cowering even in the near darkness of this clandestine alleyway. Layers of mismatched clothes—deep greens, faded maroons, patches of yellow, and threadbare blue—conceal whatever anti-radiation gear they must be wearing underneath. It all grants them the appearance of a secondhand clothing shop come to life, bumbling about on its first day of improbable sentience.

“Your hand, darling.”

Aspect, ever courageous in the face of absurdity, pipes up, “The market—does not—sell hands.”

For an instant, I think my limb is indeed the price for whatever ware this stranger is about to offer. Then a shuddering gloved hand extends toward me, fingers pinching something tightly between them. “Open your hand.”

Barely breathing, I extend one open palm, the other still gripping Aspect’s so tightly that every metal joint digs painfully into my skin. A tiny rectangle drops into my gloved hand, somewhere between the size of a fingernail-sized Morpheus chip and a handheld credit card.

“You seek a memory, of another kind.” The voice is thick. It sticks to the inside of my skull, makes me want to gag. I swallow a surge of sick. “If you mean what you said, and I think most people mean the things they say, when they think no one else is listening, then that”—one gnarled finger taps the rectangle in my palm—“is my card.”

“You have nothing to sell?” My voice is a sudden, stubborn half snarl.

This feels, as strange as it all is, like the closest I’ve ever gotten to a special, specific, impossible memory—the kind that could bring Aspect into full awakening—and now all I have is a dusty gremlin’s business card?

“You, a stranger, haul me into an alley. I follow, against my better judgment. And the best you can do, for my taking this risk with my mech in tow, and with only a simple pistol to protect myself, is your *card*?” I

close my fist around the meager offering, my voice rising despite myself. “Who are you? What’s your code name? Where is your license—?”

But all at once, there’s an explosion of thick white smoke. My knees sting; I’ve collapsed, coughing, retching. Actual sickness threatens at the cloying chemical smell that ensconces me—a terrible experience to have while wearing a sealed anti-radiation helmet. Darkness flickers across my gaze.

The next thing I register, Aspect is shaking me with all the force their mechanical arms can muster. Then straight-up kicking one knee into my gut. “Kori. Kori. *Kori*. KORI. KORI.”

Choking on a mouthful of spit, I come fully back to myself. With effort, I pull my body back up to standing. “How long . . . ?”

But Aspect has already retrieved my comms tablet from my utility belt, wildly tabbing through its various applications with both hands until the digital hourglass appears. The sand is far emptier than it was when I arrived at the Morpheus Market. But if we hurry, we can still make it home before suspicions are raised.

“Home,” Aspect pleads. “Aspect takes Kori—home to the sands—before Kori’s maker—wants to unmake.”

Numbly, I feel for the Morpheus sphere at my belt, the one my mother requested. It remains nestled comfortably in my pocket. So, too, my heatshot pistol remains sheathed at my side. My credit card is where I left it. My armor is unbroken in any way, protecting me from Pagonian radiation. What did this gremlin want, if they didn’t even take anything? Their tiny business card lies discarded, just barely visible in the half-light, at Aspect’s feet. I must have dropped it after the smoke bomb. Gritting my teeth, I snatch the card up and pocket it before I can think better of the decision.

This strange, undeniably risky encounter can’t have been for nothing. If this card can open a path to Aspect’s awakening . . . that’s worth any risk. Scientific breakthroughs have never been made by playing it safe. No matter what happens next, I need to know that, given

the opportunity, I was willing to try. I was willing to fight my good sense for a shot at something greater.

“Come on,” I say, nudging Aspect back toward the distant light of the still-teeming, never-sleeping market. “*Charon’s* waiting.”



Sure enough, Aspect and I are soon safely ensconced in *Charon* once again, my anti-radiation gear collapsing to smaller pieces at once. Somehow, despite Aspect’s eager bouncing on their metal toes, I manage to buckle them into the copilot’s seat. “And here you go,” I say, pulling their new sphere from my pocket. “One sea meat memory for the best mech I know.”

Aspect squeals. “Install now, Kori?”

A human can access a Morpheus memory and at least vaguely recall it later, despite the cognitive distance. Installation to their own internal Morpheus chip—a process that requires sedation and hands-on tinkering by a professional like Ednit—is only necessary to be able to access the fully detailed, lifelike memory at a moment’s notice, anytime, anywhere. But for Aspect, short-term memory is a precarious region in constant development. Another’s memory, experienced at a distance, dissipates almost immediately, like a wisp of fading smoke.

“I’ll install it back home,” I offer.

“Why not now?”

Because I am too tired to hold a conversation, and letting you watch this thing over and over instead of retaining it should keep you from pestering me with existential questions. “Because I said so,” I mutter, sounding like my mother and immediately hating myself. Nobody ever said that parenting an illegally semi-sentient mech would be easy, I suppose.

I can only imagine the conniption Chloe would have if she knew what I’d really been plotting in the Morpheus Market. Imbuing metal

with being . . . it's unthinkable. I already feel like I'm reporting to a parole officer anytime my homework is late. If Chloe found out I'd been dropping pieces of personhood into glorified mining equipment? I might find myself tied to a rusty chair with nothing but an algebra notebook to keep me company until I died of sheer boredom.

I set the sea meat Morpheus sphere to test mode, accessible at anyone's touch, and leave Aspect to access it repeatedly. Which I know is happening not only from the tiny flashing light on the sphere each time it's activated, but from Aspect's renewed shriek of delight at every go-around.

Exhausted from the entire gremlin-merchant ordeal in the alleyway, I set *Charon* to autopilot us back to the settlement. My eyes remain heavy, my wrist sore from Aspect's perpetual nervous hold, my lungs uneasy from the smoke bomb. I could sleep on the trip instead of just waiting to return home. But my mind races even behind closed eyes, scattered thoughts darting through my consciousness. What did that mysterious merchant really want? Could they eventually provide me with a memory capable of awakening Aspect's sentience? And what sort of memory did my mother send me to retrieve this time around, anyway?

I should've known that snooping on Chloe's memory sphere would never be an isolated incident. Now my whole body craves knowledge, if only because it's forbidden. Huffing out a breath, I seize Chloe's new sphere from its pouch at my waist and press an open palm to its surface.

"Test," I blurt before I can think better of it.

And I dive, the memory closing over and around me.

Nothing hurts.

Everything *hurts*.

I curl one finger inward at a time, until my right hand (not my hand) is firmly balled into a trembling fist, attached to a trembling arm that feels like it belongs to someone else. I clench harder to still the shaking, and my nails bite into my palm. It bleeds; why does it bleed?

"Is it not brilliant?" the doctor says, from somewhere behind me, from another world entirely.

I uncurl the fist. I reach up and thread my fingers instead through perfectly woven braids, not a hair out of place, as gorgeous a crown as I've ever had. A crown from someone else's kingdom. An obligation I am only now beginning to fully comprehend.

My queen chose me for this, the highest of honors. I should be proud beyond words. I should be leaping, dancing, alight with the fervor of youth, but I feel numb all over.

"Jelza?" the doctor says, and my name might as well be a foreign language.

I don't look at him. Instead I cast my gaze down, at the handheld mirror on the rolling table. I lift it, and I look, and the reflection is me, and not me. Will I ever not lurch, as if sighting a poltergeist, when this woman blinks slowly back at me from beyond the glass? Will Dawn—

"I want to see my daughter." My voice; not my voice.

"I'm afraid that is inadvisable, so soon."

Again my hand becomes a fist. I press it against the wall—no, I launch it like a killing blow, and the wall crumbles in on itself, the indentation of my knuckles pressed unflinchingly into the metal.

"Appropriate limitations, to prevent rapid wear and tear, take time to become active, I'm afraid," the doctor says. "And the pain receptors—"

Pain. Oh, the pain. It seizes upon me all at once. I'm on one knee, clutching my hand, tears in my eyes. It isn't broken; it should be.

If I'm unbreakable now, why do I feel so broken anyway?

"—take time to recognize those limitations," the doctor finishes, matter-of-fact, like he's talking about filing financials.

I clutch my gorgeously, hideously unbroken hand to my chest, over the place where my heart roars and roars its too-late warning. I stare, wordless, again at the mirror. Alert brown eyes, rimmed with thick lashes. My braids, my deep brown skin, the strong curves of my cheeks and jaw and lips.

I don't know her.

Will my daughter know this face? Can I wipe her tears away with this hand? Dawn, Dawn, I named you for beginnings in a world long dead, for light breaking golden and unstoppable across a velvet black sky. Is this a beginning? Do I even want to see it through to the end? Do I have a choice?

Somehow, my voice still emerges clear as crystal. "What have I become?"

"Only what you volunteered to become, Jelza."

"I want to see my daughter." The room shimmers and blurs. Everything tastes like salt. I hurt and I hurt and it isn't pain, and it's never ever going to stop. Eternal midnight, thick as the Shadowlands could ever be, opens in my chest like a sinkhole pit, ready to swallow me alive, bones and all. "Please, please," I'm pleading, tears streaking this other Jelza's cheeks, her lips quivering, her composure unwoven entirely, "I want to see my daughter."

I jerk back into myself so abruptly that my head smarts where it smacked the seat. Jelza. The same woman, again. And with Ednit. He knows more about this than he ever let on. I don't understand anything about what I just saw. What sort of procedure did Jelza undergo? Some sort of experimental limb replacement? Had her arm been in an accident? Been suffering from a progressive disease? Prosthetics would hardly be new tech in the Daylands, but one so visually convincing at first glance would be a breakthrough, right down to still drawing blood at the prick of her nails. But then, why was she so distressed? Does the body reject this advanced prosthetic like a stranger's mismatched organ?

And why remove the memory? Was this new limb tech so advanced, so wildly experimental, that even the recollection of it had to be hidden as scientific research toward perfecting it continued? Then perhaps Chloe lost track of it in a mishap, and it found its way to the open market, from which I needed to retrieve it. Or was Jelza's haunting distress so intense that she removed this memory independently and sold it to get it as far away from herself as possible? Chloe has eyes everywhere; she could easily have found out about such a thing, ordering me to retrieve the memory. Regardless of how it ended up in the Morpheus Market, why was ending its circulation so critical? I don't know what I expected

to unearth in Chloe's Morpheus sphere, but it most definitely wasn't this.

"This makes no damn sense," I mutter.

Unconsciously, I look to Aspect, uselessly hoping for an expression of understanding. It's a pointless exercise given that A) Aspect's face is locked in a singular expression, complete with a slightly crooked mouth, courtesy of my negligible art skills, and B) Aspect is presently experiencing their new fishy memory for at least the eleventh time.

I sigh, throwing my head back against the padded pilot's seat, eyes sliding shut. Not knowing things makes me itchy all over. Sleep creeps at the edges of my mind, pressing in like a soft blanket, and briefly, despite myself, I almost drift. Then a persistent beeping startles me fully awake. In a pocket of my utility belt, something is vibrating so violently that it hurts my hip bone. Is my comms tablet having a digital seizure? Am I losing my grip on reality from all these recent dives into other people's memories? I fumble in the pocket, but it's not the one that contains my comms tablet at all.

It's the pocket where I stashed the gremlin's business card.

The card, incessantly shuddering, continues to freak out once I have it back in my hands, but it doesn't appear to have any sort of interactive interface. Unless . . .

I tear off my gloves, safe from the planet's radiation within *Charon*, and press one warm, open palm directly to the card's surface. It unfolds like an alien origami flower, the pistil emanating a pulsing emerald glow.

For an instant of purest terror, I fear I've been foolish enough to willingly accept a bizarre bomb. I contemplate crushing the false business card in my fist and lobbing it out the nearest trash chute to rot in the Passage below. Then the emerald sheen intensifies, thin lines like pollen rising from the pistil until they coalesce into a creature's cloaked shape.

Not a human. At least, not anymore. While it's impossible to identify colors from a purely green hologram, the depicted stranger's skin is