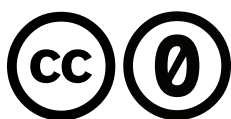




BOOK ONE
TYPHOON
BY MCM

DUSTRUNNERS
TYPHOON



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FOR ALL YOU NUTTERS OUT THERE:
You made my day, my month and my year.

DUSTRUNNERS
TYPHOON

BY MCM



About This eBook

This is a special Free-e-Day release of *Typhoon*. Going by numbers, this is version 0.5, which means it's not finalized at all. There's editing left to do, but it's still come a long way since its beginnings.

Typhoon was written as part of #3D1D, a crazy live-writing experiment where I composed a novel online in three days with the help of my audience. It was hectic and stressful, but *so much fun*. At this stage, most of that insanity still shines through. By the time we reach 1.0, I'm not sure how much of it won't feel polished into sanity. So catch it while you can!

I hope you enjoy this story, and if you do, drop me a line and let me know. Happy readers make my world go round!

MCM

December 1, 2009

The Future

NOVEMBER 3, 2042 — NEW YORK CITY, USA

No one noticed the blood stains on his jumpsuit. All eyes were on the sky above, the clearing in the middle of the buzzing crowd. Ayoub pushed through packs of onlookers, racing towards the podium, where a dozen Secret Service agents kept watch with professional unease.

He fell into a pair of revellers who smelled strongly of beer at noon, and he tried to get his footing again, but nerves got the better of him, and he fumbled forward into a woman wearing a what looked like a rocket ship — foil messily wrapped around a chicken wire mesh on her body.

“It’s here, dahling,” she said with empty eyes. “Ain’t it grand?”

He shoved her aside, trying to ride atop the wave of the crowd, rather than in it. From the left, he heard static: uniformed NYPD had noticed him, and were radioing it in. He saw his window closing, and the podium was still so far away...

He ducked down and ran, clipped by elbows and purses, but went unseen. For a few steps, anyway. Until he bumped headlong into the chest of a very broad police officer.

“Where you goin’, sir?”

He turned, saw another three coming towards him. They were calm, casual, but he knew the glint in the eye.

“I need—” he began, but then stun sticks were drawn, and the closest one grabbed him by the arm, holding him tight.

“What happened to your shirt?” asked the officer.

“It’s not what you—”

“Base, we’ve got a situation here,” said the officer, talking into his radio and stepping back. “Can you see me out here?”

Ayoub couldn’t hear the answer, checked the surrounding buildings, teeth chattering. Someone somewhere shouted “There it is!” but there was no sound, no roar, no boom. He struggled against the captors.

“...Arab male, late thirties, 180 centimetres. Checking fingerprints now—”

Ayoub swung his head back, hit the man behind him in the teeth. Something cracked, and his arm was let go. The one with the fingerprint scanner had no time to react before a foot caught him in the chest, sent him into the others. Ayoub leapt into the crowd again, pushing revellers back to block the pursuit.

“No time left... no time...”

The Secret Service saw him coming. The steps to the podium were blocked, but they stood there, watching, begging him to try. He scrambled onto the roof of a car, cracking the windshield before leaping onto a TV van, almost sending the cameraman off the edge.

“Be safe,” Ayoub said, patting him on the back as he went, only to hear a quiet *twip!* The cameraman slumped forward, a small wound in his back leaking blood. The gunshot had made no noise. Ayoub didn’t pause to check the skyline. He had to move.

His footing was bad, but he grabbed the scaffolding at the side of the podium, pulled himself up halfway, saw the polished shoes so close, called:

“Secretary Weiss!”

A stun stick hit his leg, and his hands convulsed, and he dropped onto the pavement below, surrounded by agents in dark suits, assessing him gravely.

“Threat contained,” said a voice he couldn’t place. He was dragged, limp, to his knees.

“Wait...” he slurred, his tongue not ready to move yet, “I’m a soldier... I have to—”

A fist put him back into silence, and he sucked down the blood, avoided looking them in the eye. His beard, wild and itchy, burned, but he couldn't scratch it. He stomped his foot on the ground like a petulant child.

"There's a bomb in the—"

Then the sound. A roar, sudden and shocking. Windows in all the skyscrapers shook, and though he couldn't see it, he knew what was coming. The crowd was in awe, stunned by the sight, and he fought to get loose, to get to the podium.

"Run him," said a voice from behind, and a scanner hit his finger, though he tried to make a fist to stop it.

"You said a bomb?" asked another agent, grabbing his chin and looking him in the eye. "A bomb where? Here?"

"Y-yes," said Ayoub, shivering. "It's here."

The agent looked over his shoulder, nodded.

"Check the back door to the Hilton again," he said, earpiece buzzing audibly over the hum of the crowd. "I want that area locked down."

"Sir," said another, "We checked it twice. Nobody got in there before the—"

"It's not in the Hilton!" Ayoub screamed. "The bomb is right here! In the crowd! You're all going to d—"

Another blow to the face, and his eyes had trouble focussing afterward.

"You shut the hell up," said the close agent. "Just shut up. Somebody cuff him so I can get back to work!"

There was a cheer from the crowd, and he tried to see over his shoulder, see what was going on, but a rough hand turned his head around.

"There's no time..." he cursed.

He kicked out at the agent in front, hitting him in the groin, and yanked an arm free clipping another in the face with his elbow. He grabbed a gun from a falling agent's holster and pistol-whipped the last opponent before taking off.

"Suspect is armed! Shoot to kill!"

Ayoub grabbed hold of the railings and pulled himself up, onto a gangplank that lead to the main podium. The crowd was starstruck by the sight in their midst, on the giant reproductions on the screens around the Square, but he had no time.

“Secretary Weiss!” he shouted, gun loose in his hand. “Secretary Weiss!”

The second gunshot made a noise.

Have to Run

THREE YEARS EARLIER — BOLTON, CANADA

Kani was not awake. The clock above her bed pulsed a soft “5:10AM”, but the screeching noise came from her computer across the room.

“Snooze,” she muttered, and it began to fade. Briefly.

“Snooze disabled,” it said calmly.

She sighed.

“Cancel disabling.”

“Command not found.”

“Undo snooze lock.”

“Command not found. Say ‘help’ for help.”

She sat up, eyes narrow and puffy, teeth locked in fury. She kicked her covers onto the floor and stormed into the bathroom, slamming the door. The computer went on with its day, starting a playlist of soft music.

By the time she came back out, the screen was on, showing a list of messages she’d missed overnight. She swished through them as she brushed her teeth, closing the window. She tapped the news icon, started putting on her track suit.

It began displaying articles, scrolling lazily, hard to read against the burgundy Trudeau High background. She took the toothbrush out of her mouth.

“Shpook noo,” she said, trying not to spray.

“Command not found.”

“Shpeee noo,” she repeated, then stormed into the bathroom, spat and rinsed, and leaned back out.

“Speak news!”

The computer started speaking the articles, but in a quiet voice that wasn’t audible against the running water.

“Louder!” she called.

The voice got a fraction of a decibel louder.

“Forget it! Play news video!”

“Please specify playlist,” it said.

She put her head around the corner.

“Default,” she glowered, then cursed as it put a question mark onscreen. “Of course. Preference file corruption. As always.”

“Please specify playlist,” repeated the computer.

“Just pick some random stuff. Random. World news.”

“Random world news,” it said, and then the familiar tune to the IPN World News played softly, and a robotic voice introduced Kana Choi.

“This is a IPN News Refresh for 1100 SST,” she said in a voice that almost put Kani back to sleep. “Top stories at this hour: Gossamer trial to proceed against threat of violence; Typhoon Koshi gains strength off Korea; UN pledges to revisit issue of—”

Kani put an earbud in and tapped the mute button on her computer. The earbud picked up the broadcast from there, lagging a bit as she crept through the darkened hall, down the stairs and into the kitchen. The lights gradually came up, to soften the blow of the early hour.

Kana Choi was still talking.

“... Constitutional scholars remain divided on the issue of jurisdiction, despite assurances by Attorney General Deborah Warner that Gossamer is not being tried as an enemy combatant...”

The fridge was mostly empty, and the cupboard too. Kani pulled a bundle of bagels from a drawer and searched for a clean knife to cut them with. The kitchen was in disarray, and it got worse as the lights came up.

“I’ll make it,” came a voice from behind. “Don’t worry about it.”

"I don't have time for that, dad," Kani said, checking the dishwasher and pulling out a crusty knife. "Gotta go."

"I'll drive you," he said. "Don't worry about it."

She gave him a deadened look.

"You in a car right now is a public safety issue," she said. "Besides, I'm meeting Stacey at the train station. It's way out of your way."

"How is Stacey?"

"I won't know until I see her," Kani said with a smile.

"Is she still... I mean, did she ever..."

"The police talked with her step dad last week, but she won't talk about it yet. She's still at home, though."

Her father nodded, rubbed his eye.

"Well, the offer stands. We've got an extra room."

"She knows."

"All right," he said, stumbling onto a stool at the counter. "Let's get this show on the road. I just need some coffee and I'll be fine. What time is it anyway?"

"A little past 5:30," she said, scrubbing the crust off the knife. The sponge smelled awful.

"Mr Longbottom should be shot," said her father.

"You sound like the rest of the team," she sighed.

"Who starts practice at 6 in the morning?"

"Someone who lives across the street from the school," Kani said, giving up on the knife and ripping the bagel in half by hand.

"You can't get by on just that. Water polo takes energy. Or does it? I don't know. How about this: you make me some coffee, I'll make you a proper breakfast, and we'll drive to school with Stacey and get there on time?"

"Doubtful," she said wearily.

"What do you want? Country ham? Biscuits, sausage gravy? I don't know what we have."

Kani grabbed her bag off the counter, waved to her father.

"We don't have any of that, dad. And what's more, I don't think you know how to cook any of that. So let's skip it. I hereby relieve you of your fatherly duties for the day."

He sighed, rested his head on the counter and started to snore. She grabbed her gym bag from the hook by the door, dimmed the lights and went outside.

She had made it to the driveway when the front door opened, and her father stumbled into the brisk morning air.

"Don't forget about tonight!" he called, and she stopped short, wincing.

"What's tonight?" she asked, though her voice said she knew what was coming.

"The Prabhakaran memorial," he said. "Your grandfather asked if you were coming."

"I'm..." she said, taking a shaky breath. "I'm busy tonight, dad. I'm gonna have to skip it this year."

"Kani," he said, coming further outside, waking up too damned fast, "You know it's important to him."

"Yeah, well, I'm busy. Sometimes these things happen. What can I do?"

He was close now, spoke quietly, determined. The opposite of the faltering father from inside.

"Kani, it's important."

"What's important?" she snapped. "Worshipping a war criminal? Or better yet, getting on the news while worshipping a war criminal?"

"It's not worshipping—"

"It looks that way!" she said, dialling her voice down in the quiet of the morning. "It looks that way to anyone watching. 'Hey look! There are those crazy Tamils, praising a mass murderer...' It does wonders for my social circle at school, let me tell you."

"Your friends will understand," he said.

"Will they? I don't even understand!"

He exhaled slowly, took a step away, rubbed his hands across his face. Kani crossed her arms, not ready to give in. They stood in silence for a moment.

"Your grandfather wants you there. We're family, Kani. We take care of each other. Every other day of the year, you can be whatever

you like. Today... no, *tonight*, we take a few hours to remember our history.”

“You weren’t even born when—”

“That’s what history *is*. You don’t need to agree with it, but you need to respect it. It defines who you are.”

She waved him off, turned and walked to the street.

“You’re coming, right?” he called.

“I don’t know yet!” she called back, and then started jogging away.

Kana Choi kept her company the rest of the way to the train station, talking about the latest songs by pop stars she couldn’t identify without video, and movies she didn’t have time to see. The UN was holding more summits that sounded like the old summits, and she turned off the earbud as she arrived at the train station.

The clock on the wall said 5:45. Kani’s eyes shocked to life, and she ran up the stairs, stumbling on the last step as the train’s doors closed and it shot down the tracks without her. She braced herself against the wall, shook her head.

“Great,” she sighed. “Just great. Hello, extra laps.”

She tapped on her phone and dialled Stacey, but it went straight to voicemail. She checked the clock again.

“Hey Stace, it’s Kani. Probably just missed the train. Hope you’re on it. Tell Mr Longbottom I’ll be—”

A hand grabbed her shoulder, and she nearly fell down the stairs. She turned and gasped at the sight of Stacey, bruised face and tears in her eyes, gasping for breath.

“Stacey...” Kani said, holding her friend’s arm. “What’s going—”

“Run,” Stacey said, hands shaking. “We’ve got to *run!*”

Prey

Kani's bag dropped from her shoulder as she raced down the steps, stumbling and falling into a stranger as she was pulled around the corner and into the long corridor that led to the parking lot.

"Stacey, what's going on?" she gasped, but Stacey wasn't answering. She smashed into the gate by the station, pushed and rattled it until the latch gave way, and they tumbled into the high grass in the field by the tracks. The morning sun was burning off the moistness on the stalks, but the pinpricks of water were enough to give Kani a chill.

They ran faster than they could see ahead, dancing over rocky patches and quick dips in the terrain, finally coming to a stop in a small indent in the ground near a dead tree.

Stacey pushed Kani close to the ground, peered over the grass nervously.

"What's going on?" Kani asked, and Stacey hushed her quiet.

"I'm in trouble, Kani," Stacey whispered with a trembling voice. "So much trouble. I don't know what else to do. I've got to run."

"What's wrong? Is it your step dad again? I swear to god, if he hit you again, I'm going to—"

"No! No, it's not him. It's not him. It's... god, I don't know how to say this. It's not him."

Kani grabbed Stacey's hand and squeezed, brushed blond locks from her friend's swelling face. For a moment, Stacey seemed to flinch at the contact, ready to fight, but she calmed, her breath slowed, and she nodded, bit her lip.

"I owe money."

Kani nodded.

“Okay. Money. How much money?”

“Twelve thousand dollars.”

Kani nearly choked, shook her head.

“Excuse me? What?”

“Twelve thousand. I know. I know, but—”

“Stace, seriously... how is that even *possible*?”

“It’s not what you think.”

“Oh sure,” Kani said, almost laughing at the thought. “I’ll bet it’s *perfectly* reasonable. Sometimes you just can’t resist those new shoes, and—”

“I’m being serious, Kani!”

“Really? Because seriously, I don’t know how you can possibly owe *anyone* that much money. That’s insane!”

“It’s... complicated,” Stacey offered, and started to cry.

Kani took a sharp breath in, shook her head.

“Okay, can’t you go and tell whoever it is that you’ll pay them back as soon as you—”

“It’s the mob,” she said, quieter now. “The Italians. I owe *them* the money.”

Kani nodded, peered over the grass. No one around. Another train raced out of the station, rattling the air.

“They did this to you?” she said, motioning towards the bruises. “That’s what this is about?”

“Yeah,” Stacey nodded. “When I told them... when I told them I couldn’t do it anymore. I couldn’t—”

“Couldn’t what? Hold on, I’m not following. What exactly is going on?”

Stacey whimpered, put her face in her hands. Kani rubbed her back softly, face not nearly as sympathetic as her touch.

“I was trying to get away,” Stacey said, so quiet she was barely audible. “I needed to get away from him, but I needed money.”

“You can stay with us, you know—”

“No! No, I can’t do that to you guys. I can’t do it, and he wouldn’t let me. He’d make your life a living hell, Kani. You have no idea.”

“So what, you’re going to disappear? Just up and leave me?”

Stacey looked at her friend, tears in her eyes.

"I don't want to, but..."

"All right, fine. So you borrowed twelve thousand."

"No, I borrowed half a million."

Kani's breath left her. She grabbed Stacey's chin, turned her face up so they were making eye contact.

"You *what*?"

"It's... it's complicated. I pay it off as I work. But when I'm done, Kani... when I'm done, I'll have millions of my own! I can get away..."

"You can get away *anyway*, Stacey," Kani said. "You know it, too. Your mom *would* understand. This is all just a fantasy to avoid—"

"It's not a fantasy," Stacey cried, putting her head down.

"Not anymore it's not," Kani nodded, went back to rubbing her friend's back. They stayed that way for a moment, just the sound of the grass waving around them, a train pulling through the station.

"So what. You owe twelve thousand out of half a million. You must be raking it in. Why not ask for an extension or something?"

Stacey started crying harder.

"It's not the way it works," she sobbed. "It's all or nothing. All or nothing..."

"Listen," Kani said. "We need to go to the police, see if they—"

"No!" Stacey yelled, then cursed to herself. She grabbed Kani's arms, squeezed tight. "We can't see the police. Please, Kani, you need to help me. We can't go to the police."

Kani watched her warily. A phone started chiming, and Stacey pulled hers from her pocket, checked the address. She shuddered, turned it off, put it away.

"Who was that? Was it them?"

"No," Stacey said. "I don't know. Listen. Can we go somewhere safe? Someplace we can hide for a bit? Can you do that for me?"

Before she could answer, a loud voice boomed out from the distance, and though Kani couldn't understand the words, by Stacey's reaction, it was clear they'd been found out.

They scrambled to their feet and ran through the field as the shouts got louder, more persistent. There three voices Kani could pick out, and a fourth coming from ahead, to their right. Stacey stopped suddenly, took in the options, and took off again, to the left, towards the river off in the distance.

“Stacey,” Kani gasped between strides. “Call the police. Please...”

Stacey just kept running. They arrived at the edge of an embankment, a long concrete slope going down to the river’s edge. Dark figures were closing in fast.

“We’ve got to jump,” Kani said. “Can you make it?”

“I... I think so...” Stacey breathed.

“Jump far so you clear the sides. The water should be deep enough. I can’t see the bottom.”

“Okay,” nodded Stacey.

Kani backed up, tightened her fists, and filtered out the shouts, the panic in Stacey’s voice, the sound of her own heart. She slowed her breathing, heard her heartbeat, made it calm... calm...

She took off, foot touching the edge of the concrete, and threw herself into the air, legs still pumping as she flew. For a moment she thought she might even clear the river, land on the other side, and she inhaled a hopeful breath, a smile on her face.

But then she hit the water, and choked as it filled her lungs, and struggled to bring herself back to the surface. She splashed there, sputtering.

“Hurry!” she shouted up at Stacey.

Stacey nodded, took two steps back, and then started to jump.

“Wait!” Kani yelled, but it was too late. Stacey barely cleared the edge, landing badly on her left foot, then tumbling down the concrete slope and landing in the water on her back.

“Stacey!” Kani shouted, and splashed over to where she’d gone down. She dove under the water and saw Stacey floating, face twisted in pain, not trying to get back to the surface.

Kani grabbed her by the arm and started to pull, but Stacey shook her head, eyes wide with fear. She tried to pull free, but Kani was stronger, pushed her to the surface.

Just as Stacey's head made it up, she was suddenly pulled clear of the river, out from Kani's arm. Kani yelped underwater, swam up herself, and pulled in as much air as he lungs could manage.

A hand grabbed her hair and pulled her until her shoulders were out of the water.

"What's this?" asked a man she couldn't see, his voice thick and saucy, an Italian cadence in every word. "Just getting in the way, yeah?"

The only thing she could see was a tattooed arm close to her face, and the barrel of a gun touching her forehead. Nothing else would focus.

"Don't need *you*," continued the man. "Good thing you're already in the river. Saves me some haulin'."

Kani closed her eyes as the safety clicked off.

Decisions

“Wait!” barked another man, this time with a smaller, nasally voice. Kani blinked back beads of water, tried to see who was talking. A small man in a scratched and dusted black jacket was kneeling over Stacey, jaw set tightly.

“Leave her alone!” Kani yelled, and found herself dunked under water. She struggled to get free, but couldn’t escape the tattoo’s grip. She started to choke on the water as she screamed, only to be pulled out, gagging and wheezing.

“You shut your trap,” said the tattoo.

“Bring her out of there,” said the small one. “This is not good. Look at this.”

He held up Stacey’s arm, and Kani gasped at the sight of blood.

“What did you d—”

A slap to her face ended the protest.

“This is not good,” repeated the small man.

“Who are you people?” Kani asked, watching the big man with the tattoos carefully. He had on small round sunglasses that made his head that much more bulbous. The words across his arms weren’t English, but they looked angry.

“I’m Augusto Fantoni,” said the small man, puffing his chest and throwing Stacey’s arm away, standing up. “I’m the one in charge of your little friend here. She tell you about me?”

Kani shook her head.

“It don’t matter now. I’m your new best friend.”

“I doubt it,” muttered Kani.

“This fellow who helped you out of the water, he is Erlenmeyer.”

“Erlenmeyer?”

“He spend time in Germany—”

“Austria,” said Erlenmeyer.

“Whatever. It make no difference. He’s a good guy. Strong guy. He does good work. Unlike *you*!”

Fantoni kicked Stacey in the stomach. She yelped, but kept quiet. A bone was sticking out of the back of her hand, and blood was seeping towards the river. She was pale, shivering.

“She needs a doctor,” Kani said.

Fantoni and Erlenmeyer laughed.

“Doctor! That’s funny! You a funny kid! I like you. You an’ me, we gonna get along very well, I know.”

“You can go to hell,” Kani spat, and Erlenmeyer slapped her again.

Fantoni crouched down next to her, held her chin, spoke to her like she was a child.

“Her hand is busted, you know what that means?”

“You’re a bastard?”

“It means she can’t do what I pay her to do. She’s no good to me no more.”

Stacey bent her head up, reached towards Fantoni with her trembling, mangled hand.

“They know about me...” she said. “Please, we need to stop. They know...”

Fantoni sighed, scratched his chin, then slammed a foot down onto Stacey’s hand. She cried out in agony, curled into a ball and whimpered to herself. Kani wanted to go to her, but she was held too tight.

“Since Stacey is no longer useful, with the broken hand, I have a problem. She isn’t free and clear until her debt is paid, and like this, I don’t think she’s going to be paying much. But you see, I *need* the money. Broken or not, that money needs to come in. So how about this, little friend? You get to fly in her place.”

Kani jerked to attention.

“Fly?”

“Do not worry so much, it’s very easy. If Stacey can do it, you can do it no problem.” He snapped his fingers, motioned to a third man. “Find the bottle.”

Stacey groaned as she was rolled over, her bag taken from her shoulder. Her books and papers were dumped on the ground, along with a large bottle of painkillers with the label ripped off. Fantoni scooped it up, shook it.

“This is for you.”

He opened it up and handed it over to Kani. She took it reluctantly, forced to accept by a tightening grip on her hair.

She dumped the pills into the river.

Fantoni looked back at her, eyes narrow.

“You have fire in you.”

“Yes I do,” Kani said.

“It will be your funeral,” he shrugged. “Now you do what I say, you fly this one time, and Stacey gets to go home. If not...”

He aimed a gun at Stacey’s head. There was so much blood, she was barely awake at all to notice her life being threatened.

“Wait!” Kani said. “I don’t know anything about flying! I’m just a teenager, I don’t—”

“It’s not hard,” said Fantoni. “They make it easy these days. Here...” He fished Stacey’s phone off the ground, turned it on, held it forward, but paused. “If you drop *this* in the water, you both die.”

Kani paused, nodded reluctantly.

“You take this phone, you ride the westbound train to the Guelph express stop. Get out there, and there’s a big field behind you. Look west, walk about three kilometres through that field...”

“Wait, what am I doing there? What am I looking for?”

“You keep your mouth shut, and I tell you.”

“Fine,” Kani grumbled.

“Three kilometres in, you will find a shack. Wooden thing. Looks like it was built by Erlenmeyer’s mamma, yes?”

Erlenmeyer’s grip on Kani’s hair tightened.

“You find the ship, plug the phone into the dashboard and—”

“Hold on,” Kani said. “What ship? What’s this about?”

“You plug it in, it takes care of the rest. You just punch in the code when it says to. Right? Right, Stacey, girl?”

He prodded Stacey with his toe. She barely reacted. Kani’s breathing got more urgent, furious.

“Any funny business, and we kill your friend. And maybe your family, too. I can’t decide. I will let Erlenmeyer decide.”

Erlenmeyer chuckled to himself.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Kani said, taking the phone and pocketing it. “How am I supposed to do what you want if I don’t *understand* what you’re after?”

Fantoni laughed, and his men joined in. He started up the embankment, glancing into the sky with a wide grin on his face.

“You don’t listen well, do you?” he said. “You’re flying for me. Up there. Bringing home... how does it... yes, bringing home the bacon.”

“What bacon?” Kani called as he reached the top.

“Minerals, I think. I don’t know, I don’t do that part.”

“Wait, *asteroid* minerals?” she gasped, taking a step back. Erlenmeyer caught her before she fell into the river again.

“That’s the one,” he grinned. “For today, you get to play a pirate. Will be fun, yes?”

The Ride

A pool of water was forming under Kani's seat as the train pulled out of the station, heading west. She pressed her head against the glass, ignored the sight of Fantoni shoving Stacey into a black truck in the parking lot below. She stared at the horizon.

She rested her forehead on the seat in front of her and pulled her arms in close, trying to warm up. The train's air conditioning blew from all sides, making it worse.

She caught sight of a businessman across from her, newspaper in hand, watching her more than the words on the screen. She shrugged at him, and he jerked to attention, went back to reading. Uneasily.

Kani caught her breath, held it, and all in a rush, the weight of the past hour came pounding into her, and she covered her mouth just in time to stop a sob. She lowered her head down towards her knees, wrapped her arms around her head, and cried. She kept having flashes of the gun at her head, Stacey's hand, the blood... every time she thought it had passed, that gun came back into view like lightning... a flash of terror, and then gone.

She calmed herself, stowed the panic away, and fumbled in her pocket, pulled out her phone. She hovered a finger over the nine. In the shade behind the seat on the train, help seemed so far away, but all she needed was to push that button...

She looked up. Various eyes glanced away, pretending to mind their own business. Kani wiped the tears from her eyes, leaned back in her seat, sniffled. She was fine. She was going to be fine. She gripped the phone in her hand and tried to be fine.

Above the exit was a poster, scratched on with black marker, but still clearly visible. How to pick out a pirate. The photo was nothing like her: a gravely-looking man with a scar on his face, cigarette hanging from his lips.

She read the address on the poster, keyed it into her phone. The site came up, and she tapped through to “See the signs.” A video began to play, and she popped in an earbud to hear.

“... can be anyone, anywhere. Always be on the look out for these telltale signs: excessive vitamin use. Because of their unsafe vehicles, pirates are exposed to high doses of solar radiation, which can cause serious health defects if not treated. To counter this, many criminals consume large quantities of specially-fortified vitamins to help them survive their time in space...”

Kani clasped her hands together, shaking. The pills in the water. She looked at the sun, and it felt cold.

“... An abnormal work schedule is often a warning sign. Because of the unpredictable nature of unlicensed mining, pirates will often need to leave work at strange hours, and stay out for extended periods of time. Sometimes you—”

A hand landed on Kani’s shoulder, and she flinched back into the wall, dropping her phone. An old man stood there, patchy stubble framing a rotting mouth. He put his hand out to her, brown with caked dirt and sunburnt cracks, and breathed putrid air at her.

He was speaking, but she couldn’t hear. She took the earbud out, grabbed her phone from the floor.

“Can’ya spare some, dear?” he asked.

She glanced around.

“I don’t... I don’t have any money,” she said.

“Not money, dear. Tea. Can’ya spare some tea?”

Kani smiled nervously. She shook her head.

“Sorry,” she said. “I don’t have any tea, either.”

The old man sighed and sat next to her. She pushed herself as far against the wall as she could manage. He began massaging his thighs, humming softly to himself.

“Mood swings?” he said suddenly.

"Excuse me?"

"Mood swings? You have them?"

She looked around. A few other people on the train were watching them, cautious or amused, she couldn't tell. She leaned as close to the old man as she dared.

"Sorry, what?"

"Your phone. It said 'mood swings'. You have them?"

She looked down, stopped the video from playing, put away the phone.

"No," she said. "No mood swings."

"I like swings."

"Sure," she nodded.

"When I was a boy, I jumped off the swing, did you know? I jumped off the swing, and I landed on my face. Right here... can you see the scar?"

He pointed to just under his nose. Kani smiled at him, nodded. He tapped two teeth around an empty space on his gum line.

"Lost my first grown-up tooth that way. M'mother was livid. Absolutely livid."

"Yeah," Kani agreed, looking out the window again.

"Do you have a mother?"

She closed her eyes, turned her head halfway to see him, pushed some wet hair from her face.

"No," she said. "No I don't."

"She was lovely," he said. "My mother was lovely. She bought me things at my birthday."

"I think that's normal," Kani said, the edge in her voice piercing through. "Listen, I think that guy up there has some tea."

The old man's eyes shot forward. He got to his feet.

"Tea? Really?"

"Yeah."

"I don't see him! Where is he?"

Kani pointed forward, squinting.

"He went into the other car. He's up there. He had a cup of tea. A kettle, too. He looked happy."

The old man waved to her and rushed out of the car, laughing the whole way. Kani looked at the other passengers and shrugged. They smiled back, went back to their reading.

“Guelph express station,” said the train gently. “Please prepare to exit.”

Kani got up, checked her seat, and slipped off the train onto an abandoned platform. She looked west, through a farmer’s field, and saw nothing but corn. No shack, no ship, no danger.

She looked around herself, then walked down the stairs, over a wooden fence, and into the field. The ground was wet and muddy, but she kept her pace up, hopping every so often to see over the stalks.

Ten minutes later, she came to a clearing, and in the centre was a sizeable wooden shack like a barn, boards coming off the sides, at the end of a long stretch of crumbling asphalt that ended in a patch of rocks. On the side of the shack it said “Eli’s Airpatch,” in faded paint.

The side door was open, swinging in the wind.

As she approached, something inside the shack rattled. She paused, held the door still and leaned in.

“Hello?” she called. “Is anyone in there?”

Silence. She leaned in further, tried to see through the darkness. Bright shafts of light made it impossible.

“I’m... I’m Stacey’s friend. Is anyone there?”

Another shuffle. She stepped in and tripped over something, fell to her knees. She turned around and saw a dusty bin of chocolates, left right by the entrance. Department store chocolates, the tape still around the seal. She pushed them out of the way, then paused, and pushed them back where they were.

A huge tarp was draped over an oddly-shaped vehicle, only its giant wheels peeking out the bottom. She pulled at the tarp and it came off easily, revealing a dull, patchy metal underneath. She pushed the tarp to the side and stood back, taking it in.

It was a jet fighter, wings folded up in a triangle above it, cockpit speckled with dust and dirt. Along the side, the letters “F-422” was half-removed, painted over by playing cards and fiery patterns.

Along the side of the cockpit, it said: “Incessna,” and below that, “Tundra.”

She ran her hand along the edge of the glass and found a latch. She pushed it in, and the cockpit hissed, opened gently. She glanced around herself, listening for a rattle again, but heard nothing.

She climbed the side of the ship, kneeling over the opening. A flight suit and helmet were inside, so she took them out and gladly changed out of her damp clothes. The suit was too big for her, but she rolled up the sleeves and legs, and strapped her gloves on anyway.

The front doors to the shack rolled open easily, as if they’d been greased recently. As soon as the first door was open, a small creature — almost like a cross between a hedgehog and a monkey — scurried out and into the field. Kani blinked at it, paused, then turned back towards the fighter.

It looked worse in full daylight. If it could make it off the ground, it would be a miracle. If it could survive in space...

She put on the helmet and sat herself in the cockpit, closing the lid. She fumbled the phone into a cradle in the console, and the dashboard lit up. The phone said “please dial.”

“Dial?” she said to herself. “Dial what?”

She looked around for something that looked like an address to dial, but found nothing but a small scrap of paper with a drawing of a pickle wearing a dress. She smiled at the oddness of it, turned it over, and saw the hand-written note: “M-27.”

“M-27,” she said. “Memory 27. Okay, I got ya.”

She went into the phone’s memory banks, tapped through to the memory banks, and found entry 27. Unnamed. She took a deep breath, and hit “dial.”

A few seconds later, the glass in front of her showed a text overlay, with quick words scrolling by faster than she could read. Then a peaceful logo faded overtop, proclaiming: “Centrix Interface System 4.2 — Better Than Old School™.”

The jet powered up, rolling out of the shack. Kani checked behind her, saw the wings unfolding once they were clear, and the engine started to roar.

“Please fasten safety harness,” said a pleasant voice, not unlike her computer at home. “Please fasten safety harness.”

She pulled the belts over her shoulders, clicked them into place, and only had a second to spare before the jet picked up speed and tore down the runway, straight at the pile of rocks!

One Small Step

Kani braced for impact as the rocks raced closer, but at the last second, with a whirl, the Incessna jerked into the air. Kani let out a rattled breath, put her feet down from the console, and watched the corn field shoot past in a blur.

“Coordinates locked,” said the computer. “Requesting satellite coverage. Confirmed. Changing course. Please be patient.”

The ship banked to the left, and Kani’s head knocked sideways. She saw the field give way to dark green forest, sporadic lakes and rolling hills, and then slowly, frost, snow and giant oceans of ice.

“Where are we?” she asked herself, then spoke louder. “Computer, where are we?”

“Command not found,” said the console.

“Figures,” she muttered.

“Updating satellite information,” said the console. “Confirmed. Changing course.”

The ship banked left again, and again she swayed to the side.

“Stupid... warn me next time,” she said.

“Command not found.”

“Shut up. Yeah, yeah. Command not found.”

All the snow outside began to look the same, so she started checking out the cockpit. Small pockets and compartments littered the sides, but most were empty. She found a tube wedged into a small slot, and inside was a rectal thermometer. She blinked at it through her helmet.

“Oh Stacey. This is so not how I want to remember you.”

She looked out the window again and noticed they were much higher now. Details were missing, and off in the distance, she could see the faint edge of the continent, though she couldn't tell what part. It was beautiful, whatever it was. Rich, dark blue and a kind of green noise she couldn't put a word to. The sun reflected brilliantly off the Pacific ocean.

"Course correction," said the console, and they banked right. She knocked her head on the edge of the cockpit.

"Stupid goddamn..."

"Please avoid pressing buttons during autopilot stage," said the console.

"Stop knocking me around, then," she snapped.

"Command not found."

She fumbled tapped the phone, and it came to life. She searched through the media folders, but at the angle she was sitting, she wouldn't be able to see the screen to watch a movie anyway. She flicked through to music, and hit the shuffle option.

She jerked to attention at the first song. A mopey, traditional country tune. She tapped the screen and read the title, squinting in disbelief.

"All My Exes Lives in Texas?" she said. "I don't which is worse, Stace, the thermometer or this. Holy crap."

She let it play, glancing out the window again, and in the distance, saw a mass of swirling white in the middle of the ocean, moving yet totally still.

"The typhoon..." she said to herself. "That must be Korea. Where the hell are we going?"

She began to realize her arms were floating, not resting at her sides anymore. The helmet was putting faint pressure on her chin rather than the top of her head, and she suddenly felt ill. Horribly, painfully ill. Airsickness, but worse, like there was no up and down.

She closed her eyes and took deep breaths, blowing out slowly, trying to work past the nausea.

"It's all in your head," she said. "It's all in your head. There's no reason to be sick. No reason to be sick—"

“Microgravity alert,” said the console.

“Shut *up*! Shut up! Just stop talking!”

“Enter mute mode?”

“Yes! Mute mode! Do it!”

The console didn’t reply. It flashed an “OK” on the glass above her, and went back to its business. She looked up for the first time and saw... black. Pure, deafening black. The cockpit lights dimmed until she could barely see her own reflection anymore, only the enormity of nothingness.

Off to her right, a small pinprick of light twinkled, shining more as she moved.

“The space station,” she said to herself. “Got it.”

She looked over her shoulder towards the sun, and everything went black very suddenly. Red letters flashed over her vision: “Warning: Avoid direct exposure to sunlight.”

She turned away. Her body felt... toasty.

“Good to know,” she said.

A sudden noise shook her awake. It was digital, like a glass breaking over a long period of time, coming from behind and arcing over her, off into the distance. She looked around, couldn’t see anything, but then a second noise pierced the silence, moving the same direction.

She reached to the console, saw a few buttons marked with images. She hit the one that looked like a grid, and suddenly the darkness of space filled with a set of planes showing three-dimensional space.

“Wow,” she said. “That’s pretty cool.”

She tapped the second button in the sequence, and a long rectangular trough appeared before her, running off into the distance. She was moving along it, she could see. Beside the green trough were two others, both yellow.

“What are those things?” she asked, but the console only answered its usual way on her visor.

The last button clicked down and Kani nearly fell back from the shock of what she saw. Dozens — if not hundreds — of tiny

markings, all over her vision, showing every bit of *everything* space had to offer.

Another sound shot by, and she watched a small red square arc into the distance, labelled “debris.” She was surrounded by debris. It was stunning. The ship was swivelling left and right to avoid it, and she only barely registered the motion. It wasn’t banking like in the atmosphere, it was actually *shifting itself* in clean motions, effortlessly.

Her visor read “Autopilot ending” and suddenly a long pole with a sphere on the end extracted from the side of the cockpit, and a second stick, like a gear shift, appeared at her left hand. She reached out and held the gear shift, and wrapped her fingers around the handle at the side of the sphere to her right.

“All right,” she said. This makes sense. I think.”

She turned the sphere clockwise, and the ship mimicked the motion perfectly. When she stopped, the movement stopped. She turned back, just to be safe. She turned the sphere upwards, so her hand was on top, and the ship flipped downwards. She could still see the green corridor above her. She was moving the same speed, same direction, just not with the same orientation. It was extremely unnerving. Unnatural.

“If this were a game, I’d have returned it. The UI sucks.”

She pushed the stick to the side, but the computer put up a warning saying “Fuel loss expected. Please correct course.” She put herself back on track.

“Crybaby.”

Ahead, a series of green triangles appeared, but without identification. She motioned to them.

“Can we magnify that?”

“Command not found. Please reduce speed.”

“I’m saying, can we magnify that before I get there?”

“Please reduce speed.”

“Seriously? Just—”

But then she noticed it: they were approaching much faster than she expected! She pulled back on the throttle, and jerked forward as the ship slowed down.

A ping echoed in her ear, and she heard a voice that was not the console for a change. It sounded African-American. Rough, curt, and not amused.

“Who are you?” said the voice.

“Um... I’m here because—”

“Answer the question,” repeated the voice, and she could finally see who was talking: every time the voice spoke, the green triangle over top a ship in front of her changed hue slightly.

“I’m... um... Tundra?”

“You don’t sound sure, *Tundra*.”

“Feeling a bit sick,” she said, noticing the other ships around her, all facing her. She felt late to a party.

“Sick?” said the voice. “How long have you been doing this?”

Kani glanced at the phone, as if it might tell her, but she had no time for that. She began to speak, but then her console flashed red. Weapons lock.

“Too slow,” said the voice. “Now we’ve got to blast you out of the sky.”

Ten Minute Mark

“Wait!” shouted Kani, getting feedback strong in her ears. “Hold on, I *am* Tundra!”

“Where have you been, then? It’s almost twenty minutes past.”

“I was... held up,” Kani said. “I am who I say I am.”

Silence. The fans on the console began whirring to life as Kani checked the ships around her. Aside from the angry man’s ship, there was another, a twin-bodied build with long wings spread between them; a long, gleaming metallic vessel like a mirror in space; and another F-422 like her own.

“Does anyone know her?” asked the angry man again.

A chorus of “no”s came across at once. One woman, two men.

“No one to vouch for you,” said the man. “You’re out of luck.”

“Now hold on there, Rook,” said a man with a higher-pitched voice. Australian accent, maybe. Kani couldn’t tell. “I don’t *know* her, but I have some mates who do. Let’s give ’er a test, see if she fits.”

Kani glanced between the two ships, waiting for the reply. The weapons were still locked on her, and she had no idea how to fight back. If she even *could* fight back.

“Fine,” said Rook, unhappily.

“ello, darling. I’m Spastik. How’s it going today?”

“Skip the pleasantries, Spastik.”

“They’re the best part!”

“Shipments in three,” warned the third man.

“Fine, right, okay,” said Spastik. “Tundra? Can you tell me who was the last player the NHL let go without a helmet?”

“What kind of question is that?” snapped Rook.

“Shush, you,” said Spastik. “It’s a test.”

Kani considered checking the phone for the answer, but knew the signal wouldn’t work in space. She tried thinking back to all the NHL information she’d ever been exposed to in life, but all she remembered was that the Maple Leafs never won the Stanley Cup.

“I... I don’t know,” she said, watching the guns mounted on Rook’s wings with dismay.

“She passed!” laughed Spastik.

“She *what?*” said Rook.

“Oh, definitely a pass. I heard from Ricochet that Tundra was a hockey newbie. Couldn’t tell a puck from a football if you drew a picture.”

“I don’t see,” growled Rook, “how the two issues are connected at all.”

“Logic, mate. Logic.”

“Let’s put this off,” said the third man. “Tundra, welcome. I’m Elvis, and Chenne is in the Tigris over there.”

“H-hello,” Kani said nervously. The weapons lock was still on her. The ships started to part, moving off the green corridor. Finally, Rook did the same.

“You might want to move, Tundra,” said Elvis.

She jerked to attention and moved herself off the corridor too, and a second later, she saw four green triangles in the distance, moving fast.

“Let’s get up to speed, people,” said Rook. “You *do* know how, right, Tundra?”

“Yes, sir,” muttered Kani.

“Wahoo!” yelled Spastik, taking off, back towards Earth. Chenne and Elvis followed, but Rook stayed close by Tundra, watching her. She glanced out her window at him, but his cockpit was dark.

She pushed the throttle and took off. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught sight of something big... something huge moving beside her ship. She peered over her shoulder and saw a massive box of a ship, at least six storeys tall, tearing through space beside her, straight on the green corridor.

“Decell in ten,” said Elvis. “You’re in the turn zone, Tundra.”

Kani looked around, couldn’t see anything, no markings, no corridors... she checked above herself, but...

“Move on up, kid,” said Spastik cheerfully, and she lifted the sphere and watched herself float up above the massive ships. There were three of them flying in a staggered row, and as she watched, they all blew powerful streams of air out of their sides and spun themselves around, facing backwards.

“Freighter decell stage one complete,” said Elvis. “Get ready for burn.”

Kani was just about to ask what that meant when the rear thrusters on all three freighters lit up... giant, bright bursts of flame burning so bright her helmet tinted. And then, in an instant, they were gone. So far behind her she couldn’t even see their triangles anymore.

“Good evening, friends,” came a new voice. Deep, Russian. Jovial, even. “Nice to see you all again.”

“Hello Redux,” said Rook. “How are the freighters?”

“No problems,” said Redux. “Minor deviation at halfway mark, but I fix, so we are good now.”

“Excellent. Thank you for your work.”

“No,” said Redux, “thank *you* for taking care of them from here. I will sit back and relax, if okay.”

“Tundra, your speed is high,” said Rook. “Slow it down.”

Kani pulled back on the throttle, but her speed stayed up. She pulled back on the sphere too, and that did it.

“So what’s this I hear about you retiring, Redux?” asked Elvis. “Too good for us now? Is that it?”

“Yes, is always,” laughed Redux. “But no, my time up here is over. Time to pass mantle to young pilots, yes?”

There was a long silence, and Kani knew everyone was staring at her.

“So if you go,” said Spastik sharply, “who’s gonna be the slowpoke in our group? Not me, I can tell you that. Rook? You feel like bein’ slow?”

“Ignore Spastik,” Rook said.

“Always do,” said Redux.

“I hate to break up the party,” said Elvis. “But I need to remind you all we’re coming in on the dark side of the planet today, so you need to be extra careful in the Earth’s shadow.”

Kani looked at the Earth, looking big in her viewport. She could see a sliver of light along the edge, but the rest was like a pit of darkness.

“Careful how...?” she whispered to herself.

“Four minutes to splashdown,” said Elvis, and then static filled Kani’s ears. The sound resolved itself somewhat, but she heard Rook say through the mess:

“Channel nine, switch now.”

She searched the console for a place to switch channels, but couldn’t find anything. The other ships were starting to break off and fly in strange patterns, but she didn’t know *why*. She smacked her head against the headrest, and noticed on the ceiling, a little display for comm channels.

“Oh,” she said, and switched to channel nine.

“... Elvis on backfire and Spastik—”

“Yeehaw!”

“— do whatever you want. Good.”

Kani pulled away from the freighters, trying to follow the others.

“Tundra!” snapped Rook. “Stay with the freighters! You’re on splashdown, remember!”

“Oh, yeah. Sorry.”

“Is your voice changer on?”

“My what?”

“Voice changer. Dammit. Double-check before we—”

The radio filled with static again, but this time resolved itself very quickly to a voice speaking in a clear American accent, calmly and dispassionately.

“2028. Section 4.3 dictates a maximum travel speed of 62,920 kilometers per hour; further, section 6 requires proper certification for extra-terrestrial activities.”

Up ahead, five yellow squares began their approach. They were in tight formation, and closing fast. Next to each was an identifier: UN-SEF-01, UN-SEF-02...

"In accordance with section 4.2, the Space Enforcement Fleet is hereby making the following requirements of you..."

"Tundra," said Rook. "Stay on the freighters. Copy?"

"Copy," Kani said, and went back to listening to the enemy — the good guys — speak.

"First: surrender your freighters to our control by transmitting the corridor codes. Second: eject any and all weaponry on your vessels in a way obvious to SEF forces. Third..."

She could see it from where she was very clearly: Chenne charged at the SEF ships, blasting them with something that sent giant plumes of smoke into the air around them. Smoke?

The mist cleared quickly, and the ships were all still intact, just positioned strangely on approach. Drifting towards each other...

"Stay in formation," said the SEF leader carefully. "Repeat, stay in —"

The leftmost SEF fighter broke off and started charging after Chenne. A second later, two more followed Spastik. They wove around the darkness with unreal movements... nothing like this would have been possible in the atmosphere.

By the time she noticed, it was too late: the fourth SEF ship was charging her, and her ship shuddered loudly.

"I'm hit!" she shouted. "What do I do, I'm hit!"

"Relax," said Elvis calmly. "It's just ice. Turn yourself so you get the sun, and you'll be fine."

Kani looked at her windshield and realized it *was* ice. Thick, awful-looking ice, but just ice. She turned the sphere to angle herself, but the ship didn't move the way she expected. She dropped down, close to the freighters.

"Whoa there," said Elvis. "Watch it until your RCSes are unblocked. Baby steps."

"Sorry," said Tundra.

“Don’t be,” said Elvis kindly. “Just take it slow. We don’t need the political fallout from you dying up here.”

By his tone, it was a joke. But it wasn’t really.

In the full light of the sun, the ice melted off her ship almost instantly. She turned herself around and saw the green and yellow markings of a dogfight in action.

“Thank god I’m not out there...” she said to herself.

Kani moved herself further back, behind the last freighter, trying to keep an eye on everything. From there, she could see Rook making a long arc around the convoy, and an SEF fighter coming at him from below.

“Rook!” she shouted. “Below you at—”

The SEF fighter blasted him with ice, and his ship rocked sideways. He tried to adjust his course, he was heading straight for the trailing freighter, cockpit first!

“Rook!”

Foolish Heroics

Kani turned the sphere and shoved the throttle as hard as she could, and was pushed back into her seat as she rocketed towards the freighters. Rook's ship was sputtering, trying to turn, but it wasn't going to make it in time.

Kani felt a small button on the back side of the throttle, and she pushed it down... her ship made a horrible grinding noise, like it was eating itself whole, and then a moment later, a long burst of bright white ice pellets shot out of the nose of her ship, bounding into the freighter.

She glanced up and noticed a small cross where she'd been shooting, and adjusted so it was pointing at Rook. She fired again, straight into the nose of his ship. The force of the blast spun him down, and pushed him clear of the freighters.

"Tundra!" he shouted. "Are you on the freighters?"

She looked back, saw how far she was off-target, and smiled weakly.

"Um, no, sir?"

"Jesus, newbie! We're two minutes out here! We don't have time for this!"

"But you were—"

"If your brains were made of dynamite you wouldn't have enough to blow your cap off! Get back there! You don't get points for saving me! Move it!"

"Yes sir," she said, and took off again.

The only thing between the freighters and Earth was a lone SEF ship, floating helplessly in the void. The commander kept announcing orders, but none of his fighters seemed to care.

“Return to formation!” he shouted. “That’s a direct order, and I—”

Chenne careened past him, blasting him with ice, before taking off back towards the freighters again. Another SEF ship chased after her, missing with every blast. She ducked in and out of the massive frames easily, like inertia meant nothing to her... but the SEF pilot was no so lucky.

On a quick turn, he missed his mark and cracked his right wing against the edge of a freighter. The impact spun him around and he bounced forward, skidding off the side and away from the back.

“All stop!” Rook shouted. “Everyone stop!”

All the ships paused in mid-motion, even as the SEF ships continued.

“This is Ares!,” yelled the SEF captain “All stop! All SEF fighters, stop right now!”

Slowly, the field became still. The broken fighter kept twirling away, small bits of debris leaving a red trail behind him in Kani’s visor.

“Fireball, report,” said Ares.

Static.

Kani held her breath. Space looked so much bigger suddenly.

“Lost a wing,” said Fireball, finally. “Dent on the nose, but pressure intact. Going to try and stabilize.”

“Pressure is definitely safe?” said Ares.

“Definitely, sir. I’m good.”

Kani exhaled with the rest of them. It seemed strange, going back to fighting, after that. She stayed still, waiting for instruction.

“Can I just say,” said Spastik through the silence. “That Fireball... is a damn stupid name for a pilot.”

“Here we go again,” sighed Elvis.

“I mean holy tempting fate, right?” laughed Spastik, taking off and chasing another SEF ship with expert cruelty. “Who wants to play trivia time?”

“Spastik...” Rook warned.

“Trivia time! Chenne? Chenne, darling? I’ll take your silence as a yes. Love ya. Good, then. Trivia time!”

Kani kept close to the freighters, watching the end of the corridor hit the edge of the planet beyond. Suddenly, a little light flashed on her console: “Enter splashdown code.”

“What code?” she hissed, and started paging through screens on the phone, desperate for answers.

“Trivia numero uno,” said Spastik. “Ferrets: are they rodents?”

“Shut up,” said one of the SEF pilots.

“Sorry, incorrect!” laughed Spastik. “Anyone else?”

Kani found a number in the notes app that had no explanation to it. She tried typing that into the console keypad, hit “enter”. Red light. Incorrect.

“Dammit,” she cursed.

“Ferrets,” declared Spastik, “are actually mustelids. Not rodents. You’re welcome.”

“Spastik,” said Rook, “leave the channels clear except for—”

“What is the significance of the following numbers? 0, 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8?”

“Your IQ test scores,” laughed another SEF pilot.

Kani found a second number, punched it in, and this time the light went green!

“Yes!” she laughed, and then rocked sideways as her ship was blasted by heavy ice cover. She blew past the freighters, far off to the left, and the green light turned red again.

“Dammit,” she cursed, and turned gradually to melt the ice.

“Fibonacci sequence!” said Spastik. “Come *on*, people! Make an effort!”

Kani got control of the ship back, turned the sphere and punched the throttle. The SEF ship that blasted her was in sight. She waited until it was carefully aligned, and then —

The SEF ship spun around cleanly, not losing speed, and blasted her instead!

She wobbled off target, fell into the sunlight.

“Gotta remember they can do that...” she muttered, waited for the ice to burn off, and started chasing again. She fired broadly over its right side, then the left, pinning it into a straight trajectory, straight to into the shadow of the Earth. The SEF pilot spun again, but she rotated her ship out of the way in time, and returned fire.

The first ice pellets hit, and the plume they gave off shocked her so much she jerked back, slowed herself. But then he returned fire, grazing her wing.

“Learn to stay down,” she said, and held down the trigger as she approached, layering him with so much ice it was hard to tell the features of his cockpit anymore. She shot past him, barely visible but for the yellow square on her visor, stuck her tongue out at him.

“See ya later!” she laughed, and pulled up the code from the phone again. She entered them carefully, hit “enter”, and saw to her shock that the light was red.

“What the hell?” she gasped, and looked to see how far she was from the freighters...

They weren’t there.

The freighters *weren’t there!*

Downfall

“See ya later, guys! Nice chattin’ with ya!” laughed Spastik, twirling in circles. “Next time you bring the trivia!”

Kani brought herself back to the group, but not too close. Rook was arriving from further afield.

“I missed re-entry. Was it all clean?” he asked.

“We didn’t make re-entry,” said Elvis. “I don’t know how, but we lost the freighters.”

Someone groaned, and Rook roared so loudly, Kani wanted to take off her helmet to escape it.

“What happened?” he boomed. “We were done!”

“The SEF hijacked the freighters somehow. Overrode the splashdown codes. I’ve never seen it before but—”

“Tundra!” snapped Rook. “You entered the code. Tell me you entered that code.”

“I...” said Kani quietly. “I... they chased me, and when I came back, the freighters were—”

“Dammit!” shouted Rook. “Dammit, I *knew* we couldn’t trust her! Dammit!”

“Everyone calm down,” said Elvis. “We can’t just blame Tundra for this. She really *was* being chased, so—”

“Yeah,” said Spastik. “Let’s blame *you* instead!”

“Me?” said Elvis.

“You’re supposed to be her guard, aren’t ya? Where were *you* when all this was goin’ down?”

“There were... it was crazy out there, and you—”

“That’s enough!” shouted Rook. “That’s it. That’s enough. There’s nothing to be done about it. It’s a damn mess, but there’s nothing to be done. I’m sorry, Redux. I know this must hurt you most of all.”

There was a long pause, and Kani held her breath waiting for Redux’s reply.

“As you say,” he said. “Nothing to be done.”

Redux took off towards the planet, leaving the rest of them in silence. Kani rested her head against the side of the cockpit, trying not to cry.

“Everyone go home,” said Rook. “I’ll... I’ll work out the details, see what can be done for everyone. And don’t worry, I know who pulled their weight today. Nobody’s reputation will suffer because of —”

Chenne’s ship dipped into the atmosphere, lighting a re-entry flame as it disappeared.

“We’ll figure it out,” Rook said, then turned himself around and left, too. Elvis said nothing for a minute, then turned his ship towards the dark side of the planet.

“One job at a time, kid,” he said.

“I’m so sorry,” Kani cried.

“Yeah, well...” he sighed. “One job at a time.”

He disappeared as well. Kani sat there in the darkness, hearing the faint noises of debris around her, the fan on the console shutting off in the relative calm. She exhaled and fogged her visor, closed her eyes and breathed as slowly as she could.

“Computer,” she said. “Take me home.”

Nothing happened. She opened her eyes, saw the words “Command not found” on her visor. She sniffled, adjusted the helmet.

“Mute off. Computer, autopilot on.”

“Command not found.”

She slammed her fist down onto her knee — afraid to hit anything else — and swore under her breath.

“Dammit, just get me the hell out of here!”

“Coordinates set. Autopilot engaged. Please be patient.”

The ship started moving back towards Earth, down through the atmosphere, down through the clouds and into the hangar she'd entered all those many hours ago.

She didn't notice any of it until the canopy opened.

She sat there in the late afternoon light, helmet in her lap, hearing the crickets chirping outside the hangar. She closed her eyes and sunk deep into the sound.

The corn field was hard to navigate on the way home. She stayed off worn path she'd taken in, and stumbled through the thick of things. Maybe to get lost. Her dried clothes were stiff and awkward. The world kept spinning beneath her, and a few times she had to kneel in the dirt until the feeling passed. She choked back vomit and carried on.

Her phone rang as she approached the train station, and she nearly dropped it getting it out of her pocket. It was her father. She gripped it in her hand, finger over the "answer" button, but couldn't make the last move. She put it away when it stopped ringing.

On the steps of the platform, she was paused by another phone, with an unfamiliar tone. She checked her pocket and pulled out Stacey's phone, put it to her ear.

"Hello?" she said, tentative.

"Hey," said Fantoni. "You're back."

"I'm back," she said quietly.

"How'd it go?"

"Is Stacey safe?" she asked. "I want to talk to her."

"She's sleeping. Had a nice meal of Greek yogurt with honey and cranberries. Can't stand Greeks, but their food is delicioso. How was the flight? I need to know."

"It was okay," she said.

"Okay-okay, or just decent?"

She stopped walking, pressed her back to the wall to stop the spinning.

"It was fine," she said. "Everything's great. Let Stacey go. I did what you wanted."

Fantoni laughed so loudly she took the phone from her ear. “Not a chance, girly,” he said. “I’ll wait for the money to appear, and *then* we’ll talk about the rest. Understood?”

Kani continued up the steps.

“Yeah,” she said.

“Don’t go and do something stupid now, okay?”

She arrived at the platform, lit by flickering lights and the setting sun. No one was there.

“Yeah,” she said, and hung up, put the phone away.

The next train was due in five minutes. Next to the time was an ad for Chromoco Mining Corporation. “Forging a Brighter Future,” it said.

“Don’t I wish,” she sighed.

The train pulled in, and Kani set herself at a window, looking out at the darkening fields, the city in the distance, the lights fighting off night. She felt cold, exposed, alone. She took out her phone, stared at the keypad, the nine.

Her stop was called before she found the courage.

The sun was low on the horizon and the evening chill was setting in as walked back home. Kani shivered, picked up her pace and came around the corner to her street, glad to finally be home, to have a chance for some rest.

There were five police cars parked outside her house.

Home Life

PARIS, FRANCE

He left the ship locked in the hangar outside town and with it, the name Redux. In his suit and tie, he walked less comfortably, spoke more cautiously, felt less secure. By the time he got home, he was sweating.

The door to the apartment was unlocked, and he opened it slowly, ducking through to see Sabina shoving a sweater into a packed suitcase. She turned when he came in, shook herself out of a daze.

“Yuri,” she said. “You’re home.”

He put his keys on the table by the door, loosened his tie.

“You are off to hospital?” he asked, voice coarse and dry.

“Yes,” she said, and zipped up the bag. “You didn’t answer your phone again.”

He padded his pockets, sighed.

“I am sorry. It was long week. I thought it was on.”

“It’s never on, Yuri. Never with you.”

“It was simple mistake,” he said, trying to take her small hands in his. “Please, Sabina, you know me.”

“I know you,” she said, and pushed past, getting her coat from the hanger beside the door. “I know you too well. I can’t take it anymore, Yuri. It’s too much. Anya’s been in intensive care for a week, and where were you? Where were *you* while I was keeping everything together?”

“I... I was working,” he sighed.

"Fine!" she snapped. "Fine. Working. Your contribution. Always the same. Always the same."

She tried to go, but he caught her arm, kept her in.

"Sabina," he said. "Don't. Is not your fault."

She squeezed his hand, and moved it off.

"Anya needs her gene therapy soon," she said. "This week. We cannot wait longer. The doctors are worried."

"And coverage?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"Denied."

"No!" he cursed, pounded the door with his fist. "Why this time?"

"It's because neither of us are *from* here. Why *would* they give us expensive treatments for free?"

"I pay taxes, that's why!"

"You're naïve, Yuri. So naïve."

She opened the door partway, then closed it again.

"Will we have the money soon? Will they pay you soon?"

He said nothing, put his hand to his forehead and stepped away from her. The kitchen faucet was dripping a methodical *pat pat pat*, it was infuriating.

"Yuri," she said. "What about the money?"

"The business had a setback," he said. "We lost a... a client. My manager cut our pay for the month."

"No!" Sabina cried, covering her mouth. "No! Not now!"

"I'm sorry," he said. "I will—"

"No!" she yelled. "No, you just... you don't..."

She slumped into the door, and started to cry. The suitcase dropped beside her.

"I should have listened to my mother," she whispered. "I knew it. I knew she was right."

Yuri sighed.

"What," he said. "What did she say?"

"She said I should divorce you and move back to Germany. That Anya would be covered if you were gone."

"If I were gone," he repeated.

"It's true, isn't it? You're the thing keeping her in that bed! It's you!"

"I did not give her leukaemia," he said quietly.

"You didn't cure her, either!" she shouted, and opened the door again. "Be her father, Yuri. Be her father or get the hell away from us! Before she hates you too."

She didn't close the door behind her. Yuri stood there in the dim light, listening to the faucet, staring at the photo on the wall of the three of them on vacation in Cannes. He barely breathed.

By the time he took a proper breath, he was at the bar around the corner, a beer cold in his hands. He stared into the mirror across from him, saw himself there, greying beard and hollowed eyes, and lowered his head against the glass.

Beside him, loud men with English accents were chanting a chorus, some football song with a poor excuse for a tune, and swaying themselves around like fools. Yuri slid over into a seat away from them and started drinking. He finished the first pint without pausing, slid the glass back and asked for more.

The English fools were crowding him again, sloshing around their drinks and stumbling over each other. The closest one, wearing a red and white jersey and a military cut, held his glass high and shouted "To the menthol monk!"

The rest of them cheered loudly, began to sing again. But the close one stumbled, and fell sideways, spilling his drink over Yuri's lap. He quickly recovered, wavered slightly, looking shocked at what had happened.

"Is nothing," Yuri said without looking or reacting. "Don't worry about."

The red-shirted man took another step back, then slammed his glass into the bar.

"It is a problem!" he yelled drunkenly. "That's a damn expensive drink, you moron!"

Yuri took his second beer from the bar tender, sipped it carefully. He made no move to react to the provocation.

"Hey!" said the red-shirt. "I'm talkin' to you! You hear me?"

Yuri turned his head, face blank.

"I hear you," he said. "What do you want me to do? I cannot make you un-spill it."

"Buy me a new one," he said, and his friends cheered him on. "And buy some for me mates, too, while you're at it!"

Yuri looked at his mates, looked at him.

"No thank you," he said.

"Excuse me?" slurred the red-shirt. "What did you say?"

"I say no thank you. You can buy your own drinks."

"Piss on *that*," said the man, and punched Yuri across the face.

Yuri didn't move.

"You may leave now," he said calmly.

He was punched again, and this time, he turned his head slowly, eyes narrow, and stared directly into the red-shirt's face.

"I am giving you last wa—"

Another punch, straight to the forehead.

Yuri straightened his jacket, and stood up. At his full height, he was almost half a metre taller than the red-shirt. And twice as wide. He looked down on his opponent and sighed.

"All right," he said, and punched the Englishman straight into his friends. They all backed up, shocked at the rush of reality in their drunken revelry, but then their faces twisted, and they charged at him at once, fists ready.

He took down four without trying, and the fifth ran of his own volition. Yuri was about to sit back down when the red-shirt got off the ground and pulled a switchblade from his pocket, ready to strike.

"You bit off more than you can chew, old man..."

Riot

SIX YEARS EARLIER

“Stay out of it, old man!”

Yuri took a step back, back towards the crowds. The chanting was louder, the voices angrier, and the signs being used as weapons now. Chants of “No! No! WTO!” became less concrete, more violent. The thugs crowding the old woman were wild with energy, ready to pounce.

Yuri watched them as they pushed her into the wall, circling like jackals, and shook his head.

“No,” he said, and grabbed the closest one’s jacket and pulled him back. The punk pushed him away, spat in his face.

“Beat it, gramps!” the punk cursed, shortly before a massive fist broke his nose. He crumpled to the ground, while his friends broke away from the old lady, ready to join in.

“I only ask,” Yuri said, struggling with the words. “Leave lady alone.”

They moved in on him, manic eyes shining in the light of burning effigies, and charged. He caught the first one in the face, but two others leapt on him from behind. They pounded on him, trying to make him break, so he threw himself onto his back, using them as cushions.

The riot police arrived as he was finishing off the last, cuffing him and dragging him and the hooligans off to detention vans along the Champs-Élysées.

By midnight, he found himself in an open-air jail cell somewhere in the suburbs. His block was mostly empty, only a young woman in the cell next to him. He glanced at her once or twice, taking in her spiked red hair and torn black clothes, marked with painted that equated the G20 with swastikas.

He laughed to himself, rested his head on his knees and tried to rest.

“What’s so funny?” asked the woman, her French impossibly fast.

He looked over, looked her up and down, and shrugged.

“Are you laughing at me?” she asked.

His gaze fixed on the large ring through her bottom lip. Then her unhappy eyes.

He shook his head.

“You are,” she snapped. “I can tell. You think we’re wrong. You think they’re right? The capitalists? You’re one of them, right?”

Yuri shrugged, went back to resting.

“How do you feel about the rape of the developing world?” she said, her voice rising. “Do you like seeing children starve? Do you get off on it? Is that what you like?”

He sighed, didn’t move.

“The Big Five have a stranglehold on the natural resources of the world, and who’s going to do anything about it? Not you. You like your comfy life, with eco-friendly cars and your spotless home. But you’re *killing* people with your car. *Killing*.”

Yuri looked to her, rubbed his eyes and sighed.

“You should talk less,” he said.

“You’re Russian, aren’t you?”

“You are quick,” he said.

“What are you then, part of the G20?”

He laughed, turned away from her.

“Scared to fight fair?” she called. “What’s wrong? Harder to rape me to my face?”

“Rape *you*?” he said, turning around suddenly. “I... you are not the one being raped.”

“I work in solidarity with those who—”

"You know nothing about it," he snapped. "Keep mouth shut, please. And thank you."

He turned back again.

They sat in silence for a while. He could hear her plotting, whispering arguments to herself to try them out. He leaned against the wall, considered sleeping. The floor was filthy, no place to lie down.

"Do you know the Bonn Convention?" she asked, just as he was dozing off.

"You still speak," he said.

"It's a treaty, signed by most of the world, and it criminalizes *true* free enterprise. It makes it virtually impossible for smaller players to bring back ore from the asteroid b—"

"If safety issues, maybe for best," said Yuri.

"You're a fool. Do you even know what you're talking about?"

He looked over to her.

"Do you? Have you been in space?"

She looked down, seemed hurt by the question. She regained her bravado, sneered.

"I have a job down here," she said. "I have to fight for the people without a voice. Against people *like you*."

"Who am I?" he sighed.

"You're one of the fascist pigs behind it all."

He shrugged.

"Believe what you like."

They sat in silence for another few minutes. A guard came in, checked on them, leaned down to walk to the woman.

"Having a good night, Rache?" he asked.

She spat in his direction.

The guard walked to Yuri's cell, motioned back to Rache.

"A regular," he said, and left.

"Fascist pigs," Rache muttered as the door closed.

Yuri turned towards her, began to speak, but stopped himself, turned away. Rache sneered at him.

"What?"

"Is nothing."

"What? You have something to say, so say it."

He shook his head, then shrugged.

"Is illegal to fly in space, yes?"

"Yeah," she said.

"No, is not illegal. Is *hard*. Must meet safety needs. Like to fly in airplane, is not illegal. Only hard. Yes?"

"It's an order of magnitude harder," she said.

"Order of magnitude more danger," he said. "Lose cabin pressure in propeller plane, big deal. Lose cabin pressure in spaceship, and you die."

"Splitting hairs," she muttered.

"No, is not splitting hairs. Regulations in place for reason. Protect people from danger. You want to mine asteroid for poor people, you go ahead, have your fun. But to bring home, you need to be safe, yes?"

She said nothing. For a change.

"Is like for everything. Supply and demand. First movers, they have advantage of setting rules. Chromoco set up shop, make rules to protect investment. You want to play game, you have meet ante, yes?"

"It's *wrong*," she said.

"Right, wrong, no matter. Is capitalism."

She spat at him.

"You have gland issue," he said.

"You don't know what you're talking about," she snapped. "You're making excuses for the rape of—"

"You keep using word, but you do not understand meaning. Maybe too young."

"To you, anyone's young."

He laughed, leaned back to stretch his legs.

"I am not so different than you. I think rules are unfair, and I protest too. Just without... you know... punching holes in face."

She turned away, pouting probably.

“They can keep us here forever, you know,” she said. “They can lock us up without cause and just forget we ever existed. Just because we were protesting.”

“I was not protesting,” he said. “I save old lady from protesters.”

She looked over at him.

“You what?”

“Punching them in the face, yes?”

“Oh Jesus,” she sighed, and turned away again.

“Is not my fault, they pick on old lady. You talk about injustice, this is injustice. Old lady, she do nothing wrong. Bunch of fascists.”

Rache laughed, but stopped herself.

“You’re an idiot, old man.”

“You are not so dumb yourself, Rache.”

The guard came back in, knocked on Yuri’s cell, unlocked it and opened the door.

“You’re free. An 86 year old woman came in and ID’d you. Said you saved her life.”

Yuri looked over at Rache.

“This is what I tell you,” he said.

She grumbled in her solitude.

“Good luck out there, old man.”

“And good luck to you, Rache. I hope you will find better life to live.”

Rush

Kani was walking briskly. A careful kind of fast, not likely to attract attention, but not so slow as to be seen. She worked her way down to Bolton Village, stayed out of the streetlights, close to the buildings.

She looked at Stacey's phone in her hand, took even breaths, closed her eyes, trying to think. When she opened them again, she still had no answer.

She searched through the memory banks, through all the names of people she didn't know, back to the start again. She paused at number twenty-seven.

She pushed the call button, and put the handset to her ear. It rang twice before picking up with a noisy background.

"Hallo!" came a heavily-accented voice. "Wong Mushu Chicken Factory! Home of Magnificent Cheesecake! Can I take your order?"

She pulled the phone back, frowned at it.

"I..." she began.

"No, just kidding," laughed the voice, accent gone. "I love that one. Every time I do the Italian accent I sound like a Nintendo game. Still funny, just not the same."

Kani blinked.

"Who is this?" she asked.

"Who is *this*? Who are *you*?" he asked.

"It's T—"

"Rhetorical question, sorry. Never... you know what? Hold on."

The phone went dead. She took it away from her ear, checked it, and then slid it into her pocket. She kept walking, watching the strangers around her carefully.

The phone rang. She took it out, checked the number, and saw it was from “Wong Mushu Chicken Factory.” She answered.

“Hallo!” said the voice. “Wong Mushu Ch... yeah, it doesn’t work the other way around.”

Kani stopped walking looked around.

“I think I have the wrong number,” she said.

“Wong number! You made a funny!”

“It’s not funny,” she sighed.

“You’re boring. Why am I helping you?”

“*Are* you helping me?”

There was a long pause.

“I think I’m helping you. Tundra, right?”

Kani took a step into the shadows, a couple across the street watched her, frowned. She smiled at them, but they wouldn’t stop frowning.

“How do you know that?” she asked.

“*You* called *me*, didn’t you?”

“I... Where *are* you?” she asked, looking around, into the sky. The stars were out, bathed in a dark blue that felt so comforting, Kani couldn’t describe it.

“You ever heard of Monitor City?” he asked.

“No,” she said.

“No one has,” he sighed. “But that’s where I am.”

“Is that a made-up place?”

He cleared his throat.

“Listen,” he said. “I don’t go making fun of you because you called yourself Tundra. I mean honestly, between the two of us, I’m the more grounded, I’d say.”

“What’s your name, anyway?”

“Kaso.”

Kani said nothing.

“Okay fine, I have a strange name too,” he said. “Anyway, you’re getting me off track here. I’m supposed to remind you about security. Do you remember security?”

Kani winced. She smiled into the air.

“Which part?” she asked.

“The part about not calling this number?”

“Ah. Right.”

The phone went dead again. She held it back, and it rang. She answered, put it to her ear carefully.

“Hello?”

“Sorry, wrong key.”

“Listen,” she said. “I don’t mean to be rude, but I have a crisis here and I need some help. Can you help me, or is there someone else I can call?”

“You’re talking about Espey, aren’t you?”

“Who?”

“Espey. You’re dissing me to my face. Well, not my actual face, but virtually *and anyway* no. I’m what you’ve got. Now let’s go over the security protocols. What’s your emergency?”

Kani ducked into the doorway of a closed shop, peered around for security cameras. When it seemed safe, she whispered:

“There were police at my house.”

“Do you live at a donut shop?”

“No.”

“Just checking. Okay. What’s your Plan B?”

Kani leaned against the door and closed her eyes. The wind was picking up, and she was hungry and had never felt so tired in her life.

“I don’t have a Plan B,” she said, voice wavering.

“Nobody ever has a Plan B,” Kaso muttered. “It doesn’t matter how many times you tell them, nobody ever thinks they need one. And then here we are, sitting around in the night, wishing we had one. *I* have one, and I live in a bloody autonomous city state. I don’t *need* one.”

“Are you going to help me?”

“Hold on. I need you to do something first. There’s an Off License shop across the street, right?”

Kani looked over, saw the sign, nodded blankly.

“How did you—”

“Go in there, walk to the back of the store, and pick up two bottles of Screech.”

“I’m not old enough to—”

“I didn’t say *drink them*, I said pick them up.”

Kani nodded, ran across the street and ducked into the store. The clerk watched her with narrow eyes, chewing a long pepperoni stick that made the whole place reek like processed plastic meat. Kani slipped into the back, found the whisky aisle, and picked up two bottles.

“Now what?” she asked.

“Turn a bit to your left.”

She turned, paused.

“Why am I—”

“Ooo,” said Kaso appreciatively. “You’re quite the looker, aren’t ya?”

She put down the bottles, left the store, smiling to the clerk in as calm a way as she could. She snorted at her, went back to his magazine.

“So here’s my plan. Since you’re good looking — ooh la la—”

“Shut up.”

“— but with a poor, poor excuse for a personality, I’m going to suggest the following. You need to find yourself some cheap booze, get brain-smashingly drunk, and pass out in a public washroom somewhere.”

Kani stopped, looked at the phone, and then put it back to her ear.

“That’s not a plan.”

“It’s a great plan. Listen: nobody would know when you started, and it’s as good as an alibi. Honestly, the cops won’t be looking at any teenager for you-know-what if they can help it. Give them a reason to go elsewhere, and they will.”

Kani sighed.

“It’s not just that, though. There’s something else...”

“What?” asked Kaso. “What else?”

Kani couldn’t answer, though, because she was staring into the face of a very angry Erlenmeyer. He plucked the phone out of her hand and turned it off as Fantoni came up behind him.

“The money didn’t come through,” said Fantoni. “Time you saw what we do to failures in this biz...”

Departures

DAYTON, USA

The truck jumped the curb and nearly shredded the lawn, jerking to a halt right in front of the driveway. The door flew open and a man threw himself out, adjusting his tie and running across the small field to the gates to the cemetery.

“Wait!” he called to the old man closing the doors. “Wait! Just a second!”

The groundskeeper turned stiffly, scratched his neck.

“Place is closed,” he said. “We open at ten.”

“Please,” said the man in the suit, catching his breath, “please, I just need a few minutes. It has to be today. Please.”

The groundskeeper checked his watch, shook his head.

“Last time I let someone in past hours, the tombstones got spray painted. Tagged, as they say. Got me in a big heap of trouble, you can imagine.”

“That won’t happen,” said the other man. “I promise. I’m not like that. I’m not here for that.”

“That’s what they’d all say, Mr...”

“Major. Major Freeman.”

The groundskeeper nodded.

“Where to?” he asked.

“Mexico. Afghanistan before that.”

“Tough spots. I was in the Marines myself. Back in ’05.”

“Iraq?”

“Yes sir,” nodded the old man.

“Tough times,” said Freeman.

“They’re all tough times. Listen. I’ve got to take a leak. Takes me a good ten minutes to do that. You think you can wrap it up in that window?”

“Yes sir. Thank you, sir.”

The old man patted his shoulder.

“No problem, Major. You did good.”

Freeman slid through the gate and turned on a pen light, making his way down the rows until he stopped at a tall white tombstone in a patch of flowers. He dusted off the front of the screen and it flickered to life, showing a radiant woman and a young boy sitting under a tree in the sunshine. The screen was browning, faded in spots. Freeman rubbed it with his sleeve, but it wouldn’t come off.

“Asha,” he said, then cleared his throat. He fixed his tie, his jacket, as if waiting for an interview. He took another breath, then tried again. “Asha,” he said. “Sorry I’m late. It’s... well, it’s been a long day today. I... oh, wait. Here, I brought you something.”

He carefully removed a small bouquet of flowers from his jacket, placed them on the grave. He stood back, nodded to himself.

“They’re dried out. Sat in the car too long.”

He nodded to the air.

“I guess you knew that. And I guess you’re mad. I went and let my duties come before my family again. Same old, same old. I’ll never learn, will I? I can hear you saying it.”

He rubbed his forehead, pushing back a breakdown long overdue.

“I’d give anything to hear you say it,” he said. “I’m not learning, I’m just... I’m treading water here, Asha. I don’t know what I’m doing without you.”

He knelt down, brushed some dirt away from the engraving on the front. Asha and Nicolas Freeman, died May 19, 2034. His finger paused at the base of the nine. Nicolas was five years old. Five.

“There was this guy today. Great guy. Dedicated. And he’s been working towards his... his dreams for so long. Longer than me, anyway. And today, his last day, it all got taken away. He’s got to

come back another day. He's got to put in on the line another time, and I can't... I don't know. I don't know what I think."

He got to his feet, clasped his hands, and closed his eyes.

"I've been asking myself: if I had it to do over again... if I could have said no that last time, said I was done, that I'd done my bit... would I do it any different? And I don't know. I can't imagine doing it any different, and I feel like that makes me a monster."

He shook his head, took a step back.

"I don't know. I want to take care of my family, you know. I failed once, but I can do better this time. And I wish there was something I could do for this guy. Save him that last trip. Because that last trip can be where it all falls down. I just..."

His phone rang. He exhaled, nodded to the grave, and stepped away, wiping his eyes with the back of his hand. He answered the phone with a cracking voice.

"Hello?"

"Rook?" came a voice. Old and French.

"Lucet. You heard?"

"I did," said Lucet. "What went wrong?"

"Tundra went wrong. Where did you find her?"

"She came recommended. Independent confirmations."

"She seemed new to it. Complete disaster. If I'd had any sense, I'd have put her on point guard and let Elvis do the codes."

"You had no way of knowing."

"Yeah," he said, leaving the gate and waving a thanks to the groundskeeper, who made his way over to close it up. Freeman got into the truck, closed the door, and left the lights off.

"What about Gossamer? Any word yet?"

"I do not know. I stayed at arm's length from his people. If there were something to it, I am sure I would have heard."

"This is going to get messy," said Freeman.

"It already is messy. It got messy the second he stole that plane. I do not know if anyone can protect him anymore."

"Never mind him, I'm worried about *you*."

"You leave me to me. I can take care of myself."

“Of course,” said Freeman. “What’s this I hear about Sri Lankan handlers for Indian drop zones? That’s a change, isn’t it?”

“The Indian handlers were arrested yesterday. Someone on the inside, working with police. We are investigating, but it will take time to find out where the leak came from. We need to move carefully on this.”

“I’m just wondering how this is going to change the game plan, now that we’re into typhoon season. There aren’t many good drop zones outside the Indian Ocean, so...”

The line went to static for a moment, and Freeman lost the start of the sentence. When it came back, Lucet was in mid-sentence...

“... ask about Tundra. I have heard from Kaso that she is in trouble, and is requesting assistance. I wanted your opinion, if it is safe to intervene.”

“Safe?” asked Freeman. “Or smart?”

“Same thing, I think.”

Freeman sighed, checked the rear view mirror, cricked his neck.

“If she’s really a vet, she shouldn’t be that bad. If she’s new, she’s not Tundra. We can’t take the risk. Leave her.”

Monitor

The lightbulb in the shed kept swinging long after it turned on, throwing moving shadows around the room, to the point that Kani started to feel sick again. Her arms were bound behind her back, seated on a metal chair, the dirt floor behind her wide open, ready to anything.

Fantoni rested the gun on her forehead, clicked it ready.

"Please," Kani cried. "Please, I'll go again. I'll make it work. I'll fix this for you."

Fantoni laughed, shook his head.

"Too late for that, my dear. The damage is done."

"Please don't!" she sobbed. "Please... I can fix this..."

His finger moved to the trigger, and just as it touched, his phone rang. He padded his pocket turned it on and put it to his ear.

"Yeah?" he said.

"Hello is this the mob?" said Kaso through the speakerphone. Fantoni took the handset from his ear.

"Who is this?" he snapped.

"This is Kaso. Who is this?"

"Augusto Fantoni. How did you get this number?"

"Listen, Fat Tony. That girl you've got there? She's one of ours. I think you know what that means."

"*Fantoni.* And it don't matter what that means. She owes me money, which means she belongs to me right now."

Kaso laughed. A little too long.

"Oh poor, sad Fat Tony," he said. "I can't let you kill her. She has secrets. Important secrets. Secrets worth dying for."

"Secrets?" asked Fantoni, taking the gun away. Kani exhaled, trembling. "What kind of secrets?"

"Don't be a putz," said Kaso. "I don't know. Obviously. Otherwise she wouldn't be important."

Fantoni turned away, a grin on his face.

"So how much are those secrets worth to ya?" he said.

"Oh what, is this extortion now? Is that honestly all you've got? Killing and extortion?"

"That's what I do best," beamed Fantoni.

Kaso said nothing for a moment, and Kani was terrified he'd hung up by mistake again.

"All right," said Kaso. "I was told to let her die, but she's smokin' hot, so I'm going out on a limb here. How much does she owe you?"

"Twelve grand."

"Twelve thousand?" gasped Kaso. "Oh my small fry. Let's see. Okay. If you don't let her go, I'm going to withdraw *ten times that amount* from your offshore bank account in the Seychelles."

Fantoni stood back, checked with Erlenmeyer, frowned.

"How do you know about that?"

"How do I know about that? I know *everything*, Fat Tony. I'm like a fiery ball of perlite, I am. Wait, not perlite. That's potting soil. What was the word I was looking for...?"

Fantoni ran his hand through his hair, turning around in circles like a dog looking to sit. Kani checked around her, saw Erlenmeyer blocking the exit, but on the other side of the shed was a hole half-dug under the wall. A space she could slip through if she tried.

She carefully lifted her arms over the back of the chair and started to creep sideways, making slow motions to avoid being seen. Two steps from the hole, Erlenmeyer moved towards her, and she let herself fall on the ground with a thud.

Fantoni turned around, laughed at her lying there in the dirt. Erlenmeyer picked her up, sat her back in the chair.

"Vertigo," he said. "Shoulda taken those pills, girlie."

Kani's other phone began to ring. Erlenmeyer took it from her pocket, checked it, and threw it to Fantoni. He clicked it off, dropped

in onto the ground. Kani ducked down to see where it went, but was stopped by a gunshot by her feet.

"Hey!" shouted Kaso. "What was that? Did you just kill her?"

"No," said Fantoni. "But the next one, that *will* kill her. So now you do what I say. I want—"

He paused as his phone chimed. He tapped its screen a few times, and then his face dropped. He looked to Erlenmeyer.

"What is it?" Erlenmeyer asked.

"It is... a confirmation of a twenty thousand dollar withdrawal from my offshore account."

"My bad," said Kaso. "I've got a jumpy trigger finger, and the gun shot just... you know, let's let bygones be bygones and—"

"Give it back!" shouted Fantoni.

"Give me the girl!" Kaso shouted back, equally deranged. "Or you know what? I'll do it again, only I'll add a zero or two!"

Fantoni looked to Kani, then to Erlenmeyer. She nodded bitterly, turned away, and hissed into the phone.

"She's free. Now give me the money back."

"When I know she's safe. Not a second sooner. And if I hear one more gunshot, I'm emptying the whole thing."

Erlenmeyer tugged her arms free and pushed her off the chair. She snatched her phone off the ground, made sure she still had Stacey's, and carefully slid out the door, watching Fantoni's face turn red.

Stacey's phone rang as she rounded the corner on her way back to the Village.

"Hello Tundra baby. Did you miss me?"

"That was great," she said. "You're more useful than I thought."

Kaso said nothing for a moment. When he came back, he was morose.

"That was kind of a fake. I spoofed the email about the withdrawal. I don't really know if they have an account in the Seychelles at all."

"Oh."

"It's called social hacking," he said.

"You should stop talking now."

“Ruining the mystique?”

“Yeah.”

“Gotcha.”

She kept walking checking behind herself, but feeling relieved for the first time in hours.

“You’ll want to move a bit faster,” he said. “I mean, it won’t take them long to figure out the fake, and then they’re going to be mad. So, er... maybe running is a better idea. And soon.”

Last Friend

The red-shirt kept the knife out, circling Yuri, ready to strike. Yuri shook his head slowly, turned away, resting his arms on the bar. He took his beer, chugged it, pushed the glass to the side.

“Do what you like,” he said. “I don’t care anymore.”

The red-shirt took a confident step forward, but stopped at the sight of the bartender with a cricket bat. He smirked.

“You want to play, old man?” he asked.

“Who’re you calling old?” said the bartender.

The red-shirt walked closer, face full of cocky fearlessness. He waved the knife around.

“Let’s do it.”

The knife was hit across the room before he knew what happened. A second later, five of his teeth met the same fate. He stumbled back to his feet, blood pouring from his mouth, and tried to get his bearings. The bartender held the bat ready for more. His face was devoid of emotion.

“Get out,” he said. “Before I get mad.”

Red-shirt and his friends backed up, pointing at Yuri with some unspoken threat, and rushed out the door. The bartender waited until the door closed behind them, and poured Yuri another drink.

“You all right?” he asked.

Yuri shrugged, put his head down on his arms on the bar. Neither man said a word for some time, until the bartender tapped his shoulder, nudged the beer closer.

“Don’t waste it, Yuri. It’s on the house.”

Yuri looked up, took the beer and began drinking.

"Thank you, Bernard," he said.

"What's wrong?" asked Bernard, "You've been coming here a long time, but I've never seen you this bad. Is it Anya? How's she doing?"

"Worse," said Yuri, and left it at that.

"Damn bureaucrats," cursed Bernard. "Still no word on the health care? Nothing they can do?"

"No word," Yuri said. "It is not so surprising. I cannot take it personally. Is like this everywhere now. If you want to survive, you must make your own way."

"Tell me about it," said Bernard, wiping down the countertops. "Economy's in the pits. I can tell by my weekly profits. Haven't had any for months. Don't know what else to do. My daughter moved into the projects they built in the old shipyards, what, three years ago? And they're being torn down. Owned by Kenyans now. *Kenyans*, Yuri. How did we get here?"

Yuri said nothing, just sipped his beer.

"I'll tell you what," Bernard continued. "We used to take care of our own here. The ones that made something of France. Now the only ones left are the bums, the hooligans, and the ones too poor to run. No offence."

"None taken," said Yuri.

"Have you seen the cars on the streets now? None built domestically. Every last one of them an import. It's sickening. Sickening."

Yuri downed the rest of his drink.

"Is the same in Russia," he said. "And they had no investment in tourism. Nothing to lose, but somehow they lost everything."

"Screw them," Bernard said. "They voted the wrong way. They deserve what they got."

Yuri nodded, said nothing.

"How's work?" Bernard said, sensing the shift in mood. "You're busy?"

Yuri stared into his empty glass.

"It has been better," he said. "And worse."

Bernard swapped in another pint, sat down with his own.

"There's no work anywhere. Be glad you have something. Most of my regulars don't come anymore, since they lost their jobs. King/Western folded with the Abu Dhabi spaceport. Took the soul out of France."

"The soul left before that," Yuri said. "The UN made sure of that."

"What do you think of this new Secretary-General?" asked Bernard. "She seems to know what she's doing."

"Oda? Maybe. I will believe it when I see it. I do not know anyone can survive that place."

"Amen," said Bernard, holding up his glass.

They sat in silence for a moment, Yuri playing with his glass, turning it in circles, biding his time. When he spoke, he didn't look up.

"Bernard," he said, "I need a loan. For Anya."

"Oh, Yuri. Please don't do that."

"I'm sorry. If I had another choice, you know I would take it over this. I can't—"

"Yuri, I don't have anything to loan. The fools I kicked out tonight will probably be the end of me. The only consolation I have is that I went out on principle, you know?"

Yuri nodded, but his face was white. He pushed the glass forward, looking away.

"Another, please?"

Bernard smiled, filled it up.

"Why not," he said. "My retirement party."

Yuri closed his eyes.

"Why don't you ask Pellier for a loan?" Bernard said. "He's keeping half the city afloat these days. What's one more? He might even have a soft spot for a sick little girl if you tell it right."

Yuri shook his head.

"I already owe Pellier money. Too much to go back for more. And I do not think he has a soft spot in him. He seems cold straight through."

Bernard nodded, sipped his own beer.

“You must know someone else, Yuri. Think hard. You don’t have friends *anywhere?*”

The Fool

FIVE YEARS EARLIER

The rain started the second he left the station, and by the time he was three blocks away, Yuri's jacket was soaked through. He put his briefcase over his head for shelter and started running, but paused at the warm glow of a café sign at the side of the road.

The bell chimed softly as he entered, the heaters blasting him with a warm breeze, and he took the first seat by the door at a small table that wobbled at the slightest touch.

His phone was wet, but working, and he dialled, put it to his ear while he tried to strip off his jacket.

"Hello, Sabina?" he said. "You are not out yet? It is raining. No, *really* raining. Find cover for stroller when you come. Is worse than looks. I am at Duschennes, café near station. Yes. I will see you soon."

He hung up as the waitress slid up, paper notepad ready, black-painted fingernails scratching the edge of the pen.

"Just coffee for now. Thank you," he said, checking out the window.

"Right away," she said, and the voice made him turn around. The hair was brown, the lip was healed, but it was unmistakable. Rache.

"Thank you," he said again, looking straight at her, and she nodded to him, went back to the counter without saying another word. He stared at her, sighed, and went back to gazing out the window.

On the screen in the corner, the news began playing. Kana Choi began the hourly refresh like clockwork. Yuri watched the streets clear of the remaining brave souls, even as the rain tapered off.

“... promised increased support to the space enforcement fund,” said the broadcast, and Yuri looked around. “President Campbell also backtracked on her commitment to supplying a new squadron of King/Western ships to the SEF after criticism American-based companies were not given adequate time to prepare bids for the contract.”

A coffee slid onto the table, and Yuri looked around. Rache was standing there, looking out the window.

“Anything else?” she asked, tugging at her faded yellow apron.

“No,” he said. “Thank you.”

She left, and he went back to the news.

“Chromoco profits topped analyst expectations of \$2.21 a share, sending the stock soaring in after-hours trading in New York. CEO Armin Harte welcomed the news, telling investors it marked a new high point in the quest to build a brighter future—”

Yuri laughed at the words, sipped his coffee.

Rache slid into the seat opposite, apron off.

“Something funny about Chromoco profits?” she asked. He put the coffee down, smiled at her.

“I thought you were working.”

“I’m on a break.”

“Come to antagonize customer on break?”

“Only if I can, old man. What’s so funny about Chromoco?”

He laughed again, shook his head.

“Come, let me buy you coffee. You looked tired.”

She didn’t switch her gaze, then smiled, and it was like a whole new person sitting across from him.

“I’m joking,” she said. “Don’t be so serious. How’s life? I heard something about a stroller.”

“Life is good,” he nodded. “Baby born last month. Girl named Anya. You see her when she arrive. Beautiful thing.”

“And work? You never told me what you do.”

“Work is good,” he said. “Long hours, but still good. And you? You seem happy here.”

“It’s a job,” she shrugged.

"Any job is good," he said. "Trust me on this. I am glad you are doing better. You seem so angry last time we meet. Also, less red in hair is good."

She smiled at him.

"I'd keep the red, but they won't let me," she said. "But I *am* doing better. Sleeping better, too."

"Do you have family here?" he asked, and she looked away. "Sorry," he said quickly. "Too many questions. I am nosy sometimes."

"No," she said. "It's fine. My family's all back in Sillery. I moved here a few years ago for school."

"Where is Sillery?"

"Québec. Canada."

"Oh. Long way," he said.

"In so many ways," she smiled. "I'm actually back in school now. Working my way through again."

"Studying what, if I may ask?"

"Political science," she said, and he laughed loudly.

"Is good. I am sorry, is good. The world needs more passion in politics, yes? Is good."

She got up and left, and he sipped his coffee, smiling to himself, wincing slightly at the quick departure. She came back a moment later with a piece of tiramisu and two forks.

"Celebration," she said. "To your baby, and my passion."

He laughed, picked up a fork.

"May they both do well in life," he said.

They ate the cake in silence, watching the dwindling rain outside. Yuri glanced at her from time to time. It was like the time had washed off all the anger she'd had on her, and what he saw now was a beautiful young woman, ready for life. She caught him staring, raised an eyebrow.

"What's up, old man?" she asked.

"Nothing," he said, reaching for money and putting it out on the table. "Is good to see you."

She pushed the coins toward him.

"It's on the house," she said.

He pushed it back.

"Then is tip. You deserve, for turning life around so well. Is not easy, doing that. I know. But you are doing wonderful job."

She started to protest, but he put his hand over hers, pressing it onto the coins.

"Is investment in future for me, yes?" he said. "Maybe some day you use this investment, you fix problems in world. Stuff you used to be so angry about."

Her expression changed, and she made a fist under his hand.

"Used to?" she said. "You think I stopped? You think I *could* stop? Don't you watch the news?"

"Oh no," he sighed. "Is bear trap, I can feel it."

"Things aren't getting *better* out there, they're getting worse. I'm doing what I have to do, but there's no time to do this slowly."

"Fast never solve problem," he said.

"No?" she snapped. "We'll see."

"We'll see how? You do school faster?"

"I have other ways," she said. "I know someone..." She leaned in closer, voice low. He did too, but stiffly. "I know someone with access to a space fighter."

Yuri sat back quickly. She continued in a not-so-quiet whisper, eyes narrow.

"I can still go the legitimate route," she said. "But I can make a difference in a cockpit. I can be a pirate. One of the 'dustrunners' everyone talks about."

"Not in good way," he breathed. "Not in way you want."

"I'll take my chances," she said.

"You are fool," he said, grabbing his money back. "You are fool! You have so many chance, and you do this? Fool!"

He left her there, alone at the table with half-finished coffee. She didn't say a word back.

Bear Trap

The room was stuffy from the second Freeman got in. The seats all creaked, and they creaked often as the participants in the circle shifted uncomfortably. No one wore their rank, but you could tell the officers by the slump in their shoulders. The defeat in their eyes.

Jack was talking about Afghanistan, how the things he saw in his last tour had made him relapse. One drink, but it broke four years of trying. He was ashamed, kept staring at the floor. Everyone gave him support, sympathy.

“We’ve got the tallest hill to climb, sir,” said one woman.

“And longest way to fall,” agreed another.

Freeman said nothing until called upon, and then greeted them all, told them his first name, and “613 days.”

Everyone nodded appreciatively. He went back to silence.

A new member joined the group. Neil, a fresh-faced boy — a private at best — with a north-east accent. Freeman kept staring at the floor, letting the noise wash over him.

“What made you stop drinking, sir?” asked Jack, always helpful, always gentle.

“Seeing the way it affected my family,” said Neil.

Freeman looked up at him, eyes narrow.

“How did it affect your family, *sir*?” he asked. It was a hint. The rest of the group watched Freeman, not Neil, waiting to see the reaction.

“They stopped talking to me,” he said. “Kept their distance when I was around.”

Freeman nodded, leaned back in his chair. It creaked loudly.

"Where were you stationed, sir?" he asked.

"Marshall..." warned Jack, but was ignored.

"Fort Bragg," said Neil. "For a few months, anyway. Never got deployed before I moved here."

Freeman smiled.

"Fort Bragg is a great place. Do you know Gary Weiss? 33rd Airborne?"

Neil looked away, into the air, squinted to pull a memory into focus. No one said a word.

"Yeah," he said. "Gary. Great guy. Don't know him well, but I've heard stories, right?"

Freeman nodded again, said nothing more.

"Frankly," said Neil, "I'm mostly worried about how my drinking will affect my chances of getting a job in the SEF. I've had my name in for months, but no word yet. I know they do blood tests, but man, they can't disqualify you for a little alcohol in the system, right?"

"How would you feel if they did, sir?" asked Jack.

"Wronged," said Neil. "That's my calling, you know? What I'm headed for. I wanna beat those dustrunner scum in the face."

"Amen," said Karen, and then added a hasty, "Sir," after a glare from Freeman.

"Not that it'll be hard," said Neil. "They're all halfwit scumbags anyway. Don't know how to fly a jet without assistance, can't get real jobs..."

The others were joining in now, throwing barbs into the ring, letting their frustrations flow at an absent enemy.

"That Gossamer joker's going to blow the whole thing wide open," said Neil. "Wide open."

"I hope so, sir," said Jack. "God, I hope so."

"I heard there's chatter they've got a big bust planned," said Neil. "It's downside, not in the SEF, but I'll be damned if I don't want to be there when they snag the bastards."

"Yes sir!" agreed Karen.

"Ain't that right, Marhsall?" asked Neil, voice sharp.

Freeman looked at him, and the conversation stopped.

"Yes. Sir," he said.

"They're sitting ducks," said Neil, directly to Marshall. "And they don't know it. Even the ones that do, don't."

Freeman looked at his hands, checked his watch, and then leapt across the room, catching Neil in the face with a powerful blow. The rest of the circle jumped off their chairs, backing away, as Freeman continued beating the newbie.

"Marshall!" yelled Jack from a safe distance. "Marshall, stop it!"

"You don't know Gary Weiss!" yelled Freeman. "Gary died six years ago! Who the hell are you?"

Neil put his arms up to protect himself, but it made no difference. Freeman felt strong arms lock around his shoulders, and he was pulled off, held back, heart racing and teeth clenched tight.

"He's not one of us!" he screamed, trying to get free. "He's not one of us!"

Jack checked on Neil, looked up at Freeman angrily.

"No, Marshall, *you're* not one of us."

"But he—"

"You know the rules. No violence in the group. No exceptions. It's just not allowed."

Freeman stopped fighting, caught his breath, and was let go. He slumped forward, like falling out of a dream, and started towards the door.

"I'm... I'm sorry, sir," said Neil through a bloodied face.

Freeman glowered at him, pushed outside without a word. In the parking lot, he leaned against his truck, resting his head against the glass and sighing a rattled sigh.

He took his phone from his jacket, dialled blind and put it to his ear.

"Elvis," he said. "I made a mistake. Horrible mistake."

There was a pause.

"You there?" Freeman asked.

"I'm here. What happened?"

"I just beat the bejesus out of a kid, and I don't even know if I was right."

"You're having a bad day."

"That's no excuse. I don't know what I was thinking."

"Listen, Rook," Elvis said, "everyone's on edge these days. I'd be more worried if you were holding it all together."

Freeman got into the truck, closed the door.

"I don't want to stand out," he said, putting the keys in the ignition.

"I try so hard to stay under the radar, and do something like that."

"Don't worry about it," said Elvis. "Seriously. Let it go. Nobody stands out with all this stuff going on. Us or them."

Freeman nodded, checked back towards the church doors. Nobody was leaving. The meeting was going strong. He was outside in the cold, alone.

"Have you heard anything about Gossamer?" Freeman asked.

"They were talking about him flipping. Rumours."

"I don't know about that. I know he's scheduled to testify, and I know there's talk of someone trying to assassinate him before he gets to the stand, but beyond that... it's all speculation these days. Everything's speculation."

"Yeah," nodded Freeman. "We're on our way out, aren't we?"

"How so? Over Gossamer? He's a lackey, Rook. He knows so little, it's a wonder he ever got in a plane to start. Don't worry about it."

"It's not that. It's... things are picking up speed. We're surrounded by all these rotten apples, and we don't know which are which. Lucet seems more in the dark than some idiot in a meeting."

"There's chatter, but Lucet knows what to ignore."

"Maybe he *did*, but does he still? Maybe he's missing something important."

Elvis paused, exhaled, and Freeman rested his head on the steering wheel. The wind whistled through the window.

"If they're right, there's something coming," Elvis said finally. "I guess there's no harm in being cautious. Caution keeps you alive. But don't let it eat you, Rook. You'll never survive if you let it eat you."

"I know," Freeman said, turning on the truck.

"So what are you going to do now? Go apologize?"

Freeman laughed, put it into reverse and pulled into the street.
“Only one thing *to* do. Find myself a drink.”

Missing Chip

Kani pinned herself behind a dumpster, curling into a ball and listening to the sounds of the evening before putting the phone to her ear again. She smelled pineapples, wine.

“Kaso?” she asked.

“Please hold,” he said, and started singing a tune to himself. “Hello, Kaso Industries, Kaso speaking. How many I help you?”

“What am I going to do...” she said, her voice cracking. The long day was getting to her. Her hands were constantly trembling.

“You’re going to put on a happy face,” he said. “It’s never as bad as it seems!”

“It isn’t?”

“Well, in your case it is, but I’m working on *optimism* here, okay? Play along.”

She leaned her head against the dumpster.

“Why are you helping me? They said to let me die, right? Why are you helping me?”

Kaso sighed.

“You’re cute, and I need a girlfriend. No, just kidding. You’re way too young for me. Well, maybe. When’s your birthday? Don’t answer that.”

She laughed, rubbed tears from her eyes.

“You’re an idiot,” she said.

“On the surface, yes,” he said. “But underneath, I’m all man. Man and cheesepuffs. Hmm. Too much information, I guess.”

“Slightly.”

“Right. Well, to answer your question seriously: I helped you because I have this feeling you’re not as bad as they think you are. It’s hard these days, all the rotten apples in the tree, and you never know who you can trust. But I like you, Tundra. I trust you. And if someone I like and trust is in trouble, I’ll do just about anything to help them.”

“Thanks,” she sniffled.

“Except leave my room. I have my limits.”

She laughed again, pushed back the tears. His voice got bouncier, even more playful.

“I made you laugh! We’re meant to be together. How bout you drop this piracy thing and come live with me? I have a narrow mattress, but we can overcome any obstacle if we try.”

“No thanks,” she smiled.

“You’re missing oooooout...”

“I doubt it,” she said.

“Yeah. Everyone says that. So anyway, back to business. You’re going to need some cash, so if you can give me your bank ID, I’ll see what I can route to the nearest outlet. Get you some liquid assets, if you know what I mean.”

“My bank ID?”

“The one we transfer to. I don’t know which is which from your team, so I can’t...”

Kani winced, held the phone away from her ear and ran through her memory for something that might fit.

“I... I don’t know any...”

“You don’t *know*?” he asked. “Okay, well maybe just the first few digits. That oughta help lots.”

“I think I may have stored in on my phone,” she said, and started checking, but he yelped so loudly she listened to him instead.

“Not on your phone. Please say you didn’t put it on your phone. Holy security risk.”

“Oh. Right,” she laughed, nervously. “I don’t know what I was thinking.”

Kaso sighed. She heard a pen clicking in the background, and a few heavy thumps on a table.

"All right," he said. "We'll just see if we can take a look. How much do you have in there?"

"I don't know," she muttered.

"Ballpark. Anything."

"I really don't know. The mob... I think they took it all out, so I probably don't have any—"

"Let me worry about that. You sure you don't have the number? Anywhere? You wrote it down, stuck it in your underwear? Drawer?"

"No," she said, then looked up. "Oh, yeah. Actually, I did. I wrote it on a scrap of paper and hid it... um... in my room at home."

"Excellent! Let's go get it."

"Police, remember?"

"Right. Contiguous thoughts are not my forte."

Kani peered around the dumpster at the back door to a restaurant as it rattled open. She ducked back behind and held her breath. Feet scuffled towards her, and she heard a grunt, and then fresh garbage toppled into the bin. Putrid water sprayed over her, but she kept silent. The feet scuffled off, and the door closed again.

"You there?" Kaso said.

"Yeah," she replied. "I need to get out of here."

"Gotcha. We can skip money for now. You've got the encoder chip, right?"

She glanced at the phone, tried to see how it might open.

"The which?" she asked.

"The encoder chip. The thing that... we gave you when you... did you hit your head or something?"

"No, I'm sorry, I didn't know what you meant," she said, wincing. "I left that at my house too. Sorry."

Kaso sighed.

"Well, nothing left to do but go get them."

This woke Kani right up.

"Go... to my house?"

"The chip is important, Tundra. You know that. If it got into the wrong hands, there'd be deaths and suicides and various forms of artichokes falling from the sky. Madness and stuff."

"Right," she said, and got to her feet. "I've got to get it back."

"Don't worry," Kaso said cheerfully, "the cops probably left hours ago."

Unfortunately, the police cars were still there, officers milling about. Through the front windows she could see her father on the sofa, head in his hands as detectives stood around him, questioning. He was wearing his best suit.

"Oh god, the memorial..." she whispered. "Dammit."

"You there?" Kaso said from the phone. "So you're there?"

"Across the street. The police are in my driveway."

"Okay, I see them. Don't fret, I'll make a distraction."

"Kaso, wait—"

But he was gone.

The phone rang inside the house, and Kani's father answered with a small shadow of his normal voice.

"Hello?" he said.

"Hello," said a voice, distorted and serious. "We have your daughter."

The phone hit the ground and the detectives in the room scrambled to listen in on the line. Kani's father picked it back up, put it to his ear and listened.

"Y-y-you have Kani?"

"Yes. She is safe. For now."

"What do you want?" he asked, watching the police motion to keep talking as they ran a trace. He nodded. "Is she safe? I want to talk to her."

"She's busy right now."

"Busy where? Why did you take her?"

"You've heard of Russian brides?"

"Y-y-yes?"

"It's like that, but kind of in reverse."

"You're sending her to Russia?"

"Um. No. Bulgaria. They're lonely there."

Kani's father stood up, looked out the window, tears in his eyes. The police worked furiously in the background, their traces never resolving to the same place twice.

"How much do you want?" he asked, fighting off tears.

"We don't want money."

Kani's father backed up, looked at the detectives. They shrugged.

"You don't want... money?"

"No," the voice said. "We want to know the square root of twenty-five."

The detectives were stumped in so many ways.

"Um. Is it five?"

"Hold on. Yes, yes it is five. All right. You pass. I'll tell you where she is."

The detectives were shaking their heads, but looked so uncertain, Kani's father couldn't stop himself.

"Where is she? Where's my Kani?"

The police cars kicked into reverse and tore down the street away from Kani, sirens blaring. It was so loud she almost didn't hear the phone.

"Kaso?" she asked. "What did you do?"

"I sent them on a very long trip."

"For what?"

"You. You're kidnapped, you know. Now get your kidnapped ass into that house and find the bank ID and the encoder chip!"

She dashed across the street and ducked into the neighbour's yard. At the back, there was a dip under the fence, and she slipped through, rushed to her back door, and snuck inside.

Her father was in the front, talking with a detective.

"Stay calm, sir, it'll be all right. We'll get her."

Kani inched up the stairs to the second floor, and walked carefully into her room, leaving the lights off and the door half-closed.

“Are you there?” Kaso asked. “Can you see it?”

“Yeah,” she said. “It’s here. Underneath my DVD player.”

“Wait, your what?”

“DVD player.”

“Oh, optical media. I get it. Nostalgia. Very cool. Now hurry!”

Kani was about to go back out the door when she heard footsteps coming up the stairs. She turned off the phone, slid it in her pocket, and quickly slipped into the closet, closing the door.

A moment later, a shaft of light broke the darkness and she saw her father walk in, head low, and sit on her bed. He was crying, quiet and personal, running his hand along her mattress.

“My baby,” he said to himself. “What am I going to do?”

Kani wanted to open the closet, to tell him she was fine, that she would be fine... but she knew it was impossible. She clenched her fist, closed her eyes and waited for it to end. Willed him to go. Please, just go.

He picked up the phone off her dresser, turned it on and started dialling.

“Come on,” he muttered. “Please pick up. Please be okay...”

Kani sniffled quietly, watching him there.

And then the phone in her pocket rang.

“Crap,” she mouthed.

Betrayal

Kani's father backed into the door, turned on the light. Kani switched off the phone, cursed silently to herself.

"Who's there?" he called. "Who is it?"

Kani slowly opened the closet door, looking as apologetic as she could. Her father's eyes opened wide, and he nearly fell to his knees at the sight of her. His expression was a mix of joy and horror.

"Kani..." he gasped.

She took a steeling breath and held Stacey's phone tight.

"Sorry," she said, and ran past him. He tried to grab her, but she pulled free, ran down the back stairs and into the yard. Shouting erupted from inside the house, and she dashed for the front, saw her father's truck in the driveway, free of obstructions. She ran for it, pressed her finger into the passenger side lock pad and jumped inside. The door bounced back open as she started the engine, put it in reverse, and powered back.

The police raced out of the house, yelling at her to stop, but she kept backing up. The passenger door caught on a police cruiser and ripped clean off, but she raced down the road without pausing.

The phone rang and she put it in the dashboard cradle.

"You and me have different ideas of 'subtle,'" Kaso said.

"Shut up," she said. "Tell me what to do."

"Did you get the encoder chip?"

Kani bit her lip, checked the mirrors. Red and blue lights were chasing her. She pushed the gas down harder.

"I got it," she lied, "but it got smashed when I fell out a window."

"How smashed?"

“Totally.”

“Hmm,” he said.

She took a quick right turn onto the highway and pushed the gas as far down as it would go. Her heart was beating so fast she was having trouble hearing anything else.

“What do I do?” she shouted. “I need a plan! Think!”

“Whistlepig!” Kaso shouted back.

“*What?*”

“Stop yelling at me! I’m working!” he snapped. “Okay. Get off the highway. It’s too easy to trap you there.”

She roared onto the next exit, clipping a parked car and merging into traffic on the wrong side of the road. The police followed a few seconds behind.

“Where am I going?” she yelled.

“South, I think. Just keep going.”

“There’s a red light ahead...”

“Just keep going!”

She tore through the intersection and the lights changed behind her. Traffic on either side started in, barely missing the police in pursuit.

“Damn. Network lag,” swore Kaso. “You’ve gotta put some space between you. Step on it.”

“This is stepping!”

“What kind of crappy car are you driving?” Kaso snapped.

“Shut up, you hermit!”

Kaso laughed hysterically.

“That’s the spirit! Woo!”

The car raced through another intersection, and this time the police hit a roadblock as traffic flowed into them. Two cars made it through, putting even more space between them and Kani.

“Okay, I’ve got your plan here,” said Kaso. “Ready? It’s going to be hard.”

“Just tell me!”

“All right... here we go... take the next left—”

Kani turned the corner so fast she nearly smashed into a lamp post. She switched gears, raced off again.

"Another left!" shouted Kaso, and she barely made the turn in time.

"Give me warning next time!" she yelled.

"Sorry! It's another left, then right, and then keep going straight until you see the ostrich farm on your... hold on, this is the wrong map."

"Dammit!" she shouted, and spun the wheel back towards the highway. She passed under a rail overpass, saw the train above her, heading south. She turned right again, onto the street running parallel to the tracks.

"Where're you going?" Kaso asked. "This looks like a dead end to me."

"Shut up and watch," she said, and took off as fast as the little car would go. She pulled into the train station ahead of the train, skidded to a halt in front of the steps, and jumped out.

The few people on the steps moved out of the way as she ran up the stairs, over the stiles, and onto the platform. Down below, police arrived, covered the empty car and ran up after her, guns drawn. They got to the platform just as the doors to the train were starting to close, ran inside.

"Split up," the oldest said to the others, and they took off through the mostly-empty cars, turning around any women to check their faces.

They finally arrived at the last car, and at the very back they saw a figure hunched over in a seat, head out of sight, hiding. Hiding badly.

Plan for the Worst

Yuri fell out the door into the cold night air, grabbed hold of a fence to get his balance back. He waved to Bernard, catching his breath.

“Thank you,” he said. “You are good friend.”

“Sorry I couldn’t be more help, Yuri,” said Bernard from the door. “Let me know how things turn out.”

“I will,” Yuri promised, and started on his way home. Paris at night was still beautiful, but the lights along the streets were flickering, fading, making the decay seem worse than ever. He followed the Seine, swaying dangerously close to the edge, and then fell to his knees.

“I’m okay,” he said to himself. “Is good. I’m okay.”

He threw up into the water. Spat the rest on the walkway. He sat on the ground, rested his head back, stared at the stars while regaining his composure. The stars were moving. He laughed at it, how familiar it was, seeing that sight.

“You!” came a sharp call from his side, and a police officer marched forward, hand on his stun stick. “Did you just—”

Yuri vomited again, this time on the sidewalk by the officer’s shoes. He backed up in disgust, arms crossed.

“Move on, sir.”

Yuri nodded, got to his feet, swaying towards the water. He took a moment, breathed in some fresh air, and got lost in the moment. The cop gave him a push in the arm.

“Move it,” he said.

Yuri shoved back, and the cop fell into the vomit. He got up quickly, checking his uniform, his ears turning bright red.

"That's it," he snarled, and pushed the wavering Yuri into the far wall. "You should learn to do what you're told."

"I always do what I am told," Yuri slurred. "That is how I get into trouble."

"Your bad luck, then," said the cop, pushing the fingerprint scanner against Yuri's finger. "Your luck's only getting worse."

"Worse is not possible," Yuri sighed. "I am like stupid dog getting kicked by owner. I go back for more every day. Even I do not understand myself. I must be broken somewhere, yes?"

The cop waited for the scan results to come in, a hand keeping Yuri pushed against the wall.

"My daughter is dying," Yuri continued. "She is in hospital now, dying, and I cannot help her. I try, but my luck, it does not work for me. She is dying and I have no way to help."

"Getting drunk is always a good start," snapped the cop.

"Healthcare will not cover her," Yuri sighed. "My wife and I are not French, so they would let my little girl die. It seems wrong, no? So wrong to me."

"How about you go back where you came from?" said the cop. "That would solve all your problems. All *my* problems, anyway. Maybe you're having trouble because you're in the wrong country."

"Maybe," Yuri sighed.

The cop eased up, looked back at his handheld.

"You worked at King/Western?"

"Yes, sir. Ten years."

"What job? Management? All the management were foreigners. Not a Frenchman in sight. Some take-over we funded."

Yuri shook his head, rested his forehead on the wall.

"I was not management," he said. "Engineer. Always engineer. Backthrust adjustment. Later, RCS shielding."

The cop let him go, stepped back.

"No kidding. My brother worked on the assembly line. What models did you do?"

"Many pleasure craft like R-12 and RF-31. What factory was your brother at?"

"L'Amaury," said the cop. "Six years until they closed."

"I visited often. They made good ships there. Best in fleet, I say. What is brother doing now?"

The cop pocketed his handheld, stared at the river.

"He killed himself two ears ago. He was too much of a company man, in the end. Couldn't move on."

"Yes," nodded Yuri. "I know feeling."

"It's the national psyche," the cop said. "Living a dream. Same reason they keep maintaining the spaceport at de Gaulle. The ban is absolute, but we refuse to see it."

"Is hard to give up. France was leader. I came to be part of history."

"Different kind of history, now."

"Yes," Yuri nodded. "Different."

The cop clapped Yuri on the shoulder, smiled a weary smile.

"You should join the force. We could use big guys like you. As long as you're not usually this drunk."

Yuri smiled, shook his head.

"No, just bad day is all. I am much better normally."

"Think about it. And have a good night!"

Yuri waved to him.

"Good night! And I am sorry about your uniform!"

"Don't be! It'll get me off early tonight!"

The cop laughed and ran up the steps to the street. Yuri walked back along the water's edge, watching the lights in the city's windows go on and off, and felt a smile creep across his face. He didn't sway as much. He felt alive again.

His phone rang and he answered blindly.

"Hello?" he said.

"Redux. Elvis."

"Hello, Elvis. It is late where you are?"

"Not yet," Elvis said. "I wanted to call and tell you how sorry I am, Redux. It's got to be hard, losing that retirement at the last second."

I'd cover it for you, but I'm still a few months away from paying off my own fighter."

"Is okay. Is not your problem. Thank you for thinking."

"Listen, I just found out about another mission in a few hours. It's not on any of the networks because of the typhoon in the drop zone, but I was thinking... this might be something that could help you."

"Will you be going too?" Yuri asked, stumbling a bit on the edge of the sidewalk.

"No, I'm busy that day. I just didn't want it to go to waste. It seems right up your alley."

"Thank you. I will think on it. It may be bad time for me too," he said, and his face lost its happy glow. "I will think."

Elvis cleared his throat, and his voice quieted.

"You've heard about the rotten apple problem, right?" he said. "There's a lot of speculation right now about who it could be."

"Is not me," Yuri laughed.

"Yeah, nobody'd think that. You've been at this longer than anyone. We were thinking of someone else."

"Tundra is fool, but not mole. If they want to spy on us, they send better pilot. She sticking out like sore... sore..."

"Thumb."

"Yes. Thumb. She new apple, not rotten."

"Troubling either way."

"Yes," Yuri nodded.

"What about Chenne? Nobody knows anything about her, and she *is* a good pilot. Do you have anything on her, one way or another?"

"She is good at job," Yuri said, thinking. "I do not know. She could be. But if so, she is working very slow. She has been with team for two years. What is she waiting for?"

"That's what worries me. All right, Redux. Thanks. I'll—"

"I am having problem," Yuri said, stopping. He stared at the pavement, held his breath. "I need to switch team, if I can. Do you know who can arrange?"

"Whoa," said Elvis, "are you sure about that?"

"I cannot trust Rook. He brought Tundra in. She has... damaged my life now, Elvis. Damaged badly. I cannot face her again, but I cannot face Rook either. He is meant to protect us from these things, and he... if I go back there, I cannot face him again."

Elvis said nothing for a moment.

"I understand," he said. "I'll see what I can do."

"Thank you," Yuri said, and started walking again. His foot slipped on the edge of the curb, and he dropped the phone onto the ground. He scrambled to pick it up, but it was off when he found it.

He cursed, turned it back on, and kept walking. It rang almost immediately.

"Elvis?" he said, but heard crying on the other end.

"Yuri," sobbed Sabina. "Come quickly. Please, come quickly."

Come Back

The door chimed as he entered, and Freeman nodded to the clerk behind the counter.

“Good evenin,” said the clerk.

Freeman ignored him. He made his way to the middle of the store, picked up a bottle of scotch, checking the price. He paused there, looked at the window beside him, reflecting the aisles like a mirror. There was a man, mid-twenties, behind him, eating Pocky and staring. He put the scotch back, picked up another bottle, nodding to himself.

He started back towards the counter, slowing at the sight of a second man entering from the street, hands in his pockets, glancing around the room. Freeman stopped at a display of mini-mixers, listening, waiting.

“Major?”

Freeman wheeled around. Behind him was a young man in military clothes, dog tag at his neck. He was smiling like he’d just won the lottery.

“Lieutenant Armstrong,” Freeman said, saluting. “How’ve you been?”

Armstrong saluted back, shrugged.

“Same old, sir. How’ve you been? The guys all miss you. Haven’t seen you in ages.”

“I’ve been around,” Freeman said, holding the scotch behind himself. “Are you back now? Back for good?”

"No sir. Short breather, sir. We ship out next week. Militia's been using the proceeds from piracy to buy new guns, so there's a never-ending supply of bad guys to kill."

Freeman nodded, checked over his shoulder. The two men were on opposite sites of the store, looking at bottles without using their eyes.

"Wish you were still with us, sir," said Armstrong.

Freeman laughed.

"I doubt anyone else feels that way," he said.

"No, sir, that's just not the case. The guys have no hard feelings. None at all, sir. We all wish things had gone differently. More than anything. Hell, if it had been any of us, getting that news, we'd have been on the first plane back. You can count on it."

"It wasn't an easy decision to make," Freeman said quietly.

"It was an easy one to accept, sir. You've got my word on that. AWOL isn't always AWOL."

Freeman shrugged, smiled weakly.

"Let me get your drink for you, sir. It's the least I can do. Saying thanks for all the times you saved my ass."

He reached for the bottle, but Freeman pulled it back, shook his head.

"No, Lieutenant, I can't let you do that. I've got expensive tastes."

"It's okay, sir. I'm not a lieutenant anymore. Got promoted to captain last year. Now come on, I want to do something with my captain's pay, and something tells me this is gonna be as good as it gets for a while."

Freeman smiled and went with Armstrong to the counter. Armstrong patted Freeman on the back, nodded confidently.

"This man's a hero," he said to the clerk. "And I'm buyin' him some scotch."

The clerk looked between the two.

"Good for you," he said.

Just then, the two men at the back of the store burst forward, guns out, yelling furiously to get on the ground, get down now!

The first one grabbed Armstrong by the neck and tossed him down, stepping on his neck and aiming the gun at his head. The second aimed at the clerk.

"No heroics, army-boy! Empty the register now!"

Freeman sighed.

The first one switched his aim to Freeman.

"On the ground!" he shouted.

"What do you want?" Freeman asked, not moving.

"Cash! Now get down!"

Freeman turned to him, snarling.

"What do you *really* want?"

"Cash! Now shut up before I—"

The scotch bottle exploded across the robber's head, and he fell over in a heap. The second thug started to turn, but Freeman hit his wrist so hard the gun dropped. They faced each other, one frantic and cornered, the other eerily calm.

The robber reached into his jeans and began pulling out a second weapon, but before he could aim, Freeman's boot caught him in the throat, and he landed on his back, gagging, grasping at his neck.

Freeman turned to Armstrong, helped him up, and patted his shoulder.

"Nice talking with you, Captain. Tell the men I'm counting on them."

"Yes, sir," nodded Armstrong.

He started towards the door, but the clerk called out.

"Wait! The police will be here and..."

"I've got to run," Freeman said. "I've got places to be. That all right with you?"

The clerk nodded, smiled nervously, still shaking from the ordeal.

"Please, take a case of beer. It's free. As thanks."

Freeman grabbed a six pack from the display at the front. The cheapest stuff in the store. He held it up, smiled.

"Thanks."

He ran out and back to his car as the sirens closed in from all sides.

Tiny Hands

Yuri ran down the hallway to room C-27 and stopped as a doctor came out of the room, chart in hand. Yuri caught his breath, tried not to panic.

“Doctor Olivette,” he said. “Is she...”

“She’s resting,” said Olivette. “She is very ill. She cannot be stressed under any circumstances.”

“No,” Yuri agreed.

“Your wife was upset earlier. You cannot bring that into the room. Anya can’t take it. You understand me?”

“Yes. Yes, I understand.”

Olivette checked his notepad, scrolling through pages. He frowned.

“I don’t see any record of financing yet. Are you making arrangements tonight?”

“No. I have none. None yet.”

The doctor nodded, looked away.

“Is there...” Yuri said, and Olivette turned back. “Is there some way you can do operation, and we pay later?”

The expression said it all, but Olivette still took the time to speak kindly, calmly.

“I’m afraid not,” he said. “There is a policy against it. Too many patients in your circumstances skip out on the bill when it comes due, and the hospital cannot afford any more losses, especially for expensive gene therapy.”

Yuri stood there, nodding blankly. Olivette left him alone in the dim hallway, waiting to regain his composure.

Anya was not asleep, tucked into her bed, tubes running everywhere. Her smile widened the second he walked in the room, and she put out her hands to him, as if she could hug him. As if she could move.

"Papa, you came!" she said. Her voice was weak, scratchy, but full of life somehow. "Did you have a good trip?"

"Yes, my darling," he said, sitting on the stool next to her. "How are you feeling?"

"The doctors are nice to me," she said. "One of them brought me crayons."

"Oh? What did you draw?"

"You and mama in the park."

He smiled.

"And where were you?" he asked.

"In bed, of course!" She reached for the papers on her bedside table, but her arms were too weighed down with wires to make it. Yuri reached over, grabbed the bundle, and sorted through them one by one. The drawings were crude and halting, but they were hers, and he loved them.

"This is me?" he asked, pointing to a drawing of a man with a beard, bent over so he took up half the page.

"You duck when you come in the room," Anya said, smiling. "It's funny."

"It's not ducking, darling," he said. "It's me bowing to you, when I come near."

She giggled, and her heart monitor beeped slightly. He watched it, touched her hand, stroked gently.

"You are doing fine," he said. "You are doing so well. I am so proud of you. When I was your age, I thought taking cough syrup was worst thing in the world. But you... you sit here without complaint. You are magnificent."

She darted a look left and right, and leaned forward.

"I have a complaint, papa."

"Is okay, darling."

"The morning nurse smells like onions," she giggled.

“Some people do, darling,” he laughed. “Some people smell terrible.”

She took his hand and squeezed a finger.

“You look sad, papa,” she said.

“Me?”

“Why are you sad? Is it me?”

Yuri looked down at her hand, squeezed it gently.

“Is not you, darling. Is never you.”

“I can cheer you up,” she said, and her heart rate picked up. “I have a story. I had an adventure.”

He smiled, met her eyes again.

“Please tell. When did you have adventure?”

“Last week,” she whispered. “It’s a secret.”

“I will never tell.”

Her gapped smile grew bigger. She tried to sit up, but couldn’t make it. The sash around her head came off, revealing the last wisps of her beautiful blond hair.

“I made a new friend. His name is Pierre. He lives at the hospital.”

Yuri stiffened, kept his smile intact.

“Where does he live here?” he asked.

“Under the bed. Don’t look! He’s sleeping!”

Yuri hesitated.

“He is a wombat,” she continued. “They are very sleepy animals. They sleep all the time. But Pierre had trouble sleeping. He was scared, I think. And I told him not to worry, and I helped him count sheep until he fell asleep.”

“You are a kind, kind girl.”

“It was no trouble,” she grinned. “I was tired too.”

He kissed her small hand. She pulled it away, tickled by his beard.

“When you get better, darling, where would you like to go? I will bring you on vacation. Anywhere you like. Anything you like. What do you like?”

She thought, biting her lower lip and staring into the sky as if the answer were written on the ceiling. Then she smiled broadly, looked back to him.

"Ash Wednesday," she said.

"Ash Wednesday," he repeated, uncertain.

"Last year for Ash Wednesday, you took mama to Church and it made her so happy. When I get better, I want to go there too. It sounds wonderful."

"Yes, darling. Then that is where we go. I promise."

He kissed her forehead and pulled back as the heart monitor start whining again. Her eyes started to roll back, and he stepped away, pushed aside as the doctors raced in, checking her over, ordering him out. He stumbled back, eyes never leaving her poor little face, out into the hallway.

"Yuri," said Sabina, in the hall, half-empty coffee in her hand. "What happened? What did you do?"

"Nothing, I just..."

"Jesus, Yuri, they warned us to keep her calm. You have to be careful. You have to be think about someone other than *yourself!*"

He nodded, sat on a chair by the door, expressionless, listening carefully.

"Did you find money yet?" Sabina snapped. "Or did you just drink whatever we had left? That's an excellent plan, Yuri. Maybe beer will cure Anya."

"I have options," he said quietly.

"Options? What options? I need to hear *real* options, Yuri. Not dreams, not promises. I need *answers*."

The heart monitor was silent in the room, and he held his breath, waiting for word.

"What answers, Yuri? Tell me."

He looked at the floor, avoiding her.

"I will look to join police force," he said. "They want people like me. Get medical coverage for Anya."

Sabina threw her coffee against the wall, paced away, holding her head.

"That's no answer, Yuri. It'll take months for you to get hired, to get coverage. *If* they cover you. Anya needs help *now*. Not tomorrow, not next year... *now*."

He nodded, breathing ragged, and stood up. He couldn't look her in the eye, even if she had wanted it.

The door slid open and Olivette stuck his head out.

"I need you two to stay quiet," he said. "She's fine, but your voices are frightening her. Please. Quiet down."

Yuri nodded, took his phone in his hand.

"Do not worry. I will leave," he said, and left, dragging his problems with him like a noose.

Friendly Face

“You!” shouted the officer, gun drawn. “Show me your hands! Now!”

The figure at the back of the train eased out, hands up, and turned.

“Do you have any tea?” he asked.

“Dammit!” the officer spat, as the train pulled out of the station and roared towards Guelph.

Kani wasted no time getting out of the area. She ran back to the street below, hopping into a taxi and ducking low. The driver peered over his shoulder.

“Pre-pay the first ten,” he said, motioning the the thumb-print pad attached to the glass partition. Kani reached up and pushed her hand there. It registered with a green light and the driver smiled.

“Welcome aboard. Where to?”

Kani looked up, bit her lip.

“Toronto. Downtown. Eaton Centre.”

“That’s a long way, miss.”

“Just go!”

The driver sighed, put the car into car and drove off, turning towards the highway. More police cars raced past, lights flashing. Kani winced, tapped the glass.

“Take the side roads. I need time to think.”

“Feh,” grunted the cabbie. “Your funeral.”

They turned onto a smaller road, lampposts lighting the street every half block. Kani stayed down, rubbing the dirt off the edge of Stacey’s phone, whispering to herself.

“Turn myself in, get arrested for sure. Maybe cut a deal. Probably not. Stacey’d go to prison. Never talk to me again. If the mob keeps her alive that long. Dammit, my head...”

She squeezed the sides of her head with her palms, closed her eyes tight as a wave of swirling pain washed over her. When she opened her eyes, the world was spinning again. Vertigo. Worse than ever.

“Okay, no cops,” she whispered. “Get Stacey back myself. I can do it. I just need a plan. Get her back, get her safe, and nobody has to go to jail.”

Bright lights caught her attention, and she looked up to see tall lamps beaming hot white light into a football field. She peeked over the edge of the door and saw the familiar colours of Trudeau High wrapping up after a home game.

She tapped the window urgently.

“Here!” she said. “Here’s good. Let me out!”

“It’s not Toronto,” said the cabbie, but pulled over. “Have a nice—”

She slammed the door and ran to the bleachers, hopping to see over the crowds. There, at the back, she saw him, facing away from her, arm around a giggly blonde, laughing loudly with friends. Kani pushed her way through, tapped him on his broad shoulder.

“Simon,” she said over the noise. “Can we talk?”

Simon and the blonde turned. Simon looked surprised to see her, and the blonde looked positively repulsed.

“Kani... what’s... are you okay?”

“I can’t talk about it here,” she said. “Can you... just for a second?”

“Simon, we’re on a *date*,” said the blonde.

“It’ll just be a second,” Kani said politely.

“Make her *go*,” said the blonde.

Kani held herself back. She smiled as pleasantly as she could muster.

“You must be Simon’s new girlfriend. I’m his *old* girlfriend. We should compare notes.”

Simon sighed, rubbed his forehead.

“Trudy, this is Kani.”

“Wait, you’re Trudy?” Kani laughed. “Is it true you had your grandfather sent to prison?”

Trudy’s face turned bright red, and she pushed away from the crowd, running towards the school. Simon watched her go, but didn’t go after her. Kani waved it off.

“Buy her something shiny, she’ll forget all about this.”

“Kani, you can’t just—”

“Can we do this somewhere else?” she said. “We really need to talk.”

“Kani, I don’t know what rights you think you have, but *you* broke up with *me*, remember?”

She grabbed his nose and pulled him down to her height, glowered right into his face.

“Shut up and follow me,” she said.

He followed her without complaint. She found his old Model-T in the parking lot and waited by the passenger side, fingers on the handle, while he fumbled with his keys.

“You going to tell me what this is about?” he asked.

“Inside,” she said.

They got in and she patted the dashboard, wiped away some dust.

“Drive,” she said.

“Kani, Trudy’s going to—”

“Please, just drive. You can go back and get her after.”

“After *what*?”

She stared at him, and he withered, started the engine and pulled out onto the street.

“What’s going on, Kani? I’ve done everything you wanted, so you owe me some information in return. And it had better be good, because honestly, I’ll need to hold on to it while Trudy is chewing me out.”

Kani nodded, clasped her hands, and stared out front.

“I need your help,” she said. “But I can’t say why.”

“I’m going to need more than that,” he said. “What’s this about? Your face looks bruised. Are you okay? Did someone hurt you?”

Kani turned away, ran her hand through her hair.

"It's..." she began, and he pulled over to the shoulder, braking hard. He turned to her, all kindness gone from his face.

"Kani, stop screwing around. What's wrong? I can't help you if you keep secrets from me."

"I need a place to say," she said. "For a few days. Just a few."

"Why?"

"I don't want to—"

"Dammit, Kani! This is exactly the same as when you dumped me! No communication! Happy one day, split the next."

"You landed on your feet all right," she snapped.

"Trudy's nice," he said, half-heartedly.

"Smoked her grandfather's tobacco and testified against him to avoid community service. *That's nice.*"

"Like you have anything to be proud of. Why did you break up with me? And don't give me that crap about growing apart. You know it's not true."

"It's complicated," she said.

"Try me."

She banged her head against the glass, closed her eyes.

"My grandfather found out," she said. "You know him. He's conservative. He didn't want me fooling around with—"

He touched her hand and she looked up at him. His face was kind again.

"Since when have you ever cared about stuff like that?" he asked.

"I try not to," she said. "But sometimes it's just easier to go along with it, you know?"

He rolled his eyes.

"I don't buy it. You don't believe that."

She shrugged, wiped a tear from her eye.

"I need a place to stay," she said, taking his hand in hers, holding it tight. "I wish I didn't have to ask, but it's important, Simon. Please. Please help me."

He nodded.

"I can have my mom make up the guest room, but—"

"No. No, I can't let my dad find out. Don't ask why, just..."

He moved closer, brushed the hair from the side of her face, met her eyes.

“You could sneak in the back,” he whispered. “Hide out in my room.”

She held her breath.

“Are you sure?” she asked.

He nodded, didn’t speak. She flashed a smile, leaned closer.

“You know,” he said, “it’s a good thing you dumped me for a dumb reason.” She looked at him, waiting. “Because it means there’s still hope for us.”

She smiled, and closed her eyes, leaned closer.

“God, Kani,” he said suddenly, pulling back. “What’s wrong?”

She felt a trickle on her upper lip, touched it with a shaking hand, and came back with dark blood.

Devil Inside

FOUR YEARS EARLIER

It took the fifth time past the café for Yuri to work up the nerve to go in. He waited by the kitchen, and caught the first waitress to come out.

“Excuse me,” he said, “is Rache working today?”

The waitress frowned, shrugged.

“Rache quit months ago,” she said. “She got into a fight with the manager and left. I don’t think she even picked up her last paycheck.”

Yuri thanked her, was heading out of the store when the girl behind the counter called to him.

“You were asking about Rache?” she asked.

“Yes. Do you know where she works now?”

“No,” said the girl, “but I did see her down by that dance club, Spangles, a few times. I don’t know if that helps, but...”

“It is great help,” said Yuri. “Thank you.”

Spangles was in a part of town with dance clubs, but it was not strictly that sort of spot. Even from the outside, it was clear they provided exotic dancing... and something more. Yuri tried to slip into the entrance unnoticed, but two heavy-set men blocked his way.

“Hold up,” said the bald one, wearing a name tag that read “Jean-Guy.”

“We need to see some identification,” said the other. Roger. “ID card, driver’s license, fingerprint.”

Yuri held out his hand and let them scan him. He smiled at Jean-Guy.

"It is early in day to be so busy, yes?"

"It's always busy," he sighed. "Always. What're you here for, friend?"

Yuri looked between them.

"Do I need to give reason?"

"If we ask, yeah."

"Is personal."

"They're *all* personal," he said. "We've heard them all, too. We just like to be sure."

Yuri took a step back, crossed his arms.

"I am curious. What would I do? What is wrong?"

"Well," said Roger, "if you were a cop, for instance, we'd have to ask you to leave."

"I am not cop," said Yuri with a smile.

"Some guys want to come in here to beat up the girls. Get confused about where the lines are drawn. And you're a pretty big guy, so..."

"I do not hurt fly. Very peaceful. I promise."

They looked to each other, grinned in tandem.

"Then what d'you have to hide?" Jean-Guy asked. "Sounds like there's nothing to it."

"I like privacy," Yuri said.

They laughed, shook their heads and stepped aside.

"Good luck, friend. *Behave*."

"Always," he said, and went inside.

The music, barely audible from outside, was throbbing and enveloping in the club. The only real lighting shone on certain high-value areas like the pole dancers and the cages suspended over dinner tables. Yuri glanced women, all in various stages of undress, and sauntered over to the bar.

"Do you have beer?" he shouted over the noise, and the bartender nodded, poured him a pint. He passed a large note across, waved

away the change. When he turned back to the room, a blonde woman in a revealing blouse was at his side.

"Hello," she said in a too-deep voice, like she was trying to sound older than she was. "I am Helga."

He laughed, sipped his beer.

"Hello, Helga. What accent is it you are using?"

"Svedish," she said, tripping over the "v".

"Is very good," Yuri said. "You are from France, yes?"

She shook her head, rubbed up against him.

"No," she said. "I am Sv-v-vedish."

He looked down at her, cocked an eyebrow.

"You are paid by customer, or hour?"

"Now ve are talking!" she swooned.

He put his hand over her face and pushed her back.

"You want to find someone else, Helga. Customer or hour, I am not good fit for you."

She hissed at him, turned and walked into the darkness, swinging her hips far too much, trying to be sultry. Yuri leaned back towards the bartender.

"She is funny girl," he said. "Not my type."

"What is your type?" asked the bartender. "We've got all kinds."

"Brunette," Yuri said, "Short hair."

"I can—"

"Her name is Rache."

The bartender paused, and Yuri nodded. A hesitant finger pointed to the back of the club, back where there was no light at all. Yuri could make out a dark shape like an arch. As he got closer, he could see it was a doorway, and deep inside there was dim lighting, bodies in motion.

The right side of the corridor was made up of ornate stalls, with numbers painted on each, and a red sash over the closed doors. All kinds of sounds echoed from the place: most happy, some not. All pleased.

He stopped, sniffed the air, and frowned. Burnt rubber. A man nearby was crying “it hurts! oh, it hurts!” ... but he was not complaining.

As he turned, one of the stall doors opened, and a man with a heavy stick — a table leg — shoved a woman out, and beat her over her back again and again. Yuri stepped closer, then moved even faster when he saw the woman was Rache, her back red with bruises.

He caught the stick before it hit her again.

“You still stop that,” he said.

“She stole my money!” the man spat. “Ask her!”

“I didn’t!” Rache cried. “I didn’t, I swear I didn’t!”

“Lying bitch!” yelled the man, and tried to swing again, but his arm was locked by Yuri. He leaned down into the man’s face, spoke quietly.

“You will *stop* that.”

The man let go of the stick and punched Yuri in the stomach, to no effect. In return, he got a face full of wood.

“Rache!” came a voice, hysterical, from the back rooms. “What the hell is going on?”

She got up, pointed between Yuri and the bleeding customer, and couldn’t find the words.

Yuri shrugged.

“Is baseball fantasy,” he offered.

They were thrown out into the cold.

Rache began pacing, shivering in the cold, back and forth, fuming with anger. Yuri took off his jacket, draped it over her shoulders, and watched her move.

“What the hell was that?” she snapped. “I’m fired, you idiot! Fired!”

“Is not good job for you,” he said.

“Obviously! But it paid the rent, old man! Are you going to do that? Are you?”

He sighed, shook his head.

"So what? What did you want to do today? Ruin my life? Is that it? Just ruin it, and go home to your wonderful wife and kid? Because congratulations, you did a great job!"

"Is not what I wanted," he said. "I came to say sorry. For last time, at café. I left in hurry, should not have been so..."

She sat on the sidewalk, started crying into the sleeve of his jacket. Her eye shadow was leaving streaks everywhere. He sat down beside her, put his arm over her shoulder, and pulled her close.

"Is not all bad," he said. "Will be okay. You will be."

She looked up at him, face close, held her breath.

"Do you want me?" she asked. There was hope in her eyes. He let her go, but she stayed there.

"I... I do not..."

"Is that what this is?" she asked. "If you want me, you can have me. This is what it's been the whole time. I just didn't... I didn't see it."

He moved his arm back, stood up quickly. She reached for him, caught his hand.

"It won't cost much," she said. "I just need rent."

"Is not right," he said. "Is not why I am here. I wanted to be sure you were... safe."

"I'd be safer with you," she said, and tried pulling him down. He didn't budge.

"Is not what I am here for, Rache. Will not help anyone."

"It'll help me!" she snapped, and got to her feet, wrapping her arms around him. He moved them, stepped back.

"I can find place for you to live," he said. "Safe place until you find your own way, yes?"

"Whatever," she said, walking away, the coldness back.

"Rache! You can fix this! You can live important life!"

She wheeled on him, gave him the finger, and kept walking.

"Do not lose purpose!" he yelled. "Is not too late!"

She stopped, turned and stormed back.

"Not too late? It's been too late forever! You think anyone can undo the... the *shit* we're in? You're out of your mind, old man. This

is all there is. You give me a place to say, but what's that going to do? I have problems. I have problems that don't go away with a warm bed at night."

Her eyes were red, purple streaking down her face, and she pulled his jacket tight around her shoulders.

"You have other problems."

"Dammit, yes! You need me to spell it out for you?"

"I think so," he said, the life draining from him.

"Heroin, okay? Heroin." Her voice dropped, quiet, urgent. "We'll forget all this. All this stuff today. You want me, right? You can have me. Any time. I just need some cash. Please, you've got to give me some cash."

He shook his head slowly, his hand over his mouth, sighing deeply.

"You were so good," he said. "You were going to be so good. I do not know what went wrong."

She slapped him, spat in his face.

"Get over yourself," she snapped. "You're not a saint, and you're *not* God."

She took his jacket and left him alone in the cold.

On Your Knees

The house was far down the street, where the streetlights were broken. It was a palatial home, cloaked in darkness. Yuri approached it carefully, hands visible, heart pounding.

He opened the gate and walked to the front door, where two figures stood in the shadows, watching him carefully. He tried not to smile when he saw them.

"I need to see Mr Pellier," he said to Jean-Guy.

Roger laughed.

"Do you have an appointment, friend?" he asked.

"No," Yuri said. "It is urgent."

They exchanged glances.

"What're going looking to see him about?" asked Jean-Guy.

"You ask this a lot, yes?"

"I thought you looked familiar."

Yuri shrugged.

"May I see Mr Pellier?"

Jean-Guy spoke into his sleeve, motioned to a camera above the door. Yuri looked up at it, tried to look composed. A second later, the door buzzed and Roger opened it.

"Don't beat anyone up this time," Jean-Guy cracked.

Pellier's office was flanked by two more guards, and another four inside. He was at his desk, whittling a piece of wood into something resembling a horse without legs. He waved Yuri in, pointed to a seat with the whittling knife.

"I hear congratulations are in order," he said, smiling. "Your last mission today, wasn't it? It's been a long time, Yuri. A long time. Marcel, get him a drink. What are you taking, Yuri?"

"Nothing, thank you," he said to Marcel.

"Nonsense, Yuri. Vodka for my Russian friend. Something with vodka."

He leaned forward, held up the wood, the shavings on the desk, squinted at it.

"Do you know anything about whittling?"

"No sir," said Yuri, watching the guards around him. Their gazes stayed locked near the top of the room, hands crossed neatly.

"My doctor has me doing this to relax," Pellier said. "Whittling and a vegetarian diet. Sickening stuff. I can't stand it. What does this look like to you?"

He held up the wood, turned it about.

"A stallion, sir," Yuri said immediately.

"Excellent," said Pellier. "I'm improving. My wife said it was a penguin earlier."

Marcel gave Yuri a drink. Peach and vodka. He took a sip, but kept it in his hands.

"I admit it, Yuri, I'm going to miss having you around. It's been quite the adventure."

Yuri said nothing.

"Buying you that ship wasn't the best investment I've ever made, but it's been the most interesting. I can't tell you how much fun it is to tell people at parties that I'm a dustrunner sponsor. The madness, I tell you! They all want to know what it's like. I should bring you along some time."

"Yes sir," Yuri said.

"How is Sabina? And little Anya? Is she well?"

"Sir," Yuri said suddenly. "I must tell you something."

"Anything Yuri! Anything!"

Yuri drank half the glass.

"The mission today... it failed."

Pellier's knife slipped and cut his thumb.

“Repeat that,” he said.

“The mission failed. It was not my fault, but—”

The knife embedded in the table, and Pellier was on his feet. He picked up his drink and threw it against the wall.

“What do you mean it failed? How does it fail? You’ve been doing this long enough to get it done, haven’t you? What in the *hell* happened?”

“It was a new—”

“No!” shouted Pellier. “I don’t want to hear it! You idiot, get out of my sight! Now! Get out! Don’t come back until you’ve paid it all back. All of it! There’s interest on this payment, you know! Interest!”

Yuri got up to go, but paused, stared at the knife on the desk. He looked Pellier as he stormed around the room.

“Sir,” Yuri said. “I must ask... for loan.”

Pellier turned on him, nostrils flaring.

“You must be joking.”

“Anya is sick in hospital and I—”

Pellier snapped his fingers and one of the guards stepped forward and punched Yuri across the face. He stumbled, but caught himself on the chair. He stood up, bowed his head down, and continued.

“My daughter Anya is sick and needs operation today if she—”

He was punched again. This time, he hit the floor. He sucked blood back into his mouth and swallowed, got up, and regained his composure.

“I will pay back. You have my word.”

“I don’t care,” Pellier said. “You broke your word to me, I don’t care for your word anymore.”

“But my daughter!” Yuri said, and got on his knees, pleading, begging. “Please save her! Please!”

Pellier rolled his eyes, picked up the knife again and started whittling at a furious pace. He left bloody smears on the wood.

“Yuri, I’ve seen more people die than you can possibly imagine. The one thing I know — and you’ll do well to learn — is that you get over it. Even your children. You get over it.”

"Please," Yuri cried. "I do not want to get over it. Please let me do this for you."

He stood up, held out his hands, tears in his eyes.

"Boss," said the guard with the quick fists. "Maybe it's a good investment. Save the girl now, pimp her out when she's—"

The guard's nose cracked so fast he didn't know what hit him. Yuri turned savagely to the sight of six guns aimed at his chest. His breath rumbled with anger.

"Yuri, Yuri, Yuri," said Pellier. "This is no way to get what you want."

Yuri slowed his breathing, opened his fists and let the anger dissipate. The guard stumbled out of the room, spilling blood everywhere.

"I will tell you what," said Pellier. "I never make two loans to the same man. But I will offer you a fair trade instead. You'll still owe me for the fighter, but you'll get the cash you need to save your daughter."

Yuri checked the guns. All still aimed.

"What do I do?" he asked.

Pellier reached into a drawer in his desk and pulled out a folder. He tossed it across to Yuri. Inside were photos of a middle-aged man getting out of a government car. Taken from afar. Yuri looked to Pellier.

"Duplessis," said Pellier. "Transport minister. He's corrupt, of course, but not in the right way. Selling France to the foreigners. He needs to be taken care of."

Yuri said nothing. He nodded.

Pellier took a cloth out of the drawer, unwrapped it, and shoved the pistol over to Yuri. The guards kept their aim at him.

"It's very simple, Yuri," said Pellier. "Kill him, and save Anya."

Panic Button

Kani wiped the blood from her nose, spread it on her shirt. Her head was spinning, vision filled with spots, and the blood was flowing faster. She opened the door to the car and got out, stumbling into the gravel.

“Kani!” Simon shouted, running after her. “What’s going on?”

“D-d-don’t know,” she said, trying to stand, but the world shifted and she fell back. Simon caught her, pulled her to the car, lowered her into the back seat. He checked her eyes, felt her forehead.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I don’t know at all. We need to get you to a hospital.”

She grabbed his arm urgently, kept her sleeve against her nose.

“No!” she gasped. “No, I can’t!”

“Kani, you’re white as a sheet. I don’t want you dying in my car. We have to get you professional help.”

“I’ll be fine,” she said. “Please, just give me a minute...”

She tried to sit up, but the world blacked out on her, and she fell back into the seat. When she opened her eyes next, they were racing down the road. She put her hand on the back of Simon’s seat and tried to sit up, but he’d strapped her down somehow.

“Simon...” she said. “Simon, please...”

Things blurred again, and the next thing she knew, she was being carried out of the car, her arm over Simon’s shoulder. The words were hard to hold on to, but she heard him arguing with someone, and then she was sitting in a waiting room, struggling to keep her head up.

"Are you hurt?" asked voice from beside her. She turned her head and saw a small boy with a nail stuck through his hand. He stared up at her with wide eyes, oblivious to his own ordeal.

"I'm good," she said, clearing her throat. "How are you?"

"I fell in the garden."

"Looks painful."

"It's not as bad as it looks," he shrugged. "How about you?"

"It's a girl thing," she said, and tried to smile.

He did not look amused.

"You've got blood on your shirt. And your face. What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing," she said, and looked around. Things weren't so swirly anymore, and she could see across the room. Simon was at the nurses' station, making broad motions in her direction, but she still couldn't quite make out what he was saying.

Just then, behind Simon, she saw a security guard stride into the room, talking on his radio. He was sweeping the room, watching the patients carefully. Kani turned around to talk to the boy.

"Are you scared?" she asked him.

"What? No."

"I'd be scared. How are they going to get that nail out of your hand?"

"They're going to pull it out... aren't they?"

"Hold that thought," she said, and patted him on the head. She got up and started walking for the door, her hand in front of her face.

"Wait!" shouted Simon just before she made it, and she started to run, but her vision got spotty again. She tried to keep things together, but it was too late. She fell sideways, landing on her shoulder.

She woke up in a gurney, wheeling backwards, Simon at her side. She squeezed her hand.

"... only family," said a nurse, and she squeezed his hand. He nodded.

"She's my sister," he said.

The nurse looked at Kani's dark hand interlocked with Simon's white one, and raised an eyebrow.

“Half-sister, obviously,” he said, and she rolled her eyes.

She was set up in a curtained partition, IV in her arm, heart monitor chirping away. The doctor came in, checking her chart and watching the machines.

“I’m Doctor Stanwick. You’re miss... Davenport, is it?”

“Yes,” she said with Simon, then looked away.

“Do you know what might have caused this?” Stanwick asked. “Anything at all. Help us focus our testing.”

Kani looked at her feet, squinted.

“I was diving earlier. Came up too fast.”

“Diving?”

“Lake Ontario. Looking for sunken treasure.”

Stanwick stared at her for a moment, tapped some buttons on the chart, and took out his pen light.

“Bends have very specific symptoms,” he said. “They’re similar to other conditions, but there are some important differences.”

“Like what?” Kani asked.

“Bleeding isn’t very common from the bends. Not to this extent, anyway.”

“I went really deep.”

“You’d have to go to the bottom of the ocean floor.”

She let him check her pupils. Simon gripped her hand. She felt a tightness in her arm, and her lungs felt smaller somehow, harder to use.

“I... I don’t feel so good,” she said, and then a searing pain shot through her chest. Stanwick dropped the bed back and hit the panic button.

“Cardiac arrest!” he shouted. “I need some help over here!”

Home Invasion

FOUR YEARS EARLIER

Yuri sat down to a Tandoori chicken, only to realize he'd forgotten utensils. He made a quick dash into the kitchen and came back with forks and knives for himself and Sabina, and a little spoon for Anya. She burbled in her high chair, smacking her plastic bowl like a drum.

"I hope this worked," Sabina said with a nervous smile, serving the food. Yuri took his plate and scooped a forkful.

"It will be excellent," he said, then sneezed.

Sabina put down the serving spoon.

"Don't be like that," she said.

"Like what? I like chicken."

She scowled at him, picked up her fork.

"You lie badly."

"Is no lie! I love your cooking, Sabina. Truly."

He put the fork to his mouth and the doorbell rang. Yuri left his food, kissed Sabina on the cheek on the way past, and went down the hall to the door. The bell rang again, and he opened it.

It was Rache. She was wearing a black tank top in the summer heat, but was shivering, eyes sunken. When she saw him, a smile crept across her face, and she stepped forward.

"Yuri!" she said. "It's you!"

He stepped outside, closed the door behind him. She didn't back up to give him room, stayed close.

"What do you want, Rache? How did you find me here?"

"The bouncers at the club," she said. "They scanned your fingerprint. I persuaded them to share it."

She had a playful smile on her face. He turned his head away.

"What do you want?" he asked, his voice hollow. "Just tell me. What?"

"I need some money," she said. "Just a little money. I'm not offering anything. It's not like last time. I just need some cash, Yuri. Please."

He shook his head, and she rested a hand on his shoulder, moved closer. He pulled away, but she moved with him.

"Please, Yuri. I'm getting clean, I swear."

"You do not look clean," he said. "You look worse. How is heroin treating you?"

She didn't react, just smiled. Smiled and stayed close to him. The door behind him opened and Sabina came out.

"What's going on here, Yuri? The food is..."

She look at Rache, up and down, and then at Yuri. He held his head away from Rache, obviously uncomfortable.

"Who is this?" she asked.

"Is no one," Yuri said stiffly.

"Then get rid of her," Sabina grunted. "We're having dinner." She went back inside and closed the door.

Yuri looked down at Rache, removed her hand from his shoulder, and gently pushed her away. She started to cry, but held it back, setting her jaw and narrowing her eyes.

"Rache, you are not my problem," Yuri said carefully. "I cannot fix your life for you. You have parents. Call them. They can help you."

She wiped tears from her eyes.

"My parents died a few months ago," she said. "Car accident. Decapitated. I saw the morgue photos. It was... it was horrible."

Yuri said nothing for a moment, then took a sharp breath.

"I am sorry," he said. "But is still not my problem."

"They left me with so much debt, Yuri. So much debt. I need help, Yuri. I can get back on my feet, I just need some help."

"No," he said. "Is too late for that."

She grit her teeth and reached into his trouser pockets, searching for his wallet. He tried to back away, but she wouldn't give up. He grabbed her arm, and shoved her back into the wall across the way. She stood there, panting, manic.

"I need it," she said.

"Somewhere else," he whispered, keeping his voice as low as he could.

She stepped across the hall and slapped him. He didn't react. She reached back to do it again, and he caught her arm.

"You had chance to fix your life, Rache, and you did nothing with the chance you had. I try to help you so many times, and so many times you ruin it for yourself. I cannot do this anymore. You choose your life, and this is life you get. If you do not like, you have no one to blame but yourself."

He let her go and turned to go back inside, but she grabbed the back of his shirt.

"Who are you to tell me this?" she snapped. "What have you done with your life that makes you do high and mighty? You have money? Money means nothing. Money is a symptom of corruption, and you're just on your way to hell, Yuri. To hell."

He paused at the door. Her grip tightened.

"Chromoco is killing children, the UN stands by the watch, and all the while you just sit here, eating your dinner and loving life, and you let—"

"Rache," he said, turning around. "None of this is about you. Chromoco is not you. The UN is not you. Learn to see small picture first."

He opened the door and pulled free.

Rache screamed suddenly.

"Stop it! Give me my money! I need it! You *owe* me! You owe me for what I've done for you! Dammit, Yuri, you owe me!"

She started pounding on his door, eyes streaming with tears, and he stepped away, stunned at the transformation.

She stopped the second the crying started. Anya was upset, and the cries penetrated the door. Rache backed away from it like it hurt.

She looked to Yuri, then back to the door, and then ran to the stairs and away.

Assassination

Duplessis stood at the window of his house, backlit by a yellow glow, smoking a cigarette and staring into the night. A car rolled down the street, but then it was quiet. Still.

Yuri hovered at the edge of a building across the way, tucked in a shadow, hands deep in his pockets. He didn't move, barely breathed. Just watched.

Duplessis' wife came over to him, coffee in hand, and spoke to him quietly. Nothing of consequence, just a simple chat between spouses. She rubbed his arm and left the window. He puffed some more, tapped ashes into a dish beside him.

A small girl ran up to him, and he put down the cigarette, crouched next to her, looked at a paper she had, pointed at things, smiling. Yuri's chest ached, thinking of Anya. Duplessis' girl could walk.

He dialled Sabina, pulling out of sight. It rang five times, went straight to voice mail.

"Hello Sabina," he said under his breath. "Is Yuri. I hope all is good there. I am just calling to say... to say I will have money soon. Anya will have money soon. Please do not worry." He took the phone from his ear, but stopped himself, put it back. "I love you," he said, and hung up.

He crossed the street quickly and stood at the side of the door, hand in his pocket, gripping the gun so tight it might have split in two. He rang the doorbell, needing it to be over, and watched the doorknob. Waited for it to turn.

He heard footsteps inside, and he held his breath, taking aim through his coat pocket.

He was aiming at the girl's face. She looked up at him with wide brown eyes, an expectant smile on her face.

"Who are you?" she asked without judgement.

He couldn't find the words.

She held up a doll to him, hair cut at different lengths, frayed in every direction, wearing a sparkling blue ball gown. He knelt down instinctively, staring at the doll like it was some holy relic, something didn't want to do, but couldn't stop himself.

"This is Elizabeth," said the girl. "She's English."

Yuri watched the girl speak, saw the interest, the passion in the simple things, the way the doll moved its legs. He fought back a smile. He couldn't smile.

"Jacques cut her hair last week, and he lost his allowance for a month," she declared. "Mama said he got off easy."

Yuri stood up, took a step back.

"We're going to Fiji tonight," said the girl, brushing Elizabeth's hair with her fingers. "I get to stay up past my bedtime. Do you know where Fiji is?"

"Hello?" said Duplessis, coming down the stairs. He rushed forward, took the girl by the shoulder and moved her inside, out of the way. Yuri looked at them both, took another step backwards.

"Is he sick, papa?" the girl asked.

Yuri got his nerve back.

"I must speak outside," he said, his voice hoarse.

Duplessis looked down at his daughter, then back to Yuri. He nodded. He bent down, patted her hair, whispered something to her and she ran inside. He stepped out onto the step and closed the door.

Yuri aimed the gun at Duplessis' gut, hand trembling. The politician watched the pocket shift, looked up with understanding.

"What is this about?" he asked.

Yuri flipped off the safety.

"You should know," he said, and took another step back.

Duplessis puffed his chest, shook his head in disbelief.

“You think this will stop us? You’re naïve,” he said. “There are more in my party ready to stand up to corruption. You can’t stop it like this.”

“Corruption?” Yuri growled. “Who are you to say this? You sold countrymen to the dogs for your place in power. You and your party deserve to burn. You are hypocrite.”

Duplessis stepped toward him cheeks rumbling with fury.

“How *dare* you!” he snapped. “I’ve dedicated my *life* to overturning the damn laws that outlaw piracy. It hasn’t been easy. I’ve fought for every victory I’ve had. *Every* victory! I’ve suffered for my beliefs, and I will not be lectured on hypocrisy by some hired thug in the night!”

Yuri stepped back again, stumbled on a bush.

“You... overturn laws...?”

“We *will* bring the tourism industry back to France. I don’t care what you do to me. You’ll never get away with it. People will find out. People will care.”

Yuri let go of the gun, shaking badly. He pushed Duplessis against the door and ran, ran down the walkway, through the gate, and into the street.

Duplessis called for help, and angry shouts filled the night as Yuri raced away. He heard them coming, feet pounding faster than he could bear, and a second later they tackled him to the ground, pushing his head into the dirt and pulling him away.

Hospital Food

The first thing she heard was the heart monitor. The second thing she heard was Simon calling her name. And then she felt him squeeze her hand, and the weight of the blanket on her chest, and the mask on her face. She opened her eyes, and the world came rushing back.

“Kani. Thank god,” Simon whispered. “How do you feel? You had a heart attack, I think. They say you’ll be fine. They’re just being careful.”

She reached up, took the mask off her face.

“How long have I been here?” she asked. It hurt to breathe. “What time is it?”

“A little past one in the morning,” he said. “Not that long. Listen, Kani—”

“Excuse us for a minute, young man,” said a doctor from the door. He was older than the other one. White hair, a stern face. He held his clipboard under his arm like a soldier. “I need to talk to the patient alone.”

Simon held her hand, shook his head.

“I’m going to stay,” he said. “She needs me here.”

“And *I* need you out,” said the doctor, pointing to the door. Simon looked to Kani, and she nodded, giving him permission. He slipped past the doctor, out into the hall, and the door closed behind him.

“Hello, Alanna. I’m Dr McGruther. You’re feeling better, I see. You gave us quite a scare for a minute there. Do you know what happened?”

Kani shrugged, looked away from him.

“Nose bleed and heart attack,” she said.

“Yes,” he said, sitting on a stool and wheeling closer. “Do you know how it started?”

Kani cleared her throat.

“I was diving and—”

“Young lady, please save us some time and tell me the truth. I know that’s not your brother outside, and I know you weren’t diving. This is not the bends. I need you to be honest with me.”

Kani didn’t say anything.

Dr McGruther rolled closer, lowered his voice.

“Your blood work indicates you’ve been exposed to constant low levels of radiation for several hours. I don’t know if it’s what caused your bleeding and the heart attack, but I’ve got a pretty good idea they’re related somehow. And if it keeps up, I’m sure you’re aware the damage could be much worse than what you’ve experienced so far.”

Kani bit her lip, looked at him in flickering glances.

“I don’t know what it could be,” she said.

“I don’t believe you,” he said.

She shrugged, looked down at her hands, picked at her nails.

“I have a daughter about your age,” he said. “She’s in that rebellious stage. The one I’m sure you don’t think you’re in. I understand rebellion, wanting to be your own person. I do. But there’s a difference between being your own person, and putting yourself in danger for the wrong reasons.”

Kani looked him in the eye. She was shaking.

“I don’t care what you’ve done,” McGruther continued. “I don’t care where you’ve been, or why you did it. I can’t talk about it even if I knew, because you’re my patient, and I need you to trust me. All I care about — all I want from you now — is that you tell me the things I need to know to treat you properly.”

Kani was crying, picking at her fingers. She saw Stacey at the side of the river, her hand broken open, the blood on the ground, and couldn’t help wish it had been her instead.

“You’re young,” he said. “You’ve got so much life left to live. Don’t waste it like this. Let me help you. Please.”

She nodded, caught her breath, and looked up again.

"C-c-can I see Simon again?" she asked.

McGruther sighed, thought for a moment, and then got up. He walked to the door, rested a hand on the handle.

"I'll be outside," he said. "Please. Please trust me enough to let me save you."

He left, and Simon came in, rushed to her side. He took her hand, brushed the hair from her face, and knelt down beside her.

"Are you okay?" he asked. "Did they tell you anything? You're going to get better, right?"

"I think so," she said. "I think so. You told them I was Alanna?"

"They knew her name from the health records. It was the easiest way to play it."

She nodded.

"I have to remember to answer to that name, I guess."

"Kani... it's been on the news all night. Stacey... she was kidnapped. It's everywhere. Her parents are freaking out. And I... I don't mean this the wrong way... but I think you know something about it, don't you?"

Kani sighed, shook her head.

"That's why you're hiding. You're afraid."

"It's not that, Simon."

"Why are you lying to me?" he asked. "Why won't you tell me the truth?"

"It's not that simple," she said. "I can't get you involved. I can't. I'm sorry, but it's just not possible."

"Kani," he said, and kissed her. It caught her by surprise, but she didn't resist. Their hands locked together, and she felt dizzy again. Pleasantly dizzy.

"Kani," he said. "Tell me the truth."

His face was so close, she couldn't say no, couldn't avoid the question. She nodded, pulled him closer, and whispered in his ear.

"Stacey was kidnapped," she said. "I was there. It's the mob. They're going to kill her, and there's no one that can help her but me. And I just don't know what to do anymore."

Simon pulled back, smiled at her.

“We’ll think of something,” he said.

“No,” she whispered. “I can’t do that to you. I don’t want to be part of this, but I *really* don’t want you getting hurt.”

“You’re going to have to try extra hard to stop me, Kani. You should know that by now.”

She was about to protest when the door opened again, and McGruther peeked his head in.

“I’m fine,” said Kani. Really. Fine. You don’t need to—”

“It’s not that,” he said. “I’m really sorry, Alanna, but there’s someone here to see you. From the government. I don’t know how they found out, but they think you know something about a kidnapping.”

Kani and Simon exchanged glances.

McGruther cleared his throat.

“They want to see her alone, young man.”

Kani squeezed his hand and nodded, and he left with the doctor. Left her alone in the room with no place left to run. The door opened a moment later, and a stocky man in a black suit walked in, meandering at the foot of her bed, playing with the pages in the Bible there. He seemed lost in his own world, and for a moment she thought he might not have anything to do with her after all.

But then he looked up, and saw straight through her, she could tell.

“Hello, Kani,” he said. “You and I need to talk.”

Mr Andrews

“How do you feel?” asked the suit, pausing on a page in the Bible and smiling at it. “I hear you’ve had quite the day.”

Kani didn’t speak.

He smiled, nodded, kept flipping pages.

“Radiation can be very painful the first time around,” he said. “The body adjusts over time, but that first dose is the one you remember. Rips your guts out, makes you wish you hadn’t been born.”

He laughed to himself, turned and started checking around the room, staring at random objects that weren’t even hers.

“Hadn’t been born,” he said. “Tired expression, I’m sorry. Did you take the pills like they told you to?” He checked over his shoulder. “You didn’t, did you?”

She clenched a fist.

“They wouldn’t help you anyway. Not on such short notice. Don’t believe them if they say otherwise. It’s a popular lie. It takes weeks to build enough to do you any good. And you haven’t had weeks, have you, Kani?”

He turned, leaned against the cupboard across from her, scratched his chin. His hair was red, fiery, intense.

“I’m Mr Andrews, by the way. I’m on your side. Not in the generic sense, either. *Your* side. I hope you understand the distinction.”

“What do you want?” she asked.

“Ah, a voice! Well done. Let’s keep this progress going.” He stopped at the foot of her bed, played with the Bible again. “I want

you to have children, Kani. I want you to get past this day, and have kids running around you some day. And you still can, but you need to stick to the regimen they'll prescribe today. Stick to it to the second, because you've still got a chance."

He cocked his head.

"Didn't they explain the risks to you? They didn't clarify things? Oh dear. Oh dear."

He closed the Bible.

"Here's what I think happened to you today, Kani, and you can tell me how close I am." He clasped his hands, stared up, as if reciting a speech he only half-remembered. "Stacey is your schoolmate. Your friend, maybe. She got mixed up in some bad things, with some bad people, and she's in trouble. Present tense. She's in *serious* trouble."

Kani shuddered.

"You want to help," Mr Andrews continued. "You're a good friend. You've done more than any friend would: you've actually gone on a mission to help her. You've strapped yourself in and done what no one would ever expect of you. You've seen Earth from a distance. Maybe it was beautiful. But it was the biggest mistake of your life."

Kani looked away, and he wheeled the stool next to her, perched at the edge.

"I see a lot of people going up there, Kani, for so many reasons. So many reasons, and most of them seem noble. Oh, you know... poverty, fighting injustice, starving children. For every out-of-cash pirate, there are ten more out there that think they're saving the world when they put on that helmet. They're saving the *world*. And maybe they are. It's not my job to decide."

He wheeled across the room suddenly, and she turned to watch him go. He seemed to enjoy the ride.

"Your teammate, Spastik. He nearly killed a hundred thousand people when he lost control of a freighter over Victoria. Showed no remorse. Did he seem troubled to you? Or Chenne. She's disabled a shop in such a dangerous place, the pilot nearly ran out of oxygen before they could get him back to the space station. Think of that.

Think of being in that cockpit, knowing you're going to die. Think of what that's like."

Kani could. She really could.

"Rook has fired on unarmed cargo ships from law-abiding companies. There are politics to it, as I'm sure you've learned. For all the passion, no one wants a death in space. It brings the whole conflict to a whole new level. Something no one can control."

He stood up, walked back, and started flipping through the Bible again.

"These aren't the statistics you hear in the news, Kani. These aren't dressed up to bother the public. Inflated, sensationalized. These are *real*. This is the life you're on the brink of."

He stared directly at her, and she couldn't tear her eyes away. He was looming over her from across the bed.

"Honestly, Kani, the companies aren't perfect. And it's not a just world, either. I've seen enough things to make me doubt humanity. But when you put your faith in the kinds of people that dustrunning attracts, you're putting your faith in the basest of human nature."

He turned his head suddenly, squinted into the heart monitor.

"Do you know where the word 'dustunner' comes from? Most don't. I know 'pirate' is more en vogue these days, but if you'll forgive my diversion... the 'runner', as you know, refers to bringing contraband across enemy lines. Blockade runners were famous in the American Civil war. Gun runners, what have you. The 'dust' refers to the loose particles outside the freighter when they reach cruising speed. Floats around the ships like a cloud. Dust. It's poetic, don't you think?

Kani looked away, but he didn't seem to notice.

"You're trying to save Stacey," he said. "You're not one of them. You're trying to do what's right, and it's killing you. And I know... I know why you're not answering. You don't know who you can trust. They've got you scared of everything. It's part of the game. Paranoia. More dustrunners commit suicide than are caught, did you know? Terrible statistic. Entirely avoidable."

He threw the Bible onto the bed, startling her.

"I don't know any passages that cover this," he said. "God has never been my strong suit. I represent something more basic. Something man-made, and powerful. And I want to help you, Kani."

She reached for the emergency call button, hand trembling. He didn't move a muscle.

"You can protect Stacey," he said. "The police will find her, and if you tell them what they need to know, they might find her faster. That's within your power. That's something you can do."

"I know it's hard to trust, but if you don't do this, you'll be an accomplice, and the longer it goes on, the less sympathy anyone in law enforcement will have for what you've gone through today. Everything you've done so far, we can call it fear, or shock, or just plain old desperation. But everything from this moment on? That's you. It's all on you."

Their eyes met, and his smiled disappeared.

"If you co-operate, none of this will be on your record in the morning. We'll make up any story you like, and everyone *will* believe it."

She inhaled, said nothing.

"Or," he said, smile coming back. "If you prefer, I am prepared to offer you assistance in the form of advice and material support — fifty thousand to start — if you will consider working working for me instead."

"Who are you?" she asked.

"I am one of the good guys, Kani."

Forgiveness

THREE YEARS EARLIER

Water spilled across the table, and Yuri rushed to wipe it, but there were no towels in the kitchen. He ran back with tissues, soaking up the puddle and sliding the mess off the edge of the table into his hands. He was midway to the trash when the doorbell rang.

He opened the door to a shock. It was Rache, but unlike he'd seen her before. Her hair was neat and she wore tidy glasses, a blouse and skirt, and held a briefcase in her hand. Her eyes looked healthy. Yuri almost gasped at the sight of her.

Still, he couldn't fight instinct, and he slammed the door in her face and stepped away.

"Please, Yuri," she said from outside, her voice never above an urgent whisper. "Let me explain."

He rested his head against the door.

"I cannot do any more, Rache," he said. "Please go."

"Give me five minutes," she said. "I can explain. Please."

He rested a hand on the doorknob and closed his eyes.

"Is not enough," he said. "You do too much damage."

She said nothing for a moment, and he began to wonder if she'd left. Just as he stepped back, she spoke.

"I'm back in school," she said, voice clear in the hall. "I've given up my old habits. I'm better now. I haven't used heroin in... in months. I... I just wanted you to know. That I'm doing something about it now. I'm fixing it."

He didn't move. He didn't know what to do.

"I wanted to thank you," she said. "So. Good-bye, Yuri. Thank you."

He opened the door looked out, and she turned, halfway to the stairs, a look of surprise and tentative happiness on her face. He sighed, motioned for her to come.

"Inside," he said. "Is wrong place to talk like this."

He brought her a cup of tea, sat next to her at the table. She smiled at the cornucopia in the centre, turned it slightly, investigating.

"Thank you for understanding," she said. "I know it can't be easy, after last time. I wouldn't be so forgiving."

"I am not sure I am either," he said, leaning back and crossing his arms. "No heroin?"

"None," she said. "I got out of the rehab clinic three months ago, and I honestly haven't even thought about it since then. I've been too busy."

"What clinic?" he asked suddenly, shocked by his own aggressiveness.

She smiled uneasily, nodded, turned her tea on the saucer.

"St Lucienne," she said. "Outside the old city. I can bring you if you like. There's this odd fellow there... a writer who thinks he's Billy the Kid. He needs company."

She smiled, but he didn't. She sipped her tea, watched him carefully.

"You are dressed well. What do you do now? Is not café, yes?"

"No, I'm back in school again. On my way to a degree in international relations. I'll get there this time. I know what I'm after. It's a lot of small motions, but they'll get me there someday."

He nodded, sipped his tea.

"I just needed to tell you how sorry I am for how I behaved last time. You didn't deserve it. I know that. I know it, and I'm sorry for dragging you through it with me. It was wrong."

She started to stand, taking her bag off the ground, but he reached a hand over, not touching her, but pausing.

"How can I trust?" he asked. "I do not know how I can trust anymore."

"You can't," she shrugged. "And it's my fault. I accept that. But hopefully you'll be the last one to have that experience. I honestly hope so."

He caught her hand this time, and she turned, looked at him, though he was staring into his tea. He took a moment, thinking things over, then spoke.

"Students do not need such fancy clothes."

She nodded.

"I've got a part-time job working for the United Nations. As a translator."

He looked at her and she shrugged.

"It's not where I'm going," she said. "It's a step on the way."

"At UN," he said.

"There are better ways to make a difference than I was willing to see," she said. "You taught me that. I just didn't see it until recently."

He tugged on her hand, and she sat again, taking up the tea cup, sipping. She left lipstick on the edge. It wasn't black or purple. Seemed odd.

"You are done with Chromoco? I say word, you do not feel burn inside? Do not want to scream?"

She smiled.

"Oh, I still hate them, Yuri. I can't lie about that. I'll see them destroyed one day, but it won't be with a protest sign or a Molotov cocktail. It'll be at the end of a vote in an international committee. It'll be *just*."

He let his breath go, tried to hide a smile, but it was impossible.

"You have grown up, Rache," he said.

She flashed a smile at him, and it was brilliant.

"Not as much as you, old man."

She stood up, took her case and pushed in her chair.

"Thank you for the tea, Yuri. And thank you for letting me explain. I'm sorry for disturbing you, and please tell your wife I'm sorry. I wish I could have done it in person."

“Sabina is out with Anya, visiting grandparents,” he said. “But I will pass on message. I do not know if Sabina will be happy, but I am.”

He opened the door for her, and she turned to him, smiled with confidence, and looked up at him.

“Good-bye, Yuri,” she said. “And good luck to you.”

He couldn’t close the door.

The End of the Road

The light in the basement was pleasant and soft, but nothing else was. Yuri was punched again, breaking loose a tooth, blood splattering on the plastic sheeting below the chair. He coughed, tried to recover, but another blow knocked him back again. The cuffs shook, cutting into his wrists.

The guard massaged his bloodied knuckles, his face devoid of emotion. His right ear was crumpled, a deep scar along the side of his head. He almost purred as he breathed.

Duplessis sat at the table across from him, sorting through papers, almost not aware there was all this violence going on around him. He looked up again, frowned.

"I will ask you again: who sent you? The party hardliners, wasn't it? They're all in Chromco's pocket. I don't care what they told you, just tell me who they are."

Yuri dribbled blood onto the plastic, turned his swollen face up again.

"I am..." he wheezed. "I am not on that side. On *your* side."

Duplessis laughed, went back to his reading.

"I find that hard to believe," he said.

"They lie to me," Yuri said. "I do not fight against France, I fight *for* it. I do not fight you, you are ally."

"You must take me for a fool," Duplessis said. "My *ally*? You tried to kill me in front of my children."

"I did not know... they lie to me. They said you were corrupt, taking money to sell out—"

"Yes, yes," Duplessis said. "We've been over this already."

Yuri shook from another blow to the stomach. He fought back the urge to vomit.

"I am with you," he gurgled. "I am on your side. Piracy... is not bad. Should not be illegal."

Duplessis looked across at him, eyes narrow.

"What did you say?"

"Piracy steals from poor, not from rich. Laws much change, protect the poor. I know. I know it all. No one says, but it is clear. Chromoco stealing freighters from un... unaffiliated miners and use for profit."

Duplessis stood up, moved across the room and stood before Yuri, arms crossed. When he spoke, his voice was low, rumbling.

"How do you know that?"

"Check radiation levels," Yuri wheezed. "You will see."

Duplessis laughed.

"I don't have that kind of equipment in my *house*. Who does? Now tell me how you know."

Yuri looked up, shuddered.

"I hear on grapevine."

Duplessis shook his head. He snatched Yuri's wallet off the table, flipped out his ID card. Read it, passed it to one of his guards.

"Send someone to his house, find out everything they can."

"No!" Yuri cried. "Leave my family alone!"

"You don't give me much choice, do you?" Duplessis said. "You know quite a lot about things you shouldn't, and I don't know a thing about you."

He nodded to his guard, and two of them left, checking their weapons as they walked. Yuri yelled furiously, shaking the cuffs behind him, unable to get free.

"I am dustunner!" he shouted. "I am on your side. I am not assassin."

Duplessis bent down, shook his head.

"Recent experience suggests otherwise," he said.

"I owe money to Pellier," he said. "Pellier told me to kill you, that he would save my daughter. I do not kill. Am not assassin. But my daughter will die, and he will pay for operation. You must believe!"

Duplessis stood straight, adjusted his jacket, and nodded to Yuri, clapped him on the shoulder.

"Excellent," he said. "That's all we needed. It changes a lot. I thank you for helping me understand things. You're a brave man."

Yuri looked up at him, his left eye swollen shut.

"Sadly," Duplessis said, "Pellier has forced my hand. We can't keep you around. If word got out that I had dealings with an actual pirate, my career would be over. And I can't risk that. I'm sure you understand. This is bigger than either of us."

Yuri trembled as the guards came to take him off the chair.

"Please..." he gasped. "Please, no."

"Pellier isn't a fool," Duplessis said. "When he learns you didn't do your job, he'll shine a light on our meeting. The only hope we have is if you disappear."

He looked to the guard at Yuri's right.

"Throw him in the river," he said. "Make it look like the mafia. I want nothing more to do with this."

He left the room as Yuri screamed. The guards took a sack and put it over his head, tied it tight around his neck. They knocked him to his back, and he felt the air around him thicken, a zipper close, and when he moved, he was wrapped in a bag. He thrashed as they carried him, but their grips were good, and he landed in the trunk of a car so hard it knocked the wind out of him.

He reached for his phone, stuck in his pocket, and opened it with shaking hands. He pushed buttons, heard voices, but couldn't get it to his head to talk, the bag was so tight on him. He felt them go over a bump in the road, started downward, and he knew they were nearing their destination.

The trunk opened and he was pulled out. He fought against them, tried to break free somehow, but there was no way. He screamed for help, and got a quick blow to the back of the head. He swayed there, eyes rolling up, and then fell forward into the water.

It took two minutes before he blacked out from the cold and lack of air.

Escape

Kani came around the corner, pulling her bloodied shirt on, and grabbed Simon by the arm. She rushed him down the hall, off toward the stairs.

“Don’t talk,” she said. “Just keep moving.”

“Are you all right?” he whispered. “Is it okay for you to leave?”

“Yeah,” she says. “It’s recommended. All taken care of. Just *hurry*.”

They broke into a run, started down the stairs, but stopped short at the sight of security guards on the floor below. Kani grabbed Simon’s hand and ran through the closest door, out into a ward with pastel-painted walls and clouds on the ceilings. The oncology ward.

They walked urgently past all the darkened rooms, patients moaning in their sleep. One room’s lights were on, and the woman inside was thrashing around in her bed as nurses tried to calm her.

“It’s not supposed to be this way!” she screamed. “No! Stop it! Please!” Kani slowed to see, unable to take her eyes off the commotion. The woman had blood all down the front of her gown, down the front of her face. She kicked her dinner tray, and a bowl skidded across the floor, off-colour jello sliding to Kani’s feet. She stared down, shaking. Simon took her by the shoulders, kept her walking.

“Come on,” he said. “Let’s go.”

They took the rear stairwell down to the back door to the hospital, out into a clearing by the back. The mid-night air was crisp, gave Kani new energy. Simon squeezed her hand.

“Are you sure you should be doing this?” he asked. “You still look pale. We can say I brought you for a walk, and—”

"No," she said. "We've got to go. Where did you park?"

He led her down a slope and across a deserted street, to an open-air parking garage near the emergency ward. He pointed towards the edge of the lot, but froze, and Kani did too. There, standing next to his car, were two security guards, peering in the windows with flashlights.

"Oh damn," he said.

She pulled him away, started walking back towards the hospital, looking as innocent as she could manage with a bloody shirt on.

"How about the bus?" Simon offered. "That'll get us out of here at least."

"The fingerprint payment will bust me," she said, and he stopped.

"Bust you *how*, Kani?" he asked. "What's going on?"

She looked around urgently, grabbed his arm and pulled him into some bushes nearby. She sat in the dirt, knees up, shivering. He took off his jacket and wrapped it around her, rubbed her back.

"First things first," he said. "We need to get you someplace safe, so you can lay low for a few days. It's a bit of a walk to my house, but we can make it if we try. Though the way you look now, I'd rather not. So I can call my mom and ask her to pick me up, but—"

"No," said Kani solidly. "No, it's too dangerous for that."

"Kani..."

"We need to save Stacey, Simon. We..."

She noticed his face, the look of shock, concern and victory all at once. She bit her lip.

"You're going to tell me what's going on *now*," he warned. "I'm not moving another step until you tell me the truth."

She sighed, leaned back and lay down in the dirt, looking up at a light at the side of the hospital. She put her hand over her heart, felt it beating. Made sure it was beating.

"Stacey owes the mob money. They're going to kill her if I can't pay up."

"Okay," he said slowly. "How much does she owe?"

"Twelve thousand dollars."

His eyes shot wide open.

"Twelve thousand? How the hell did she—"

"It's a long story."

He laughed nervously.

"I can imagine," he said. "But Kani, that's way more money than you can be responsible for. At a certain point, you need to accept there's nothing more you can do. This is *beyond* you."

She shook her head.

"Nothing's beyond me," she said. "Not anymore."

He shook his head, rubbed her knee and started to laugh. She looked over at him.

"What?" she asked.

"You're so damn stubborn sometimes," he said. "It's like I'm talking to myself. I could tell you that getting involved in this any more is going to end up hurting you, but you're not going to listen to me, are you?"

She shrugged.

"Probably not."

"So all right then. What're we going to do?"

"We?" she said. "No, this isn't your job, Simon."

He flicked her forehead, lay down next to her.

"It started being my job the second you pissed off Trudy. Now come on. What are we doing?"

"I'm not sure yet."

"But you're thinking of something," he said, looking over at her. She turned her head, leaned over and kissed him. He touched her cheek, returned the favour.

"I'm thinking of something," she agreed.

"So do it," he said.

She held her breath, took the phone from her pocket and paged through some numbers. She dialled, wincing as it rang, and then let out a rattled breath when it was answered.

"What?" asked Erlenmeyer.

"Let me talk to Fantoni," she said. "And be quick about it."

"Who is this?"

"Stacey's friend," she said. "Now hurry up."

She glanced over at Simon, who gave her a thumbs-up. A moment later, Fantoni came on the line.

“What?” he snapped. “It’s late. I’m working.”

“Naptime’s over,” she said. “I’ve got your money. I want to trade. Bring Stacey and meet me at the Trudeau High football field at... I don’t know... one second before three.”

“In the *morning*?” he whined.

“You want to delay? Fine, I’ll delay...”

“No no! It’s okay. I’ll be there. You bring the money.”

“Good,” she said. “Ciao.”

She hung up and dropped the phone. Her hands were shaking. Simon was smiling at her, eyes sparkling in the fluorescent lights.

“You’re pretty bad ass when you want to be,” he said.

“Yeah,” she gasped. “I don’t know where that came from.”

“Well wherever it was, it was impressive.”

He kissed her again, and she held onto him, soaking in the moment. It was hard to let go.

“So what’s the plan?” he asked. “Ambush or something?”

“They have guns, Simon. What do we have?”

“The... uh... element of surprise?”

She rolled her eyes.

“Surprise isn’t bulletproof. No, I think our best bet is to get Stacey there, and try and negotiate. Make them see reason.”

“Kani, you just told them you have the money. You can’t go negotiating *after* that. That’s not how it works...”

“So what’s your idea?” she asked, flicking his forehead this time.

“I’ll pretend I have a gun. Take them hostage. You get Stacey, and we’ll run.”

She blew air in his face.

“You’re an idiot. That’ll never work, and when they find out it’s a fake, they’ll kill you.”

“Don’t be so sure...” he said knowingly. Without any knowledge.

She stood up, helped him to his feet. He held her hand, and she squeezed it tight. A little bit of hope in an otherwise terrible day.

“We’ve got to get moving,” she said. “And I hope to god we think of something smart before we get there.”

City Lights

Freeman sat on the hood of his truck watching the city lights shine like stars in the sky. They were just a line to him from this distance, a sprinkling in the dark, but they were beautiful. He finished another beer, threw the can into the pile at his feet.

A car came down the gravel road and stopped next to his, but he didn't look to see who it was, tensed up at the sound of its approach. He pulled the last beer from the pack and cracked it open.

"I thought you didn't drink," said Elvis, coming around to sit next to him.

"Two years," nodded Freeman. "A long time to go without a beer."

"You sure you want to be doing this, then?"

Freeman shrugged, drank some more. He was swaying, kept up only by sheer will and a lack of movement.

"I'll survive. Start counting again tomorrow. It's part of the plan."

"Oh, so you have a plan?"

"Yeah. First part is: did you bring more beer?"

Elvis smiled.

"Another eighteen. In the car. You really need it?"

"I will in a second. Get one for you, too."

Elvis hopped down, leaned in the back of his car and came out with two cans. He tossed one to Freeman, who fumbled the catch. It exploded on the rocks the truck's wheel.

"Dammit," he cursed, checking over the edge and almost falling off. Elvis took another can from the car, closed the door, and sat on the truck again, looking out over the city.

"You're not doing well," he said.

"No I'm not," Freeman agreed. "Today's been a bitch of a day. Special anniversary."

Elvis said nothing.

"Back in the day," Freeman said, leaning back on the windshield, "how did you do it? How did you deal with letting your men die? You knew something was a trap, but you sent them in anyway. How did you deal?"

"In the army?" Elvis asked, opening his beer. "Never did. Still don't."

"I never had problems, staring down death," Freeman sighed. "Death is easy. But asking someone else to do it... that's hard."

"Soldiers know that's in the cards," said Elvis, sipping lightly. "They know it could happen. They can cope. Save you the trouble."

"Dustrunners don't know it's in the cards," Freeman said. "They can't cope."

"No they can't," Elvis nodded.

They sat in silence for a while, staring at the city and the stars, drinking their beer. Finally, on his third, Elvis laughed, threw the rest into the bushes.

"It's too bad about Redux," he said. "I tried to find money to cover him, but I'm so far from being clear. I almost got my loan called tonight, just for asking. But damn, I wish I could help him. He's a good guy."

Freeman lay there, can on his chest, listening to the crickets.

"I don't think he'd take the money anyway," he said. "That's a lot to ask of a man of his stature. A lot to ask."

"Might be a good idea to find out," Elvis said.

"Yeah," agreed Freeman.

"You ever think about signing up to go out there?" asked Elvis. "I mean, *way* out there? To the belt? Ceres?"

"No. You?"

"Sometimes. Sometimes I think it's simpler that way. You do your work, you send it back, and whatever happens, happens. Fruits of your labour, one way or another."

"It wouldn't bother you, knowing someone had hijacked your shipment at the end?" Freeman asked.

"I don't know," Elvis said, squinting at the moon. "I don't know what really bothers me in this. They call us pirates, but all we're doing is protecting an honest day's work. They call themselves good, but they're raiding someone else's pantry."

"That's poetic."

"I don't know," he sighed. "I just feel like I'm making tiny dents in a very big tank. It's not a fun feeling."

"No it's not," said Freeman. "No it's not."

"You heard anything new about Gossamer?" asked Elvis. "The trial should be underway by now. It's got to be morning there."

"Early morning, probably. But soon."

"I'm hearing chatter about it. People are worried that if he tattles, it'll run down the chain. If they snag Lucet, it takes us all down. It's the flaw in the system. Nobody knows what Gossamer knows. Scared shitless."

"Lucet isn't worried."

"He wouldn't tell you if he was, Rook. That's his job. He needs to instil calm and confidence in his agents."

Freeman laughed.

"That's a tall order."

Elvis closed his eyes, leaned his head back, sighing loudly. It was getting colder. Freeman could see his breath.

"At least Kaso would be safe," Elvis said.

"Yeah."

"We'll have someone to call from prison."

"Hell no," said Rook, and they both laughed.

A minute passed with no noise but the crickets.

"How about the rotten apple," Elvis said. "Any thoughts on that? I know every team thinks they've got one, but something really smells wrong, doesn't it?"

"It's Tundra," Freeman said, like it was the end of the topic.

"I don't know," said Elvis. "Redux had a point. He said if they wanted to plant a mole, they'd pick someone who knew what they

were doing. Obviously sabotaging us just makes no sense. Not in the long run, anyway.”

Freeman grunted.

“I don’t understand how she got on our team in the first place. Lucet said she came recommended.”

“That’s a loose term, though. You’ve only worked with the best, so maybe you don’t know. You get on a team with someone like Captain Poultry, and let me tell you: Tundra’s like an idiot savant next to them.”

Freeman laughed again, but not happily.

“Don’t depress me any more. I might throw up.”

“No, I don’t think it’s her. But then who? Spastik? Not a chance. Chenne? Maybe. She’s a great pilot, but... well, it’s never easy to tell. I’d say it was you, but you’re way too paranoid to be working for the cops.”

Freeman sat up, threw the rest of his beer away and rubbed his face to wake himself up.

“Redux needed one more mission, and now he’s on the hook for one more. And I can’t get out of my head the thought that that ‘one more’ is going to hurt him like it hurt me.”

“Rook, Asha’s accident is not your fault. That’s something that happened independent of whatever choice you made.”

Freeman turned away, slid off the truck.

“Are you going on the mission this morning?” Elvis asked. “I’m still trying to find someone willing.”

“No,” Freeman sighed. “The typhoon makes it too dangerous, and without the Indian agents on the ground, I don’t really know if it’s worth trying.”

“Yeah,” said Elvis. “I figured as much.”

“I keep waiting for the other shoe to drop,” Freeman said, swaying in the darkness. “I know it’s coming, and the tension is killing me.”

“Well,” said Elvis distantly, “if it’s going to drop, it’ll have to drop soon.”

The Trap

Without the flood lights, the football field was pitch black. Kani stood in the light of the sliver of the moon, pushing down her fear and watching the street as Fantoni's car pulled into the parking lot. He got out with Erlenmeyer, marching across the grass with leaden steps, until he was a few metres away. He crossed his arms, nodded to her.

"Had a fun night?" he said, motioning to her blood-soaked shirt.

"It keeps getting better," she said.

"Where's the money?" he snapped, puffing himself up as much as his little frame could manage.

"Where's Stacey?" Kani countered. "Because unless I see her in one piece, you can kiss your money good-bye. I've got other things I can spend it on."

"She's good," said Fantoni. "She's close by."

"Do I look like I have binoculars?" she snapped. "Bring her here!"

Fantoni shook his head, pointed at her like his hand was a gun, winked.

"I wanna see the money first," he said.

Kani rolled her eyes, tried to hide a smile as she saw Simon, ducked low to the ground, running towards Fantoni's car. He creaked open the back door, and ducked inside. Kani crossed her arms, mimicking Fantoni.

"You show me yours first," she said. "This isn't a negotiation. You do what I say if you want the cash."

He sneered at her.

"Why wouldn't I just shoot you now?"

“You’re not that stupid.”

“Maybe I just don’t like you,” he snapped.

“Then the feeling’s mutual,” she said, then muttered to herself: “Damn, I sound like Kaso.”

Just then, the other door to the car opened, and Simon stumbled out with Stacey. Kani had a moment of elation before she saw Fantoni’s second thug step out after them, taller than Simon by half.

Fantoni looked over his shoulder, tipped off by her expression, and smiled.

“Pretty cute,” he said. “This is what passes for a trap?”

Kani kicked the turf as Stacey and Simon trudged toward her. Simon’s face was ashen. He hadn’t expected things to go so wrong. Stacey seemed distant, confused. Her hand was bandaged, but still soaked with blood.

“So I’m guessing there is no money,” said Fantoni, scratching his chin. “Which leaves me very little reason to keep you alive. You understand me? This is what you’ve done to yourself, and your boyfriend here.”

Kani stepped forward, in front of Simon.

“He has nothing to do with this,” she said.

“Should have thought of that before you brought him along,” sneered Fantoni, and drew his gun.

“Wait!” Kani shouted, holding out her hand. “I can fix this. Just wait. Give me a second.”

Fantoni rolled his eyes.

“What? What can you do?”

Kani glanced over her shoulder at Simon, who couldn’t take his eyes off the gun. She swallowed, looked back.

“I can go back,” she said. “I can try it again. Earn back what I lost before.”

Fantoni laughed loudly.

“Who says they’ll want you after you screwed it up last time?”

“Let’s see,” she said, and took out her phone, dialled.

"It's-a me, Kaso!" said Kaso in the worst Italian accent of all time. "What can I do you for, babe? And why are you in a football field? Oh no, you're not doing *sports*, are you?"

"I need another mission," she said so Fantoni could hear it. "Something good, and something fast."

"You've got twelve hours," said Fantoni. "Three tomorrow. If I don't have the money by then, I kill them both."

"You heard that?" Kani asked.

"His accent's worse than mine."

"Can you please focus?"

"Sorry. Mission. Right. And soon, too. This isn't going to be easy. They send those freighters off every few weeks, not days."

"Please, Kaso. Please."

"Hurry it up!" shouted Fantoni. "Or I'll turn your little friend into a human sponge!"

He pointed his gun at Simon's chest.

"He's a dick," grumbled Kaso.

"Tell me about it," muttered Kani.

"Do me a favour, can you tell him something for me?"

"Like what?" she said warily.

"Fleedledeedle."

"No, I won't say that."

"Oh come on."

"No, he'll just shoot me," she hissed.

"You never know until you try..."

"Kaso!" she snapped, and everyone looked at her. "Mission! Now!"

She heard typing in the background, and Kaso's voice went from bouncy to scolded.

"Fine," he said. "Give me a minute."

She covered the phone, nodded to Fantoni.

"He said give him a minute."

Fantoni turned the gun to the side, checked his aim at Simon's chest.

"A minute's all you've got," he said.

Death Sentence

Elvis' car had long since disappeared when the phone rang. Freeman struggled with his seat belt and pulled the handset out, put it to his ear. He rubbed his eyes, trying to sober up, without much success.

"Yeah," he said.

"Rook," said Lucet, "we have a problem."

He let go a rattled breath, nodded.

"All right," he said.

"Tundra is in trouble."

Freeman sat forward, cocked his head.

"Wait, again?"

"My bad," said Kaso. "I misheard you earlier. I thought you said 'save her at all costs,' when you really said 'let her die.' Funny how those two things sound so al—"

"Same answer," said Freeman. "Let her die."

"There's more this time," said Lucet. "She's requesting another mission. I trust you've heard about this shipment Elvis has been tracking? Due in a few hours?"

"There's a typhoon in the drop zone," said Freeman. "It's a no-go."

"If you could change the corridor ahead of splashdown, you—"

"Look, even if I could, with only two fighters, the SEF would be all over us, and we'd have no way to stop them."

"The SEF won't be looking for you, given the typhoon," said Lucet.

Freeman sighed, leaned back in his seat. The world was swaying slowly, and he still felt ill. It would take a lot of coffee to sober up in time for a morning run.

“If Tundra’s the rotten apple—”

“She’s not,” said Kaso. “Uh. Sir.”

“If she’s not,” said Lucet, “you have a two-way split of the proceeds. Which is agreeable to her.”

“Then let her go up on her own,” snapped Freeman.

“You know I can’t do that. She needs you there for support. If she’s good, you get paid. If she’s bad—”

“I ditch her in the atmosphere and we call it an accident.”

There was a moment of silence. Even Kaso stayed quiet.

“Agreed,” said Lucet. “If she betrays us, kill her.”

Last Chance

When she hung up the phone, Kani's hands were shaking. They shook as she told Fantoni the news, and they shook as she hugged Simon good-bye, and he kissed her, tears in his eyes. On the train, through the field in the dead of night, into the shack, the whole way, her hands wouldn't stay still.

She sat on the bundled tarp in the corner of the shack, the world so dark she couldn't tell if she was scared anymore. She closed her eyes to sleep, but it wouldn't come. She lay there, thinking ahead, running through the motions, the words, the things expected of her.

Sometime before four, Stacey's phone rang, and she slipped it from her pocket, put it to her ear.

"Hey kid," said Kaso. "How you holding up?"

"I'm good," she lied.

"You sound it. You know if you stay in one place for as long as you have, you're gonna get blood clots and die, right? Happened to a friend. Don't do it. Get up and walk."

"I'm okay," she said. "Stop spying on me."

"Me? Spying? Never!"

He coughed awkwardly, and she laughed.

"You're a good guy, Kaso," she said.

"I know," he said. "Thanks for confirming it, though."

She said nothing for a few moments, watching the wheels of the Incassna in the glow of the phone's screen.

"You know what I just realized?" Kaso said, breaking the silence. "You and me, we both have four letters in our first names, and they both start with the letter 'K.'"

"Yeah," she said. "You're really quick, aren't you?"

"That's nothing!" he said. "Try this on for size: Kilt. Kebab. Kerfluffle. Kin... um... kiss..."

"Stop hitting on me," she said, and sat up. She smiled a bit, despite her best efforts not to.

"Say Tundra," he said. "You can tell me things, you know. I'm not like a lawyer or anything, but you know I have your back, right?"

"I know," she muttered.

"So if there's something you need to talk about, I'm ready to..."

"There's nothing," she said. "I'm fine, Kaso. Really."

"Okay," he said.

He started whistling a tune with no melody, then stopped abruptly.

"You know what's funny?" he asked.

"I have a feeling I'm about to find out."

"When you were having that trouble with Fat Tony, I was searching through your old transcripts, trying to see which members of your old teams you might've got along with. See if I could hit 'em up for money on your behalf."

"That's really not—"

"Turns out you weren't very popular. Can't see why not. Well, except for losing freighters. That's definitely full-on suckage."

She lay back down, covering her head with her arm. Her sleeve smelled like blood.

"Anyway, one thing I wanted to ask you. And I dunno how to say this, but... back on your first mission, Ricochet asked you what your name was, and you said what sounded a lot like 'stay'."

Kani froze, held her breath.

"And I guess I'm just wondering," he said, "if that makes any sense to you. Because it's confusing the hell outta me."

She didn't move, didn't breathe, didn't know what to say. She opened her mouth to reply, but he beat her to it.

"You were trying to double-cover," he said. "It's pretty common with newbies. They use some other name instead of their own, think that'll throw the SEF off, if they go looking for the wrong person."

"Um..." she said.

"But really, Tundra, you shouldn't use your best friend's name in situations like that. You could get her in trouble."

"Oh. I... thanks for the tip."

"I live to serve," he said. "Any time. My door's always open. Really. Stop by. I'm lonely."

She laughed, sniffled, sat herself back up.

"How do you do this?" she asked. "Doesn't it just drain you? The fear? The paranoia?"

"Me? I'm safe where I am. Guess it doesn't hit me as much. I can appreciate why it sucks for you guys, but to me, it's like a game. Find the spy, catch the mole, that kinda thing. It's just a game."

"Yeah," she said, but knew it was anything but.

"*Speaking of which*," he said. "One game I love to play to catch moles is this thing called the 'encoder chip game'. I make the mole go running around, looking for something that doesn't exist."

"Oh," she said.

"Great for laughs. Well, on my end. When I tell the higher-ups, they're never laughing."

"I..."

"So yeah, *Tundra*. If you ever get told to look for an encoder chip, make sure you laugh it off, or people'll get the wrong idea, right?"

"Right," she said. "Thanks."

"Especially Rook. You know what I'm saying? He's already jumpy. You've got to be extra careful around him."

"I got it," she said. "And I noticed."

"Okay, then. You should get some sleep. Big day today. Stop bugging me, all right? Calling me at all times of the night, wanting to chat about your girl problems. Sheesh. I've got things to do, lady. Things!"

She laughed, probably more than she would have on any other day.

"Thank you, Kaso," she said. "You're a good friend."

"Oh go on."

"I'll talk to you soon."

"You'd better, or I'm gonna come over there and kick your ass."

“Good luck leaving your room,” she said, and turned the phone off right before he started howling.

She let the phone light the ship for a few more seconds, then put her head on the tarp and the hours of stress carried her off to sleep.

It was a short sleep.

Resolution

Yuri couldn't close the door. He watched Rache walk down the hall alone, leaning against the door frame, and nodded when she looked back, just before she started down the stairs. It was when her hair disappeared from view that the wave of despair came over him, and he gasped for breath.

"Rache!" he called, running to the stairwell. "Wait!"

She was standing on the first landing, looking back.

He didn't know what to say.

"Another minute," he stammered. "Please."

She smiled, came back into the apartment, and he closed the door gently. She sat at the table, fingers dancing over the cornucopia, eyes anywhere but on him.

"Is all right?" he asked, sitting next to her. "Are you happy?"

She laughed a bit, shrugged.

"Not yet," she said. "I guess not yet. But I'll get there."

He took her hand in his, but she pulled back, smiled awkwardly at him.

"What's wrong, Yuri?" she asked.

"What about passion?" he asked. "What will happen to your passion if you go to UN?"

Her smile got an edge, like she was about to cry. She laughed, cut it off, looked away.

"What are you talking about?" she asked. "This is what you were asking for. This is what you wanted..."

"But what do *you* want, Rache? Will this kill you?"

"I'll be fine—"

“No, I mean... will this kill who you *are*?”

She pushed her chair back, stood up, blinking back tears. She patted him on the shoulder as she passed, but he caught her arm, held her.

“I worry I have doomed you,” he said. “Doomed the world. Not helped. Ruined hope.”

“You make no sense,” she said, wiping her eyes.

“I had passion once,” he said. “I did good work. Work I believe in. Work that made difference. And when day came, I traded that work in for work that pays bills. I stopped being right. And every day since, I... I do not know if I am living my life anymore, or life of someone else.”

“I don’t know what you want from me,” she said.

“Live right life,” he said. “Save the world.”

She looked at him, smiled.

“Sometimes saving yourself is all you can do,” she said. “I didn’t understand it before, but I do now. Nobody can change the world. They can just change enough parts of it, that it looks different at the end. Thank you for teaching me that. Even if it hurt both of us.”

She leaned forward and kissed him, and he let go of her arm, put his hand on the table for support. They stood there, frozen in time, his heart paused mid-beat, waiting for instruction.

She wrapped her arm around his neck and pulled herself closer, and he breathed her in, kissed her again, holding her tight. Her hands ran down his chest, pulling off his tie, unbuttoning his shirt.

She moaned, and he slipped her sweater up over her head, fingers dancing on her skin, down her waist, and he touched... he touched her lips, her lipstick, her...

He stood back, hands shaking.

“What is it?” she asked.

He couldn’t look at her anymore, her skin, her face. He couldn’t look at her anymore.

“Yuri?”

He ran to the bedroom, closed the door, and sat against it, holding his head in his hands, waiting for her to hate him enough to leave for good.

Lost Friends

Yuri gasped for breath, but his arms were still stuck at his sides, the bag clinging tight even out of the water. He choked, rolled himself to his side, and only then became aware of a cry from above. A splash.

He was pulled to his feet, torn out of the bag, and he felt the burn of a blade at his neck. Despite his shivering, he stayed very, very still.

“Another step and he dies,” said a voice at his ear. One of the guards. Trembling. “One step, and I swear—”

The burning stopped suddenly, and Yuri heard a blade hitting the ground, and he was free, stumbling forward as a something heavy landed behind him. He pulled at the sack on his head, and when it came off, he nearly dropped to his knees.

“Yuri?” asked Rache. “I was afraid it was you.”

He stumbled back, landing on the guard behind him. A knife was embedded in his forehead, his eyes rolled up like he was trying to see.

“We have to move,” Rache said. “Can you walk?”

He nodded, but didn’t move. She held a hand out to him, winked.

“Get up. Come on. I’m not supposed to be out here.”

He took her hand and got up, running with her to the steps up to the street. They walked in silence, but he couldn’t help but stare. It was the same Rache as ever, but she was confident, composed, precise. She wore a black biker jacket, barely covering a belt holding six thin knives and a pistol at her back.

They ducked into an all-night café, went straight for the back, and slid into a booth with a good view of the door. Rache put a menu up in front of her, leaned forward.

"We have to be careful," she said. "No names. You understand, Redux?"

He blinked, stunned, said nothing.

"We've been wiretapping Duplessis' house for a few months," she said. "We suspected he was using his contacts to run a moonshine operation. Moonshine doesn't mean what you think it does. Ask later."

He nodded.

"We heard you talking to him, and my bosses thought you were turning on us, going to turn us in. They wanted me to make sure you didn't get out of the river, Redux. You have to know what kind of trouble you're in over that."

"Yes," he said, scolded.

"When I saw the size of the bag, I knew it had to be you. You're pretty distinctive. How've you been?"

"I... I am confused, I think."

She smiled, accepted a coffee and dumped several seconds of sugar into it.

"I can imagine. I'll cover everything eventually, but right now I want to talk about you. Your daughter. She's in bad shape?"

"Yes... she... last mission, it failed, and is bad for her."

"I understand," she said. "I'd help you with that, but I don't have the resources right now. I give all my money to sustain our operations here."

"Operations...?"

"Doing good," she smiled. "Saving the world."

"I do not understand... what are you?"

"I'm on your side," she said. "I'm part of the team that makes sure everyone else plays nice."

He squinted at her, leaned close.

"Since... since when?"

"Two years ago? Maybe less. I hadn't seen you in person, if that's what you're asking. They didn't promote me until after that."

"Wait... you were... were *out there* when we... when you..."

"Since I was twenty-one," she said. "I would have told you, Redux, if I'd known who *you* were."

"Who are you? I still do not—"

"Chenne," she said, and all he could do was nod. "I found my purpose after all, I guess."

"You are very good," he said.

"I try," she smiled. "But now listen. I know you need some money, and I think I've picked up a solution on the wire. There's a shipment coming through in about four hours, and so far nobody seems to want it."

"There is typhoon, yes? Elvis told me."

"If we do it together, I think we can make it work," she said. "Three freighters, the two of us, and as a thanks for kicking my ass, I'll give you the whole take."

He gasped, shook his head.

"No," he said. "No, I cannot do that. Is not right."

"Redux, listen. If you hadn't treated me the way you did, I never would have got my ship, I never would have done what I've been able to do, and I can promise you, the world would be a worse-off place as a result. You're taking the money. There's no debating it."

He smiled, nodded, trying to remain calm.

"We must go then, yes? Time is short."

"Yeah, we should head out," she said. "I'll have the co-ordinates sent to your phone—"

"My phone is dead," he said. "In water."

She nodded, reached into a pocket and pulled out a tiny black one. She passed it across.

"That'll do for now. You should be good with that."

They stood, and while she walked to the door, he didn't move, eyes searching left and right, like he was trying to piece together a puzzle.

"I must make little stop," he said. "One stop first."

Good-Bye

Sabina had stopped crying hours ago, but she still couldn't move from her seat by Anya's door. Light was coming through the windows, casting long shadows in the orange around her, and she watched them move, slowly, over time.

She looked up at the sound footsteps down the hall, and got to her feet when she saw them. Yuri stopped short, his jacket still dripping wet, Rache at his side. Sabina scowled at them. Both of them.

"Is Anya awake?" Yuri asked, voice low, tired.

"No," said Sabina. "We're not allowed in. *None* of us."

Rache looked away, held her arms behind her back. Yuri stepped closer, walked past Sabina and leaned against the door.

"Anya, darling," he said, "is papa. I know you are sleeping, but I need to say good-bye again. I hope you have beautiful dreams, my angel. Beautiful dreams. Take care of mama for me. I love you, Anya. Sleep well."

Sabina was barely controlling herself when he looked back, put his hand on her shoulder.

"You will have money today," he said. "One way or another. Take good care of her."

She moved to speak, but Rache gave her a warning look, and she kept to herself. Yuri lumbered out of sight, into the orange sun, and left her there, alone.

Last Hurrah

The sun left a bright white streak across the ocean, like a line along the Earth, pointing to the mass of white cloud inching into darkness. The sight was beautiful and terrifying, but Rook wasted no time with sightseeing.

He switched his view on and off, toggling the sensors, listening through the static of the debris to pick up a sign of something that wasn't coming. He hit the codes in his console and initiated the re-entry sequence when he caught sight of a green triangle on his grid.

"Sorry I'm late," said Tundra. "Traffic."

"I swear to god," he fumed, "if you don't take this seriously, you will never fly again."

"Sorry," she said meekly.

"Follow orders and keep your mouth shut."

"Yes sir," she said.

He sent her co-ordinates and pushed his throttle, bringing himself in line with the expected corridor of the incoming freighters. He switched his channel to private and called her directly.

"Kaso tells me you can't go home after this."

There was a pause, and then she spoke.

"I guess not," she said.

"We have a protocol for dealing with this, but you're going to have to trust me. Can you do that?"

"Yes sir," she said immediately. Smartly.

"All right. When we're done here, I'll send you landing co-ordinates where I can find you, and I will help you get set up in a different life."

A longer pause this time.

“Okay,” she said.

“You hesitated.”

“No sir, it’s just... leaving my—”

An alarm sounded and he looked up to see two ships closing in on the horizon. He switched on his ice cannons, dimmed the cockpit and kept ready for anything.

“Behind me,” he barked. “And don’t shoot me in the back.”

A moment later, the gun caught the wing of one of the ships, and the blinding flash told him who he was dealing with.

“Chenne?” he asked. “What are...”

“Hello Rook,” said Redux. “You are here for shipment too?”

He held his breath, tried to gain the composure he needed to face this. The unexpected mission.

“I’m letting Tundra make up for her mistake,” he said.

“She is here,” Redux said, his voice dull. Rook understood it perfectly well, but felt the accusation aimed at him. *Why did you bring her here?*

“Do you have a plan?” Rook asked. “Or is four a crowd today?”

“Sir—” protested Tundra, but he cut her off.

“We’ll go back home if you’d prefer a two-way split. *We* owe you that much.”

“No,” said Redux. “Four is still good. Thank you for offer. You are true gentleman.”

Rook laughed at this.

“I wouldn’t go that far.” He punched commands into his console, sent information to all three ships. “Here’s the game plan. Chenne and I will run interference on whatever fighters the SEF send our way. Intelligence suggests it won’t be much. Redux, you check trajectories, and Tundra will change the splashdown co-ordinates and enter the landing—”

“Excuse me,” said Redux. “I do not want Tundra near the codes this time.”

Rook nodded, wincing to himself.

“Sorry, I should have—”

"I'll stay back with the freighters," Tundra said. "Make sure they re-enter properly."

"Good," said Redux. "I do not want to hear your voice again."

He flew out to the bright blue line that was the Ten Minute Mark, leaving the rest of them behind. Rook hesitated, considered calling it off, going back home.

"You and me, Rook?" asked Chenne, and took off to the rendezvous. Rook nodded, pushed his own throttle, and sped off. Tundra followed silently behind them.

We're aiming for an alternate dropzone because of the typhoon," Rook said. "You need to make sure you enter the data before they reach the five minute mark, or they won't have time to adjust their burn, and we'll have to scuttle the operation."

"I am good," Redux said.

"If anything goes wrong, you ask for help. We're a team here. No proud heroics, all right?"

Everyone voiced agreement except Tundra. It was better that way.

The connection time on the clock reached zero and started counting up, and Rook checked his horizon again, switching the grid on and off just in case.

"They're overdue," he said.

"They have no guide," Redux said. "May be off-course."

"Stay ready," Rook said.

He searched the grid over and over again, but saw no sign of the freighters. Even increasing the sensitivity to the sensors gave him nothing... just more debris static.

"Hey," said Tundra, piercing the silence. "Are those..."

"What did we tell you?" Rook snapped.

"I'm just saying—"

"Redux, I'm sorry," he said. "I don't know why she has to much trouble listening to—"

"Freighters at six o'clock!" Tundra shouted.

"What?"

He spun himself down, and his screen lit up with red. Three freighters, racing in on a collision course!

“Move!” he shouted, and hit his thrusters hard. His ship raced to the side, but the freighters were moving too fast to avoid. His screen screamed at him of danger, and he spun the ship around, hitting a sideways drift that put him straight in line with the empty gap between the second and third cargo ship.

He spun himself as the second freighter passed, corrected and barely missed the third. A cloud of dust sprayed his windows, sticking in places and bouncing off into space. His ears were full of collision pings, but he couldn’t see enough to tell why.

He activated the window jets, and compressed air blew the dust out of his viewport. What replaced it was far more dangerous: twelve SEF ships, ice cannons firing straight at him.

Desperation

Kani must have done something wrong when the freighters passed, because her ship went into a spin that she couldn't break out of. When it finally resolved, she had a moment to breathe before a barrage of ice pelted her, and she spun back out of control, off towards the Earth's shadow.

"It's a trap!" shouted Rook beyond the noise of impacts. "Everyone move! Regroup in the—"

Kani lost the rest of the sentence as she was hit by another round. She switched her grid on and off, trying to see where the SEF ships were coming from, but the picture distorted, being replaced with a warning: "40% sensor coverage. Cannot generate map."

"Mute off," she said, and the computer welcomed her back. She looked out the top of the ship for sunlight, and saw a swirling beat through the ice. It was slowly sliding down toward the nose. She grabbed the throttle, watched the light, and pushed hard when the sun seemed to be beside her.

The ship lurched forward, and she was pressed back into her seat. The ice started burning off her viewport, replacing the white distortion with an image of a rapidly-spinning Earth, and a freighter dead ahead.

"Warning!" said the console. "Impact danger!"

"Got it," she said, and spun the controls. But the ship didn't react the way she expected, and she turned sideways, her right wing closing in on the side of the freighter. She pushed down on the throttle, but all it did was move her further down the edge of the target, not away. She kept shooting sideways, straight into danger.

“Dammit!” she shouted. “Move!”

She pushed the sphere downwards and the ship rocked, flipped around so she couldn’t see the freighter anymore.

“Warning!” said the console. “Impact—”

“Zip it!” she snapped, and turned some more. She yelled a furious battle cry and spun the sphere as hard as she could, and the Incessna rolled in space, missing the freighter by centimetres. She gasped for air as the console stopped warning of danger.

“Deccel in five!” yelled Rook from the chaos. “Everyone clear!”

Kani looked out her window and saw the freighters all rotate around 180 degrees, massive thrusters pointing straight at her.

“Oh damn,” she muttered.

She hit the throttle but the ship still wouldn’t steer. She started veering towards the first freighter’s engines, where the first signs of ignition were already apparent.

“Come on you stupid piece of sh—”

The thrusters flared suddenly, and in an instant, the ice on the left side of her ship melted. Her eyes shot open, and she turned hard right, punching it as hard as it would go.

She spun clear of the danger, but a pursuing SEF fighter wasn’t so lucky. It caught the flame directly and burst apart, throwing briefly-molten fragments all around.

Kani’s ears screamed with warnings as the console tracked every bit of the SEF wreckage, tumbling past her as she arced back around behind the freighters.

“Everyone report!” yelled Rook. “Chenne!”

“Here. Safe. I have you covered.”

“Redux!”

“Working on co-ordinates now,” he said.

“Tundra!”

“What do I do?” she gasped, ducking out of the way as another SEF ship shot past her. “They’re everywhere!”

“You’re on the front lines,” Rook ordered. “Keep them off Redux.”

“Yes sir!” she said, and turned her ship around. It was an odd feeling, drifting backwards so fast, but now that she had the hang of it, it was almost like ice skating. A dangerous thrill.

The grid was a mess of yellow squares, shifting corridors and rapidly-shifting green triangles. She tried to pick out which one was Redux, but it was too hard to see.

“Redux!” she said. “Say something.”

“Not now!” he snapped, and his green marker lit up.

“Thanks!” she said, and raced towards him. An SEF ship took a pass at her, but the ice only hit the tip of her wing. She ignored him, kept charging forward.

“Rook,” said Redux, panic in his voice. “Co-ordinates are not accepting. Freighter codes not accepting. Something is wrong!”

Kani opened fire with her cannons, shooting straight over Redux’s ship, pounding an SEF ship that was coming around to attack. Collision pings whined from behind, and she spun herself around and fired again, catching the side of another as he swept past.

“This is insane,” she said to herself. “There are too many of them!”

“There’s something wrong with the freighters,” said Rook, his voice cracking. “They’re not ours.”

“They must be,” said Chenne. “Where else did they—”

Kani looked around at the swarming SEF ships, and her mouth fell open.

“They’re trying to catch us,” she gasped.

“Chenne! You and I are cover. Redux and Tundra, head for home. Abort the mission.”

“But—” said Redux.

“There’s nothing to do! Move!”

Kani turned her ship towards Earth, through the swarm of ships that would chase her every step of the way. She looked over at Redux, who hadn’t moved yet, and grit her teeth.

“Can you crack it if I give you some time?” she asked him.

Three SEF ships raced towards them, ice firing wildly.

“I can try,” he said, and she charged into the fray. She rotated around the first volley and fired her own shots at the cockpits of two

of the ships, then doubled back to pursue the third. It weaved side to side to avoid her, looping around towards the dark side of the planet, its engines the only light in the sky.

“How’s it going, Redux?” she called.

“Maybe progress,” he said.

“You two should be going home!” Rook yelled. “Leave the freighters!”

Kani was jolted by the sound of ice hitting the rear of her ship, and she looked up to see a second and third SEF ship tear past.

She broke off pursuit and went after the one that shot her, locking on her weapons and opening fire.

The ship dodged ably, but a second later was hit by a massive barrage from above, layering up and spinning towards the planet. Kani look up and saw the attackers weren’t Rook or Chenne, but two other SEF ships. They took off, back towards the freighters, abandoning their own in a dangerous situation.

The ship was tumbling rapidly, its engines not able to break through the ice in the deep shadow around it.

“Mayday!” shouted Ares, the SEF commander. “Mayday! I need help here!”

Kani looked back, but none of the other ships were coming to his aid. Her console showed he was about to hit the upper atmosphere of the planet, and she had a pretty good idea that would be bad news.

“Redux!” she said. “Any luck?”

“I think maybe,” he said.

“I’ll be right back.”

She shot towards Ares, spinning the sphere as she went until she was matching his rotation. She brought herself down below him, her head facing the planet, and the console immediately flashed red.

“Warning: dangerous re-entry angle.”

“I know,” she said. “Drop landing gear.”

“Command not found.”

“Lower landing gear.”

“Command not found.”

“Put down the wheels!” she shouted, and she heard a ker-chunk as the landing gear moved out.

“Thank you,” she said.

She lurched herself towards Ares, carefully keeping herself clear of collisions, and with one last jerk, landed herself on the belly of his ship.

“Get out of here!” Ares barked.

“That’s the plan!” Kani said, and throttled up.

The two of them pushed up and out of the atmosphere, the console calming itself, and lurched awkwardly into the the sun. Kani saw the ice melt off his Ares’ ship until she could read the “FC-01” on his wing, and without warning, he broke off of her, drifting for a moment before racing back to the battle.

“You’re welcome,” she muttered.

She was about to follow him when she saw a twinkle on the horizon. The space station again. Closer than ever, too. She could see the solar arrays, the expanded living quarters, the...

“Computer, magnify that area.”

“Command not found.”

“Help.”

“Help menu. Please choose option.”

“Magnify.”

“Command not found.”

“Dammit, how do I zoom?”

A yellow grid appeared over her viewport. She reached out and touched the square where the space station was floating, and it enlarged immediately.

Floating next to the solar array were three motionless freighters.

Finders Keepers

Redux pulled away from the freighters as they turned into slow Earth orbit, gracefully avoiding re-entry and sliding around the planet like tiny moons. Rook pounded his leg with his fist, barely able to control himself.

“They were decoys,” he fumed. “Dammit. It was a set-up.”

SEF ships buzzed past him, and he turned to return fire.

“How did they get information into network?” asked Redux, arcing back towards Rook and Chenne. “This is serious issue, yes?”

“Yes,” said Chenne, her voice darker than usual.

“Where’s Tundra?” asked Rook, checking the grid. “Wasn’t she guarding you?”

“She was here second ago,” he said. “Maybe she is captured?”

“Or maybe she got out of the mess while she could,” said Rook. “Went back to her people.”

“Wait, are you saying... she is rotten apple?”

Rook looked through the racing SEF ships, didn’t see a third green triangle.

“I think she is,” he said. “I think she’s the traitor.”

Maryann Lewis was in the crew quarters of the old quadrant of Alpha One, fighting with a socket that hadn’t been upgraded with the rest of the space station fifteen years earlier. Her space heater had four prongs, and this had three, and try as she did, she couldn’t find a way to make them connect.

She set the heater back on the counter and pulled the cord over to the newer socket at the other side of the cabin, but then the heater drifted off and knocked her in the head.

She grumbled, put it back on the counter, lifted her feet so she was free-floating in the centre of the room, and gently reached across with the plug.

She was only a tiny distance away from the socket when the room suddenly shifted around her, and she completed the motion by jamming the plug into a window.

She looked up, uncertain.

And then the alarms started.

Kani had her landing gear hooked over the nose of the front freighter, thrusters on full, ignoring the console warnings as she pushed the row of them away from the space station.

The docking wire between the freighters and the station was pulling tight, knocking the structure out of alignment, blinding her with reflections off the moving solar array.

“Come on...” she muttered, watching the freighters slip away. “Just a little further...”

Then something caught her eye. A glow off the back freighter. It wasn’t sunlight... it was something else.

“Oh no,” she sighed.

Maryann was racing through commands at her computer, watching out the window as the three freighters lurched away from her. She finished the order and hit “send”, and watched the confirmation as the rear-most freighter’s engines powered up. She grinned confidently.

“Take *that*,” she said.

Kani’s console warned her she was moving backwards. she looked out to the left and saw the space station coming back into view, the tether cord slackening.

She pushed the throttle harder, but it made no difference.

“Warning,” said the console. “Damage to landing gear detected.”
“Dammit!” she cursed, hearing the creaking beneath her. “Move!”

Maryann laughed as the tiny F-422 slid backwards under the mighty boost of the freighter’s engines. She tapped a key on the keyboard and watched the flame intensify, and the dustrunner slip even further back.

“That’ll teach you,” she said, and collected her space heater and took a closer look at the plug.

Outside, the F-422 made a quick manoeuvre, lifting itself off the top of the freighters, and a second later, the three of them shot off at full speed, out and away from Alpha One. The tether cable tightened quickly, and before she could react, the room spun around her, and she found her face colliding with her floating base heater.

Kani retracted her landing gear and raced after the freighters. They were moving fast, and even at full speed, she was having trouble catching up. She saw the console calculating corridors for them, flashing options until it settled on a solid green path. A moment later, a warning came on-screen.

“Warning: Fatal re-entry angle. Catastrophic outcome predicted.”

“Great,” she sighed, and charged forward.

Crash and Burn

The first freighter hit the atmosphere at an angle, and the friction made it pivot just enough that the other two broke free, the middle one deflecting away from the planet, and the last one still firing its thrusters straight towards the blue ocean below.

Kani whimpered at the sight, trying to decide which one to follow, when suddenly Chenne squeezed between the second two, spinning around behind the Incessna and firing back after the first one.

“I have this one,” she said.

“Good,” said Rook. “Redux, catch the outbound one. Tundra and I will take care of the other re-entry.”

“Understood,” said Redux, and looped back into the void.

“What do I do?” Kani asked, hands shaking like mad.

“Get out your Bible and pray,” Rook said.

Chenne’s freighter was upside-down, dropping so fast its antenna array had dissolved from the heat. The huge heat tiles along its nose were aimed out towards space, doing it no good against the incredible heat it was absorbing.

“Calculate corridor,” she said, holding her ship steady in the wake of the freighter’s fire trail.

The corridor began changing beneath her, eventually settling on a spot a few hundred metres to her left. Her ship rocked as the freighter turned suddenly, its top side gleaming and white, quickly dimming to orange.

“Map,” she grunted, seeing the planet beneath her light up. The corridor was wrong. It ended up in south eastern Australia.

“Merde,” she spat, and reached a hand out against the gravity and pulled the corridor point back towards the Indian Ocean. It clicked into place, and the console re-calculated the corridor. It was to her right. Several kilometres to her right.

She pulled up her keyboard, hit the landing codes through, and pulled up the freighter’s engine control. She activated the RCS jets closest to her, and looked over to watch. To her horror, she saw the cone-shaped jets were melting, white hot, and bubbling.

“Not good,” she muttered, and then they exploded out, spraying liquid metal towards her. She swept sideways and back, as the console tracked the trajectory, little flecks barely missing her nose.

The freighter was rumbling towards the corridor, rotating gradually as the atmosphere thickened. A moment later, it completed its turn, and as the heat shield took the brunt of the friction, the whole ship rocked smoothly into place, and slid downward like an ice cube melting on gentle slope.

Chenne pulled her ship back, slowly shifting into an arc back out, watching the freighter make its descent below her.

“One freighter in,” she called into the comm. “How are the rest?”

Kani’s harness held her in, but her body felt like it was going to fly straight out of her ship.

“What do we do?” she shouted over the roar of re-entry. “I can’t see anything!”

Thin smoke shot out from the freighter’s tail as it spun towards the planet. She and Rook were a short distance behind, catching the wake and trying not to get hit.

“Enter the code!” Rook yelled. “We need to get it stabilized!”

Kani pulled up the keyboard and hit the code, but the console flashed red. She tried again, but no luck.

“It’s not working!” she yelled.

The freighter hit a patch of friction and changed dynamics, tumbling headlong into the ocean.

“Long-range communications melted,” Rook yelled. “We need to get closer.”

“We?” Kani squeaked. “You want me to—”

“Hurry!” Rook shouted, swinging in behind the freighter.

Kani rocketed forward, hitting “enter” on the console every few seconds, waiting for the light to turn green.

“It’s not working!” she yelled.

The freighter hit another pocket, and the freighter pitched sideways.

“Tundra! Move!”

She banked right, spinning out of the way as the freighter swung towards her. The fire from the engines passed close to her, throwing warning upon warning across her screen.

On its second rotation, she saw the tip of the heat shield glowing bright yellow.

“Oh no,” said Rook. “Get out! Get out now!”

The freighter finished another spin and stuck, and a huge rumble filled the air around them, drowning out even Kani’s frantic heartbeat.

The freighter became still for a second, and then with a massive sucking noise, the heat shield caved into the body of the ship.

Kani pulled back, tried to pull up, but she was too thick in the atmosphere to stop herself. Little fragments of rock shot out from the sides of the freighter, shooting past her like stars falling upwards. It was almost hypnotic.

And then the freighter imploded on itself, and her console lit up with a debris field the size of a football stadium.

Narrowing Field

“Flip and full blast!” Rook screamed, and Kani spun the sphere as hard as she could. The ship barely made the motion, lurching against the atmosphere, and the console immediately warned of structural damage to the rear engines.

She pushed down on the throttle and was pinned flat against her seat. She felt faint, her hands went numb, and for a second she thought the black sky grew a little bigger. But a moment later she was out of the atmosphere, spinning through space, the debris from the freighter splaying out beneath her like the a massive fireworks display.

Rook shot past her, regained his orientation, and passed back around.

“Dammit,” he said. “Damn it all.”

“I’m sorry,” she gasped, fighting for breath. “I didn’t—”

“Save it,” she said. “There’s one more, and I don’t have the patience right now.”

He took off around the planet.

Redux had the freighter on a corridor back to the planet, but the SEF were swarming him like flies, pelting him with ice from all sides. He fired back sporadically, but couldn’t leave the freighter alone. The landing codes were overridden every time he looked away.

“SEF!” called Ares over the comm. “We have an explosion in the atmosphere. I need eyes on the scene now. Go!”

The ships took off, leaving him in peace for a change. He pulled up the map and adjusted the splashdown zone to the Indian Ocean, and re-calculated the corridor. The freighter shifted into place. It

would take a whole other orbit of the planet before it would make its descent.

“Under control,” Redux said into the radio. “How are others?”

Chenne was five minutes out by the time the two SEF ships tailing her were forced to retreat. She spun herself around and powered up her guns, ready to give chase. But then she saw the freighters — the decoys — orbiting the equator, swinging gently through space on their way to Redux and his corridor.

“Show me corridors,” she said, and the console threw up a set of green toughs that made an “X” over South America. She gasped.

“Redux!” she shouted. “Watch your angle!”

There was no response. She powered her engines and shot forward, repeating her warning every few seconds. He never replied.

“Rook!” she called. “I can’t reach Redux!”

“Where is he?” Rook asked. “I can’t see him.”

“With the freighters, near Antarctica.”

“On our way!”

Rook raced around the planet, Tundra close behind, until his console drew the triangles for Redux and the freighters in the distance. He drew the corridors onscreen and saw the meeting-point coming up fast.

“Redux!” he yelled. “You have to change the corridor!”

There was no answer.

“Dammit, his antenna might be frozen. Tundra, see if you can—”

A sudden barrage of ice clipped his side, and two SEF ships shot past, turning in graceful arcs and coming back for another pass.

“I’ve got them,” Tundra said, turning.

“No!” Rook shouted. “Warn Redux. He needs to get out of there!”

“Yes sir,” she said without hesitation, and shot into the distance. One of the SEF ships chased after her, while the other took another pass at Rook.

He rocked his ship sideways as best he could, catching his tail in the sunlight. The SEF ship hit him again, this time on the underside,

and it knocked him into a spin. He tried to correct it, but it was no use. With every rotation, he lost a little more ice, but it wouldn't be fast enough.

He opened his thrusters to full blast and shot forward, straight into the atmosphere. His console whined, but a second later, his ship was clear.

"You should learn when to quit," he said, and swung back into space, firing in a constant stream, pelting his target with so much ice its nose looked bulbous.

Rook turned himself around and took off after Tundra.

Kani heard the ice hitting her tail, but she didn't move. Her thruster was on so high, almost anything melted anyway. The distance to Redux was closing fast, but no matter how many times she called, he didn't respond.

The SEF pilot finally got his aim right, hit the back of her canopy with several successive bursts, and she checked over her shoulder to see the glass fully covered.

"Buzz off," she said into the comm.

"Suck my pipe," replied the SEF pilot in a weaselly little voice.

"I'd have to be able to see it first," she snapped.

"Come 'ere and I'll show it to ya."

Her eyes narrowed.

"I'll show you something," she said, and spun herself around. Her ice cannons blasted his nose, and he swerved down to escape, letting her coat the top of his ship as well.

"Suck on that," she said, and turned back to the freighters, only to find she'd overshot her objective.

The SEF ship swung down, ice cannons blasted at Redux as she struggled to slow herself down.

Chenne was half a minute out when she knew there was no hope. The freighters moved together in slow motion, their noses colliding, then buckling, and swinging inward like a book closing.

She pushed the throttle so hard it creaked, but a second later, she saw it: the brief flash of an explosion, and a debris field drifting away from the scene.

“Yuri!”

Early Demise

The debris scattered in a plume like a puff of smoke, catching the light as Chenne shot forward. The freighters swayed apart, dropping ore over the ocean. Tundra swung around, her engine flaring once or twice before she came to a stop.

Chenne's eyes filled with tears that wouldn't fall, clouding her vision. She slid up her visor, wiped them away with rough gloved hands, unable to catch her breath. The cockpit was so small. So small.

"Chenne," came a voice over the comm, slow and careful. "Is okay."

As the freighters parted, she could see him... Redux's ship drifting above the debris, red paint catching the sunlight.

She froze in her seat, reached her hand to her lips, the life sucked out of her. Her hand was trembling, fingertips cold.

"Oh my god," she whispered. "Oh no..."

"Chenne!" shouted Rook, arriving at the scene. "What in the hell did you do?"

"I... I don't..."

"Is okay," said Redux, life gone from his voice. "Do not worry."

Chenne's hands floated above the controls. She couldn't touch them, couldn't move.

"What happened?" Tundra asked. "What's going on?"

"Not now," Rook snapped.

"Is old rule," said Redux serenely. "You don't speak names in ships, yes? SEF records all transmissions, compares for identification back home."

“But just a first name, they can’t—”

“It reduces error to small degree,” he said. “You would be surprised how much they know by your voice alone. They will have me picked out like ripe apple by bed time.”

Chenne lowered her head as far as she could, crying.

“I’m so sorry, Redux,” she said.

“Please,” he said. “Is okay. Yuri. Suits me better. Redux is silly name that came with ship. I sound like heart burn, yes?”

She laughed a little, sniffled.

“You got freighter in safely, yes? One out of three is not too bad. It should pay my bills. Buy me new car for fast driving. Ha ha!”

“Redux, I’ll make sure your share gets—”

“No,” said Chenne. “I will. I’ll take care of it, Yuri.”

“Thank you,” he said. His ship powered up, turned gently, and moved towards the Earth. It paused for a moment, and they heard him sigh a long, deep sight.

“Is no one’s fault,” he said. “If I had seen my antenna frozen, I would have been fine. Is no one’s fault. Is fate, yes? Do not blame anyone. Not even Tundra.”

Chenne looked over at Tundra’s ship, grit her teeth.

“Tundra is becoming good pilot now,” Redux said. “I wish I could see how she changes the world.”

And with that, his engines flared brightly, and he took off into the atmosphere. They watched his re-entry fire burn brilliantly around him, and then he was gone, another pinpoint of light floating around the globe.

Rook and Tundra left next, slipping away without a word, leaving Chenne alone in the darkness. The puff of debris was bigger than the freighters now, and as it touched the edge of the planet, parts of it sparkled as they burned into nothing.

She watched until the last of it was gone.

Quiet Lie

Rache picked up her sweater from the table, turned it around and walked past the bedroom, listening for sounds from inside. She held her hand out to knock, but pulled it back, shaking her head and heading into the bathroom.

She turned on the lights, slipped on her clothes, and checked herself in the mirror. Her lipstick was smudged. She fixed it the best she could, leaning close to see that it was all gone.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw into the medicine cabinet, a row of bottles without labels. She opened it carefully, took one of the bottles out, and unscrewed the lid. It was filled with an assortment of pills without brands; different shapes and sizes, textures, different purposes.

She put them back, closed the door to where it had been, and walked back to the table. She picked up her bag from the floor and looked back towards the bedroom, at the closed door. She opened her mouth to speak, but never did.

She found his phone on the table by the door, and started scrolling through. She paused at the entry for Pellier, with the notation “DSR 22 FLY” at the bottom.

She jotted the number down in her own phone, a smile on her face.

“Thank you for the tip,” she said. “I won’t let you down.”

Below it, written in scratchy handwriting, was the word “Redux.” She smiled at it.

“Redux,” she said to herself. “Doesn’t roll off the tongue like ‘Yuri,’ does it?”

Notice of Death

The hangar was bathed in orange light, long sheets of plastic draping down like cobwebs in an attic, casting half-shadows on the walls and floor. She ran her hand along the tarp, felt the roughened grit and the cold gloss of the machine beneath. It was the death mask of a hero, standing proud in its throne room, looming tall over all visitors. She knelt before it, for so many reasons.

She found the letter in a worn envelope by the front wheel, the small, precise letters of an engineer spelling “Chenne.” She looked at it, running her fingers along the edge, the object she most wanted and most feared.

She opened it, unfolding the paper inside, and read in silence, the tears held back to protect the words below.

Dear Chenne,

I will not see you again. I have turned myself in, and I hope you will understand why. They would find me someday, and I cannot live with that fear. It would not be a life.

You said you would take care of my money, and I hope you will still take that task. I would ask you to go to the hospital and make the payment yourself, so I can be sure it will be done. They will seize all I have, and I cannot lose my baby to such a reason.

Thank you for all you have done for me today. I will never forget it.

I asked you once if you were happy with your life. If you were happy giving up passion for safety. And in truth, I was looking for the answer myself. I think I have it now, and I regret it took such a day to become clear.

Get out of this game while you can. It will kill you. You will not change the world. The world will change everything you know as yourself, and you will not see it until you are two steps past the point of no return.

You can change things, Chenne. I need you to change things. But do not change yourself.

As always,

Yuri

She held the letter as she stood in the hospital, watching Anya wheeled to surgery, the bed making no noise as she floated down the hall like an angel.

She held the letter as she faced Sabina, lacking the words to tell her, only shaking her head and holding back her own tears out of respect. Playing the enemy. Making it easier.

"I'll make it better, Yuri," she said to no one at all, and she hoped he would know.

Interrogation

Kani stood at the edge of the road, back to the truck, cowering under Rook's careful watch. Cars raced by down the highway, and she plugged her ear so she could hear the phone clearly.

"Thank you," she said. "Thank you for everything."

Kaso laughed.

"You say that like I'm going somewhere," he said. "I was thinking we should move in together. Are you free Thursday?"

"No," she said. "I'm in hiding Thursday."

"All right, Friday. You're such a control freak."

She hid a laugh, ran her hand through her hair.

"Have you heard anything about my friends?"

"I sent Fat Tony the cash myself," he said. "You guys didn't net the full amount, so I chipped in from my personal account."

She gasped.

"Oh god, Kaso. Thank you so m—"

"Okay, I lied. It was some guy Malaysia. But he won't notice, I think. I mean maybe he will. Let's move on, shall we?"

"Are you going to be okay?"

"I'm fine. And better yet, your friends are fine. Fat Tony even thanked them for being good hostages when he let them go."

"You're kidding."

"Okay, I'm kidding. I waited until they were out the door and called the cops on him. Apparently he collects very strange sub-genres of porn that are illegal where you live."

"You're insane."

"You're just noticing?"

"How can I ever repay you?" she asked, then frowned, and added: "Don't answer that."

"I heard you did pretty good up there. Incident reports said you were like a hummingbird, babe. A hummingbird. Whatever that's supposed to mean. You should be proud! I think."

"I don't know how I did it," she smiled. "It just came to me. It just made sense."

"That's the Centrix system at work. Meant for gamers. Easier on the brain. Uh... which is not taking *anything* away from your skill. You are the master. Centrix? Feh. Centrix is like the... the diaper to your... your... help me out here."

"No thanks," she said, and glanced over her shoulder as Rook whistled for her.

"I've gotta go," she said.

"You're going to be okay?" he asked.

"I think so. Rook is taking me to a safe house somewhere."

"Remember what I said, okay? I met the old Tundra, and she sucked ass. You I like. You should stick around."

"I think I don't have a choice," she said.

She got into the truck and strapped in as he pulled into traffic. They drove for ten minutes without a word, her stealing nervous peeks at his tense face, dark hands squeezing the steering wheel like it could feel pain.

"Can I ask a question?" she asked quietly.

"Speak up," he said. "Or don't talk at all."

"Can I ask a question?" she said again, louder.

"Go."

"What happened with those freighters? They were decoys?"

"We think so. They've never done that before, but it was always in the cards. We're going to have to work around it from now on. I just don't know *how* yet."

"But the information came from... inside...?"

"That's what worries me."

He looked over at her, frowned.

"You haven't had any pills since you landed, have you?"

“N-no,” said Kani, remembering the hospital. “I didn’t bring any with me.”

“Glove compartment,” he said. “And a bottle of water. Has some extra vitamins mixed it. Stops the vertigo, if you get that.”

“Do I ever,” she muttered.

She threw a handful of pills in her mouth and washed them down with water, choking at the end. Her throat was dry. She hadn’t eaten for so long.

“That was a stupid move with the freighters,” he said. “You’re lucky it worked.”

“I couldn’t just leave them there. The space station was totally unguarded.”

Rook smiled, looked in the mirror for a moment.

“Who do you think the mole is?” he asked.

“There’s a mole?” she asked, feigning innocence. “I mean, we know it for sure?”

“We didn’t end up in a trap by accident,” Rook said. “Someone put us there.”

“Well then I guess it’s someone that wasn’t there,” she said. “Not Elvis, so maybe Spastik?”

“Spastik’s crazy, but he’s no mole. He’s too reckless for that.”

“So not Elvis?” she asked, and blinked away a spot in her vision.

“No, not Elvis,” he said. “He thought Chenne was a good candidate, and after what happened tonight, I can almost see his point... but I don’t think it’s her. She cares about the team too much for that.”

“So what,” Kani asked. “Wait, are you saying it’s me? I just got here!”

Her head flopped back, and she found it increasingly hard to focus on her surroundings. Rook took a hand off the wheel, felt the side of her neck, and pushed her head gently against the side of the car.

“You called it a space station,” he said without judgement. “First thing you learn up there is the proper name. Alpha One. There’s no way you’ve been up there as long as you say you have, if you’re making mistakes like that.”

“Wait,” she said. “I *am* Tundra... I...”

“Don’t bother,” he said. “I asked around. We know you’re not Tundra, no matter what Kaso says. The question I have now is: who *are* you?”

“I told you—”

“You’re going to want to think about your answer,” he said. “Because in my position, I don’t have many options to deal with moles.”

She was looking out the window, but it was just a blur of light. Her hands moved slightly on her lap, but that was all she could manage. She said nothing for a minute, and then took a deep breath.

“I’m not Tundra,” she said. “Tundra is my friend. I had to take her place because she got hurt and—”

“You’re going to have to do better than that,” he said. “We don’t just go recruiting anyone into this world. You had to have been vetted first.”

“I swear, I’m not the mole. I only found out about this yesterday. I’m not who you think I am.”

“Sure,” he said. “Then you won’t mind it if I...”

There was a moment of silence, and then Rook grabbed her head and shoved it forward, into the dashboard. She started to cry out, but then she heard glass shatter, and the car swerved to the left.

“Hold on!” he shouted. “This could get messy.”

Flip

Freeman shot across the median and into oncoming traffic, but the black sedans followed close behind. He put his foot to the floor and swerved back to the other side, a bullet catching his side mirror and shattering it.

“What’s going on?” slurred Tundra from the seat beside him. “Where are we going?”

“We’re being followed!” he shouted. “What did you do? Who did you tell?”

“I didn’t tell anyone,” she said, and another shot broke out the back window. He pulled aside a compact car, jerked left and smashed it into the railing, then took off. The car spun out of control, straight into the path of one of the sedans, crumpling both cars in an explosion of glass and metal.

Freeman grabbed his phone from the dash and dialled.

“Kaso!” he yelled. “I need help!”

“On it,” Kaso said.

Another sedan raced ahead, pulling up beside him. The window rolled down and a man in a dark suit aimed a gun towards the truck. Freeman glanced over once before spinning the wheel, smacking the car across two lanes, straight into the edge of a highway sign. He raced forward without looking back.

“Dammit,” said Kaso. “Dammit, there’s a problem.”

“What?” snapped Freeman. “What’s wrong?”

But then he saw it. Up a head, across the road, a roadblock. Five more sedans, agents on the ground. There was nowhere to go. He

leaned Tundra back in her seat, made sure the seatbelt was tight, and floored it.

“Kaso,” he yelled. “You have to warn them! The mole isn’t Tundra. It *isn’t Tundra*. It’s—”

The front tires hit the roadblock, bursting on impact. They fishtailed for a second, and then hit the concrete barrier ahead, flipped into the air, landing on the roof and skidding in a sea of sparks and shattered glass.

When they stopped, the world kept spinning. Freeman undid his seat belt, landing on his back, cutting himself with every movement. He pulled his gun from under the seat, crawled over to Tundra and checked for a pulse.

Footsteps came closer, guns clicking into place, and before he could stop it, a hand grabbed him by the neck and dragged him out through the window. He tried to shoot, but a rifle butt hit his hand, then his head. He crumpled, eyes losing focus, waiting for it to end.

He heard another set of footsteps, and saw a shadow looking down on him, head tilting to the side.

“That’s them,” said Elvis. “Bring ‘em in.”

