Z H A O Y A N G

T H E B L I G H T C R I M S O N D U S K

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Thank you for your understanding, and I hope you enjoy the journey ahead.

-Zhao Yang-

The Blight

Crimson Dusk

Prologue

"Lord!!!"

My vision erupted in a tempest of pulsing, prismatic bursts. White noise crashed against my eardrums like brutal waves, massive sound battering my skull with relentless force. I had no conception of where I was. Sprawled across the floor? Blown skyward? Or had I already been torn asunder by the blast?

I tried to twitch my fingers, but my brain's commands vanished into the ether. I could feel nothing at all—not my limbs, not my flesh. But that smell... charred, *putrid*, like meat left to cook and rot. I smelled blood as well, metallic and sharp, mingled with the acrid bite of gunpowder. The very heat of it all seemed to burn my nostrils.

The white noise continued its relentless buzz within my head. Static electricity danced across my face like invisible threads, racing through my blood vessels. Something drew closer; a weight settled upon my chest.

"Quick!!! Give him the shot!!!"

More voices, louder now but muffled, like shouting underwater. Their screaming churned the fog in my mind into a violent maelstrom. Words threaded through the cacophony, phrases tangled with those disgusting odours... but where the hell was I?

Not a clue in the world why I was lying here. And why the cold, hard surface pressing against my back.

The white noise still roared.

Through it all, however, a silhouette suddenly pierced the buzzing haze. That arrogant, flowing hair. Those broad shoulders. That back—one I had witnessed countless times yet remained frustratingly indistinct. I know him. Know it as surely as my own reflection. He is why I came.

My throat suddenly constricted, likely from blood pouring from ruptured organs that had finally surrendered, yet I felt nothing. No suffocation, no pain. Though the vertigo-inducing screams in my head continued their relentless assault. Then understanding struck: what was slowly drowning my lungs was not blood but something else entirely.

It was sorrow. Pure, undiluted grief somehow made liquid, seeping into every corner of my chest. My eyes burned, pressure mounting beneath the blur.

"This blood loss!!! —We're running out of time—"

Had I found him? *Had I finally caught up to him?*

"Portal—"

The colourful patches before me darkened as blurry shadows crept in, followed by shouts that bled into a single roar, waves morphing into dense blocks of noise that hammered my skull. I strained to focus, rolling my eyes, but the haze refused to sharpen.

Something leaked from my eyes. Tears, I supposed, yet they felt wrong somehow... thick and viscous. Like a haunting note, a delayed farewell.

I felt as though I had stopped breathing entirely.

The figure hovering above me reached out. Not a tendril but a hand, distinctly human, with fingers. They might have touched my face, my skin too numb to discern. They tilted my head slightly to one side. The hot wetness crawled across the bridge of my nose and seeped into my other eye.

Then came the red. Not merely a splash but an entire ocean of it. The white noise amplified to unbearable levels as patches of black and red conquered what little light remained.

I finally surrendered, abandoning all attempts to translate this riot of colours into anything comprehensible. My eyelids, mercifully, began drawing the curtain on this bewildering spectacle.

No. Wait. I had forgotten something. Something of... critical importance.

Did I actually find him? Why was I looking for him?

I tried to scream, but my mouth filled with more of that sorrow. Warm and viscous, flooding my throat. I fought for breath, but my lungs, chest, even my vocal cords might as well have belonged to another. I forced them to vibrate, curled what remained of my useless tongue, struggling to produce even a single sound.

A name, any name. But who was I even trying to call?

The silhouette in my mind crumbled to ash, breaking into dust so thin it seemed to seep directly into my nerves. It latched onto something deep inside me, and that urgent, familiar feeling finally morphed into a word.

Theo. Theo.

That was it. That was who I was coming for.

"It's closing!!"

"Lord—"

Where the hell did he go?

"Get your ass over here now!!"

Hands moved me closer to whatever was making that deafening white noise. My flesh was struck by a faint spark—barely a slap, but enough to hit my off switch.

The jumble of names and voices finally faded to nothing. That molten heat and stickiness peeled away from my mind, and the scene in front of me blinked out completely. The sounds surrendered to a dark abyss, draining slowly. My world went dead quiet.

No, that's not right.

I was the one who'd been pulled out, extracted from that broken meat puppet I used to call a body.

I drifted through darkness that felt strangely like home, knowing somehow, I would always end up back here in this void. I sensed I could hear again, breathe again, but only because I'd shed the constraints of that physical shell. But, how did I know any of this?

As though I had been here before. Like this return was inevitable—a homecoming to the origin point of everything. And then an echo, or maybe just an instinct, nudging me.

Open your eyes, reach out, listen. Feel.

I felt I floated downward, slowly, like a feather caught in the rhythm of perfect stillness, guiding me toward... something.

So I opened my eyes.

Blood-red memories exploded across my mind like lightning splitting open the night sky. Jagged truths ripped through my brain, like a million blades slicing across my mind.

And there he was—the long-haired man with features and eyes almost similar to mine, wrapped in those white robes, with that lethal smile on his face. The man who wore my father's face better than I ever could.

I felt disgust, like the elegant corner of his coat just slashing through my veins. Yet somehow the fabric was still purely clean, untouched by the absolute hatred boiling up from my core.

I watched myself running flat-out, boots hammering against metal flooring, pushing every muscle to its breaking point.

A voice suddenly cut through the void, perhaps someone's desperate shout: *Aim for the energy pillar!*

But I was deaf to it then. Blind rage in my heart, poison hatred in my blood, thick toxic grief clogging my chest. They drowned out everything else.

I watched as my past self-levelled my gun at him. This time, I had to end him. Failure wasn't an option. Not one more fucking day of him breathing. I could not afford to fail. *Not anymore*.

Trigger pulled. The man fired at the exact same moment.

The scene slowed to a sadistic crawl, like some cruel mockery. I watched as the blinding laser beams erupted from his weapon, slicing through the air before punching clean through my right shoulder. Saw my own flesh explode outward, bone fragments glittering white against the red mist, scattered by the laser's punishing force.

The impact hurled me backward like a discarded doll, my gun arm tearing free from my shoulder in a sickening ballet of rending muscle and snapping tendons. Flesh charred, bone splintered to dust, all turning into that nauseating stench in microseconds.

Light exploded, blinding burns. The shock wave hurled me onto a floating platform; the back of my head crashed violently against the cold surface before being flung in another direction. Not that it mattered. Not that anything mattered except my bullet.

My vision tunnelled, fixated solely on the projectile arcing toward that wretch at the carousel's edge.

I watched in horror as my shot drifted off-course, veering into nothingness beyond the memory's boundary. The satisfaction of seeing his smug face disintegrate never came. No closure, no justice. Just a rage that ignited like delayed napalm, spreading from my shattered shoulder through every cell, climbing up my throat as I fought to unleash a scream that would not come.

If I could just rip him apart, see the light leave his eyes... I would gladly trade my last breath for it.

I howled hopelessly like something feral, rage consuming me like wildfire through dry timber. I had to end him. Had to tear him limb from goddamn limb, grind him to dust, make him feel every second of suffering. I etched his face into whatever was left of my mangled flesh, took every word he'd ever spoken and ground them between my teeth, letting them seep into my nerve endings, my marrow, my soul. I was still conscious, still *thinking*—which meant I still had a shot. Revenge was still on the table.

But even my white-hot hatred for that worthless piece of shit could not explain the soul-crushing anguish flooding my chest. A glacial cold spread through me, faster now, as memory fragments stretched and twisted into bloody hieroglyphics, thrashing wildly in all directions. My anger suddenly froze solid, and something massive and invisible dragged my consciousness down into deeper darkness.

Sylvain's face, the scorching laser, my shredded flesh—all vanished. But the heat, the crimson fury, the rage remained trapped in the darkness. One by one, images succumbed to eerie lilac flames, curling into ghostly ash. In one burning memory fragment, Sylvain's carefree, almost gleeful laugh dissolved into frigid light.

Before that scene burned completely, the farewell song reached me again.

"Theo? Dead."

This time, the lyrics were damn clear.

That verdict froze me solid. I was encased in pale violet ice as I lost all control, plummeting deeper into the void. The free-fall clawed at my throat with the need to scream, but I couldn't make a sound, couldn't break free from my own paralyzed mind, couldn't reach that figure in the memory crumbling to ash.

That tall silhouette walking away forever.

More scenes orbiting me like dying stars, flaring to life and then extinguishing. All those pointless fights just to feel something, the silences and cold wars, the accusatory questions. Theo's sleeping form beside me during those rare nights I'd wake and watch him. Bodies colliding then retreating, lips desperate then distant, fingers intertwining before tearing apart... those ceaseless dances of us, finally ending.

I saw, too, that cigarette box of him, and those eyes that looked at me with that impossible mixture of adoration, perhaps regret and... disgust.

Bitter pain took form. Thousands of phantom hands stretching from the void to strangle me. Grief poured like concrete down my throat; I thrashed against it uselessly as more fingers latched onto me, dragging me toward the end of this nightmare. Inky poison invaded my lungs, expanding, endlessly expanding until my bones fractured under the strain. My ribcage snapped, innards and gore exploding outward in a ghastly fountain, drenching my dying thoughts in pitch-black and crimson.

Senses gradually withdrew. I saw his cocky half-smile when we first met. It was something I didn't want to admit: a part of him I liked.

The final memory burned away.

I couldn't reach him, not anymore.

The macabre slideshow flickered to black, and I finally let go of that last, useless breath.

Ah...

A soft, resigned sigh rippled through the emptiness. Tinged with regret, yet achingly familiar.

Then came those hands I would recognize anywhere, tenderly gathering what remained of my fractured soul. That gentle strength wrapped around me like a cocoon, soothing my splintered essence the way a mother would calm a feverish child...

Rest. I'm here.

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Chapter 1

The Eldest

"Child, you should rest a while," said the white-clad woman standing by the bed, her voice unhurried.

I blinked hard. When my eyelids touched, a dry, searing pain knifed through them, the swollen skin beneath radiating heat like a furnace.

The pain told me this was real.

Last night when I'd jerked awake to find myself no longer caged in that blinding prison. And when I'd scrambled toward my second sister in the next bed, clutching her while we both fought to swallow our sobs, I knew for certain this wasn't just another drug trip messing with my head. I'd pinched my thigh hard enough to bruise.

The wall clock ticked away actual seconds, nothing like those fake digits in that prison. The cold floor that chilled my feet was real. My sisters, flesh and blood, real. We'd busted out of Astragan alive.

Forty hours without sleep, if that holo readout on the wall wasn't just another sick joke being played on us.

My tears had dried up hours ago, leaving my eyes so puffy that everything blurred like I was seeing the world through frosted glass. Still, my nerves stayed wound tight as tripwire, ears straining for the rhythm of my sisters' breathing and the slightest whisper of movement in this strange place.

People kept shuffling past our door; I'd catalogued their footsteps by now. The light padding of nurses, the heavier tread of guards, and those muffled conversations that died whenever they passed our ward. The tiniest sound would snap my drifting mind back to high alert, like a slap to the face.

My second sister and little one were out cold in the beds beside mine. They'd cried themselves empty. The youngest hadn't stopped sobbing for a whole day after they'd brought us back.

I shifted my gaze to the IV lines that disappeared beneath their skin, avoiding any acknowledgment of the woman hovering near my bed. I'd given her just one quick once-over.

She wore that same sickening white I'd hate till the day I died. But Astragan's white had been violently aggressive, like it could burn. This woman's white had subtlety... more like the pale glow of a winter moon. Her cape with its sharp lines draped over angular shoulders, like moonlight washing over some tall, forbidding solemn monolith.

Beautiful in a way, but just as cold and lifeless.

I shifted my gaze to the IV bag hanging from its stand. Two days on the drip with nothing but normal vitals, so it wasn't laced with anything nasty, just glucose like they claimed. I wiggled my toes; the gash on my knee had been treated and the throbbing reduced to a dull whisper. They'd told the truth about that much at least.

But we were defenceless against another betrayal. If, and God it terrified me to even think it, this place was just another elaborate stage for torture... we'd crumble like paper dolls. We had nothing left. Not a single drop of strength left to fight back.

My fingers twisted in the bedsheet as her footsteps whispered closer. Pure instinct kicked in. I yanked my knees to my chest and inched toward the far side of the mattress, my free hand snaking behind to close around the stolen scalpel beneath my pillow. Trust was a bridge I'd burned to ashes—not for this woman, not with anyone in this place.

She halted three steps away when the monitor betrayed my panic with its high-pitched warning, my heart hammering against my ribs. Without a word, she drifted backward.

I kept my gaze lowered, refusing to look at her, fixated instead on the bluish-purple veins standing out against my skeletal fingers as I clenched them. From that sterile white prison to this equally lifeless hospital room. Just another place with that minimalist futuristic shit I hated. My eyes still burned raw in the unnatural light.

"Should you require anything, the screen will summon assistance," I heard fabric rustling as she raised her hand. I could detect the faint whisper as her fingertips sliced through the air. Through my lashes, I watched her gesture toward a holoscreen that hovered above the end of my bed.

"Regular meals shall be permitted in approximately eight hours. I shall arrange for something gentle on your system. If you require nourishment before then, I can consult the medical team."

Her tone maintained that infuriating evenness, almost mechanical. Like the best AI ever designed, mimicking human concern with perfect technical execution but missing the soul entirely. My focus drifted to the IV in my arm, memories flooding back of our arrival two days ago, when armed guards had escorted us into this ward, and my first encounter with this woman. When those so-called "doctors" had approached with what they euphemistically called "sedatives," the needles catching that same merciless light that populated my worst flashbacks, I'd shoved my terrified sisters behind me and grabbed the first weapon I could find. A surgical scalpel from an unattended tray.

"Back off!" I snarled, slashing the scalpel through air, daring these white-clad strangers to test me. The electronic collars that had kept us docile were gone; some feral part of me had woken up. For the first time in years, I could fight back.

Then this woman appeared, parting the sea of medic like some ethereal ghost.

"I am Aurora Vidal, Director of VSS... Lord Faucher's betrothed. You... please calm yourself," she stammered, palms raised facing us.

Replaying the moment now in my mind, I could see those flawless amber eyes fixated on the steel in my grip, that porcelain facade of control fracturing just enough to reveal something human underneath. Her credentials meant nothing to me, but that name, that *family name* pierced through my rage like a bolt of lightning.

Surrounded and outnumbered as we were, I hesitated, squared my shoulders, retreated half a step, and reluctantly lowered the quivering tool. But my fingers remained locked around the handle in a bloodless grip, the weapon still very much mine.

She had mentioned Faucher. The name of *that person* Papa had told us about.

Whatever happens, trust Francis Faucher. Listen, he's just a bit shorter than me, with neatly trimmed straight hair, and those same beautiful purplish eyes you girls have. Just make him take that damn mask off, and you'll see. Oh, and he has a mole behind his ear, he probably doesn't even know about it. Remember that.

Papa had pulled us against his chest, soothing us as we wept, just like he always did.

My God, look at you three, you grew taller now my sweethearts. It's okay now, it's okay, shhhh ...Papa's here to save you.

Those were his last words.

"What exactly is this place?" I asked, yanking myself back from that memory spiral. Stay focused. Stay sharp. Papa had entrusted my sisters' lives to me; falling to pieces wasn't an option.

"You're in the Faucher family's private estate. This is a guest suite on the ground level, temporarily converted for medical purposes," Aurora turned slightly, gesturing toward the doorway. "Out and to the right leads to the main hall, if you're wondering about the exit."

I raised my eyes to hers, truly facing her for the first time since our arrival. Aurora's gaze dropped to my raw, swollen eyes, and something flickered behind her calculated exterior. The ghost of empathy, perhaps.

"We're allies, not jailers. This distinction matters." she said.

"Those girls... over a thousand of them." I bit back the acid in my tone, reminding myself these people had, at minimum, freed us from hell: "Why were only the three of us brought here, while everyone else was taken elsewhere?" I didn't even know if the others had survived. Aurora's gaze slid away, her eyelids falling shut with what seemed like resignation. As if the algorithm had finally processed the query she'd been programmed to avoid.

"Your father."

The mention of Papa stole my breath, but couldn't stop the molten grief surging up my throat, spreading like poison through my chest.

"The arrangement was between Lord Faucher and him specifically. Faucher assumes guardianship of you three now. For the specifics, you'll need direct consultation with him, I believe," she paused, her lips compressing to a bloodless line, that flawless composure developing its first fracture."...His condition isn't promising either."

Her knuckles whitened as she tightened her grip.

"How did Papa die, and where is his body?" I hissed through a jaw clenched so tight my molars threatened to crack. Since yesterday, she had persistently dodged this one question, sealing her lips in silence, exactly as she was doing now.

I wrenched my gaze away, a sudden flare of anger bringing tears that burned behind my eyes. I trusted Papa, of course I did—but whether these strangers were players in yet another cruel performance, I couldn't tell.

Who exactly was this Francis Faucher? What power did he wield? What desperate bargain had Papa struck with him? All questions remained mysteries. Everything about these past few years felt too surreal, and I had no idea what came next, with no one telling us what to do, whether to stay or flee. Never again would there be certainty.

"Regarding your father... my deepest condolences."

The same hollow phrase she'd offered forty-eight hours ago. I met it with stone silence. Aurora exhaled softly, almost convincingly human. She turned on her heel, and glided from the room. The barrier door shimmered as it dissolved with a whisper, then recongealed as she left.

The minutes crawled by. Slowly, the room's ambient lighting shifted to a warmer spectrum, the harsh glare softening as if responding to the thinning tension. Still white, but no longer that sickening sterile glare.

I raised my head slowly, eyes fixed on the closed barrier, ears tuned to the rhythm of my sisters' breathing. They were steady, untroubled.

My wrist rotated as I drew out the scalpel from its hiding place beneath the blanket. The subdued light traced its outlines, the polished metal reflecting back my swollen, bloodshot eyes. I allowed them to close for just a moment, then slid the tiny weapon back under my pillow.

Should we run? And even if we could, where the hell would we go?

I exhaled heavily, collapsing back against the soft pillow. I let myself pretend it was stuffed with cotton from home. *Real* cotton, hand-picked and carded by the aunties from our underground small city, a place now so distant I couldn't even point to which slice of the horizon might hide it.

From our earliest memories, we'd joined everyone to harvest the ripe cotton, tiny fingers learning to pluck the fluffy bolls without tearing them.

Once Papa came with us. Our haul that day had spilled over the sides of the collection bags, cotton so downy it rivalled those rare clouds we'd glimpse when we were permitted topside during the cooler seasons. When the temperature dipped below 40 and the air wouldn't scorch your lungs.

Papa had this way of selecting the most perfect cotton puffs, tucking them like precious jewels into my sisters' and my ponytails while we trudged alongside the neighbourhood women to the processing plant.

The way those women melted around him, stifling giggles behind weathered hands, like teenagers rather than the hardened survivors they were. Nobody stood a chance against his smile. Not a soul.

I'm sorry, Papa. God, I'm so, so sorry.

These damn tears keep breaking through every time I let my guard down. Home's not real anymore, is it? Without him, it's just some word in a dead language, a stupid fairytale we can't go back to. Now everywhere's just... geometry. Four walls, a ceiling, a floor.

He was our true north, and the compass shattered when he left.

The barrier door's whisper-soft melting jerked me from sleep like a gunshot. That faint sound of hard fibres breaking... to my hypersensitive ears, it crashed like shattered glasses.

I snapped upright, instantly alert despite my body's protests. Dried tears had cemented into a crust along my eyelids, making every blink feel like sandpaper against my swollen, fire-raw eyes. They'd cranked the lights back to that stupid white that made everything look sterilized and dead.

In the beds flanking mine, sheets rustled with movement. My sisters were awake too.

Two figures glided in. Masked women wrapped in that blank white guided a floating cart that... Thank God, I saw no scalpels, no syringes, no restraints. Instead, a clear water jug caught the harsh light, surrounded by what looked like... dishware?

I dragged my hand across my face; Aurora's earlier comments about meal schedules suddenly clicking into place. The digital readout on the wall pulsed 7:00 AM in light blue numerals. I squinted, trying to make out the smaller font beneath the time—some date I didn't really trust, along with ambient readings for temperature and humidity that all blurred together in my exhausted vision.

I slept exactly eight hours. Which meant my sisters had been out for nearly thirty hours straight. I twisted toward the furthest bed, where my little sister had tucked herself into a defensive ball beneath the covers. She knuckled sleep from her eyes, her bottom lip already beginning that telltale quiver that she might start crying again.

As the cart hovered closer to us, my hand slipped beneath my pillow on pure instinct, fingertips reconnecting with that sliver of metal. I felt the scalpel's handle, cold against my skin.

The twin attendants moved with this creepy grace, their steps matching each other perfectly, like someone had choreographed them down to the microsecond. They positioned their cart at the foot of our beds and struck identical poses, hands folded all prim and proper over their cores, spines straight as boards as they did this shallow, robotic bow.

Their hair—just like Aurora's—was pulled back into tight buns, the colour a silver-white, so devoid of warmth.

"Good morning, ladies," one said, though I couldn't tell which one right away. "From this day forth, we shall serve as your caretakers."

It took me several seconds to figure out whose lips were moving behind the masks. They looked... identical, in height, features, eyes, everything. Basically carbon copies of each other. My sisters and I exchanged glances, totally speechless for a moment. My second sister scooted sideways toward our little one's bed, muscles tensed to jump in if anything went wrong.

"Who sent you to us?" I kept my voice neutral.

"We have been dispatched from V.I.D.A.L., scholars temporarily assigned by Lady Vidal to attend to your requirements until Lord Faucher provides further instructions."

"Vidal is your family name?" My brain connected the dots to Aurora Vidal. These must be her robots or something. And... "Scholars?" The pair exchanged glances with this weird synchronized awkwardness, like marionettes sharing a single string.

"V.I.D.A.L. stands for Virtual Intelligence and Data Archival, the central neural network and resource infrastructure of Inoasis."

My tongue was already forming questions about what exactly they did when Papa's face flashed through my mind, stopping the words cold. I needed to keep my mouth shut. These weren't Faucher's people, which meant any screw-up could blow our cover.

And we still had no clue whether Francis Faucher was even alive and awake. Whoever this Lord guy was, I had to keep our cards close to our chest until he showed up. If he turned out to be our target, we'd save time; if not... I'd deal with that mess when I got there.

The caretakers started moving. They came to my bed and my second sister's first, doing some simple stuff on the touchscreens at our bedsides. Along both edges of each bed, these softly glowing white fragments popped up, hovering in perfect alignment like shards of glowing ice. The translucent puzzle pieces assembled themselves in midair above our laps, building what gradually took shape as small tables. And then the glowing seams between fragments faded, leaving behind surfaces as smooth and seamless as if they'd been made in one piece.

"Peb, don't move." My second sister's voice dropped to this steel-edged whisper, her eyes tracking the caretaker looming over our youngest's bed.

"Where... where are we?" Our little sister squirmed backward until she was practically swallowed by her pillow, voice

cracking around the edges, tears about to spill. I shot her a sharp headshake, signaling her to stay quiet.

My fingers stayed locked around the scalpel beneath my pillow, ready to go. My second sister pressed her index finger against her lips. The little one pulled the blanket up to cover half her face and shut up.

In Astragan, silence had been totally pointless against the electronic eyes that never blinked, the collars that monitored our pulses, the hidden systems that tracked our every move. I swept my gaze across the ceiling's corners, hunting for that telltale glint of surveillance, though I knew better. Tech this advanced probably didn't need anything visible to track us.

The IV stuck in my vein, the medical equipment humming beside me... they could be listening devices for all I knew. Still, keeping quiet around these creepy strangers might buy us some time, however brief. For what? I couldn't say. This constant readiness felt partly like bullshitting myself, as if staying battle-ready gave some meaning to our existence here. A comforting lie I told myself to keep from losing it completely.

The caretakers methodically arranged what looked like food on our glass tables, making several trips between the cart and our bedsides. Finally, they filled each glass with water that at least looked normal, before retreating to their original spots. We stared down at our "meal," if we could even call it that.

Before us sat perfectly uniform cubes that didn't even look like actual food: Awful blocks with the texture of canned ham but in colours that screamed poison. Neon green, light blue, grey. Block after block of blended, compressed meat thing sat on separate white plates, looking like smooth building blocks. Only the water in the glass seemed to have escaped whatever processing nightmare had created the rest.

The caretakers bowed once more. "Ladies," they chimed together, "please enjoy your meal."

Was this the first phase of reprogramming us? Some creative new torture method? Even Astragan's bland potatoes and undercooked rice looked like gourmet food compared to these... things.

The unnatural colours seemed designed as warning signs, nature's universal way of screaming "toxic," and the stench rising from them... like rotten eggs. None of us reached for anything on the table; we weren't stupid enough to put these shits in our mouths.

The door dissolved again, fibres unweaving themselves like a digital curtain. The caretakers pivoted in perfect unison, folding into identical bows as a familiar figure stepped through.

"Good morning, children." Aurora glided in, today wearing a relatively looser long dress, no longer as stiff and formal as the previous three days. Her silver-white hair, long enough to reach her knees, flowed from a high ponytail, the ends gathered through a metallic ring, while her heels made rhythmic taps on the floor as she approached.

The caretakers stayed in their submissive posture, heads bowed. She approached them, lips barely moving as she whispered something that made them nod slightly before pushing the cart toward the exit.

"How are you feeling today? Are you experiencing any discomfort?" Aurora moved toward the monitoring panels at our bedsides, eyes scanning the displays before checking our IV lines. "Please inform us if you experience nausea or digestive distress. Severe malnutrition often causes stomach upset during refeeding."

Nausea? What an incredible timing.

"What are these?" I flicked my gaze from the... things to Aurora's face, muscles in my neck going rigid. The substance yielded reluctantly, like cheap gelatine left to set for way too long, releasing another wave of that nasty smell.

A condescending smile flickered at the corners of Aurora's mouth. "To Outsiders, this might seem rather primitive." She swept her hand across a section of wall I hadn't noticed, summoning a holographic display that shimmered into existence midair. Another gesture produced a confirmation tone, followed by a chair generating itself beside my bed, fibres weaving themselves from nothing, just like our tables had. The casual display of technology was obviously meant to impress us. Or intimidate us.

"This constitutes standard Inoasian nutrition. Resources in our society are not squandered on such... archaic luxuries as traditional food. We engineer nutritional requirements through laboratory cultivation and molecular compression techniques. Each serving requires no preparation, remains viable for eight years, and contains precisely one day's nutritional requirements. Per meal daily. Maximum efficiency, minimum waste."

"You seriously don't have anything else?"

I kept my expression neutral, casually resting my hand on the table's smooth surface, fingertips searching for the vanished seams to figure out if they'd just darkened or truly fused into a solid. "This smells like dead rats."

I heard her suck in a sharp breath, like the false calm before a storm when patience was nearly shot.

"Everyone here consumes this." Her voice dropped several degrees. "In a world where Earth has collapsed beyond recovery, mere sustenance constitutes privilege enough." Her chin lifted slightly, disdain seeping through the cracks of her mask. "Alternative options are not a luxury we shall entertain."

"That's the world in your fantasy," my second sister suddenly jumped in. I turned to see her lounging against her pillow, arms locked across her chest, chin tilted in challenge. "We ate pretty damn well out there."

Aurora's perfect posture went even stiffer, her chin lifting as storm clouds gathered behind her eyes. She rose from the chair with this regal slowness, hands automatically folding at her midsection. That defensive gesture again, like armour she didn't realize she was putting on.

"Our technological advancement surpasses yours by a thousand years." The words fell like ice chips. "These measures ensure humanity's continued survival, not your temporary comfort."

"Abandoning us and then locking yourselves up, this future doesn't seem that great either."

"Pony." I shot my sister a warning glare despite my throbbing eyes. She was playing with fire we couldn't afford. I looked back to Aurora, voice staying neutral. "Just one meal a day, right? And you're sure it's not poisonous?"

The momentary crack in Aurora's composure sealed itself. Emotion drained from her face like water through sand, she looked almost relieved to get back to her script.

"Lord Faucher's directives regarding your protection have been absolute since the contract's inception," she replied, that serene mask firmly back in place. "Your wellbeing falls under his personal oversight. You have nothing to fear whilst under this roof."

If true, we had a temporary shield. Safety, at least until we could sort fact from fiction. But one critical question remained.

"This Lord Faucher, your fiancé, he is Francis Faucher? The current family head?"

"Indeed."

"Where is he now?"

Her body language betrayed everything her face kept hidden. Heartbeat suddenly racing, faster than during her momentary anger. Not anxiety or concern, but something way more primal: guilt, panic. Those perfectly controlled hands tightened until knuckles went purple-white against her skin, tiny rebellions against her carefully maintained calm.

"Intensive care." The words seemed reluctantly dragged out of her. "Deep coma. Recovery... statistically unfavourable."

"Is he sick?" I pressed.

"No." Her gaze flickered away for a second. "He was gravely wounded in the rescue that brought you here."

Under my pillow, my hand loosened its death grip on the scalpel.

Chapter 2

Our first breakfast in Inoasis was hardly pleasant. Steeling myself, I held my breath and slid one of those light blue cubes past my lips, and to my shock, the expected wave of rot never hit my taste buds.

The texture reminded me vaguely of peas, with notes of soy underneath. What it lacked entirely was flavour. No seasonings, no herbs, nothing that might make food actually taste like something. Luxuries that probably didn't exist in this energy-conserving country. It was like unseasoned beans boiled in plain water, edible but barely, which already counted as a surprise.

We were absolutely starving. Discovering the food wasn't as impossible to swallow as I'd imagined, I still couldn't stomach the alien colour palette.

So I took my fork and mashed all the cubes on my plate, stirring the mess into a uniform brown sludge that at least didn't look toxic. My sisters caught on instantly, their utensils clanging against their plates as they followed my lead.

That 'Lady' apparently found our table manners lacking. She let out a soft huff before gracefully turning and leaving the ward.

"Tch," Pony's fork smacked against her plate with a disgruntled clang. "Same damn face as those Jacques' assholes."

"Did they just trick us?" Pebble whimpered, fingers pinching her nose shut while she chewed, her voice turning into a nasal drone. Pony shot her a look.

"Don't talk while pinching your nose, little one. Your ears will balloon up and you'll go deaf."

"We need to ask Faucher," I said, already three-quarters through my plate. If I shovelled it down fast enough, my nose wouldn't have time to register what was happening. "What exactly happened to Papa when he entered Inoasis. He seems to have joined Faucher's side."

"Just have him send us home and be done with it," Pony muttered, her face dropping. "Papa's gone. No answer brings him back." She hunched over her remaining food.

If only it were that simple... I ran my fingers around my water glass, the lukewarm liquid leaching heat from my palm where it had flushed angry red from clutching the scalpel's handle. It didn't hurt as much now.

The wounds on my feet were healing too. The raw, flayed skin of my soles barely protested when I shifted my weight. I guessed the IV might contain something to speed up healing. Maybe.

Or perhaps this was another "gift" from my modified genetics. Accelerated healing to complement our unnaturally lengthened lifespan. What other alterations they'd smuggled into my DNA, I didn't know. The super sensitive hearing thing was my curse alone. My sisters didn't share it.

Those two caretakers who had just left were still standing guard outside. Their heartbeats pulsed steadily, their breathing so perfectly timed it was as if they breathed from a shared lung. VIDAL clearly wasn't operating on any normal organizational chart I recognized. No legitimate institution still practiced this level of behavioural conditioning and master-servant hierarchy, at least not in the world I'd known. They called themselves "scholars" rather than employees. Though "servants" might be more accurate.

Their reverent use of "Lady" when addressing Aurora confirmed her position at the top of their pyramid.

But to get the real story about Papa and this mysterious contract thing involving us, we'd need to corner Francis Faucher himself. I knew nothing about the guy except that Papa had trusted him, which was saying something.

And now he was barely hanging on between life and death, and I didn't even know if he was somewhere in this building or halfway across the damn city.

The guards beyond our door made one thing clear: seeing him wouldn't be as simple as asking nicely.

I turned to see Pony pushing away her empty plate, tilting her water glass to drain every last drop, while my little sister was still making faces as she forced the last scraps into her mouth.

Snapping back from my concentrated eavesdropping on the hallway, I stared at the remaining sludge on my plate. I swept it into a pile with my fork, then lifted the plate and shoveled everything into my mouth.

About half an hour later, the two caretakers came back into the room, gliding toward our tables to collect the dishes. Having figured out these robots wouldn't give us anything useful, I kept my mouth shut. Pony, however, never the one to read the room.

"That man, Francis Faucher, where is he now?"

Both women froze, sharing this panicked look. Their identical expressions of shock suggested Pony had just broken the most sacred rule in their little playbook.

"We possess no such information," one finally responded, her voice getting noticeably stiffer. "Lord Faucher remains under the exclusive care of his personal medical staff. We... we lack the necessary clearance to monitor his whereabouts."

"Doesn't your Lady ask them?" Pony cocked her head, looking like butter wouldn't melt in her mouth. I shot her a warning glare. One more question and I'd shut her down myself.

"Unless Lord Faucher explicitly authorizes such inquiries, no one may request or receive information regarding his status," the second caretaker moved toward my sister, her gaze turning to ice.

"I strongly recommend the young lady refrain from addressing Lord Faucher without his proper title."

The rest of the post-meal cleanup went down in dead silence. Pony mercifully kept her mouth shut for once, while I tried to swallow down the burning rage building in my chest.

'Outsiders.' The word hung unspoken but you could practically taste it in the air. Without Papa's mysterious contract protecting us, we'd be worth less than dirt in this locked-up country.

As they got ready to leave, they gave us these polite little nods but wouldn't look us in the eye, like staring at us might contaminate their precious genetic purity.

The footsteps outside our door faded away, only to be replaced by the soft sounds of two new guards taking their spots.

Papa was right. Inoasis had been built on keeping people out, a fancy hideout where only those with supposedly "superior" genes got to live.

"I knew we wouldn't get anything useful out of them," I sighed, sinking back against my pillow, absently rubbing my uncomfortably stuffed stomach. At least the once-daily meal thing was legit. The thought of choking down that fertilizer crap twice a day was enough to make me consider starving myself instead.

"Who says we didn't learn anything? We found out tons," Pony finally showed her smug grin. Both Pebble and I looked at her.

"Other than figuring out they think we're trash?" I raised an eyebrow.

"First," she counted on her finger, "Francis Faucher outranks VIDAL. They can't track where he goes, which means Faucher doesn't trust them enough to give them basic updates."

"Shh," I hissed, pointing frantically at the door before holding up two fingers as a warning. Pony's eyes lit up with understanding. She waved us closer, patting the mattress of her centre bed. We leaned in, but stayed put in our own beds.

"Second," she whispered, "the help we're getting probably isn't coming from Faucher's people. We're not about to get murdered or anything, but we're stuck in this weird middle ground. Protected on paper but surrounded by assholes who didn't sign that contract."

My stomach dropped. *That made total sense*.

We stayed stuck in the ward for another day and night.

Yesterday afternoon, several medical staff came in to check our monitoring screens, probably checking our condition. I expected our stay in this room would drag on for weeks, definitely not days. When they announced our discharge for tomorrow, I was secretly shocked.

Free movement was impossible, of course, no doubt coming with invisible boundaries. I didn't think they'd let us leave this building, though we had no plans to anyway. Still, mentally mapping this fortress, its dimensions, pathways, blind spots seemed necessary. Just in case.

A cage with better furniture and treatment was still a cage. We weren't truly safe yet.

And our main goal was to find Francis Faucher, the master of this house and our supposed guardian. Pony had questioned the medical staff yesterday, only to get the head-shaking of people trained to know nothing. That left Aurora Vidal, his fiancée. But something about that woman... even minimal interaction with her made my skin crawl.

If Faucher turned out to be the same kind of person... I shook my head, stopping my thoughts from drifting toward a future I couldn't control.

It was just past 6 AM, and the room was still dark. Pony and Pebble were still asleep, but I'd had more than enough sleep these past few days.

I'd been awake since five, superhearing picking up the rhythmic click of boot heels. Guards rotating shifts throughout the building, equipment occasionally clanking against combat belts. The twin guards outside our door had cycled through several Vidal replacements already, their

movements given away by whispering fabric and quieter footsteps.

Lying in bed, I remembered the day Papa came to rescue us.

His tactical gear mirrored the uniforms of those soldiers who'd brought us to Inoasis. Their midnight-black outfits had stood out against Astragan's sickly brightness like ink on white paper. To the Jacques guards, Papa's team might as well have painted targets on their chests.

I didn't blame them; Faucher's choice of that stark contrast made perfect sense. After Astragan, the colour white had become a trigger for memories I desperately wanted to forget.

Thinking about it, did all personnel under Faucher's command wear similar dark uniforms, representing a side we could relatively trust? I pressed my palms against tired eyes, my mind trying to identify potential allies besides Vidal. If we ran into such people during our limited exploration, maybe they might give us information on Faucher himself.

At exactly 7:30, the ambient lighting shifted from twilight to blinding dawn. My sisters stirred from sleep, hands instinctively covering sensitive eyes.

"Good morning, ladies. We have confirmed your health parameters and may proceed with discharge," announced one of the Vidals. They arrived in formation. Two nurses to do final wound assessments, yesterday's caretaker duo with our breakfast, and an unfamiliar addition.

This newcomer maintained the required formality, yet something about her was different from the standard template. Upturned eyes with honey-coloured irises. A mask hid her facial features, but those bright eyes provided an unexpected

insight: the Vidals weren't all identical copies from the same mold after all.

She did a slight bow, her silver-white hair perfectly bound except for a single strand that had escaped, swaying gently across her forehead. My gaze tracked down to her nametag.

"...Muli?"

"Greetings, my lady," she raised her head, and I had this weird impression, as if I caught lines resembling a smile at the corners of her eyes. "I am Muli. In conjunction with Kori and Dera, I have been officially appointed to serve as your caretaker from this point forward."

She stepped back, lowering her gaze as medical staff removed the bandages from my feet. Fresh skin had formed across my soles, still thin and sensitive. They applied some cooling gel before sealing it with a transparent film. I wiggled my toes, feeling a tingling sensation on my soles but no pain whatsoever.

We slipped into the cloth shoes they gave us and followed Muli toward the exit. Muli led the way, and the ward door automatically dissolved as we got close, and we left the sterile whiteness behind.

We entered a corridor so dark it seemed to eat light, with only soft amber glow flowing from recessed panels along the walls. The space above us vanished into darkness.

My eyes struggled with the shift in lighting, making it impossible to spot any ceiling or surveillance equipment. The floor beneath was made of some matte material, not quite like ceramic tiles, more likely some synthetic metal.

The temperature dropped immediately—a penetrating cold that cut through our thin hospital gowns. They hadn't given us any blankets or coats to fight off the cold.

Pebble didn't complain, but I still silently signalled Pony to keep her close. As the chill settled against my exposed skin, I momentarily forgot all the New Human upgrades they'd forced on us.

Muli ahead of us turned her head to glance at us, not breaking stride. The other two quietly followed behind us.

The corridor ended in a sharp left turn, opening into a bigger chamber housing an elevator. Its walls rippled with liquid-like reflectivity, our reflections breaking apart and reassembling with each step we took. Here, finally, a ceiling overhead, lightened by warm lighting that somehow lit everything without casting shadows. Before us stood the elevator itself. It was a transparent capsule reinforced with dark steel. As we stepped inside, concentric rings of light pulsed beneath our feet, tracking our movements.

I watched as Muli pressed her palm against what looked like an ordinary section of the capsule's transparent wall. Light cascaded across her hand, scanning biometric markers, before a holographic panel of floor options glowed.

She selected level 3.

I barely had time to register seven total options. B2 glowed an ominous red, probably marking the lowest basement level, while the remaining floors shimmered with amber indicators.

Another identical corridor greeted us when we got out. We were brought to a wall that wouldn't have looked like a door if not for a screen. Muli repeated the authentication process, her palm triggering an intricate scan before the midnight-

black barrier dissolved, fibres pulling back to create an entrance.

"Ladies," the three Vidals stepped aside, with Muli taking the lead. "These are your assigned quarters. The contract has stipulated shared accommodation initially, with flexibility for separate rooms when you feel prepared for that transition."

"This works for now." I replied, taking the first step forward into the warmed space.

My attention immediately went up to the skylight spanning the ceiling. Beyond the angled glass stretched absolute darkness, not natural night, but the artificial void beneath Inoasis's protective barrier, interrupted only by scattered pinpricks of distant city light bleeding through.

Three identical beds seemed to float in the dim space, their minimal frames barely visible against the deep charcoal flooring. Amber light seeped from hidden wall panels, bathing everything in a gentle glow that softened the manufactured darkness above.

"They've actually got carpet in here," Pony noted, genuine surprise in her voice as she guided Pebble toward the window to look at the artificial night.

"Synthetic fibres," either Kori or Dera corrected briefly. Pony rolled her eyes.

Each bed had a neatly folded stack of white fabric. I claimed the one nearest the exit and examined the materials they'd provided. Indeed, smoother than any cotton or polyester I'd ever felt, without even a single wrinkle.

They said these were our temporary wardrobes, with separate formal and casual options sized for each of us. They

confirmed that the innermost bed had Pebble's size, and our little sister didn't object to that spot.

While Pony helped our youngest get dressed, I gathered my assigned clothing and went behind the privacy screen to the changing area.

The space was surprisingly big, connected to a full bathroom. I knocked the walls to check for hollow spaces, scanned corners for any hidden devices. Everything seemed solid and private.

I exhaled, relaxing my shoulders. I needed to at least try to trust the man Papa had put his faith in. For better or worse, we were guests under his protection now.

The mirror reflected a stranger wearing my face. Like all Astragan's test subjects, my body had been reduced to angles and hollows. Sunken cheeks, wrists like twigs, ankles that looked ready to snap under my minimal weight.

The white clothes only made this ghostly quality worse, their pristine fabric almost glowing against the changing room's dim lighting. The structured shoulders tapered sharply to a waist secured by a metallic silver belt. Very... *Vidal*, but we had no choice at the moment. If I had to identify what made me uncomfortable, any other colour would do. Just replace the damn white.

My sisters had also changed, the uniformity highlighting our shared fragility. The three of us together... we looked terribly skinny, as if we might faint over with the slightest push.

"Lady Vidal has arranged for additional clothing sets to be delivered," Dera noted, watching Pony fidget with her high collar, her eyes dropped, mockingly. "Should you have specific requirements, we are authorized to relay them."

That frost-laden tone basically implied: Be grateful for what you've been given.

"No, this is fine. Thank you." I tried to make my smile look more genuine. "What's next on our schedule?"

"Today's orientation includes the public meeting area and Lord Faucher's personal library, the spaces you have been granted access to," Kori explained.

"Lord Faucher has specified that your education shall fall under V.I.D.A.L. supervision," Muli added, her tone slightly less robotic than her counterparts. "You shall be introduced to Inoasis technologies and information systems over the coming cycle."

School, then. Just in a glorified prison.

We swapped the impractical slippers for more substantial boots and followed our handlers into the corridor. Dera and Kori took the lead position, while Muli fell back.

When I glanced over my shoulder to check on my sisters, I caught something unexpected. An unreadable expression in Muli's eyes that disappeared the second our gazes met.

Chapter 3

I never imagined the library would become our most visited space. I had no clue what a library might look like a thousand years in the future; when I first saw this place, I thought it was some spacious lounge or maybe a fancy reception room.

There were no actual books here, no dusty collection of paper relics. Each "book" was a transparent interactive module, sleekly packaged in metallic cases that connected directly with the system when you pulled them from their slots. The shelving units themselves seemed to float, their undersides lit up warmly. No hard corners anywhere, just organic curves that guided your eye from one section to another.

Light spilled from behind ridged panels, casting ribbons of light and shadow across charcoal-tinted surfaces. Both open and relatively private corners were furnished with burgundy cushions, even featuring supportive soft pillows, letting you find your preferred spot to read after activating a tablet.

The sprawling saga of Inoasis, its evolution, innovations, and two centuries of history, all waited there, ready to be simplified or turned into visual presentations based on what you wanted to read.

I stumbled upon some fiction by local writers, but the overall collection still leaned heavily toward engineering and tech stuff.

After that first day, we fell into a routine. Wake up, eat, then head straight to the library until nightfall. Thanks to Papa giving Pony and me the chance for education, we didn't hit major obstacles when absorbing unfamiliar vocabulary and catching up on the years of required education we'd missed. Pebble got the kid-glove treatment, with Muli giving her just under three hours daily of picture books and writing practice. She adapted quickly.

Honestly, during these brief three weeks, my constantly guarded heart had slowly begun to lower its defences. Dera and Kori hardly showed up except to deliver meals, sometimes even being replaced by other Vidals.

Only Muli stayed consistently with us. That weirdness I'd sensed about her that first day was probably just my imagination. Since then, she'd been no different from the other Vidals.

Still, Pony had a soft spot for her: "At least she doesn't talk to us like we're morons," she'd said once. Pebble kept it simple. "Teacher Muli" was all she ever called her.

Before we knew it, Pebble turned ten. I casually pulled out a module from the corner of a shelving unit, holding it and extending the panel, though my gaze drifted to my little sister quietly reading at the floating table. Calculating carefully, I realized this marked our fifth year away from home.

Five years. Surely our original hometown had gradually forgotten us, forgotten Papa, no longer our place of belonging.

I lightly touched the panel to activate it, and to my surprise, a musical staff appeared; I hadn't noticed the module was labelled 'L'écho d'Amélie' under the indicator light that classified the book type.

The staff lines gleamed gold across the screen, with the animated notes like tiny sparrows, momentarily perched before flying away into the distance. My fingers floated above these fragments of my homeland when I accidentally brushed against one note.

A bright 'do' cut through the quiet, making me flinch so hard the module almost fell from my grasp. My superhearing, too sharp for comfort, as always.

"Oh, 'L'écho d'Amélie'. That is Lord Faucher's favourite," Muli said, walking over after hearing my startled reaction. "The entire top row of this unit contains his scores."

"He... knows music?"

"It was his greatest talent, actually," Muli answered. She'd stopped wearing her mask weeks ago, but the small smile now playing at the corners of her mouth was something I rarely saw. "He possesses exceptional talent for music and writing."

Rich people and their endless talents. No surprise there. That's what privilege buys you. But the strange thing was...

"You seem to know him well." Even as a Vidal.

"It is hardly a secret, my lady," she reached toward the shelf and grabbed another module, activating it. "This is one of Lord Faucher's original compositions."

Les Vagues que Je N'ai Jamais Connues. Another string of words I couldn't understand.

"What does this mean?" I asked, pointing at the lit-up panel in her hands. I couldn't even begin to wrap my tongue around those syllables. Muli's eyebrows twitched slightly, as if searching for the right translation.

"'The Waves I Have Never Known,' it is French." She looked up at me, asking in return, "My lady, when you lived outside, did France still exist as a country?"

"Pretty sure it did... I heard people mention it," I said, shutting down my panel. "But down in the tunnels, nobody really cares about flags or borders anymore. After the world burns, you're just trying to make it to tomorrow." That nearly hopeless environment was something Muli probably couldn't truly get, I thought.

"I understand." She collected the panel from my hand and slotted both modules back into their places on the shelving unit.

"Well," I ran my eyes over the remaining titles, all musical scores from what I could tell. "By the time you all left Earth, the outside was pretty much toast anyway."

"We do not prejudge an uncertain future. People's minds change with circumstances." Muli turned her back to me. "I can prepare Inoasis's daily news updates for you, but before that, I suggest you might start considering official names for yourselves, ones you shall use for life."

Right. From our first step into this place, seeing the puzzled looks from the Vidals during introductions, I realized it was time for us three sisters to choose official names for ourselves. This was also something Papa had hoped we would do once we learned to read.

I instinctively looked up at L' echo d' A m elie. The title of the music score gave off a subtle glow, reminding me again of those little birds, free to fly and perch as they pleased.

"Muli, when do you think Lord Faucher is going to wake up? Or... will he ever?"

"He will." She didn't look up, busy switching to more suitable content for Pebble, placing the completed module in the charging dock on the table.

"Don't rumours say he's nearly permanently paralyzed? If he never wakes up... won't Inoasis be...?" Unstable? Forever *sealed?* Bathed in eternal night?

"Believe in the power of belief, my lady."

Dawn hadn't even broken on the 27th day when Pony and I jolted awake, tangled in our sheets at the sound of muffled crying. Pebble sat upright, one trembling hand clutching her chest while the other pressed against her mouth. Between ragged breaths, she managed to choke out that she felt violently sick before clamping her lips shut, terror flashing in her eyes as if speaking might unleash whatever churned inside her.

Pony slipped an arm around her shoulders, guiding her toward the bathroom while I scrambled to the door, heart hammering against my ribs as I called for the ever-present Vidals stationed outside near the elevator.

The Vidals' medical response was immediate. Not even five minutes had passed before white uniforms filled our room.

Four consecutive full-body scans pulsed with the doctor's scanner, each one confirming what the last had shown: nothing was wrong. Strangely, Pebble's symptoms disappeared the moment our room filled with at least five Vidals, as if her nausea had been nothing more than stage fright. No elevated temperature registered on their instruments, no drop in blood pressure, no sugar crash. Just a perfectly healthy kid who moments before had been gripped by inexplicable terror.

"Where did you feel discomfort before the nausea?"

The female doctor's voice carried the artificial warmth of someone trained to sound compassionate. She leaned over Pebble's bed; her spine curved in a practiced posture of concern while her fingers never stopped their relentless dance across her screen. Pebble shook her head.

"I was just sleeping," she whispered, her voice still raw.
"Then I had this dream... I had a dream... I heard a voice

talking to me," Her finger rose, pointing to the empty space beside her bed, exactly where one of the Vidals now stood. "A man's voice coming from here... it felt like he was right here."

We all exchanged glances. Just a nightmare, I told myself.

But the doctor and nurse showed no impatience. They prescribed what looked like nutritional supplements with instructions for twice-weekly doses if needed. I thanked them, the door dissolved behind them as they left, leaving us once again in our quiet room.

Pebble was already sinking back into her pillows, falling asleep almost instantly. Pony and I exchanged a heavy look before carefully creeping back to our own beds, the sheets now cold against our skin. Soon, the rhythm of Pony's breathing slowed and deepened.

I lay motionless, staring into the absolute void beyond our window. The sprawling night city had switched to its energy conservation protocol during these small hours. Countless buildings dimmed, leaving only the main network of roadways and critical signage still lit up. The darkness under the protective barrier had never been so complete, so honest in its artificiality.

I found myself mentally painting stars onto that perfect canvas of nothingness, recreating the real night sky I'd glimpsed during those rare, dangerous trips to the surface before we came here. How the Milky Way had spilled across the sky like glowing dust, individual stars pulsing with ancient, beautiful lights.

As my finger traced invisible constellations in the air, my consciousness began to slip sideways, the line between

waking and dreaming growing paper-thin, then vanishing entirely.

The veil between worlds thinned, and I drifted weightless into a stellar brilliance, an ocean of stars that stretched infinitely in all directions. I reached out, capturing fragments of pure light between my fingertips, crystalline and impossibly bright, only to have them dissolve and slip away, leaving trails of stardust across my skin.

My body seemed transformed, limbs elongated and graceful, outlined by a corona of pulsing radiance that shifted with my movements. I began to pluck stars from the void, one shimmering point after another, arranging them into constellations of my own design.

Trust him.

The words didn't arrive as sound but flowed as ripples through the cosmos itself. I froze mid-motion, suspended among my half-finished patterns, every sense suddenly alert.

"Papa?"

My voice sounded strange here, both swallowed by vastness and somehow everywhere at once. I twisted, searching every direction through the star-strewn emptiness. That voice... the distinctive rasp from years of smoking, resonant and deep, yet always carrying that undercurrent of stubborn playfulness that made him who he was. It couldn't be anyone else.

Trust him, hear him...

"Papa! Is that you?" Desperation edged into my voice as I spun through the void. "Where are you?" The words echoed endlessly, bouncing through dimensions I couldn't perceive. Though his voice seemed to come from everywhere at once, I couldn't catch even a shadow of his presence.

Amelie.

A word, a name, carried with such tenderness that it yanked me violently back to reality.

I bolted upright, heart hammering against my ribs. The holographic digits on the wall pulsed a steady 7:00 AM, their amber glow the only movement in the stillness.

Beside me, my sisters lay wrapped in blankets, their breathing deep and undisturbed. I eased back against my pillow, eyes closing in pursuit of those fleeting extra minutes of sleep that always seemed most precious.

One minute crawled by, then two.

My consciousness hovering just at the edge of slumber when the sounds of movement from the floors below filtered up. Footsteps, the soft whir of service bots, voices too distant to make out but present enough to pull me firmly back to wakefulness.

With a sigh of surrender, I sat up and pressed the heels of my palms against my eyes. There had been a dream, maybe something important, but trying to grasp it was like clutching at smoke. Only disconnected impressions remained: a sensation of floating, an impossible vastness, and the lingering echo of... *something*.

Whatever message my dream had tried to send already vanished upon waking, leaving nothing behind.

I rolled my shoulders, suddenly fighting the urge to collapse back into sleep now that I was fully upright. The irony wasn't lost on me. After all, we'd lost nearly an hour of rest in the middle of the night thanks to Pebble's episode. By eight, we shuffled into the first-floor dining hall, a massive space that made our small trio look even tinier than we already were. My eyes were still heavy; vision slightly blurred at the edges from interrupted sleep. The architectural excess of the room never failed to unsettle me.

A floating table large enough to seat twenty or more, each hovering chair a testament to technology abused for the most mundane purposes, and those windows... massive floor-to-ceiling panels of perfectly transparent material that was definitely not glass, framing the most exclusive view in all of Inoasis. This building crowned the highest point in the sealed city, offering an unobstructed view of the manufactured night that stretched endlessly to the horizon.

While eating, we would gaze silently out the windows. Flying vehicles cut bright paths through the night, airborne transit vessels drifted between huge towers.

Sometimes I would wonder, with a pang that felt almost like homesickness for a place I'd never known, if Earth hadn't torn itself apart, maybe views like this would have been normal, not marvels preserved behind barriers for the privileged.

I expected this morning to be like every other boring day this past month. Waiting for the Vidals to show up with their meal carts, waiting to return to the library at noon, fingers seeking the exact page where yesterday's reading had been interrupted. Waiting, most of all, for news that never came. Word of that man's awakening.

Today, however, carried a subtle wrongness. A discordant note almost too faint to detect.

Looking at my breakfast, I'd convinced myself that familiarity had dulled my senses to its disgusting smell and gross colour, just like previous meals. Normally I could override my instinctive revulsion through sheer force of will, but today was *different*.

Something within me recoiled, the mere sight of it triggered waves of nausea that gathered like storm clouds in my chest, threatening to surge upward. I pushed the plate away, leaning back into my chair to escape its smell, and to my surprise, even that small distance brought immediate relief.

Hunger and training battled instinct. I steeled myself, pulling the plate back. I held my breath, used my fork to mash everything together and forced several rapid bites into my mouth. I barely tasted it, focusing instead on swallowing, but my body betrayed me.

The food in my throat threatened violent return, I abandoned the fork with a soft clink against porcelain, retreating back into my chair. I made soothing circles against my chest, willing my rebellious stomach to cooperate.

Don't eat.

The command echoed in my head, not a thought I had formed, but one that seemed to arrive like a spark from elsewhere. My hand froze, suspended in the space between plate and body. This wasn't simply reluctance or aversion. It came as an impenetrable barrier blocking my intention. Every survival instinct I possessed suddenly aligned against what sat before me.

But our meal schedule only included breakfast. Maybe I should have them delay my meal until midday when these strange symptoms might have passed.

"What's wrong, sister?" Pony noticed my discomfort and paused with her fork midair. "Can't eat?"

"Just can't stomach it today," I confessed, creating even more distance between myself and the plate, as if those extra inches might somehow dilute its nauseating smell. I raised my water glass instead. "I wonder if we ate something weird yesterday. Or if Peb's nightmare is contagious?"

Pony's gaze drifted toward our youngest sister, who was now fully engaged with her meal, totally unbothered. Pebble sensed our attention and dragged her gaze from the window, blinking at us.

I opened my mouth to call for Dera, planning to rearrange my meal schedule, when the mental blockage turned into something almost tangible. No longer just voices but an obstacle, reverberating through my mind in waves that seemed to physically shut my mouth from voicing her name.

Don't eat.

"Peb's nutritional pills," I murmured, voice barely audible as a creeping sense of helplessness took over. "What did the doctor say they were for?"

"Some kind of detox or supplement, I think. Probably something to help with the adjustment period? Want to try one?" She studied my face. "Might settle whatever's happening in there."

"That works." I made my decision.

"So, um," Pony pointed her fork at the remnants on my plate, eyes flickering between my plate and Pebble, who was scraping the last bite from her own dish. "Are you going to finish that? Peb and I can split it."

I pushed the plate toward them without hesitation.

The Vidals came to collect the emptied plates. Not once did I consider requesting a replacement meal. The phantom warning had killed any hunger; I just really needed to return to our quarters and take those supplements.

Back in our room, I moved immediately toward the water dispenser. The transparent capsule rested in my palm; I tossed it back with a generous swallow of water.

The rest of the day passed without incident. The supplement erased all traces of my earlier discomfort, even silencing the hollow ache of hunger that should have followed a missed meal.

It wasn't the first time I'd marvelled at our physical transformation. In just one month, our skinny frames had begun filling out, sharp angles softening under Inoasis's nutritional alchemy. Whatever weird science Inoasis had perfected in their food systems, the evidence was written across our recovering bodies.

Driven by curiosity, I selected a module labelled "Sustainable Nutrition: Inoasis Food Systems" from the library's shelving unit and retreated to a recessed cushioned alcove. From this spot, I could observe my sisters at the main reading table, their heads bent together over a shared screen while Muli stood nearby, her restraint softened as she guided them through educational videos.

The hours melted away in comfortable silence, our steady breathing and occasional murmurs the only disruption to the library.

By early evening, the day's study began taking its toll. Pebble's yawns appeared first. Tiny, stifled things she tried to hide behind her hand, followed soon by Pony's more dramatic displays of fatigue, her arms stretching skyward. Even Muli suggested ending their session earlier than scheduled.

After returning to our quarters and showering, we went to our beds by ten. My sisters gave in to exhaustion almost immediately, faces smoothing into perfect peace within seconds of contact with their pillows. I looked at them briefly, reassured by the rhythmic rise and fall of their breathing, before tapping the bedside touch screen to turn off the ambient lighting.

In the dark, I withdrew my contraband from beneath the pillow, a module I'd "borrowed" from the library's fiction section without permission. The screen lit up with a soft glow as I activated it, revealing a script titled "The Dragon's Keeper", a fantasy romance that had caught my attention purely by accident.

Its presence in Inoasis's curated collection surprised me almost as much as its contents. A world of magic, fire-breathing dragons, and demonic entities that had no connection to our scientifically regulated reality.

More shocking still was the author's mastery of language. Prose that flowed like liquid silver, dialogue that sparkled with wit and authenticity, descriptive passages so vivid I could almost feel scales beneath my fingertips, or smell woodsmoke and magic.

Time slipped away as I immersed myself in the novel. The midnight hour approached before tiredness finally began claiming its victory. My eyelids grew heavy, the text blurring despite my best efforts to focus.

I deactivated the module and tucked it back within the safe harbour beneath my pillow.

As I settled back against the soft bed, my blurry gaze drifted unconsciously toward the ceiling window. Stars winked and shimmered, countless points of light stretching into infinity. Their gentle radiance cast ghostly patterns across my half-lidded eyes, and for one perfect moment, I could almost glimpse scaled wings slicing through cosmic winds, riders astride magnificent beasts soaring between starlight...

Wait

Alarm surged through me, jolting me back from the edge of dreams.

The night above Inoasis was starless. Always had been. Always would be. The electromagnetic barrier that protected us from the ruined world rendered the sky an impenetrable void. Not a single pinpoint of light could possibly exist there, let alone the celestial tapestry I'd just witnessed.

I turned away from the skylight, putting my back to whatever hallucination my sleep's borderlands had conjured. Probably the fantasy's influence, I supposed. Just my imagination projecting its fictional wonders onto reality's empty canvas.

But sleep had completely abandoned me. Worse, bone-shattering chill slithered up my spine in an instant.

My enhanced hearing captured multiple sets of deliberately muted footfalls converging outside our door. The cadence was wrong, predatory. Nothing like the measured security patrols. Then came irregular heartbeats, accelerated by nervousness, and finally, a voice dropped to a whisper but super clear to my ears.

"They're all asleep."

Kori. I'd recognize that voice, that subtle synthetic quality beneath the human tones. But why? What possible reason

could justify them appeared outside our quarters at this hour, moving with the calculated discretion of those with something to hide?

Don't move.

This familiar command again. It resonated through my mind, carrying the weight of absolute certainty. This time, I gave in to it, trusting it.

The door dissolved with a barely perceptible hum. Two pairs of feet entered, each step placed with calculated softness. I heard the friction of fabric against skin, controlled breathing, and something else that sent ice through my veins: the distinctive click and hollow resonance of emptied syringes and vials.

Don't move.

The warning pulsed stronger now, almost a physical pressure against my mind. I maintained the deep, rhythmic breathing pattern of deep sleep while beneath the covers, my muscles coiled into steel cables, ready to unleash.

I was certain: there are three. Kori and the other unknown Vidal had entered first, and trailing behind them—identified by that slightly arrhythmic heart pattern I'd memorized during our daily sessions—was Muli.

I remained motionless, wrestling with conflicting theories. Maybe this late-night visit had innocent explanations. A medical check, a concern about our earlier symptoms. But the sneaky approach, the timing, the empty syringes... each element clicked into place like components of a weapon being assembled...

These weren't concerned guardians. We weren't guests being protected. We were specimens being monitored, countdown

timers placed in comfortable lies until trust matured enough for whatever procedure awaited us.

After the door reformed itself with a soft sigh, they crept forward like hunters approaching sleeping prey. Behind my closed eyelids, my mind swirled violently. Timing the ideal moment to jump from my bed, mentally measuring the distance to the heavy decorative object on my nightstand, and then to drive it into the nearest face...

"Ah! Ugh!"

Twin cries of shock shattered the midnight silence. I launched myself from the bed, muscles uncoiling like a whip as I spun to face whatever threat was coming. In the near-total darkness, I could only make out two stiff figures frozen in what looked like agony.

"Perhaps keeping a nightlight active during your rest would be advisable, my lady."

My fingers shook against the touchscreen at my bedside. After several fumbling attempts, light flooded the room, revealing a scene that confirmed my worst fears while raising a whole bunch of new questions.

Kori and Dera were sprawled across the floor in totally unnatural ways, their white uniforms now messed up. Small weird devices were stuck to the exposed skin at the base of their skulls, pulsing with this subtle red glow.

Around them, evidence of what they'd been planning lay scattered everywhere: injectors designed for silent deployment, collection vials with strings of codes, and what looked like tissue sampling equipment.

"Leave them," Muli said as she saw I prepared to lunge toward Pony to shake her awake. "They each consumed their

full portion this morning. Harmless, but they'll remain insensate until exactly eight tomorrow morning."

Shit.

I studied Muli with fresh suspicion, noting how her whole body language had totally changed. Gone was that submissive posture, the carefully maintained respectful eye contact she always did. Now she moved like a predator, weight balanced evenly, hands loose but ready to strike. But her face showed something I'd never seen on any Vidal before. A real smile that actually reached her eyes, making them crinkle at the corners with what looked like amusement.

She took several steps toward me. My body responded before conscious thought, retreating until my thigh pressed against Pony's bed. She halted immediately, extending one open hand palm upward. A universal gesture of peace.

"Who are you?" I demanded, voice steadier than I felt.

"I'm exactly who I've presented myself to be. Muli, Vidal Scholar, Educator Class," her smile deepened, eyes flickering with something that might have been pride. "Raven Force close-quarters combat specialist, fourth division."

Raven Force. Faucher's notorious elite combat unit. *Papa's unit*.

I cautiously extended my hand to meet hers. Her grip was gentle, somehow tempering the wild pounding in my chest.

"What exactly," I gestured toward the unconscious Vidals with my free hand, "were they planning to do to us?" I couldn't keep the tremor from my voice entirely.

"Theo was exceptional in many ways," Muli released my hand, her expression softening, "but he missed the obvious with almost alarming regularity. You, however, seem considerably sharper."

The casual reference to Papa confirmed my growing suspicion that Muli was something far more significant than she appeared. She strode purposefully toward the door, fingers dancing across the security interface.

"I've temporarily locked down elevator access to this floor," she explained, glancing back at me over her shoulder. "First, I need to remove our unconscious friends to their original positions. Then we can talk."

3834-I

Chapter 4

Francis

There was a time in my childhood when the mere mention of lessons would send a wave of dread through my small body.

I did not simply dislike attending classes. I despised them with the pure, uncompromising hatred that only children can truly perfect.

One particular Sunday remains vivid in my memory.

I had botched a political science examination. As punishment, Father had confiscated my day of respite, replacing it with six gruelling hours of remedial studies, a timeframe insufficient to cover all the material I required for review. The following Sunday, I expected more of the same.

I dressed and prepared early, following the butler to the library. We stood before the open doors, the butler consulted his tablet, frowned slightly, and verified the schedule again. After a third confirmation with the Vidals, he turned to me with uncharacteristic hesitation.

"Young Lord, it appears your educational agenda has been cleared for today. All lessons have been cancelled by Lord Faucher's direct command," he informed me, a knowing smile gracing his weathered features.

I stood paralyzed, my small frame suddenly incapable of movement as wild, unbridled joy flooded through me with such force that I feared it might physically manifest.

I managed a slight, controlled nod, the muscles in my face straining against the smile threatening to emerge. I fixed my expression into a mask, a perfected performance. Any excessive display of emotion, any hint that this freedom meant the world to me, might reach Father's ears. And what was granted so unexpectedly could just as easily be revoked, replaced with something infinitely worse than political theory.

I shadowed the butler's return journey, maintaining the posture and measured gait that had been drilled into me since I could walk. I listened as the door sealed shut with a soft hiss, tracking the butler's retreating footfalls until they faded entirely. Still, I waited, watching the holographic digits on my wall complete two full minute cycles.

The moment my self-imposed waiting period expired, euphoria shattered through my carefully constructed mask. I launched myself across the room in a single bound, sailing through the air before crashing onto the enormous bed with its cloud-soft coverings that seemed to envelop me like a welcoming embrace.

Laughter erupted from deep within my chest. I surrendered to momentum, rolling repeatedly across the expansive surface as my elegant surroundings tumbled in my vision. The ceiling, the arranged dark furnishings, all spinning in a delirious, wonderful blur.

Mid-roll, a realization struck me and I ceased my movement.

For weeks, I had been accumulating ideas, projects, and forbidden curiosities for my next true moment of

freedom. Now, unexpectedly granted this precious gift of time, I could not waste a single second of it.

My bed was incredibly soft. Its custom fibres seemed to cling to my skin, making rising difficult with their overwhelming comfort. But remaining there would squander my precious free day.

I rolled twice more to reach the edge, then climbed down to crouch beside the right nightstand. In the second drawer down, I found my reading tablet and several damaged styluses, as expected.

But these were not my objective. I reached into the open drawer, feeling for a fastener on the upper surface, pressing and rotating it approximately ninety degrees, then slipping my index finger into the newly aligned hole to pull down, revealing a thin compartment just large enough to hold a single module. I had modified this hiding place myself.

Opening the secret compartment revealed my private module. It was a piece of fiction I had taken from the library that no one had touched in ages. I had purged its initial programming, added my own security lock, and modified it into an empty journal.

Perhaps it was the only thing in my life that was genuinely mine.

I preferred sitting beside the nightstand where a soft cushion padded the floor. This little corner served as my private refuge, with the mattress edge perfectly concealing my head from anyone who might enter. I distinctly remember calculating that just a few more centimetres of height would render this hiding spot useless, forcing me to engineer a new sanctuary elsewhere in my room.

Discovery risked more than standard discipline; it threatened the small freedom I had carved out for myself. If the butler walked in, he would immediately inform Father, who would view my curiosity as a frivolous distraction beneath the dignity of someone bearing the Faucher name.

What I kept in that notebook could not fall under Father's gaze, nor anyone loyal to him. From my earliest days, when I could barely see above the mattress from my sitting position, I guarded my most dangerous secret: an obsession with the Second World, with the reality that existed outside our walls...

What had become of Earth's scarred surface in the centuries following the apocalypse?

My module contained several newly created folders holding images and videos of the Second World, along with preapocalypse documents from centuries past. Many unfamiliar characters made reading difficult for me then, so I had made extensive notes.

Some of those digital folders preserved fragments of the Second World. Summer breezes bending grass in waves, autumn leaves creating crimson carpets beneath skeletal trees, jagged cliffs where ocean waves crashed in perpetual warfare against the land. All scenes I had never witnessed beyond these stolen images.

I obsessed over whether they still existed in some form. I ached to hear dawn birdsong, to experience winter's howling fury rather than climate-controlled simulations. I yearned to see what had emerged after devastation. And the resilient flora pushing through irradiated soil, the Outsiders who had somehow endured when so many others perished.

Before the inevitable evacuation that Father occasionally referenced in grim tones, I desperately wanted to stand before

the ocean. I yearned for just one chance to feel the breeze, the stretched horizon and to feel those humid winds that carry the essence of vast waters.

In that module of mine, I did have a favourite folder: music from the ancient world. Before algorithmic compositions and engineered soundscapes had replaced traditional methods, humans created music using physical instruments that harnessed vibrations in air.

I had discovered sheet music as well. Those peculiar arrangements of black notations positioned at different heights along five horizontal lines. Some symbols sported tiny flags, others stood isolated, many connected in flowing sequences, while some clustered together.

Once, working up the courage to interact with the display, I had touched one of these strange markings, and it responded with a single, pure tone as the bean-shaped symbol illuminated with golden light.

Years would pass before I truly understood what music meant.

Later, Muli explained this was the language of music. Artists used it to communicate how others should manipulate their instruments to create compositions. It was a discipline requiring dedicated study.

In the end, music too became collateral damage of the apocalypse, drowned in the flood of more urgent necessities. *Survival represented triumph*, Muli had explained.

Speaking of Muli... her presence in my life remained unexplained throughout my early years.

I never questioned exactly who she was. I simply accepted her as a Vidal who didn't conform to the strict limitations imposed on others of her kind. Unlike my tutors or caretakers, she had unrestricted access to my floor which was explicitly forbidden to anyone outside the Faucher bloodline.

During our first encounter, she presented a convenient fiction, claiming Father had specially appointed her as my *playmate*. I accepted this explanation without scepticism, treasuring those occasional holidays when my silver-haired, white-uniformed "sister-friend".

"I promise I won't tell anyone. We can do the pinky swear."

Everything changed the day Muli discovered me clumsily hiding the module behind my back. We struck an "agreement." She would protect my secret and provide insight for all my discoveries. She requested only one thing in return, which was complete transparency about what I had taken from the V.I.D.A.L. cloud system.

This bargain proved irresistible to my five-year-old self, driven by insatiable curiosity and starved for genuine connection. My assigned educational materials systematically excluded everything that fascinated me most: art that was not purely functional, music, dances, and most significantly, accurate information about the world beyond our barrier.

The library's collection had been meticulously curated specifically for me, ostensibly a child-friendly environment. But in reality, it was merely an elaborate system of censorship, selective education, and controlled narratives designed to cage my explorations.

I had questioned Father about these restrictions since I could form coherent sentences. His responses evolved in a predictable pattern. From dismissive deflections offering no reason to declarations that "we cannot save everyone, son." This strategy of gradual revelation culminated in the explosive confrontation on my coming-of-age day.

So no, I never once regretted sealing that pinky swear with Muli.

The years flowed like water, carrying me forward through adolescence and into the harsh realities of training.

By twelve, I had received my mandatory conscription into Raven Force for combat training. My regimen included everything from hand-to-hand techniques to bladed weapons to firearms proficiency. The comprehensive martial education deemed essential for Inoasis's future leader, my Father insisted.

Father made a rare display of personal interest by commissioning my custom combat suit, even making a solitary appearance at the training grounds. Just that once, I remember.

After all, it was simply another attempt to remedy what Father deemed an unacceptable aspect of my nature, hoping that military rigor might accomplish what years of subtle correction had not.

My adolescence unfolded almost entirely within military compounds, the mansion becoming a place I actively avoided returning to. Despite ostensibly training alongside Raven Force's elite, I existed in isolation. I was assigned private quarters, given a personal armoury while others used communal equipment, and even served meals hand-delivered by the Faucher butler. Among the thousands-strong force, I recognized only the handful of faces approved for interaction.

During training, I faced not warriors but actors. Soldiers who purposely diluted their skills, who moved with exaggerated tells before striking, who reduced their speed to ensure I could react in time. My increasingly forceful requests for genuine combat training were ignored, each silent dismissal stoking a smouldering fury within me.

The breaking point came when a soldier I genuinely respected accidentally grazed my hand during sparring, barely breaking the skin, only to vanish from the duty roster the following day. His career was sacrificed completely for the minor offense of making me bleed.

With rage boiling over, I raced back to the family estate and burst into Father's study, years of accumulated frustration erupting in a tremendous altercation.

My disgust for bearing the Faucher name grew stronger, hardened.

I would forever remain the family's precious songbird, kept in a gilded cage, untouchable and protected from reality's harshness. I had already uncovered the nickname that shadowed me through military quarters: *the paper young lord*, a biting insult that captured their perception of me as something manufactured, fragile, and untested.

But then came the morning that changed everything.

My miserable, oppressive adolescence was shattered unexpectedly when I arrived at the training grounds to find Muli standing in the centre ring.

After years of absence, she reappeared, her distinctive silver hair coiled in a tight, practical knot that somehow made her more conspicuous among the dark uniforms. More shocking than her presence was her attire. She wore the fitted carbonmesh battle suit of Raven Force's close-combat specialists, the insignia on her chest marking her a senior operative in the division.

"My young lord," she said with a slight bow that seemed halfsincere, half-mocking. "You are permitted to employ your full strength against me."

Before I could fully process my happiness for seeing her, I was forced into combat. That day earned a special place in my memory as the time I discovered just how many colours a bruise could be. I looked like I'd volunteered as canvas for an aggressive painter working exclusively in purples, blues, and an impressive spectrum of yellows when I sprawled face down on the floor.

Yet that night, I slept better than I had in ages.

But this wasn't what made Muli's special.

Her genuine rarity had nothing to do with her fighting skills but stemmed from her connection to knowledge Inoasis had discarded generations ago: she comprehended music and painting as living languages rather than historical curiosities. In our relentlessly practical society, creativity had been delegated entirely to algorithms. No rational person would squander valuable time developing talents that could not enhance survival odds.

Somehow Muli, despite emerging from the brutally efficient administrative corps, had acquired fluency in these forgotten human expressions.

After our childhood pinky swear, when I'd nervously revealed my module's forbidden contents, her reaction wasn't disapproval, but genuine relief. I wasn't accessing anything truly dangerous, just... art.

"The sun is a great ball of fire," she said once during a rare moment of mutual quiet when I was six. "What colour do you think it is?"

Our conversations often drifted to the Second World. Muli had never ventured outside Inoasis herself, so I assumed her knowledge came from restricted sections of V.I.D.A.L. encrypted archives.

"Red?"

I remember saying. "Because Earth's atmosphere was nearing the end of its life, under the influence of oxygen depletion and magnetic field changes... the sun was probably a bloodred brightness."

"Now, yes. But it was once a beautiful, warm gold."

The sun was once a beautiful, warm gold. The moon, a pure, understated silver-white.

"Like your hair?" I asked then, my short finger nearly reaching toward her silver strands.

She caught my hand before I could touch her, a reflex I would later recognize as combat training. Her expression remained soft. She nodded, the faintest smile warming her face.

"Yes, exactly like my hair."

It wasn't until I reached adulthood that I unearthed certain truths Father had buried beneath silence.

The revelations about myself, my mother, and Muli's place in our history. I discovered these fragments while navigating restricted sections of the VIDAL archives, following digital breadcrumbs through sealed records, piecing together a story known to perhaps a dozen people in all of Inoasis.

My mother hadn't simply died during childbirth, as I'd always been told. The truth was far more violent: she had hemorrhaged fatally during an exceptionally difficult delivery, her vital signs fluctuating wildly as terror overtook her system.

But this was not merely the fear of a difficult birth. It was a response to external threat.

The Jacques faction had somehow penetrated our security perimeter, targeting the delivery room specifically to eliminate both mother and the unborn heir.

While medical staff focused on the increasingly desperate delivery, Muli and a handful of other Vidals, along with several medical personnel, had turned themselves into human shields. They bought my mother the precious minutes needed to complete my delivery, a terrible bargain of lives for life.

Muli was the only one left standing at the end. Using everything she knew about childbirth, she helped bring me into this world. By the time Raven Force breached the blockaded wing, I had entered the world, and my mother had departed it.

This blood-soaked origin story explained everything: why Muli moved through the Faucher compound with unprecedented freedom, why she alone could be trusted with unsupervised access to me, why even my most stringent security protocols bent to accommodate her presence.

Even if she beat me to a pulp, Father wouldn't intervene. He even maintained an unspoken respect for her. I could tell from how politely the butler treated her, and how some of Raven Force's toughest men would bow respectfully when they saw her.

Muli was, intermittently, someone who watched me grow up.

She appeared and vanished according to some schedule I could never decipher, yet ironically accumulated more hours in my company than Father ever managed to spare. When I drew my first terribly ugly childhood picture, she was the first and only person to see it.

Before I joined Raven Force, during those birthdays when I existed as an afterthought in the household calendar, she would sneak in to celebrate with me.

She was there when I learned to play my birthday song on the electronic violin she had made. She sat beside me when I first coaxed recognizable notes from the electronic violin she had engineered specifically for my hands. And yes, she was also the first to knock me completely unconscious during training, having a medical team to carry my ass to the infirmary for assessment.

When Theo and I had our first major argument that caused a scene, Muli inadvertently witnessed the entire spectacle while arriving to deliver news.

It was the first time I was left speechless before her.

I find myself hoping that when I claw my way back from this current dance with death, Muli's face will be the first image that registers when I open my eyes. Only she will do. Only she can tell me what to do next. *Anything*. Whatever it might be.

Because I truly can't find any more meaning to continue living in this abyss.

"Call the team!! He's showing signs of waking! Quickly!"

Wake up.

"My Lord, please, stay with us."

Face your fears, master them. I'm with you.

3848-I

Chapter 5

Amelie

When Pony and Pebble woke, they stretched comfortably in their beds, completely unaware anything was wrong. It wasn't until they had finished washing up and changing into their clothes that Pony noticed me sitting motionless on my bed, making no move to get up.

I shook my head and told them no Vidals would show up today, gesturing for them to sit while I unpacked last night's mess.

Muli had dragged the unconscious Vidals to the elevator area and propped them against the wall. She then peeled off her white uniform, revealing a combat suit beneath that seemed practically glued to her skin. She blended into the corridor's darkness, her midnight-black suit with subtle crimson lines that caught the light only when she moved at certain angles.

From her utility belt, she pulled what looked like a palm-sized module that expanded into a control panel, her fingers tapping commands.

I watched her from the doorway, not daring to venture into the corridor. Partly from lingering fear of the two unconscious attackers, but mostly because I couldn't bear to distance myself from my sisters. The corridor stayed silent except for the faint sounds coming from Muli's panel. The small discs stuck to Kori and Dera's necks began pulsing with steady red light, apparently making some kind of connection.

"What... are you going to do to them?" I whispered.

"Why do you not come observe for yourself?" Muli replied, pausing her work to face me with an expression that wasn't quite a smile. "It would be prudent for me to instruct you in these procedures."

"Instruct me... what?" My voice hitched slightly. A cold draft swept across my face and slipped inside my clothes as I inadvertently gasped, but the real chill came from Muli's casual tone.

"Memory deletion and rewriting," she said with a flick of the panel. "You shall require knowledge of these techniques. As Aurora Vidal's current target of interest, there is considerably more you must learn from me than this particular skill."

I darted out barefoot across the cold floor, halting just beyond Muli's reach as I peered at her work. The panel's interface was simple, with clear commands. Opening the linked device's operating panel revealed a timeline slider. Muli adjusted a marker backward, selected the modification option, and began crafting an entire fake reality in the empty field.

"Navigate to the initial moment of the memory you wish to modify, input the desired replacement, and allow the AI and nanomachines to complete the process." she explained, while her fingers composed the new memory: 'Mission completed, blood samples delivered to Muli. Continue the night watch.' The moment she confirmed the command, Kori and Dera's eyes snapped open. I lurched backward with a startled cry, nearly losing my balance.

Their bodies recalibrated. Their spines straightened, postures correcting as they rose with the coordinated precision of factory-made duplicates. They migrated to their designated positions flanking the elevator, assuming the characteristic Vidal sentinel stance—motionless, expressions vacant. Muli collapsed her device, securing it in her utility belt before circling behind the pair to extract the neural interfaces from their necks.

"They are currently in neural suspension," Muli explained.
"They will register no information during this period. Once they reach the preprogrammed termination point, normal function will resume with the fabricated memory sequences fully integrated into their cognitive frameworks."

Cautiously, I edged forward and passed my hand before Kori's unblinking eyes. Not even the slightest pupillary response disturbed her blank stare.

"Aurora Vidal," I whispered, irrationally concerned that these human automatons might somehow perceive us, "what exactly does she want with us?"

"Her private research has centred on New Human for years. Specifically, to develop transition protocols that completely eliminate the pain and trauma." Muli's voice dropped an octave. "Attempting such conversions within Inoasis constitutes a capital offense with no judicial discretion. I've been unable to determine her true motive, and she has withdrawn completely these recent weeks, rejecting all communication attempts."

"She wants us as her lab rats?" The realization sent ice through my veins.

"Not precisely that extreme. She just needs blood samples for now." Muli's tone remained neutral, though her expression softened. "She would not risk more invasive procedures given your status. The other New Human victims are secured within Raven Force containment protocols, an environment inaccessible to V.I.D.A.L. operatives, including their surveillance networks and digital infrastructure. However, you three," her gaze shifted toward the doorway, "exist in a precarious position. Lord Faucher's incapacitation has created a temporary security vulnerability. Due to their engagement, V.I.D.A.L. has unrestricted access here."

"Can't you limit their access?"

"I'm just an ordinary scholar. Revealing my secondary function as Raven Force's solitary embedded operative within the V.I.D.A.L. presents unacceptable security risks." Muli's posture shifted subtly, arms crossing as her eyes darkened. "Besides, I've calculated that permitting their controlled access allows us to document their plans."

My attention drifted involuntarily toward the Vidals flanking the corridor, their rigid postures unnervingly perfect.

"What about the blood samples... how will you account for that?"

"Substitution with compatible alternatives from military medical reserves. The cryogenic repository maintains extensive female-sourced samples for emergencies." Her chin elevated slightly, a gesture I'd come to recognize as her calculating expression. "For the next two days, I will be operating outside contact parameters. You will need to protect yourself for the duration of my absence."

I snapped my attention back to Muli, who hovered at the threshold of our quarters, her dark silhouette partially eclipsed by the doorframe.

"Protect ourselves with what?"

The flashback dissolved as I pulled out the twin memorymanipulation devices from under my pillow to show my sisters.

"NeuroQuill," I explained, the weird term feeling strange on my tongue. "Muli's own invention, according to her. And this..." My hand disappeared beneath the pillow once more, retrieving an elongated object of polished black stone.

I held the weapon at a safe distance from my sisters before activating it. The blade sprang from its housing, its hilt curved, wrapped in some carbon-fibre stuff. Red accents dotted the design, most notably around the circular power cell. A low hum came from the cell, sending subtle vibrations through the grip.

Consider this a welcome gift from me.

"...A short blade." Which I had no clue how to use without causing fatal damage. The shape already looked like a soul extractor, designed for a single, lethal strike. Faint electrical pathways traced along the blade's edge, making my hair stands just holding it.

We left our room as usual, heading downstairs to the dining hall, following Muli's earlier instructions. We continued our schedule as instructed, including the grim task of eating breakfast that now seemed potentially hazardous. I found myself wondering if we would become unwitting donors of blood, tissue, or even our heads while knocked out by drugged food.

You may consume your meals without concern. I have successfully installed NeuroQuills in numerous individuals. Simply maintain proper nutrition and rest, perhaps engage in some reading. Entrust the remainder to our care. This ordeal shall end shortly.

I remember asking Muli what exactly would be ending soon.

I sense Lord Faucher will wake soon.

"...Does he know V.I.D.A.L. is doing all these?"

"Yes." Muli lowered her gaze. "However, his previous state rendered him somewhat... distracted. He has yet to formulate a strategic response, or perhaps more accurately, he remains uncertain. I will present all evidence for his assessment once he awakes."

We would soon escape V.I.D.A.L.'s hidden control. Following our morning meal, security personnel in black uniforms appeared at the entrance, closely watching the unfamiliar Vidals who came to clear the table.

And my enhanced hearing had picked up Kori and Dera's laboured breathing at four in the morning, like guards who had accidentally dozed and suddenly woken up. They left at five and were noticeably absent from breakfast service, for which I was secretly grateful.

Whenever we left the safety of our rooms, the short blade stayed tucked in my boot. After some consideration, I decided to leave the NeuroQuill devices beneath my pillow, seeing no need to carry them. We took multiple modules directly from the library archives: combat techniques, Inoasis structural layouts, facility systems, any information that might prove useful in the future.

Throughout the entire day, we didn't run into a single Vidal. Guards in black tactical gear, though visibly unarmed, maintained positions at strategic locations: the ground-floor elevator, main entrance, library, and all areas within our movement range.

My sisters insisted I should rest, having gone a night without sleep, while they took turns keeping watch. This would become our routine going forward.

On the third day of Muli's absence, big news broke. Headlines spreading instantly across all media channels, automatically appearing on the holo-screen in our room:

Francis Faucher had survived, and Inoasis had lifted its military restrictions, allowing limited resource imports from the Second World.

"No riots after all," Pony remarked, scrolling through news displays hovering above our breakfast table. "I expected chaos, though."

Pebble sat silently, attention fixed on the eternal night beyond our window. The city continued its rhythmic activity, pinpoints of light from flying vehicles moving in their unchanging patterns. No one knew about Astragan's existence, or how it might totally reshape their carefully ordered reality. Resource scarcity seemed to be their only concern.

"I wonder why Faucher didn't just tell everyone the truth from the beginning," Pony dismissed the holographic window with a frustrated gesture. "People kept in here have no clue they could become Astragan's prisoners at any moment."

"Because faith has boundaries, my lady, while fear knows none."

We turned as one toward the doorway where Muli stood behind a meal cart. Her silver hair stayed coiled, her V.I.D.A.L. uniform still white enough to hurt the eyes, but something had changed in her amber gaze. Exhaustion lingered at the edges, overshadowed by traces of relief.

"Muli." I watched her move the cart into position before she paused, tilting her head almost imperceptibly. Outside, the black-uniformed guards received her unspoken command, nodding once before sealing the door.

"Revealing such intelligence would irreparably fracture three centuries of carefully cultivated public confidence," she exhaled softly, the closest to resignation I'd seen in her. "In a sealed environment without daylight or escape, fear propagates. More lethal than any external threat."

My mind betrayed me then, showing unbidden images of kids with eyes stretched wide. Those fellow test subjects whose hearts had simply given up to terror, their small bodies discovered motionless in white rooms. I cleared my throat sharply, forcing the memories back into their box. Not now. Not here.

"Is it true about Lord Faucher? Has he actually woken up?"

I kept my voice steady, despite the sudden acceleration of my pulse.

"He has." Muli served Pebble first, a small courtesy that didn't escape my notice. "Critical phase has passed, though medical protocols require continued observation."

"And his location?" The question slipped out before I could think twice.

Muli's response came without words. Just a meaningful smile, a subtle headshake, and one finger pressed briefly to her lips. Understanding hit me.

Once again, I'd failed to exercise even basic caution, voicing sensitive questions in a space almost certainly monitored. How many more amateur mistakes would I make before learning?

"Alright, then. We'll wait for official medical updates like everyone else." My tone projected practiced unconcern as I turned to attack the breakfast with a fork.

The colourful hues blending beneath my utensil, I recognized the irony: this manufactured meal might be the only sanctioned splash of colour in Inoasis's depressing spectrum. Strip away Inoasis's technological shine and careful governance, and what remained? A sealed habitat with beautiful but hollow promises.

How fundamentally different was it from Astragan, really? Both controlled environments, both ruled by hidden agendas, both guided by figures who either couldn't or wouldn't address the fundamental problems eating away at their foundations...

Trust Francis Faucher.

My spiralling thoughts screeched to a halt, just before they could touch the edge of fear.

At midday, we returned to the library and replaced the modules we'd previously smuggled to our room. Muli caught us mid-extraction, our hands disappearing beneath clothing to pull the modules out. Her laughter startled us. Not mocking, but only amused.

"The modules are already cleared for removal from the archives," she explained, eyebrows raised. "No authorization required."

We froze, hands stuck mid-motion beneath half-raised skirts, exchanging glances. I felt heat crawling up my neck as Muli's gaze settled on the "Basic Self-Defence" module I was awkwardly returning to its slot. Her expression shifted subtly before she gestured toward a darkened section of shelving units we'd never approached.

"They're in energy conservation mode, my lady. They'll illuminate upon detecting movement."

A complete examination of the library's contents would take decades. Though maybe not for us. I'd forgotten we were no longer ordinary humans. I ventured down the indicated aisle, setting off a cascade of illumination as shelving units woke up, rising from their recessed floor positions to hover at my browsing height.

My eyes tracked across the first row, then widened in disbelief as I registered the neighbouring section's markers. Heat surged into my face, spreading to my ears with such intensity I instinctively reached to touch them, drawing a deep breath to steady my quickened pulse. The embarrassment of being so thoroughly understood stung deeply.

It was an entire section of romance fiction.

Pebble's clear voice carried from the central reading area, accompanied by the soft tap of a fingertip against a module's surface.

"Evelynn!" Muli's response held genuine delight. "Derived from the Hebrew 'Chavah'. Meaning 'life' or 'living one.' What an exquisite selection." She joined her hands together in a gesture of quiet celebration. "Would you permit me the honour of addressing you as Evelynn from now on?"

"Yes!" The enthusiasm in my little sister's voice was unmistakable.

Evelynn. The name settled in my mind like something precious. Our youngest had claimed her identity, stepping further from the nameless existence we'd endured for so long.

Pony was probably exploring the library's upper level, beyond earshot of this exchange. I found myself wondering what name she might claim as her own. My lips curved into an unbidden smile as I imagined Papa's face upon learning that his littlest one could not only read independently but had chosen her own name now.

Naturally, I no longer brought modules back to our quarters. With no other Vidals present in the residence and Faucher's personal guards in position, we had no reason to stay confined to our room. Muli confirmed she would oversee our care in the short term, eventually handing over her position to Faucher's newly appointed steward.

Once we demonstrated self-sufficiency in reading and learning, V.I.D.A.L.'s access to us would end entirely. The unspoken implication hung between us. I would probably meet Muli only within Raven Force after this.

Only after our chamber door closed did I pull out the short blade hidden in my boot.

"Keep this secured for now, but do not bring it upstairs," Muli instructed, moving toward the entrance panel where her

fingers activated a previously invisible interface matrix. Complex security protocols lit up briefly as she reconfigured the access parameters. "I shall design a suitable concealment holster for you. I anticipate you shall require tactical options in the future."

"Where are we going?" I asked, retracting the blade and returning the dormant handle beneath my pillow.

"To meet Lord Faucher."

What?

"I have recalibrated the elevator's security permissions," Muli explained, noting our collective expressions of disbelief. "He has been situated directly above your assigned level since your arrival."

Previously disconnected observations suddenly made sense. Those irregular nighttime footsteps that penetrated my enhanced hearing, the calculated rotation of armed security personnel, and the subtle but persistent electronic monitoring tones, all from the upper floor.

"However, before this meeting, certain advice seems necessary."

Muli's features darkened with something resembling grief before she executed a practiced pivot, hiding her sudden emotional shift.

"His current condition remains precarious. Since regaining consciousness, his emotional stability has fluctuated significantly. Avoid direct questions, particularly regarding your father."

"Muli," I swallowed against the sudden constriction in my throat, "what exactly was his relationship with Papa?"

"...Friends." Her response emerged after a weighted silence.

We stepped into the elevator, and Muli pressed her palm against the familiar scanner. After a brief authentication, a silent holographic keyboard appeared on the transparent wall.

Her fingers danced across the buttons, accessing information clearly beyond our clearance level. Despite our newly granted privileges, entry to the uppermost floor wasn't automatically given. This made perfect sense; judging by the armed guards stationed in the corridor when the doors slid open, this was territory reserved for genuine VIPs, especially considering Francis Faucher's current vulnerable state.

We followed Muli silently through another shadow-filled hallway. She'd ditched her standard uniform in favour of the black combat suit worn by Raven Force's elite soldiers, making me reassess her position within Faucher's hierarchy. Unrestricted movement throughout the compound, direct authority over every guard, the freedom to meet the ruler of Inoasis without appointment or request. These weren't ordinary privileges.

She couldn't possibly be a standard Raven Force soldier. Pony had discovered during her studies that even Raven Force generals couldn't meet the ruler directly, forced instead to rely on written applications or virtual conferences. In Inoasis, Faucher represented absolute monarchy, unquestionable authority.

So what exactly was Muli's relationship to Francis Faucher?

I found myself studying her silver-white hair, coiled into that perfect knot at the nape of her neck. Despite myself, comparisons to Aurora Vidal, that so-called fiancée of similar age, invaded my thoughts.

A broken picture began forming in my mind: a brittle political engagement forced upon Faucher, while his true companion stayed banished to the shadows. Such an arrangement would explain the fleeting sadness I'd glimpsed breaking through Muli's carefully maintained mask, those moments when her eyes came alive at the mention of his name.

"Please wait here," Muli directed, pausing before a concealed doorway identical to the one guarding our quarters. She acknowledged the armed guards with a respectful nod. "I'll announce your presence to Lord Faucher first."

The door dissolved quietly. Darkness greeted us like a physical presence, allowing only the vaguest impression of a massive bed adrift in shadows, its contours traced by the ghostly blue light pulsing from the surrounding medical equipment. Though invisible from where we stood, he lay there. The man Papa had commanded us to trust without question, but details stayed hidden. Muli glided toward a control panel beside the entrance, the room responded to her touch, warmth bloomed throughout the space, precisely balanced to avoid disturbing the patient while providing enough light to see.

Francis Faucher remained hooked up to an oxygen mask, each laboured breath fogging its transparent surface. My sisters and I froze involuntarily, holding our breath when our eyes registered the emptiness where his right arm and shoulder should have been. It was now just a negative space wrapped in bandages.

Monitoring sensors dotted his exposed chest, their wires trailing off toward various machines. The extended coma had eaten him from within; his skin had acquired the sickly thinness of paper held against light, so pale it seemed to compete with Muli's silver hair.

"My Lord, it's Muli. I've come to see you."

She positioned herself at his left side, a subtle tactical choice I couldn't help but appreciate. With Faucher's right limb gone, she'd chosen the approach that would preserve whatever fragile sense of security remained to him.

His eyelids parted slowly, head rotating inch by inch toward her voice as if fighting against an invisible weight. Recognition sparked in his gaze, his left arm stirred weakly in response, a ghost of intended movement blocked by the network of IV lines and clinical tubing anchoring him.

Muli extended her hand, gently clasping his weakened fingers and giving them a squeeze.

"I have brought the three young ladies to pay their respects, my Lord," she said, her formal diction softened at its edges. "Would you like to meet them? They await your permission just beyond the entrance."

I felt Faucher's consciousness pivot toward us. Something electric and weightless travelled the space between us, the inexplicable sensation of being evaluated by a mind far more complex than its broken vessel suggested.

A phantom chill silently traced across my neck. The bedridden figure seemed to exist outside normal time, his silence stretching until I began to doubt whether he'd registered Muli's question at all.

Finally, he eventually managed a slight nod.

Muli released his hand and turned toward us, beckoning with a raised arm.

"Ladies, you may enter now."

I ushered Pony and Evelynn ahead of me, noting how their hands clasped tightly in shared nervousness. I followed in their hesitant wake, crossing through the door into the warm room.

The differences between this space and our assigned quarters hit my senses like a slap. Expensive materials composed every surface. A colossal single-pane window dominated the far wall, its transparency currently overridden to block out the night that enveloped Inoasis. An impressively large desk hovered near this artificial horizon, its surface cluttered with disorganized modules and components I couldn't identify.

The absence of conventional furniture made the room's vastness even more obvious. Bedside tables had been made obsolete by spaces that dissolved seamlessly into the walls themselves.

The entire room was aggressively minimal, bordering on austere. Nothing superfluous survived this ruthless curation except for an armchair and small table tucked into a distant corner, maybe the last vestige of frivolous comfort.

Francis Faucher watched us with disturbing intensity, his breathing heavy and strained. Each exhale fogged his oxygen mask, hiding whatever expression might lie beneath. His face's right side showed devastating damage from what must have been a violent attack. Burn scars that suggested he'd been too close to something that exploded.

The angry purple-red of scarring created a violent contrast against skin that must once have been already pale. His right shoulder and arm were gone, while identical burn patterns corrupted the exposed portion of his right chest.

When my gaze traveled downward, I registered another absence beneath the contours of his blanket. His lower legs, too. Simply... gone.

The mission to free us New Human girls had cost him parts of himself that were gone forever. Every girl who'd escaped that nightmare owed something to this broken man lying before us. Including me, especially me.

"The children have made excellent progress with their education while you were recovering, my Lord," Muli observed, her features softening, voice shifting to a tone that seemed designed to smooth the subtle tension visible in Faucher's brow. "They've all progressed to reading without supervision." She inclined her head toward us.

"Ladies, you may introduce yourselves to Lord Faucher."

"I'm Evelynn, and I'm... ten years old." My youngest sister's voice wavered between syllables, her fingers flexing an anxious ballet at her sides, clearly double-checking her own age.

"I'm Joelle," Pony suddenly announced her chosen name, drawing everyone's immediate attention. "I believe I am around sixteen or seventeen years old."

Muli's chin dipped subtly, a warm approval. Evelynn's eyes sparked with quiet wonder as her gaze traveled from our middle sister to me, and everyone seemed to hold their breath, waiting.

I found myself captivated by Francis Faucher's pale violet irises, so identical in hue and luminosity to our own. Since entering, I'd silently noted this questionable detail: here before us lay another New Human, a *male* New Human. A one in a million.

"I'm Amelie. Eighteen years old."

Muli's eyes widened with delighted surprise, her lips curving into unmistakable joy. To be free like the sparrows of musical notation, perching and hopping along golden staves. From that first glance with the sheet music's title, my soul had claimed this name as mine.

Francis Faucher offered no response. Something ancient and wounded swam behind his gaze, maybe from post-traumatic weakness.

My hand settled instinctively upon Evelynn's shoulder, fingers applying gentle pressure as the silence expanded around us, threatening to preserve us eternally in this moment of awkwardness. I wondered if we represented an unwelcome burden. Three strange children forced upon him by some contractual duty.

"...Muli." His voice fractured the suffocating stillness.

"I'm here, my Lord."

"I don't want to see... any more... white. Their clothes, change them. Tell the butler."

We stood frozen, breath caught in our throats at his sudden demand. Muli bowed her head slightly, promising that the family's personal tailor would create appropriate garments worthy of our position.

"Who," he breathed each word through layers of pain, his ravaged chest rising with laborious effort, "has seen them?"

"Some VIDAL scholars, my Lord."

"Kill them all."

Chapter 6

It wasn't until we returned to our quarters, until the door reformed behind us with a soft hiss, that Evelynn finally released the sob she'd been holding in her lungs.

Joelle gathered our youngest sister close, first patting her back in gentle rhythm before drawing her into a protective embrace. My own palm pressed instinctively against my chest, as if I could physically contain the frantic beating of my heart. I forced myself to breathe steadily, counting each breath while struggling to fight the uncontrollable trembling that had taken over my fingers.

Beneath the layer of immediate fear lurked something more disturbing: the man Papa had insisted we trust without question shared alarming similarities with the tyrants who had tormented us in Astragan.

His casual sentence of death, the expectation of absolute obedience. It was all depressingly familiar. This recognition froze something vital inside me, a bitter truth impossible to dislodge.

I glanced between my sisters' terror-etched faces and Muli, who had followed us inside. She stayed by the door, adjusting access permissions on the security panel, her expression betraying neither surprise nor disturbance at Faucher's execution order. As if lives could be snuffed out with no more consequence than switching off a light in the room.

She turned to face me, and as I studied the gentle contours of her face, a chill crept up along my spine. "My lady, Lord Faucher was not referring to you three. Please be at ease."

"I know he wasn't talking about us," I managed, clearing the tightness from my throat. "But those Vidals were just following orders. They haven't actually hurt us. To just... kill them. Isn't that way too much?"

"The Faucher family maintains specific protocols," Muli sighed softly. "All bloodline members... Everyone bearing the surname cannot have their faces exposed to outsiders. You have likely encountered this in your previous readings."

"We are not Faucher."

Evelynn's voice cut through the room. All eyes turned to our youngest sister, still trembling with the aftershocks of her tears. She sat perched on the innermost bed, swiping tear tracks from her cheeks with the back of her hand. "I'm not one of them. I don't want to be part of this place. I just want to go home."

Joelle's chin lifted in silent support; her eyes fixed stubbornly on anything but Muli. The silence that followed had its own weight, interrupted only by Evelynn's soft, irregular breathing and the absence of words where explanation should have been.

"We're not pawns in your political games," Joelle finally said, sinking onto the edge of Evelynn's bed. "We're not shields to intimidate his opponents. If he needs scapegoats, find them elsewhere. We never intended to become killers." She paused, her jaw tightening. "Of course, if he enjoys these lethal power games, that's his business. We're Outsiders, we don't understand the rules here. I know Faucher wants to make an example of the Vidals as a warning to leave us alone. But won't this only attract more unwanted attention? Won't we

become targets and face even greater danger? Faucher has armies and authority protecting him. We have nothing. We are nobodies."

She threw herself backward onto Evelynn's bed, her body tense despite the appearance of surrender, fingers curling into the soft fabric as if she might tear it with her bare hands.

"We are not his game tokens. If keeping his promise to Papa feels like such a chore, if he's so intent on finding some use for us, just send us back to the Second World. Everyone benefits."

Something passed across Muli's face so quickly I nearly missed it. Her lips curved upward just enough to create the ghost of a smile, while her eyes briefly captured the room's ambient light, gleaming. She stayed silent, only listening, neither challenging nor endorsing Joelle's outburst, before turning away with that unreadable expression and gliding through the doorway as it dissolved before her.

I followed her out.

"Muli."

The pneumatic hiss of the door sealing us into the corridor left us standing in near-darkness. Only faint amber light from floor-level strips broke through the gloom, washing over Muli's skin with a warm glow that couldn't hide the exhaustion etched into her features. I noticed how the shadows beneath her eyes had deepened since our first meeting. "Those Vidals who've been bringing our meals and clothes. They're just following orders, aren't they? If Aurora Vidal is the one doing things behind the scenes, why should the regular Vidals die? It's unnecessary."

"Your month of education has clearly paid dividends," Muli said, unexpectedly breaking into a smile. "Joelle possesses remarkably complex reasoning that penetrates directly to the heart of problems. 'Joelle', meaning 'God's will'. Symbolizing strength and faith. The name suits her perfectly."

Her smile faded gradually, replaced by something more contemplative. "Lord Faucher isn't what you imagine. His sudden command surprised me as well." She lowered her head slightly, a barely perceptible shake conveying volumes. "Mental anguish often manifests physically, spreading like contagion... Give him some time."

"Will you carry out his order, then?" I couldn't keep the edge from my voice.

"I shall speak with him."

I stood frozen long until Muli started to move, with Joelle's words still echoing in my mind. Each syllable resonated like a warning bell, counting down to some inevitable moment of truth: we could never be completely safe here; no one would truly protect us.

My thoughts drifted to Faucher's gaze when he'd examined us.

Those eyes, hauntingly beautiful but hollow, brimming with emptiness and something like contempt in their slightly upturned corners. Even as he lay broken and hooked up to machines by a web of medical tubes, his temperament stayed unbroken.

I couldn't help wondering if getting power just naturally made people go crazy sometimes.

We aren't safe.

The thought hammered in my mind, again and again. The man Papa had instructed us to trust now seemed nothing more than a broken crown atop a fragile body. He could barely protect himself. How could he shield us?

Yet somehow we needed to survive, to continue our painfully extended lives in this fractured world. If we couldn't remove the boulder blocking our path, no road would lead to freedom.

"Will I see you again?"

After today, she would probably return to V.I.D.A.L. headquarters, keeping her distance from the Faucher residence to avoid raising suspicions. Our only trustworthy ally and the small pocket of safety her presence provided would soon disappear.

If given the choice, I would have preferred staying with Muli rather than sharing a roof with Faucher. Yet our situation offered no real possibility of leaving Inoasis entirely.

The sound of running water drifted from our quarters as someone turned on the bathroom faucet. This simple luxury highlighted why staying had its advantages. Here, we weren't forced to scavenge through underground ruins or barter our labour for expired food supplies. Maybe this security was why Papa had insisted we trust Faucher; he couldn't stomach the thought of his daughters living under constant threat of starvation or disaster.

Regardless of whether we stayed or left, we faced walls we couldn't climb. But at minimum, within these walls, my sisters would have full stomachs.

"Perhaps," Muli answered. "I must report to Lord Faucher regarding V.I.D.A.L.'s New Human research. He remains irresponsive of these developments."

"Then teach me how to use that dagger," I said impulsively. "It seems to have some electrical effect as well. I... I don't dare activate it blindly. And if something actually happened, I'm not sure I could..."

"Of course, my lady," Muli interrupted gently. "But do not be overly concerned about your current situation. Faucher's guards maintain constant vigilance." She smiled, consulting the holopanel projected from her wrist device. "I owe Theo a debt. I shall not allow his precious treasures to face any danger." Her expression softened with genuine warmth. "The tailor shall arrive personally the day after tomorrow. Remember, these garments will be custom designed. Do not hesitate to make specific requests."

"When will we meet again?" I asked, referring to the self-defence training.

"Oh, my Lady," Muli whispered, deactivating her panel, "you will know."

Before I could press further, she melted into the corridor's darkness, disappearing toward the elevator. I stood alone for several moments, then shrugged off my unease and returned to our quarters, feeling the weight of exhaustion settling in.

I slipped into a dream that night, not the usual broken images but something deeper. I drifted through darkness that felt almost womb-like, where human sounds filtered through to me like voices heard underwater. Distorted and distant, as if sealed behind invisible barriers.

These ghostly murmurs bounced through my mind, beckoning from forgotten corners without fully penetrating the empty corridors where memory should live. The sounds gradually came together into something recognizable. A stifled crying, the sound of a boy desperately fighting tears.

Then I saw him. A young boy huddled in the darkness in front of me, his back rigid. His knees were pulled against his chest, tiny arms secretly wiping away the tears on his cheeks. Sadness betrayed him nonetheless; each hiccupping breath grew more ragged.

"Hey," I called softly. "Are you alright?"

He stayed perfectly still, as if my words dissolved before reaching his ears. I noticed more details as I drew near. Dark hair that almost brushed his shoulders, a tailored uniform paired with formal shorts, and leather shoes buffed to an impossible shine that somehow caught light even in this lightless void.

He had curled himself into a tiny ball; despite my careful circling to glimpse his face, he kept it firmly buried between his knees.

"Hey," I called again, my voice surely close enough to stir the hair above his ear. Still, he stayed sealed in private grief, offering no response. His sobs grew louder instead, his breathing quickened but got shallower.

I stretched my hand toward his trembling shoulder, but where the surface should have met my touch, my fingers sank through fabric and flesh as if through vapour.

I tried again, this time aiming for his head, but my arm passed through his body. I touched nothing but air.

His weeping continued, tiny fingers gripping the fabric of his clothes. I noticed fragments of something clutched tightly between his fingertips.

Papers lay scattered across the darkness before him, strewn over what felt like an invisible floor. Paper, an almost forgotten texture in my world of modules and screens. I knelt beside the largest piece, reached out cautiously, and felt a surge of satisfaction as my fingers connected with something solid. I lifted it for closer inspection.

The sheet showed blocks of color applied with childish enthusiasm, clearly the boy's own art. This single piece revealed too little of the whole, so I stood and turned my attention toward other fragments.

These things offered my only means of interaction with this dream world; maybe collecting them might provide answers, even an exit from this vision.

The next piece, torn at one corner, held broken lines of text:

If I am destined to...

Surrendered

Unbind these feet...

Trade them

Cast my soul...

Following this came a photograph with its top portion violently removed, a headless portrait of a pregnant woman in a flowing white dress. She cradled what looked like a module in her hands, though I couldn't be certain. Someone had clearly ripped off her face on purpose.

Then another corner of a drawing.

I gathered piece after piece, watching my collection grow. As I examined the items piling in my palm, I figured out these weren't random scraps but memories... fragments of personal history belonging to someone.

They glowed with a gentle warmth I found familiar yet couldn't quite identify, like the golden-amber light of sunset when the day is ending. The lines of my palm basked in their soft glow.

Carrying my collection of papers, drawings, photographs, and what seemed like pure, dancing mini stars, I returned to the boy. I knelt a short distance away, carefully arranging everything in a small mound before his polished shoes. The previously scattered dim light, now concentrated in this tiny hill, suddenly lit up the space around us. Warmth flowed outward from our spot, creating a soft halo while golden dust drifted through the air.

The boy sensed the shifting light, finally raised his head from the protective cradle of his knees. His skin flushed red from crying, but his eyes caught my attention most. Lilac irises like gemstones, the dim light turning his tears into tiny stars.

Something about those eyes pulled at my memory, a familiarity I couldn't quite catch, like trying to remember a name that stays just out of reach. I had seen that precise shade of violet before, and recognized that particular shape.

But where?

His shaky breathing settled as he spotted the glowing heap. Like a kid distracted from a scraped knee by a shiny toy, his tears paused mid-fall when he focused on the strange treasures I'd gathered. His gaze made it clear he still couldn't see me. I existed merely as an invisible presence, or maybe more accurately, he was the ghostly visitor in my dream world.

Face your fears.

We both jerked at the voice. That voice...!

"Papa?" I stood, calling loudly.

This must be another dream about him. Maybe on previous nights I had experienced similar visions with his voice, echoing through a similar, silent void.

I looked down at the boy, who clearly didn't recognize the voice and shrank back like a startled animal. He looked around nervously, lilac eyes wide with confusion and growing fear. The unfamiliar male voice emerging from darkness had clearly frightened him; his small heart pounded loud enough for me to hear, and tears quickly filled the eyes he had just managed to dry.

Take them with you.

The boy suddenly threw himself forward onto his knees, scrambling toward the glowing collection. His small arms swept across the floor, gathering the scattered light fragments close to his chest. As he touched them, the pieces began to pulse with weakening rhythm, like a failing heart gradually losing strength, their already dim glow threatening to fade completely.

A cold washed over me instantly. Beyond our fragile circle of light, something stirred in the darkness. I couldn't see them, but I felt their presence. Tendrils of pure void slithering toward us with patience. Their icy chill pierced through my mind, raising every hair on my skin and sending ice through my veins.

I launched myself toward the boy on pure instinct, driven by a desperate need to protect him, but passed through his small form once again like fog dissolving in sunlight. I could offer no protection whatsoever, unable to touch him while he stayed completely oblivious to my existence. Strange sounds came from the approaching darkness, not exactly growls but something more ancient and primal, like hunger and malice combined. The darkness lingered at the edges of our light, patient and calculating, a predator savouring the fear of cornered prey before the final strike.

Tears streamed freely down the boy's face, but his fingers moved with surprising purpose, clutching a nearly extinguished paper fragment while frantically searching through the pile.

Trembling fingers found another piece; he then pressed it against the first. The moment they touched, the pieces merged seamlessly, like puzzle pieces finding their perfect match. The light surrounding us brightened only slightly. He wiped away his tears with his sleeve, whispering between ragged breaths, *I forgot*, *I forgot*, *I don't remember*.

I moved, half-running and half-crawling to retrieve distant fragments before the darkness claimed them. One paper shard lay at the furthest edge where our faint light still reached; as I stretched toward it, the darkness flowed over my face like liquid shadow.

Pain erupted across my skin, blinding, searing agony that tore a scream from my throat. I fell backward, then forced myself to scramble back toward the boy, ignoring the burning sensation that felt like piercing frost.

The boy continued his work, trying to reconstruct his shattered memories. But the mound before him stayed mostly chaos, the paper pieces far too few among the jumble of light.

"Papa!" I shouted, the name bursting from me without thought. Stop this nightmare. End it now. I pinched my thigh hard, welcoming the sharp jolt of pain that followed.

Face your fears, master them.

"Papa! This isn't funny!"

I rose to my feet again, rushing toward fragments about to be consumed by encroaching void. I grabbed each one regardless of form, paper, photo, or pure light, before darting toward the next flickering point about to be devoured. Each time I returned to deposit my findings, the boy's words reached me through his tears.

I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, but I can't remember. His sobbing escalated to a heartbreaking pitch, filling our shrinking circle of light.

After several frantic collection runs, I placed everything I'd salvaged at his feet. Dark, viscous tendrils began winding around my ankles, and our circle of light had shrunk to barely two steps across, the darkness pressing in from all sides.

My last image before being pulled completely under was of the boy curled protectively around the fading light, his small body forming a final barrier against the encroaching void. His eyes drifted closed as the bloody red tear streamed down his face.

Then, suddenly, my pain vanished.

My body lightened, becoming weightless as I floated through layers of soothing waves, the boy's sobs growing intermittent and distant. The sensation turned into something gentle, like sand drifting downward through the water. Invisible currents cradled me, guiding me softly into what felt like a waiting embrace.

Warmth enfolded me. The crying retreated further, its pitch deepening strangely as it faded to a point beyond my reach, and a familiar sense of comfort replaced the earlier terror. I shifted my legs, feeling the plush softness beneath them, and stretched with contented relief.

Wait. Something wasn't right.

My eyes flew open as I bolted upright in bed, heart racing.

Someone was crying. Not the small boy from my dream but a man.

The sound was raw with distress, choked and constricted as though fighting against restraint. His heartbeat thundered with a sickening rhythm, his breathing laboured as if drowning in open air. The terror I'd felt in the dream crashed back through me, now tinged with urgent purpose.

I threw the covers aside and launched myself from bed, not pausing to wake my sisters. I slammed my palm against the door release with such force my hand stung, not waiting for it to fully dissolve before bursting barefoot into the darkened corridor.

"Guards! Guards!" My voice echoed down the hallway. "Call a doctor! Check on your lord, now!" I shouted toward the elevator.

Chapter 7

We found out about our fancy new wardrobe appointment when a floating hologram popped into air the second we opened our door in the afternoon.

The details hovered in the air like digital confetti: ten o'clock, reception room, complete with portraits of everyone who'd be there and a roster of guards assigned to babysit us.

Pretty clear the Faucher mansion had gone full lockdown mode. Anyone stepping foot inside was probably getting tracked like a lab rat in a maze.

And no updates from Faucher himself.

After that night's drama, the upper floor had settled into an eerie quiet. Even the medical equipment's familiar beeping soundtrack had thinned out considerably. They must've unhooked some machines. A good sign, I supposed. His condition had stabilized enough that he might actually leave that bed sometime soon.

He would probably spend his days in a wheelchair from now on. Or maybe some high-tech hovering tech. This place loved its floating gadgets.

Joelle mentioned reading about techs for disabled people in the library, but such references were exceedingly rare. The founding population of Inoasis had been carefully screened for specific genes and lineages, and with the settlement's rigorous safety protocols, disabilities were practically extinct here. Nearly extinct, anyway—the broken man upstairs being the glaring exception.

However, that dream kept nagging at me.

Usually, dreams slip through my fingers like water the moment I wake up, taking whatever emotions they stirred along with them. Just brain static, nothing worth holding onto. Dreams are just dreams. But that one was different.

I could still feel the raw ache in my throat and the grief sitting heavy in my chest... that small boy, those fragments clutched in his tiny hands, that light so feeble it barely pushed back the darkness. Those lilac eyes, the distinctive curve of those lips. The physical similarities to *the man upstairs* was downright unsettling.

And Papa.

My heart still ached at his absence, yet somehow he'd found a way to visit me again. I could almost feel him. Like he was still trying to protect us from somewhere beyond, unwilling to rest because we'd been robbed of so many years together, all those heart-to-heart talks we never got to have, and that final chance to say a proper goodbye.

But that dream he'd planted in my head... was there some hidden meaning there? Was he nudging me to put my chips on Francis Faucher, hinting that our survival hinged on the guy? Or maybe it was some kind of freaky premonition? Astragan was still out there lurking in the shadows, that whole mess was far from over. Was Faucher somehow the key to untangling this whole disaster?

I'd kept the dream to myself, not breathing a word to Joelle or Evelynn. Since their little speech that day, they'd been sleepwalking through life—eating, sleeping, killing time in

the library, or zoning out with mindless games on their modules. This routine had been going on for two days straight, with barely three words exchanged between us.

Couldn't blame them, honestly. Whether we stayed or left seemed like a dead end either way. They'd just... stopped giving a shit.

We arrived at the reception room five minutes before the scheduled time. Evelynn was lost in her digital puzzle game, the picture of boredom. Joelle's eyes were glued to her module as well. No clue what she was reading, but it sure beat making conversation.

I sat ramrod straight, partly from nerves and partly because the Vidal uniform's built-in corset was basically a torture thing masked as fashion.

Behind us stood the fully armed Faucher guards, their motionless presence distinctly unnerving, as usual.

Faucher's butler glided through the dissolving doorway, with several people trailing behind him. These newcomers rocked the same dark colour scheme, with textured shoulder panels and asymmetric fitted tailoring. Fancy, but at least...functional. Muli had mentioned they were the Faucher family's designated tailors. And yes, they definitely looked like it.

"Good morning, ladies," the butler said with a shallow bow.
"These are tailors from Stellar Atelier. The best in Inoasis."

"Greetings, ladies." The lead tailor spoke with the polished confidence of someone who'd navigated high society forever, their voice and appearance so perfectly neutral I couldn't tell if I was looking at a man, woman, or something in between. "I am Belvoie, founder of Stellar Atelier."

"Hello."

I barely registered what was being said because something else had completely hijacked my attention.

The three people Belvoie had brought along—two women and one man—all had heartbeats so rapid, their thundering pulses drowned out everything else in my enhanced hearing.

Nervousness? I didn't think so. The way their eyes darted around, never settling, spoke of something way beyond regular jitters. *Fear*, however... was more like it.

That's when I spotted them. Dark metal collars clamped around all the tailors' necks. The design was sickeningly familiar, practically duplicates of the ones that had once locked around our own throats in Astragan. My stomach turned.

They quickly took their positions. I nodded toward my sisters, directing the two twitchy female tailors their way. Meanwhile, the male tailor, whose heartbeat suggested he was on the verge of panic despite his outwardly calm face, stepped up to me with his floating tool kit.

"H-hello, my lady. Please excuse me." His voice wavered just enough to confirm what his pulse had already told me.

Everyone was staring at these three. The butler's eyes never blinked, locked onto Belvoie, while Belvoie watched their employees with the intensity of someone expecting disaster any second.

I couldn't understand what was happening. This was simply a fitting for new clothes, but why was it being treated like a bomb diffusion?

The guy in front of me pulled out some high-tech measuring gadgets and started setting it up to scan me. The device could obtain results by targeting specific areas without needing measuring tape or even physical contact. I was genuinely impressed by this slick tech. Super convenient and efficient.

So why wouldn't his fingertips stop trembling?

"Uhm," I finally broke the suffocating silence with a throat clear. "What's your name?"

"Oh? I'm, I'm Gerald. Gerald Bennett." He stumbled over his own name like it was something he'd just memorized.

Bennett? Something about that name tickled the back of my brain. Totally ordinary, yet somehow familiar, like I'd heard it before.

"Okay, Gerald." I tried to be casual, aiming to put him at ease, but his fingers just trembled worse, like my attempted chill tone had somehow cranked his anxiety up another notch. A quick scan of my sisters' tailors told me they weren't fairing much better. Their hands might be steadier, but that same bottled-up tension was written all over their faces. "I'm looking forward to seeing your work. Have you been in this profession long?"

CLANG.

The measuring device hit the floor like a bomb dropping.

The reaction was instant. Every Faucher guard in the room snapped to attention, weapons raised and locked on Gerald like he'd just pulled a knife. Pure instinct kicked in, and I threw my arm out to shield his back, which had gone board-stiff with terror. My eyes shot questioning glares at the butler.

[&]quot;What's going on?"

"Safety protocol, my lady," the butler replied, standing there like he had a steel rod for a spine, hands neatly folded in front of him.

Between his manicured fingertips, I spotted a small remote with a blinking red light. My eyes then darted to Belvoie's nervous face, then back to the collars. The collars. The remote. The hair-trigger response from the guards. The tailors' faces. All the dots connected into something absolutely wicked.

My blood went cold, then hot with fury. Suddenly this was Astragan all over again, just with fancier window dressing. These people were walking on eggshells with explosives strapped to their necks. One wrong move, one slip of the hand, and boom. Lives snuffed out like candles for the crime of dropping a measuring tool.

"Remove their collars, sir," I said, fighting to keep my voice level when what I really wanted was to scream. "You said I could make any request. So remove their collars."

"That violates protocol, my lady." The butler's tone could have frozen water. "Mr. Belvoie has never objected to this arrangement. We have implemented this protocol for decades. It ensures the Faucher family's personal safety."

"I don't like it. Remove them," I hissed, a vein pulsing in my temple like it might burst. "I wore one of those things for years. I know exactly what it is."

"Lord Faucher would not approve of your decision, my lady."

"Then let him punish me. I don't care. Remove them," I snarled, my hand diving to my boot for the hidden short blade.

The weapon flew into my grip like it had been waiting for this moment, and I whipped it around, aiming straight at one of those masked guards. The blade responded to my fury, shooting out of its housing with that perfect metallic snap before roaring to life. Blue lightning crawled along the edge, filling the air with the angry buzz of static.

"He is nothing to me, and I have no obligation to obey him. If I'm not mistaken, the entire Faucher household still owes me an explanation and an apology, sir."

Everyone went dead still. My sisters, the tailors, the guards—they all froze like someone had hit a pause button. Gerald's eyes were superglued to the blade, and he went white as a ghost, like I'd aimed the thing at his heart instead of the people threatening him.

The butler and I stared each other down, his eyes practically bulging out of his skull when they locked onto my weapon. His mouth started doing this pathetic little quiver before his thumb grudgingly smashed the release.

The collars disengaged with satisfying clicks, dropping like dead weight to scatter across the floor. I shut down the weapon immediately, gripping the inert handle tight against my ribs while silently thanking whatever luck had kept sweaty-ass grip from sending it flying across the room.

"I'm not one of your precious Fauchers, I'm not important to anyone here. Continue."

The rest of the fitting was a masterclass in uncomfortable silence. The butler's face had morphed into a full-blown thunderstorm, and I could see the wheels turning as he planned exactly how he'd rat me out to Faucher.

Whatever, as long as Gerald's fingers had finally stopped their trembling.

Though his eyes kept bouncing around between my face and my weapon. His mouth kept doing this ridiculous goldfish impression, words bubbling up and dying before they could escape.

I eventually stopped looking at him altogether, catching Joelle's eye instead. She cocked an eyebrow in silent appreciation of my little rebellion. I shot back another look.

When the tailors finished their measurements, the butler swept out in a cloud of injured pride, leaving frost in his wake. He fired a look at Belvoie that could've incinerated steel before snarling orders at his goon squad to follow out.

Perfect. I'd quit giving a shit about our so-called "safety" or whatever bullshit excuse they used to keep everyone on a leash. In this fancy-ass prison, nobody was actually safe anyway. We were all just prettier targets.

"My lady," Belvoie approached us once the room cleared, and it was like watching a completely different person emerge from under layers of fear. The rigid, terrified formality dissolved, with this smile that lit up their entire weathered face. "On behalf of Stellar Atelier, there aren't words big enough for our gratitude."

Their eyes were practically glowing with relief. Like decades of quiet submission suddenly lightened, a burden visibly lifting from shoulders that had carried it so long they'd forgotten its weight. "Whatever designs you desire, consider them yours. Additional pieces, special requests, anything at all."

I spun the dead blade between my fingers, weighing my options. No point playing by their rules anymore.

"For regular clothes, I want stuff that's actually practical. Pants. Not these ridiculous dresses they keep cramming us into." I glanced down at my weapon, wheels turning. "And I want a combat suit." I locked eyes with Belvoie. "If that's not asking for too much trouble."

"Not a problem, my lady," Belvoie replied with a bow that contained actual respect this time, not the hollow performance we usually received. "They only commissioned standard attire for you. About your additional specifications," A smile tugged at their lips. "Consider them my personal project."

We watched them pack up their gear and head for the exit, moving like they'd suddenly remembered how to walk without fear weighing them down. As the door started melting back together, Gerald spun around one last time.

His eyes found mine across the shrinking space, mouthing a silent "Thank you."

The door sealed shut. I shrugged.

Chapter 8

Speaking of which, we'd nearly forgotten about someone—that woman who'd disappeared after we bailed from the hospital ward downstairs.

Beyond Muli's warning that she harboured ill intentions, we knew nothing about why she kept messing around with New Human genetics research. Perhaps, like the greedy Jacques, she was chasing immortality too, thinking she could cheat death.

I wondered if either had considered what extended life truly meant in our fucked-up, falling-apart world. Like... getting to watch everyone you care about eventually disappear, break down, or get crushed by falling space debris while the whole universe slowly dies around you?

I blinked and realized I'd been staring at the module in my hands for ages. The story's heroes—immortal elves living in eternal bliss—seemed like pure fiction when real extended life usually just meant an eternity of suffering

I set it down and closed the panel.

In less than three hundred years, Inoasis went from federal government to full-on dictatorship. Just shows how people never really change, I guess.

Joelle had been diving deep into local history lately, and the stuff she'd dug up was pretty wild. Turns out multiple factions had banded together to create Inoasis back in 3654, all making these grand promises about helping humanity

escape Earth. Fast forward a century later, and they were still stuck on the surface, systematically strip-mining the planet for everything it was left.

Power struggles broke out over the scraps until only the Faucher and Vidal families were left standing, having devoured everyone else in their hunger for absolute control.

We'd been tearing through the library hunting for intel on Jacques and their New Human creation drug, but every module went deadly silent about that ugly piece of history.

With Muli off doing whatever, we couldn't squeeze gossip out of anyone else either. The butler sure as hell wasn't talking. He acted like we didn't exist anymore, probably too busy playing nursemaid to his fragile little lord upstairs. Saved me the headache of dealing with his attitude.

Armed guards were scattered all over the library. My sisters and I had gotten used to these weapon-toting strangers tracking our every move with their hollow stares. They'd basically become part of the furniture at this point—always watching, but never actually doing anything useful.

I melted deeper into the alcove's plush cushions, stretching my back until it cracked in all the right places after sliding the module back into its slot on the shelving unit. Closing my eyes, I let my enhanced hearing spread out, searching for my sisters.

The soft cadence of their breathing floated to me across the massive room. Joelle had claimed her favourite perch in the upper corner again, while Evelynn had holed up in her usual spot on the far side.

That's when I caught something weird. A sound that went beyond just breathing, something that tickled my memory from our time in the hospital ward. Something shooting through narrow passages at high speed, echoing like mining carts racing along underground tracks. Those subterranean transit noises were old news to an Outsider like me. We knew every sound that came from beneath the surface.

The noise was so faint I had to really strain to pick it up from here on the second floor. As I pushed my hearing to its absolute limit, the effort suddenly hit me like a brick wall. My vision swam, and I had to death-grip the cushion's edge as this massive dizzy spell crashed over me.

I collapsed back into the padding, waiting for the world to quit spinning.

A tunnel running under the house?

I peered toward the guards flanking the doorway. Despite their fancy helmets, they immediately swivelled toward me, those creepy visored faces locking onto my position like heatseeking missiles.

I bit back the urge to roll my eyes and sank back into my alcove. No point trying to get answers from them.

Besides, these weren't even real Raven Force soldiers. I'd figured that out eventually—their uniforms were missing those distinctive metal badges that decorated Muli's gear. Only after Faucher woke up did they get their weapons, probably taking orders straight from that pompous butler. I had no clue what the master thought about any of this, but I definitely wanted to punch that arrogant butler in his smug face.

I still wasn't used to this whole super-hearing thing. Those few seconds of intense focus had completely drained my battery, leaving my fingers like icicles and my skull pounding hard. Time to call it a day and drag myself back to our room, even if my sisters weren't ready to call it quits yet.

I tapped out a quick message to Joelle on my panel before hauling myself toward the library exit. The guards didn't even twitch as I shuffled past. Why would they bother? We had plenty more babysitters posted throughout the upper floors anyway. We couldn't exactly stage a dramatic escape, but I guess that also meant we were relatively safe. What a fucking comfort.

Beyond the constant prickle of being watched, we couldn't exactly file complaints about our situation. Life in this fancy prison was still better than our previous underground existence—crammed together in the pitch-black depths beneath that ruined city, scrapping for food, breathing recycled air that always tasted like metal shavings...

I stepped into the elevator and jabbed the third-floor button, watching the doors glide shut with a whisper. As the lift started its lazy climb, my eyes drifted to that glowing red B2 button like they always did.

Something about that crimson pulse kept nagging at me. The brightness, that specific shade of red, the steady rhythm—the way it seemed to breathe in the dim lighting. It reminded me of something I definitely *knew*. Looking up, all the other buttons gave off another warm, welcoming golden glow, except for the fourth floor. We'd never been up there, and didn't have the clearance yet, obviously. Though Joelle and I had secretly tried pressing it just to see what would happen. B1 and B2 were totally off-limits too.

The elevator continued its unhurried climb. My gaze locked onto that pulsing red light, and pure curiosity got the better of me. I reached out and casually pressed it, just wanting to feel those engraved numbers under my fingertip.

The second I made contact; the elevator chimed with successful interaction and came to a complete stop. I yanked my hand back, but it was too late. The damn thing had already switched directions and was now heading down.

My heart started doing this panic dance as I pressed myself against the curved glass wall. This was not what I'd expected at all, and now I was descending toward the mysterious B2 level that nobody had ever mentioned, not even Muli.

I'll just smash the third-floor button as soon as the doors open, I told myself. Joelle and I had always wondered if it might be storage or maybe something evil like a torture chamber... That thought made ice water run through my veins.

When I finally arrived, the elevator chimed cheerfully and the doors slid open to reveal something I definitely hadn't seen coming: a tunnel that stretched into what looked like forever, surprisingly bright and well-lit.

Right at the tunnel entrance sat this sleek little transport pod with a mirror-smooth surface and an open door showing off luxury seating for two people. The most shocking part though—no guards. Not a single person anywhere on this entire level.

I stepped out of the elevator.

Silver light flooded the tunnel in perfect rings, each luminous arch flowing into the next like ripples in an endless metallic pond. I held my breath, listening with every fiber of my enhanced ear, confirming no one was present; no heartbeats.

The passage stretched way beyond what should've been possible, definitely extending past the mansion's boundaries. My pulse quickened as realization dawned. This could be an escape route, right? A way to slip past the guards, the cameras,

that insufferable butler with his perpetual sneer. I was pretty sure he didn't have access to this level. He couldn't follow me here.

A shiver ran from my ankles upward as uncertainty mingled with possibility. If I ventured forward now, I might discover the one thing we'd been desperately seeking. *An exit*.

I could practically see it: the three of us slipping away on some random afternoon, our absence unnoticed until we were already gone.

This tunnel could be our ticket out. Every step forward might get us closer to ditching this gorgeous prison, to actually feeling real wind again instead of recycled air. To maybe find our way home, if there was still a home to find.

I pulled the blade from my boot and flicked the activation switch. The weapon sprang to life, edge gleaming while the handle pulsed with that familiar red glow. Exactly like the elevator button.

That's when it hit me. When Joelle and I were messing with those buttons earlier, I didn't have this knife yet. Muli gave it to me afterward, and I only noticed the red light later. What if the weapon wasn't just for stabbing people? What if it was also some kind of key?

I ditched the whole being-careful thing and walked straight to the transport pod. All that hesitation just evaporated as I climbed in, the blade still warm in my grip. The seat was so ridiculously plush it basically hugged me back, nothing like those awful benches from the underground networks back home. A holographic screen popped up with one tempting option: "Depart."

Through the transparent shell, I glimpsed the closed elevator doors one last time.

It'll be fine.

This still belonged to Faucher's people, so they had to know about it. They knew about B2. They just had no clue I'd figured it out.

My finger hit "Depart" before I could reconsider. The pod sealed with this soft hiss, hovering for a second before taking off.

I barely had time to think about texting Joelle before I was flying through the tunnel, the pod staying perfectly steady even though we had to be going crazy fast. I just went with it, melting deeper into the seat while those light rings outside turned into one solid blur of white.

The digital clock said 3:14 PM. Nine minutes later, everything started slowing down, those blurred rings separating back into individual halos. The pod glided to a stop and the door just dissolved, revealing what looked exactly like where I'd started. Same fancy design, same tunnel stretching forever.

I stepped out, blade already ready.

Instead of another elevator, there was this sealed archway. My enhanced hearing caught the obvious signs of life on the other side—heartbeats, clothes rustling, footsteps.

A lot of people were waiting on the other side of the door.

"Sounds like someone's here," a voice said, loud enough that even regular people could hear it. The words cut right through the wall like an uninvited nighttime visitor. I completely froze, looking around for hidden cameras while trying to keep my breathing under control.

Heavy footfalls approached from beyond—five, maybe six people heading for the door. Cold sweat broke out along my hairline as I gripped the blade handle tighter.

Too late to run now.

The footsteps abruptly stopped, as if waiting for the door to open. My heart hammered so violently I feared they might hear it through the barrier. I raised the blade higher, ready for whatever was about to come through.

"Is it her?" someone asked from the other side.

"Let's wait and see."

The tension in my shoulders loosened. It was Muli's voice. I kept the blade up anyway despite feeling slightly better. Her giving me this weapon had to mean she trusted me, though I wasn't totally sure I reciprocated yet.

I gathered whatever courage I had left and stepped toward the door. The thing just dissolved without warning, vanishing in a swift molecular dance.

"Good afternoon, my lady," Muli greeted me with that familiar calm. "You've arrived sooner than I anticipated."

Every person in the space went silent. Humans, half-machines, and whatever else was in between all turned to stare at me.

Two neat rows of humanoid things stood nearby, all a bit shorter than me. Their bodies screamed high-tech engineering, way too symmetrical and precise to be natural, but with weirdly human faces on top of these mechanical bodies. I couldn't stop staring at their glowing blue eyes or that skin that looked like someone had airbrushed it to perfection, like dolls that nobody bothered giving actual texture to.

"They are Synths," Muli said, catching me staring. "Human brains in manufactured bodies. That's all that remains of who they used to be."

"So you guys are also doing these..." I started to ask about this whole inhumane experiment thing, when one particularly nosy Synth stretched his neck toward me like some curious bird. His chassis was something else. Dark metal plates woven through with blue channels that pulsed like someone had trapped lightning in his veins. My accusation just died in my throat as those glowing eyes studied me. "...uh, hi?"

"Before Jacques redirected the New Human project exclusively toward women, many men were also... sacrificed," Muli nodded toward the Synths, patting one on the shoulder as they started to spread out. "Their physical forms were damaged beyond repair, but their brains stayed viable, suspended in nutrient fluid while their cognitive capacity got exploited for computational research. We rescued these souls who'd lost their bodies, giving them new vessels that let their brains age naturally. A bit of restoration, even if it's not complete."

"Are they working for Faucher now?" I asked, noticing how their bodies were obviously designed for way more than just walking around. Every joint had visible micro-hydraulics, their segmented torsos and precision-built limbs holding superhuman strength. The whole design seemed built for combat

That curious Synth kept swivelling his head toward me until another yanked him away with a gesture so human it surprised me, like watching someone drag their nosy friend away from eavesdropping.

"They do. Apparently, the former patriarch of House Faucher wouldn't rescue them without getting something in return," Muli sighed. "Still better than Astragan."

She wasn't wrong. There was a huge difference between being someone's personal army and being stuck as a lab rat for eternity. I deactivated my blade, sliding it away while still clutching the handle against my chest. My breathing gradually found its normal rhythm again.

The chamber appeared to be the Synths' living quarters, bathed in this blue glow that stretched shadows across industrial metal floors. Some of them sat around with data cables plugged into ports at the backs of their heads, which was pretty disturbing, but they seemed chill about it, just chatting casually on these raised platforms.

A bunch of them turned to check me out, their perfect synthetic faces impossible to read, but they were obviously curious about the flesh-and-blood girl who'd stumbled into their world. One guy just casually detached his hand, making my stomach do a little flip.

Then he waved the disconnected limb at me.

I lifted my own hand, giving back a small, awkward wave. Apparently, that totally made his day. With his still-attached arm, he got all excited and jabbed his buddy in the side. "She waved back!" I heard him say. "Ma'am, I'm 3786!" he called after me as I glanced back, right before his friend playfully shoved his face away.

"They don't have names?" I asked, noticing that while they all had that synthetic skin thing going on, each one had different facial features.

"Their original identities are tied to extremely traumatic pasts," Muli explained. "Some brains were partially wiped to prevent permanent damage from severe psychological trauma. Those who couldn't remember their names afterward were assigned codes. We standardized coding protocols for all Synths about twenty years ago."

The space went up through multiple floors. The ceiling had these complex mechanical panels that hummed quietly with blue light. Huge holoscreens covered the far wall, displaying notices and what looked like control interfaces.

A few Synths were talking quietly, barely glancing at me before going back to whatever they were doing, apparently some of them not bothered by the random human in white wandering through their space.

Various passages extending from both sides. Charging stations maybe? Did they need to plug in to recharge, or did they sleep like normal people?

The air also had this metallic smell to it.

"I had no idea B2 would lead me straight to you," I said as Muli walked me toward what looked like the exit. "You could've just told me earlier."

"Consider it as a small test," Muli replied. "Curiosity unlocked doors. You passed."

As we passed through the exit, a gust of air struck my face carrying an even stronger metallic odour. The noise level went crazy, with sounds of heavy machinery, conversations, and footsteps suddenly overwhelming my enhanced hearing.

In front of us was this even bigger space, a hangar so massive it could fit multiple fighter jets with tons of room left over. The angular metal flooring gleamed under harsh lighting that cut through wisps of steam floating around. Huge black support pillars shot upward, disappearing into shadows near what looked like an impossibly high ceiling.

Soldiers in combat gear moved between maintenance areas and launch platforms, their overlapping conversations splitting into way too many threads for me to follow.

"Welcome to Raven Force Headquarters," Muli turned toward me, raising her right hand in a military salute.

Papa had blundered across the border only to get scooped up by patrol rangers who hauled him straight to this headquarter. Nothing like our cushy VIP welcome when we arrived at Inoasis with our precious contractual protections. No. *Not at all.*

Papa got arrested, beaten bloody, and tossed in a cell until some supervisor matching Muli's rank finally decided to "handle the Outsider trespassing situation." My fingernails dug crescents into my palms hearing this story.

Those responsible faced consequences, my lady, Muli said softly, her hand finding my shoulder, comforting. Papa's rare abilities eventually earned him Faucher's mercy—not just a pardon but permission for one extra request: custody of us three sisters.

Later on, Faucher even made him colonel of the long-range combat division. Just an honorary title, really. Anyone who knew Papa understood he was too scatter-brained and allergic to responsibility to actually enjoy pushing paperwork around.

Muli cracked a smile at that, nodding her agreement.

The ache has gotten duller when I hear Papa's name now. These months of actual beds, regular meals, and climate control have changed something inside me. The powerless, terrified girl is fading away. I can read now. I have access to stuff. My sisters sleep soundly without hunger gnawing at them.

But sometimes this nasty thought creeps in... Am I turning into some ungrateful sellout? Like I'm building my comfortable new life on top of Papa's sacrifice. The guilt gets heavier every day, but I've got nobody to dump it on. Joelle practically lives in the library archives these days, and the gap between me and little Evelynn is wider than just our ages. She wouldn't get it even if I tried to explain.

The morning after finding B2, I skipped the library routine completely.

Not feeling it today, I lied to Joelle over breakfast before hopping into the pod transport straight to Raven Force HQ.

With Muli stuck in meetings, I parked myself in the Synths' info chamber, soaking up their weird digital chatter. They couldn't stop talking about their artificial bodies and what they were built for. And they were exactly what their name suggested: specialists who snuck behind enemy lines to steal information or plant nasty code. They could literally plug their brains into enemy electronic systems to steal data or launch attacks from the inside.

"And it might be a one-way mission!"

403 announced with this bizarre cheerfulness, sitting crosslegged on his maintenance platform like it was story time. He sounded ridiculously young, slapping his metal thigh like he'd just shared the punchline to some hilarious joke. His synthesized voice had all the energy of a human teenager who'd had way too much sugar.

I couldn't find even a ghost of a smile inside me.

"Theo!" The name hit like a punch to the gut. 403's previously animated movements went completely still, his blue optical units flickering with what could only be emotion. "He was such a brave man. Before him, this place was boring. Then he was here and brought chaos, risk, adventure. Oh, 074 was really close to him."

"074?" I looked up.

"Yes! The one who cracked Astragan's security maps to find you all," 403's eyes brightened to almost painful intensity. "Him, strong! Everyone privately calls him our role model."

Right. A one-way mission.

"403...?" My voice came out barely audible, nearly swallowed by the constant mechanical hum filling the chamber.

"Yes!" he chirped instantly.

"Promise me something. Make it back from your missions. Every single time."

He cocked his head at an angle too perfect to be human, absently reaching to scratch the back of his skull, perhaps a leftover habit from his flesh-and-blood days. His fingers found the cable connection ports instead, and he awkwardly

dropped his hand, staring at his digits like they'd betrayed him.

"We're technically already in the dead column, you know. No breathing, no eating, can't even feel hot or cold or touch anymore."

"You're not dead," I insisted, echoing Muli's words that once comforted me. "As long as you can think, as long as any one of your senses still functions, you're a living soul. You can see me right now, can't you? You're talking to me."

"Fine, fine! I'll do my absolute best not to get scrapped!" He giggled again.

"Let me tell you about the Second World," I offered, bunching up my ridiculous white dress to sit cross-legged in front of him. The fabric weighed a ton and rustled like wrapping paper, but I managed to arrange it somewhat decently.

At first, only 403 was listening as I kept my voice low, almost like I was sharing secrets. Then I noticed his friends drifting closer, metal feet making barely audible clicks against the floor. More and more Synths appeared, until they formed a semicircle around us.

I got so caught up in telling stories that I didn't even notice the crowd until I mentioned how parched my throat was and how much I wanted some cool water. When I looked up, there were dozens of mechanical faces staring at me with total focus, their glowing eyes fixed and unblinking like little kids mesmerized by bedtime stories.

That's when it hit me why Papa and 074 had connected so completely. These compact steel frames held spirits just as

desperate for freedom as ours had been. Different containers, same yearning.

The Synths spent their days training around headquarters, but mostly just wandering hallways or doing perimeter checks. With Faucher in some kind of standby mode, nobody was giving orders to this mechanical battalion whose control was still firmly in *that disabled guy's* hands.

Surviving clearly wasn't the gift everyone thought it would be, especially not for him. Yeah, I'm totally taking shots at Francis Faucher.

Living comfortably on borrowed luxury bought with Papa's blood while nursing this unexplainable rage toward Faucher was creating this storm inside me. The contradiction was twisting my stomach into knots.

I needed strength, not just physical, but enough power to actually change things, to make sure Papa's sacrifice wouldn't just fade away like some forgotten footnote.

Day three found me emerging from the tunnel with fire in my veins. Muli took one critical look at my ridiculous white dress and shook her head.

"You'll require proper attire before we begin. That garment is entirely unsuitable for training."

No argument from me there. Still no word on when I'd get my own clothes. Muli stood about a hand shorter than me, making even her stretchy exercise outfit feel like it might split at the seams if I moved wrong.

She didn't waste time with formal instruction. Just pointed at the track and told me to run thirty laps.

When I finally collapsed, the industrial ceiling lights swam above me like a gateway to the afterlife. Muli appeared over me, hands planted firmly on her hips, and announced we were done for the day.

Somewhere behind the bulletproof observation glass, 403 and his buddies cheered so enthusiastically I wanted to crawl under the floor and die from embarrassment.

Day four bled into five, into six, into ten. By the eleventh morning, those thirty laps barely registered as exercise. Just a light warmup that didn't even dampen my hairline.

So Muli introduced push-ups to the routine. Now those were genuine torture. Two female rangers had to physically brace my core before I could manage anything resembling proper form. My arms vibrated like they were connected to faulty wiring, muscles completely betraying me.

On the fifteenth night, the mansion settled into its usual silence. I was drifting toward sleep when a heavy thud from upstairs jolted me awake.

Something had hit the floor above us.

I rolled onto my back, releasing my hearing thread toward the ceiling, but didn't catch anything else. Deciding it was probably nothing much, I closed my eyes again.

The darkness had already claimed our room completely, and my sisters' deep, rhythmic breathing confirmed they were far away in dreamland.

I hovered in that strange space between reality and sleep when more sounds filtered through. Subtle at first, the whisper of fabric dragging across the hard surface, then more. Fingers grabbing at cloth, followed by some guy's increasingly heavy breathing. The cool floor met my bare feet before I slipped them into slippers. My fingers found the blade beneath my pillow, the one that doubled as a security key.

I grabbed the blade and stepped into the corridor, which stretched empty in front of me, the elevator bank at the far end conspicuously unguarded. I strained my hearing toward the upper floor for just a second, confirming what I was seeing. No guards. No staff. Nothing.

The butler's absence struck me as especially wrong. Where had everyone disappeared to?

I entered the elevator, staring at the fourth-floor button. That top level we'd never been allowed to access. My finger hovered, then pressed it. The panel chimed softly, accepting my touch. The doors whispered shut as I tightened my grip on the weapon, ready for anything.

Meeting the Synths had taught me that living beings didn't necessarily need heartbeats. Better safe than sorry.

I'd barely gotten into position outside Faucher's room when the door suddenly liquefied right in front of me, molecule by molecule, swishing open without any warning. A small gasp slipped out.

The sight inside froze me in place. Faucher lay sprawled across the floor, his entire body caught in an undignified struggle. His remaining arm trembled violently as it struggled to support his weight, fingers white-knuckled against the polished floor, while his other empty shoulder kept trying to grab bed sheets to stop himself from sliding further.

When his head turned toward me, the pain etched into his features instantly turned into raw terror. And there I was,

framed in his doorway with a weapon gripped in both hands, looming over the helpless dictator in the middle of the night.

"...As expected," he muttered, turning his face away so sharply that his long bangs swept across his features like a curtain, hiding whatever was building beneath his composed exterior. "Go ahead then."

Oh. He obviously thought I'd come to kill him.

The mighty Faucher, lying helpless with not a single card left to play, and not even bothering to call for help. I lowered my weapon and stepped all the way into the dark room, lit only by this faint glow from the night city's lights.

His only hand maintained its dignified push, but his body already sagged against the floor, half-concealed by the elevated mattress. I rounded his absurdly oversized bed to find him sprawled awkwardly, loose but expensive sleeping clothes twisted around his form, the right sleeve hanging empty with a grotesque mass of burn scar visible at the shoulder.

The door sealed behind me with a soft hiss. He flinched at the sound but kept up his stubborn silence, focusing on steadying his ragged breathing instead. I moved closer, one careful step at a time, watching for any sudden moves.

When I got to the desk across the room, I set my blade down with a clank. The sound echoed through the dimly lit space, way louder than it should've been.

"Unlike some people, I don't just kill because it's convenient," I said, moving toward him without waiting for a response.

His expression shifted to naked shock as I grasped his good arm, helping him lean more comfortably against the bed frame. His floating wheelchair had drifted halfway across the room, sitting by some distant tea table now. Must've fallen during the transfer.

"Where's the butler?"

"I don't know," he replied flatly.

I studied the considerable height of the mattress and his substantial frame. No way I could manage this alone.

"Anyone else in the building tonight?"

"I don't know," he muttered, deliberately angling his face away when I tried to make eye contact.

"Guess you're camping on the floor forever then," I said with a shrug.

He offered nothing in response, just that same stubborn silence. Like dealing with a toddler who'd decided words were beneath him.

"Wait here," I said, straightening up and retrieving my knife from the desk. "I'm getting my sister."

Joelle stumbled into his quarter minutes later, dragged from sleep and thoroughly unimpressed with the midnight rescue mission.

I found the dimmer switch by his door and adjusted it upward, flooding the room with proper light.

Getting him situated took strategic planning: Joelle halfsprawled across the mattress to grip his shoulders from above while I improvised a sling from a towel, wrapping it around his hips to distribute his weight. We counted down together before heaving in unison, my already overtaxed muscles screaming in protest as we finally maneuverered him onto the edge of the bed. Then I dimmed the lights back to their previous comfortable dark and rolled my shoulders, trying to work out the burn that had settled deep in my muscles.

Time to escape this awkward midnight encounter. My leg had just reached the corridor when Faucher's voice broke the silence, so quiet it was barely more than a breath.

"How did you know...?"

I paused, slowly turning to face him. He sat perfectly still on the bed, the shadows making his features impossible to read. Without my enhanced hearing, those whispered words would have vanished into the darkness unheard.

"Woman's intuition," I answered with a half-smile that held no warmth, and slipped out the door before he could ask anything else.

Chapter 9

The morning after felt like stepping into a ghost town. Not a single guard in sight, and that pain-in-the-ass butler had vanished too. Everyone other than us in the building just up and disappeared overnight. My sisters and I kept circling the dining hall, and I was about to march into the main hall to hunt down another living soul...

The dining's door swooshed open.

There was that familiar breakfast cart, floating in right on time like nothing had changed. Except everything felt absolutely twisted.

"Why is it you two?"

I moved toward the entrance, blood turning cold. My sisters went rigid the second they spotted those white coats. They shuffled backward without a word, putting as much distance as possible between themselves and the long table.

"House Faucher has issued new directives regarding your care. All meals and daily requirements will now fall under V.I.D.A.L. management," Kori recited her obviously prepared script. Those eyes didn't even blink as she executed some fancy bow. "Please take your seats, ladies. We'll handle everything from here."

Evelynn let out a strangled sob.

"Sure thing," I said with the fakest shrug, turning my back on these psychos while catching Joelle's eye where the Vidals couldn't see. "You do you." This was all kinds of wrong. No guards, no babysitters, just three girls who knew jack squat about our enemies and were almost unarmed. Well, four people if you counted the broken guy upstairs. We'd seen his pure hatred for these V.I.D.A.L. freaks up close, and even if Muli had sweet-talked him, there was no way in hell he'd let them waltz in here and get anywhere near us.

Yet here they were, serving breakfast like they owned the place.

My mind went straight to the butler. They'd probably gotten rid of him somehow, cleared the field. When Faucher said he didn't know where the man went, it meant he was just as blindsided as we were.

Joelle gently steered Evelynn to the seat next to her. Our youngest sister cut off her tears like someone had flipped a switch, swallowing them back down until her bright eyes went flat and emotionless again. I channelled every ounce of acting ability I possessed, dropping into my usual chair like this was just another boring morning. My toes curled nervously inside my boots, right where my blade waited in its custom sheath.

Yes, Muli had worked some magic on those shoes. I could have the knife out and ready in under half a second. I ran through the combat drills from last week, muscle memory on standby.

Dera set plates down in front of us. Same disgusting grey cubes staring back at me, but now I had to actually choke some down for the show. The final plate touched down in front of Evelynn with a soft clink. She jumped slightly but kept her face perfectly blank, not giving these women an ounce of suspicion. *That's my girl*.

"Enjoy your breakfast," Dera purred, her smile so fake it could've been painted on. I nodded and grabbed my fork, mashing the mystery meat like always. Joelle and Evelynn took forever to start, clearly stalling for time by prodding their food around aimlessly.

Meanwhile, I could practically feel laser beams boring into our backs. The Vidals hadn't retreated to their cart. They were lurking right behind us. Waiting. Waiting for us to *eat*.

I stabbed a chunk and forced it into my mouth. Same fishy, rotten taste as always, the kind of slop we'd gotten used to over months of compromise. I nearly gagged before managing to swallow, then grabbed my water glass and took a massive gulp while pretending to be starving. No clue if diluting whatever poison they'd added would help, but the performance sold it.

The two Vidals exchanged satisfied looks and started wheeling their cart toward the exit. I held my breath so hard my lungs burned, silently begging the universe not to let anything go sideways now. I nudged the floor with my heel, letting my hover chair drift back just a few inches. My eyes locked onto their exposed necks, tracking every step, making sure they hadn't caught wind of anything suspicious.

The second they were perfectly positioned, I moved.

I lunged forward, yanking the NeuroQuill from my belt and jamming it straight into the base of their skulls. Both Vidals shrieked violently before hitting the deck, bodies seizing up as electricity fried whatever contents they had for brains.

"What...What now?" Joelle scrambled over, gawking at the twitching bodies sprawled across our fancy dining room floor. Evelynn completely lost it, dissolving into sobs while

clamping her hands over her ears and eyes, desperate to block out the nightmare unfolding around her.

"Memory wipe, and I'll call Muli. Today's gonna be really insane," I ripped out the control panel and hammered the emergency button before diving into their neural pathways, scrubbing every trace of this morning's visit. "If these two showed up, you can bet their puppet master was already moving. This whole place is damned."

Evelynn's crying got worse, turning into broken gasps between words. "He's... he's in danger. He told me... danger."

Who told her what now?

Joelle and I locked eyes over our baby sister's terrified rambling, both equally tensed.

"The man upstairs," Evelynn choked out between sobs. "Faucher. He's in danger right now."

I slammed the confirmation button and ripped my blade from its boot sheath in one fluid motion. "Lock the door. These bitches will be out cold for hours. Don't move until I get back."

I bolted for the door, grabbed fistfuls of this ridiculous white dress, and sprinted toward the elevator. The numbers crawled upward to 4 while I flicked my blade to life, then charged through the opening doors.

Dead silence greeted me. No guards patrolling the halls, no V.I.D.A.L. agents, no uptight butler hovering around. Even Faucher's door was sealed tight, which never happened. *Fuck it*—I blasted through that auto-dissolving barrier with my weapon drawn and ready for war.

The room was weirdly empty except for Faucher himself. He sat slouched in his floating chair with his back to me, not even bothering to check who'd just barged in. The space stayed dim as always, with only the city's glow outside barely sketching out his hunched silhouette.

"I'm going to have to seriously reconsider your professional standards, Mr. Stanley. You better have an excuse for disappearing," he said with that clipped tone that screamed barely controlled fury mixed with bone-deep exhaustion.

I didn't waste time. I marched straight up and backhanded his breakfast plate clean off the table.

The thing went flying from the force I put behind it, smashing into the floor with a crash that probably woke half the building. Those nasty grey cubes exploded everywhere, along with some kind of sauce that splattered across what had to be a ridiculously expensive rug.

The look on Faucher's face right then was absolutely priceless.

"Who just brought this to you?" I demanded, still gulping air from my sprint upstairs.

"I wasn't really paying attention," he said with this weird, forced calm. His eyes had gone dinner-plate wide, probably because here I was again, storming into his private space with a weapon in my hand. The guy looked completely shell-shocked, like nobody in his entire pampered existence had ever dared treat him this way.

"Didn't Muli warn you about anything?"

Total blank stare. I reached over and yanked the fork right out of his frozen hand—still had a bite of that poison on it—

and slammed it down on the table hard enough to make the whole thing jump.

"How much of that thing did you actually swallow?" I jabbed my finger at the mess decorating his floor.

"I'd just picked up the fork."

"Good." I let out a shaky breath. "Because we are screwed right now."

"Care to explain?"

His mouth tightened into a thin line while anger crept across his brow. Some inexplicable rage built between my eyebrows too.

We were clearly pissed off about completely different things. The idiot had no clue that those white-coat vultures had slithered back into his precious mansion. Hell, he didn't even give a damn who'd brought his breakfast or whether someone had laced it with drugs. Right now he was staring at me like I was some bratty kid throwing a tantrum. Or maybe a stray dog he regretted feeding.

Deep breath. Arms crossed. I clicked my blade off and dropped it on the table, then grabbed his floating chair and spun it around to face the bed. I mentally chanted Papa's words about trusting this dictator, trusting this broken man who looked ready to cash in his chips.

"Long story short, while you were unconscious, V.I.D.A.L. drugged me and my sisters. Muli had to bail us out. You banned those white freaks, right? They're back. Like, literally just now, downstairs. And they want our blood. New Human blood."

Faucher's face stayed blank as a wall. His one good hand drifted up to fiddle with some holographic interface on his chair, fingers shaking slightly as he poked at whatever buttons ran his sad excuse for a life. His puffy eyes looked dead inside, like my words had bounced right off his skull without penetrating.

"You're the next target," I said as calmly as I could manage, fighting every instinct to grab him and shake some sense into his thick head. What was wrong with this guy? Sure, he was disabled now, but why did he act like he couldn't care less about enemies trying to drain him dry?

"I distinctly remember telling you to eliminate those Vidals," he said, turning away from me toward the open doorway. "What gives you the audacity now to stand here and complain about the consequences of your disobedience?"

The air left my lungs in a rush. My mouth opened and closed like a dying fish, but nothing came out.

"You—"

"I'm not talking to you," he cut me off sharply. "Muli."

"Yes, my Lord."

The voice came from just outside the doorway.

Muli stepped out of the shadows, decked out in full Raven Force battle gear. She must've hauled ass straight up from B2 because she was still carrying her chain blade and everything. I automatically backed up a couple steps.

She walked in and planted herself right in front of his chair. Faucher stared at her with that same dead expression, but I could feel the frustration and defeat radiating off his broken body in waves.

Oh, so now he could actually make eye contact, I thought bitterly. My dramatic sprint upstairs to save his ass suddenly felt pathetic and pointless. What was I even doing here? I had zero authority in this room anyway.

"You're looking much healthier, my Lord," Muli dropped to one knee and gently squeezed his remaining arm. He grimaced slightly but didn't shake her off.

"Explain."

"I needed them for bait," she said, smart enough to let go before he got uncomfortable. "Lady Aurora hasn't appeared for weeks. No post-mission debriefs, no appearances at V.I.D.A.L. headquarters. Nobody can get a meeting with her. I've tracked her movements. She frequently visits her private laboratory, and we know she's privately researching New Human technology. Today she's set her sights on you, my Lord."

Faucher went completely still. Just sat there breathing in and out like he was trying to meditate away his rage.

"Besides me and Amelie, the only other person who can access this floor is Lady Aurora." Muli stood back up. "We should have our answer real soon."

Something shifted in the man's posture. The tension leaked out of him all at once, leaving him looking like a punctured balloon.

"So, what do I need to do?"

"We wait for the fish to bite, my Lord."

Muli and I headed back down to the dining hall. She had me get Joelle and Evelynn locked up tight in their room with strict instructions not to open the door for anyone except me. As I turned to bail, Joelle's hand shot out and grabbed my arm.

You've jumped headfirst into this toxic mess, sister. I know you've been sneaking off to Raven Force this whole time, she said. Her words hit like a slap, and I had no comeback ready. I didn't even know what I was fighting for anymore, or who I was supposed to be fighting against.

All I knew was that Papa's sacrifice couldn't be for nothing. After he got us out, he'd turned around and charged straight back into the depths of Astragan. The way Joelle was staring at me now was exactly how I'd looked at him back then.

"Papa told us to trust him," I finally choked out. "I want to know why."

Joelle went quiet, her hands settling protectively on Evelynn's shoulders while she studied the floor like it held all the answers. I could read her thoughts clear as day.

These people were total strangers who'd never accept us as anything more than Papa's leftover baggage. We were only safe because of some old contract, not because anyone actually gave a damn about us.

But I still had to know why Papa had thrown in with these people.

I started toward the door again. The sensors picked up my movement and the thing slid open.

"34, 67, 9... 8. The stars in the sky are leaves."

I stopped mid-step.

"Hey sweetie, what's all that about?" Joelle gave Evelynn's shoulder a gentle squeeze. "Are you still spooked? Want some water? Everything's okay now."

"I'm not scared," Evelynn said with that flat, bored expression she got sometimes. "34, 67, 9, 8! The stars in the sky are right!" she repeated, more insistent this time. Joelle and I traded worried looks over her head.

Hours crawled by until the mansion settled into that dead-ofnight silence.

The main hall door whispered open. A stunning woman emerged from the shadows, wrapped in flowing white silk that seemed to glow against her porcelain skin. Her cloak drifted behind her like galaxies, every step making the fabric dance around her legs.

The door sealed itself with barely a sound. She moved like some kind of ethereal spirit, gliding toward the elevator, disappearing around the corner of the dark corridor. The cloak's hood cast mysterious shadows across her face, but nothing could hide those pretty lips that would haunt any man's dreams.

She brought the night with her, like she was cloaked in the most enchanted moonlight, arriving at the fourth floor. Her footsteps were whisper-soft, just the faintest rustle of expensive fabric against skin that somehow made the silence even more intense. She gathered her skirt, hesitated for just a heartbeat, then slipped into her sleeping fiancé's room.

The space lay shrouded in darkness. The man was sprawled across the bed; face turned toward those massive windows that normally showed off the city lights. Too bad for him that even if he'd been awake, he was facing the wrong direction to catch this vision floating into his private space. His remaining hand rested casually on his stomach; blankets tucked neatly around his waist.

She drifted toward him, heartbeats hammering out some twisted rhythm in the dark. Her cloak pooled on the floor like fallen feathers, revealing the woman's tall, slender, beautiful form.

The nightgown she wore was more like a bride's dress—bare shoulders, a neckline that barely covered her chest, strips of fabric that left most of her torso exposed. She looked like some untouchable goddess. A flower on a high peak, a rare beauty seen once in a thousand years.

The pale moon perched herself on the bed's edge. She leaned in closer, and closer still, until her flawless face hovered just inches above his. Then, in what should've been the most romantic moment of the century, she let out this defeated sigh. As if trapped in a dead end with nowhere to go, or more honestly, in disgust.

Her ivory hand finally reached out, fingers barely grazing his cheek. She seemed to be observing, appraising him like some broken antique she might consider buying...

Except in her eyes, he was clearly a damaged vase. Her fingertips traced every burn scar and twisted line of flesh, mapping out the destruction until she reached his exposed chest. Then she got bolder, sliding her hand under his shirt to explore. The night's prelude was quietly unveiled by her knuckles.

That's when I crashed the performance, pressing my blade against the side of her throat. She froze, staying bent over his chest without looking up.

"What are you doing?" I flicked on the electrical charge, blue light washing across her perfect jawline.

"That question should be mine to ask, Outsider," Aurora snarled without moving her head, pure venom dripping from every word. "Do you comprehend the consequences of your interference? I am his betrothed."

Another hand shot up from the bed, ice-cold fingers clamping down on her wrist like a steel trap. Her eyes went wide with terror as she twisted to stare at the man who was supposed to be asleep.

"Not for much longer," Faucher said, then yanked her off him so hard she went flying. She hit the floor with a crash and a yelp.

Every light in the room exploded to life.

Chapter 10

Nine days after stumbling onto B2, Muli brought me to the close combat division. That's when something crucial hit me: what happened to the other rescued New Human girls?

"Ah, my sincere apologies for neglecting to inform you," Muli slowed her stride. "They are currently residing in Raven Force auxiliary dormitories. Their physical conditions have stabilized, as healthy as you, my lady. Several require psychological intervention, though I assure you our medical personnel are quite capable."

She mentioned that if I wanted, she could arrange a visit. But getting there meant taking underground transport way beyond Faucher's mansion, putting serious distance between me and my sisters. I'd have to pass on that for now. Just knowing they were alive and okay was enough. At least I hoped she wasn't feeding me some pretty lie.

"Are they gonna be sent back outside eventually?" I asked.

"I believe that is... unlikely," Muli replied. "Surface temperatures during thermal cycles now exceed 80 degrees Celsius."

Great. Even if I knew which way led home, which I didn't, we'd be toast within two minutes of stepping outside this massive hemisphere. Though I wondered if being a New Human might make any difference.

That same day, I got introduced to the chain blade. This thing was like a metal snake—interlocking segments that pulsed

with red energy lines running through dark plating. In standby mode, it looked like a regular carved blade, each segment wrapped in thin safety covers protecting the sharp bits. Just like my short knife, it needed activation to go live.

But when Muli really put some muscle behind it, the weapon came alive in the most terrifying way. Those connected pieces flowed like molten metal, stretching into this flexible serpent that could extend into a whip lined with razor-sharp teeth.

"Astragan's gravitational fields prove highly unpredictable," Muli explained while I stared, completely mesmerized. "Rather than expending limited fuel on propulsion systems, this device permits anchoring during zero-gravity. Compared to conventional firearms, it demonstrates better precision and energy efficiency against smaller aerial targets."

She kept the demonstration going, that chain blade dancing around her like liquid silk. Pure grace in motion. The static electricity crackling through the air made me instinctively want to plug my ears.

"This weapon requires considerable skill to master safely. It was, after all, conceived as a primitive energy conservation measure," she snapped it with authority, and those blade segments clicked back into perfect formation like magnetized puzzle pieces, instantly becoming a silent sword again. "I would be willing to instruct you, should you desire it. However, I must caution that injury during training is virtually inevitable."

Word around base was that even Francis Faucher himself had needed stitches thanks to this thing. But what really blew my mind wasn't the weapon's difficulty. It was finding out that the broken man had aced every single top-tier combat evaluation they had. I'd figured his injuries came from being outclassed, maybe getting jumped by Astragan goons or whatever.

But I'd witnessed what their high-level training looked like when the Rangers gave me a demo. And that wasn't even their hardest stuff.

"What about the other options?" I asked, swallowing nervously.

"Alternative armaments consist primarily of energy-based firearms. Sidearms, machine guns, rifles, cannons," she paused thoughtfully. I would recommend cold steel as the basic practical approach, my lady."

Right then, something clicked inside me. It felt safe to come clean with Muli. To finally share the truth about what was happening with my ears. This wasn't Astragan anymore—I had to keep reminding myself to trust this place.

Nobody was going to slice me open here. No more chopping heads in half and stitching them back together like some sick jigsaw puzzle. That nightmare was over. Done. The Synths even handled their own repairs and software updates, right? I wasn't going to end up as some specimen. Not here.

"Muli, there's something I need to tell you," I stepped closer, dropping my voice so only she could catch it. "Since becoming a New Human, my ears have changed. I can hear very far, very...loud. Everything is loud for me. I have superhearing."

"Oh." Muli made a simple sound of acknowledgment, but she didn't look shocked or anything. "I observed your habit of

covering your ears when passing the firearms division. I mistakenly attributed this to post-traumatic stress responses."

"Back in Astragan, every girl who developed special abilities after the transformation process ended up dead. Cut open on operating tables," I said bluntly.

"Understood," she nodded with that formal precision of hers. "However, I strongly advise maintaining this confidentiality. Share this information only when absolutely essential. Such capabilities can be your significant advantages, but also your fatal weakness."

I gave her a serious nod back. I trusted her.

But cold weapons were clearly my only real choice for now. I pulled out the short blade she'd given me, flicking it to life with a satisfying snap. "Guess we start with this then. Basic knife fighting, fundamentals, whatever."

"Certainly, my lady."

Here's the thing about Muli—she looked like a delicate little flower, all petite and graceful. But when she swung that blade, it was like getting hit by a damn sledgehammer.

I barely managed to block her strike, my wrist screaming from the impact, leaving me with just enough juice to stumble backward. I white-knuckled my knife handle, somehow absorbing the brutal force of her attack.

When I finally dared to open my eyes, the blade was surprisingly still in my grip, but both my arms had turned to useless noodles. It then hit the floor with a pathetic clatter.

"Never close your eyes in combat. That is how one dies," Muli sheathed her weapon and took my hands, gently

working the angry red marks on my palms. "This discomfort will fade with practice."

She let out this quiet sigh, and even through my ragged breathing, I caught something in her voice.

I didn't get a chance to dig deeper because 403 and his metallic fan club started their usual round of applause from behind the safety glass. God, I didn't know whether to laugh or scream.

Over these past few training sessions, I'd gotten friendly with some of the more upbeat Synths. Problem was, some had undergone memory scrubbing or suffered glitches during their brain transfers, which made things pretty awkward. They couldn't really read the room. Still adorably human in their own weird way though.

The days that followed cranked the intensity up. And the training got serious fast. More techniques to memorize, reflexes to sharpen, and my body pushed way past what I thought was possible. It was brutal. Absolutely brutal.

One time I got launched clean across the room and almost kissed the floor hard before some quick-thinking ranger snatched me out of midair.

Muli started making me use my enhanced hearing as a combat tool, predicting where attacks were coming from and how hard they'd hit. I followed her instructions, stumbling through it like a drunk person learning to walk.

I started picking up the subtle differences; the whistle of blade edges cutting through air, fabric brushing against skin, even the tiny pause when opponents held their breath right before unleashing heavy strikes. The trickiest part was learning to dial my hearing up and down on command, controlling it instead of letting it control me.

Between that mental strain and getting my ass kicked physically every day, I'd collapse into bed each night and be unconscious before my head hit the pillow. I couldn't even hear my sisters whispering across the room, let alone whatever drama was happening upstairs with Faucher.

But right now, after a full day of just waiting and adrenaline, my enhanced senses were locked onto the frantic hammering of Aurora's heart as she scrambled around on the floor.

She crawled toward her fallen cloak like her life depended on it, clutching the fabric against her chest while desperately trying to put distance between herself and the bed.

Rangers poured through the doorway, forming a silent circle around their boss without making a sound.

I had enough sense to back off into the corner by the tea table. After this morning's spectacular screw-up, I knew exactly where I stood in this hierarchy—nowhere important.

Muli had been right about Faucher being paranoid and highstrung. Me bursting into his bedroom with a weapon drawn was probably the worst possible way to get on his good side. Man was still royalty, after all. Had to be handled with care.

Muli glided into the room and went straight to Faucher's side, gently helping him sit up against the pillows. Aurora's stare turned laser-focused on Muli's face, with the kind of focus that comes right before a nasty revelation. Her breathing got shallow and quick as understanding dawned, along with the kind of rage that comes from being played.

"You," she glared venomously at Muli standing upright beside the bed. "So it was you all along."

"This morning's meal delivery to Lord Faucher contained dangerously elevated sedative concentrations," Muli stated with clinical precision, hands clasped behind her back. "Such compounds might induce harmless unconsciousness in the young ladies, yet prove fatal to a patient requiring medical supervision. Your oversight regarding this matter, despite your position as V.I.D.A.L. leadership, suggests actions driven by some...desperation, my Lady."

"I, I was just," Aurora's eyes grew misty with panicked tears, her beautiful gaze locked onto Faucher. "I simply longed for you."

Ew. Cue the waterworks. Classic damsel in distress routine. I rolled my eyes hard from my corner.

She kept fumbling for excuses, but there was basically no way to explain away poisoning the ruler of Inoasis. Her only options were full confession or spilling whatever twisted plan she'd been cooking up. Maybe she could still bargain her way out of this mess.

"We've exchanged fewer than ten sentences in the past decade, Aurora," Faucher said, turning his face away from her completely. "You know exactly why."

That fleeting sadness flickered across Muli's features again before disappearing. I caught it and curiosity got the better of me.

I let my hearing expand for just a second—everyone's heartbeats crashed into my skull like thunder. Five Rangers plus Muli made six. My own racing pulse. Faucher's steady rhythm.

Aurora's panicked tempo on the floor. And from somewhere inside her body, another impossibly faint but much faster pulse.

I yanked my focus back, zeroing in on just her direction, trying to figure out what the hell that other sound could be. Some kind of tiny bomb? Was this psycho carrying explosives? I let my imagination run wild. No, that wasn't right.

It was just another heartbeat. A smaller one.

The realization hit me like a brick to the face. I stared in absolute horror, accidentally sucking in a sharp breath.

"Amelie?" Faucher asked.

"Uh," my focus snapped back into my head like a broken rubber band, jarring me back to reality. Everyone's eyes had swivelled toward me—the only idiot who'd made noise. Muli kept her expression neutral, but I could tell she'd gotten the memo that my reaction had to do with my hearing.

I raised a finger toward the woman on the floor. "Um, you're not pregnant, are you? Just want to double-check. You guys could run a test or something."

Everyone in the room froze like not even daring to breathe.

Faucher's head whipped back toward Aurora, confusion spreading across his features. Muli's eyebrows shot up in genuine surprise. I dropped my finger and bit my tongue, trying not to grin; this soap opera was getting better than anything in the library archives.

Aurora went completely mute. Her knuckles had gone bonewhite from death-gripping that cloak. Yeah, that reaction pretty much confirmed it. She was definitely knocked up. In a place this technologically advanced, pregnancy tests probably took all of five seconds. Interesting to know V.I.D.A.L. clones could reproduce normally. Another random fact I never needed to learn.

She still wasn't denying it. The silence stretched way too long for an innocent person. Faucher drew a painfully slow breath.

"Whose child is it?"

Wow. Wow. This was a top-tier gossip material.

I snuck a glance at Faucher, whose expression made it crystal clear he knew damn well that whatever was growing in her wasn't his responsibility. He turned away again, sinking deeper into the pillows.

When I looked back at Aurora, all that earlier panic had evaporated. She just sat there with her lips pressed tight, head hanging down, eyes closed, like she'd accepted her fate.

One hand drifted slowly to rest on her belly.

That's when Faucher moved faster than anyone expected. His arm shot out toward Muli's waist, I didn't even manage to see his fingers already wrapping around her sidearm, everything was happening within milliseconds.

The weapon cleared its holster with a metallic whisper as he chambered a round. Without even turning to look, he aimed the barrel dead centre at Aurora.

"I asked you a question," he repeated, but this time his voice carried bone-deep exhaustion mixed with cold finality.

I found myself taking a half-step forward. Muli did the same. Our eyes met across the tension. "If I provide you with complete honesty," Aurora's voice came out shaky despite her obvious attempt at composure, "might you consider sparing our lives? Both of ours?"

The energy cell in Faucher's pistol whined to life with that distinctive charging sound. I winced—that high-pitched whine was like nails on a chalkboard to my enhanced hearing. He didn't bother answering her desperate plea. Hell, he wouldn't even spare her a glance.

Muli stepped boldly in front of Aurora, putting herself directly in the line of fire.

"Move."

"Her private research encompasses critical New Human medical applications," Muli said with ice-cold composure. "New Humans suffer exponentially higher cancer rates due to flawed genetic modification procedures. Lady Aurora's work suggests she has developed highly effective countermeasures for these defects. Such research could prove invaluable for your review, my Lord."

The vein throbbing in Faucher's temple looked ready to explode right through his pale skin. The gun barrel shook with his trembling grip. Everyone's heartbeats hammered so loud in my enhanced hearing that I could barely think straight—including my own crazy rhythm.

Here we all were, somehow desperately worried about an unborn kid we'd never met, and I couldn't even explain why. Muli stayed eerily calm through it all. No sweat beading her forehead, no tremor in her steady hands. She just planted herself there like a human shield while a fully charged energy weapon aimed at her.

Faucher clicked the safety back on and launched the pistol across the room. It smashed against the far wall with a furious crash before clattering uselessly to the floor. He collapsed back into the pillows, those unreadable lilac eyes sliding shut like he'd aged a decade in the past five minutes.

"Get her out. I don't want to see her again."

That's when Aurora finally dissolved into broken sobs that echoed through the room.

"So why exactly was she crawling into someone else's bed in the middle of the night?"

The morning after the drama, Muli stuck around at the mansion. She'd swapped her usual formal gear for a comfortable black dress, her white hair braided neat and pinned up in a casual style. Honestly, this was the first time I'd ever seen her looking so relaxed.

Apparently, the ex-butler got canned immediately, and those useless guards probably got booted for screwing up their one job. No clue if Aurora had slipped them some cash to clear the field, but from Muli's expression, it sounded like the butler just bought whatever story Aurora fed him about wanting a "private visit."

I sat there scratching my head, totally stumped about her real motives. My teenage brain couldn't work out the reason yet, but give me a minute to connect the dots and I'd definitely figure it out. I'd devoured enough romance novels to recognize the patterns, after all.

Muli was trying to hide behind her hand, but I caught that telltale smirk tugging at her lips. She was definitely holding back laughter.

"Your extensive experience with fictional romance hasn't provided any insights?"

"Maybe she came to beg for mercy?" I shrugged, picking at my breakfast.

Joelle and Evelynn had already wolfed down their food and bolted for the library, complaining about being cooped up in their room all yesterday. "But since when does begging involve peeling off someone's clothes... Oh."

The pieces clicked into place. I immediately grabbed my water glass and chugged half of it to hide my embarrassment at imagining that scene.

She'd actually tried to trick Faucher into taking the fall for whatever was growing in her belly! That was way too melodramatic. Surely that man wasn't stupid enough to fall for it.

"Desperation makes people take wild shots, hoping one might somehow find its target," Muli said with that calm wisdom of hers. "She's been pregnant for over six weeks. Conducting an affair while bound by engagement represents the gravest breach of moral conduct. Lord Faucher has elected to dissolve their arrangement permanently."

As for all the political power play crap, none of that seemed to matter much at the moment.

I caught the way Muli's eyes had this subtle upward tilt, practically glowing with quiet satisfaction. She was clearly thrilled about how this whole mess had played out, finally getting her chance to stick around the mansion during the caretaker's absence to serve us and Faucher. My wild theories about what was really going on between her and Faucher were gaining serious traction. I chewed my breakfast slowly, picking my words.

"You're looking pleased with yourself, Muli," I said, testing the waters.

"Of course I am, my lady," she replied with the kind of genuine smile that reached her eyes. "I'm delighted for Lord Faucher's sake. He was railroaded into this hollow arrangement when he was barely seventeen. He despised every moment of it."

"So..." I bit my lip and shuffled closer to her with the floating chair. "Does that mean he's got a thing for you instead? Because he sure treats you differently than everyone else."

The special visiting rights during his coma, letting her touch him without flinching, plus that insane moment last night when he couldn't pull the trigger. And he had actually listened to her.

Muli froze. Like, totally frozen for a solid three seconds before she absolutely lost it, bursting into the kind of laughter I'd never seen from her.

Now I was the one sitting there completely stunned, because this was probably the most unprofessional thing a Vidal could do. Even her muffled giggles were basically a criminal offense by their standards.

"Oh, my dear lady," she managed between dying chuckles, still trying to catch her breath. "You've definitely been reading too many romance novels. I'm much older than Lord Faucher. I've been his caretaker since he was old enough to speak, until he was assigned to Raven Force for training."

Ah, shit. "But you look super young? You could pass for someone the same age as him easily... so I just figured..." that they two had a thing. "You take good care of yourself."

"You flatter me, my lady." She snapped back to her usual composed self, hands folding primly on her thighs. But I could tell there was more she wanted to say—she had that look when words were getting stuck somewhere between her brain and her mouth. I'd gotten pretty good at reading her face over the past few weeks.

"Ah, the classic loveless political marriage," I said with exaggerated sympathy, like I was some expert on political

drama. "No wonder Faucher was so sure that whatever's growing in Aurora's belly wasn't his. Did you guys get anything out of her?"

"Unfortunately not. Lady Aurora has barricaded herself within her quarters since we returned her to VIDAL custody. Without direct authorization, we cannot proceed with further interrogation."

Muli's gaze drifted to some random spot on the table, her mind clearly elsewhere. I gave up on my breakfast and reached for my water glass. This slop still tasted like it came straight from a cow's ass.

"Besides, the child certainly isn't Lord Faucher's. He has always preferred men," Muli said.

I sprayed water across half the dining table.

While I scrambled around, trying to mop up my mess with whatever fancy napkins I could grab, a ranger showed up in the doorway to save me from further embarrassment. He announced that the Stellar Atelier people had rolled up to the front gates and were waiting for permission to enter.

Muli headed upstairs to brief Faucher while my sisters and I camped out in the reception room, practically vibrating for our new threads. I yanked at this god-awful white tent I was wearing, for the one last time. Thank God I could finally ditch these rags.

"Psst," Joelle nudged my elbow, dropping her voice. "Word is that woman got locked up? You guys actually nailed her last night?" I gave her a nod followed by a headshake.

"Not exactly. But Faucher called off the engagement. She was running some shady New Human experiments on the

side, which is basically treason around here," I whispered back. "Either way, she's stuck now. She's pregnant."

Joelle's eyes practically bulged out of her skull. "Wait, whose kid is it? Faucher's? No way. Rich people's drama is wild."

My attention drifted past Joelle to little Evelynn sitting quietly behind her. According to Joelle, after yesterday's weird rambling episode, she'd just yawned and crashed out cold. Didn't even stir until Muli had food delivered straight to our room.

When she finally woke up, she acted like absolutely nothing had happened and went right back to her tablet games.

I'd grilled her over and over about whether she felt sick or scared, because honestly, this was way too much heavy stuff for a ten-year-old to process. The last thing I wanted was our Astragan trauma following her into this place.

She'd just blinked those big eyes at me, insisted she was totally fine, and dove back into her videos.

But looking at her now, she was definitely quieter than before. That bubbly, chattery kid energy had dialled way down.

Footsteps echoing down the hallway snapped me out of my brooding. I straightened up as our visitors appeared in the doorway. Belvoie led the pack again, trailed by his usual crew of three tailors.

"Good morning, ladies. My sincerest apologies for the extended delay."

A hovering cart glided in behind them, loaded down with like twenty-something gift boxes all tagged with our names and clothing categories. The female tailors smoothly lifted several boxes and arranged them on the long table in front of us.

A quick touch of the activation buttons made them pop open with satisfying little chimes, revealing neat stacks of deep charcoal fabric.

"Mycelium-enhanced fibres interwoven with reinforced molecular threading. Completely wrinkle-resistant, self-cleaning, requiring only infrared sterilization for maintenance, my lady."

Belvoie's right hand moved elegantly through the air as he described the tech. That's when I noticed his fingertips—each one tipped with sleek matte-black metal that caught the light.

"Stellar Atelier remains the sole manufacturer committed to traditional tailoring methods. Our elasticity and breathability ratings exceed mass-produced 3D printed garments by seventy-five percent. You're welcome to try them immediately if you'd like to confirm they meet your standards."

My sisters didn't move, so I took point and stepped up to examine the goods. The fabric felt slightly coarser than the prison dress I was wearing, but weirdly reminded me of the cotton stuff we used to wear back home. I was already impressed without even unfolding the clothes.

Half an hour later we came out from the changing rooms looking like completely different people. Joelle and I were basically wearing matching outfits—sleek black coats with clean lines and fitted pants that actually let us move like human beings. Mine hit ankle-length with this V-neck that showed off my collarbones, while Joelle got the wide-sleeve treatment and a more flowy A-line cut instead of my bodyhugging style.

Little Evelynn's design was different. Minimalist cloak-coat thing where the sleeves could disappear into the main body. Belvoie explained it was for extra warmth and to make her feel more secure, which was actually pretty thoughtful. She even got special skin-toned stockings instead of our regular ones, topped off with these warm black boots that went up to her thighs.

Looking in the mirror felt like meeting strangers wearing our faces. We looked like we'd aged up several years overnight.

We were taller, dressed in clothes that probably cost more than most people made in a year, our hair had this glossy healthy shine, and our bodies had definitely filled out in all the right places since arriving here.

For a second, I had no clue who I was looking at.

The girl I remembered was all scraped knees and greasy ponytails, face streaked with dirt and sweat, standing next to her equally scruffy but happy sisters with Papa's protective shadow behind us. That version felt like a million miles away from the refined, noble-looking woman staring back at me now. Those were scenes I could never return to, never see again.

The other boxes held variations on the same theme. Basically the same designs with tweaks for different occasions.

"Each garment includes adjustable elements for future modifications. Should your measurements change, simply return them for alterations. We'll also check in every eighteen months to assess whether your wardrobe requires expansion."

Belvoie's smile crinkled the corners of his eyes, and his silver-streaked ponytail gave him this ethereal artist vibe that was honestly pretty mesmerizing. "Miss Amelie, we've prepared some specialized pieces for your particular needs."

Right, the combat gear I'd asked for. I'd been wondering how practical that long coat would be for actual fighting, but compared to the white tent of doom I'd been trapped in, anything with decent flexibility was a massive upgrade. No complaints here.

But when Gerald—yeah, I still remembered his name—cracked open my special box, I could tell immediately this wasn't just another pretty outfit.

"This uses synthetic fibre technology, um," Gerald still had that nervous energy from before. But without the slave collar this time, he adjusted his state pretty instant. "Think of it as bio-engineered material combining spider silk proteins with algae cell structures. It's better than normal clothing. It also has a little bit of self-repair function."

"Gerald crafted this entire ensemble personally, Miss Amelie," Belvoie chimed in with obvious pride. "He invested considerable effort into reinforcing and perfecting each component. However, this represents his inaugural project, so please share any suggestions for improvement."

"Anyone named Gerald has got to know what they're doing," I grinned, watching his ears go from pink to full-on red after my comment. I lifted the outfit from its box. Impossibly soft despite feeling paper-thin. "I trust your skills here."

After slipping into the combat suit, that weird disconnect I'd been feeling mostly faded. This sharp training suit better suited my needs. This sleek training gear actually made sense for what I needed to do.

The high collar would protect my neck from blade swipes, while hidden buckles and reinforced panels were cleverly worked into the design to guard all my vulnerable spots. Nothing bulky or restrictive, just smart protection layered under fabric that moved like liquid.

But my absolute favourite feature had to be the pants—they looked painted on but actually gave me tons of room to move, especially paired with these thigh-high boots that were basically custom knife holsters. I could spot attachment points for other weapons too. The whole setup looked solid while feeling like I was wearing air.

"Thank you so much. This is beyond my expectations." I drew my blade handle and slid it into the back slot, where it locked in with a satisfying click—like it had been made specifically for this weapon. "How'd you know the exact specs for my blade?"

Belvoie's expression shifted. "I hope you'll forgive the presumption, but that blade is virtually identical to one carried by someone I knew years ago. I took the liberty of estimating its dimensions and provided Gerald with approximate measurements to work from."

An old friend? Like Muli, maybe? I wondered. Though it was probably just a standard-issue blade. Electromagnetic combat knives weren't exactly unique snowflakes around here.

"What do you think?" Gerald's eyes had gone dinner-plate wide, like he was bracing for me to tear his work apart.

That's when I really looked at his face for the first time. He had these little freckles scattered across his cheeks, giving him this ordinary, approachable vibe that felt weirdly familiar.

But racking my brain, I was pretty sure I'd never met this guy before. Maybe it was just his genuine, humble personality that made him seem trustworthy. Definitely a refreshing change from the creepy-perfect Inoasians who looked like they'd been carved from marble.

"It's amazing. Incredible. I definitely can't cover this kind of expense, so put it directly on Faucher's bill," I said, planting my hands on my hips, half-joking.

"Oh no, Miss Amelie," Gerald ducked his head, and I swear his old stuttering habit was about to make a comeback. "This is a gift from Stellar Atelier. It's...it's free. For you."

"This city has forgotten how to nurture those who fight for others," Belvoie said, his smile turning more serious. "Voices that refuse to be silenced by the darkness are becoming extinct. You deserve this, miss."

I kept the combat suit on afterward. When they packed up to leave, Gerald did that same thing as last time, kept glancing back over his shoulder with this dopey, distracted expression.

In a place as buttoned-up and sterile as Inoasis, that kind of genuine awkwardness was actually pretty endearing. I gave him a big wave goodbye as they disappeared down the hallway.

"That ensemble suits your purposes admirably, my lady. More than sufficient for Raven Force training requirements," Muli's voice came from directly behind me, nearly making me jump out of my skin.

"You done babysitting our grumpy lord upstairs? Is he feeling any better?"

"Not well," she said bluntly. "Phantom limb syndrome presents significant complications. I've already reported to

his medical team. He's been suffering through sleepless nights for quite some time without mentioning his discomfort."

"Too stubborn to ask for help, I guess." I rolled my eyes and followed her into the elevator.

Muli stayed quiet, her finger hovering over the B2 button before pressing it.

Chapter 11

I gripped the handle tight, twisted my wrist, and whipped it upward to activate the chain blade's whip form. The metal segments detached, each link separating instantly tore through the arena's silence.

The sound bounced off the walls, and I stretched my hearing, desperate to catch every detail—the trajectory, the speed, the whisper of air getting pushed aside. My wrist moved with careful control, applying force, redirecting, then lashing out again. I was starting to get the hang of it. Each swing and snap back sent the chain blade exactly where I wanted it, following smooth, predictable arcs that sang through the air.

It reminded me of ribbon dancing. That seemed like the closest thing I could compare it to. But the chain blade's weight and mechanics were special, complex, with the sharpest blade section at the tip. You had to predict enemy movements and spot weaknesses before your own next strike, then control where the strike point went within a split second.

These past few days of practice had only taught me to hit target points within time limits. I needed to learn predictions. Reading opponent attacks, movements, and figuring out when they'd be vulnerable.

"Maintain your rhythm. Use your hearing."

Muli was serious and didn't waste words when teaching. I figured a big part of it was to avoid messing with my hearing. She activated her chain blade too, and the sound of two deadly weapons slicing through air crashed into my ears. I

focused, trying hard to tell them apart while watching at the same time.

Obviously, the basic tutorial Muli gave me was totally different from her usual techniques. Everyone develops their own weapon habits after getting the basics down, I guess.

Her task for me today was to figure out the opponent's methods quickly and predict countermeasures fast.

"I'm starting, Muli."

I lashed out a perfect arc, the whip tip following my force's command as it struck toward Muli's head.

She tilted her head, the whip tip barely grazing past her ear. I quickly rotated my wrist, using the chain's bounce to pull it back, then used the swinging momentum to return it to attack mode. This time, Muli's chain blade blocked my blade tip less than a hand's width from her eyes.

I silently gave myself a small encouragement—good, I was probably getting the rhythm.

I retracted the whip and spun my body, creating more lashing force to speed up the swinging weapon. The sound of air getting torn became louder and sharper, like the fabric of air ripping at high speed.

I lashed out toward Muli again, this time harder, using the whip at full extension. The neat interlocking blade segments spun rapidly, basically creating a saw that could attack in a wide range.

It slashed toward Muli, who raised her weapon and switched back to blade form to block it, then got quietly knocked back a small step by the impact.

This was definitely good encouragement for me. I took a deep breath.

I swung the chain blade, adjusting my attack, getting ready to create another saw—that's when Muli swung out her chain blade again.

I heard the sound of a blade not belonging to me slicing through air, and it was rushing toward my face at a threatening speed. I twisted my head to dodge, and her blade tip struck my whip mid-flight.

I silently congratulated myself, about to adjust the chain blade's path, when I felt another resistance. Her retracting whip happened to scrape against mine, the metal blades smashing together, making this violent crash. Angry sparks danced between the collisions.

Then she unexpectedly created wave after wave of interference I couldn't ignore. My chain blade became more and more erratic, veering off its intended path like a wild animal fighting its leash. My wrist trying to correct it got more strained, and I instinctively backed away, trying to pull back the whip I'd already let loose.

But the initial impact force hadn't been consumed yet. It stubbornly swung and spun with chaotic fury, a metallic tornado that refused to die. Meanwhile, Muli unleashed several sharp attacks in rapid succession.

I had to keep my chain blade flying; I desperately needed some kind of barrier between us. Muli's chain blade seemed to come alive, like this extremely clever and elegant silver snake.

Interference, more interference, flexible coiling that mocked my exhaustion like a predator messing with wounded prey. The blades spun through the air, the stirred-up impact force roaring like storms in my ears, scattering my focus.

My strength started failing, stumbling backward. Her scattered attacks got denser and denser. I could barely keep up with defence—no, I could barely control my own chain blade anymore.

To block Muli's unpredictable strikes, I'd poured massive arm strength into creating desperate barriers. The leftover kinetic energy, fangs screaming in the air without anywhere to land, had quietly turned against me, becoming a rabid dog snapping at its own master.

Dodging my own blade tip, I lost my balance completely, my footwork becoming messy and rushed. Meanwhile, the silver snake's master approached with calm patience, death walking in measured steps.

I clumsily retreated, breathing rough and ragged, my arm muscles screaming as they hit their breaking point. I watched my out-of-control chain blade, the high-speed tearing saw approaching my neck—

CLANG!

A sharp sound exploded. My chain blade got viciously knocked aside. I instinctively loosened my clenched fingers; if I hadn't, my wrist would've completely dislocated. My chain blade went flying, crashing to the floor where it kept writhing angrily before tangling itself into frustrated knots.

The deflecting force knocked me over, and I tumbled onto the floor. Ow. My butt really hurt for a second.

"Chain blades are primarily strategic weapons. You cannot attack without defending, my lady." Muli retracted her chain blade, inserting it back into its sheath with practiced ease that

made me feel even more clumsy. "Only releasing without retrieving leads to backlash. This principle applies to everything." Her voice softened slightly, taking on an almost maternal tone.

"However, such force already surpasses many beginners. Considering this is your first time engaged in actual combat, these results are quite impressive."

Fortunately, all my previous workouts had built a good foundation for my strength. Thank God Muli knocked my chain blade away at the crucial moment, or I'd be covered in cuts from my own blade right now, probably bleeding all over the arena floor.

But I couldn't respond to her. Like something beached, I fell backward, gasping for air. A puddle of mud on the ground, limbs so sore they felt like they were about to melt—that described me perfectly.

Days of consecutive high-intensity training had my muscles screaming surrender in languages I didn't even know existed. This first combat session had "successfully" ended, and I'd gotten a full taste of my self-inflicted suffering.

Next came the rangers' evening shift rotation, which meant I should head back to the mansion to rest. So I kept lying there, not rushing to get up, savouring the brief moment of stillness.

The arena's overhead white lights were somewhat glaring, so I closed my eyes and breathed slowly, letting the cool air fill my burning lungs.

Right. I'd ultimately decided to learn this chain blade thing after all. Never mind its lightweight and flexible usage, just the fact that it could help me stand steady and move in that hellish place Astragan when gravity failed was already appealing enough.

Would I go back to Astragan? Would I go back for revenge?

I didn't know. When I asked myself these questions, my heart felt shrouded in fog, thick and impenetrable. *I didn't even know who I should go after*.

That 'Saviour', the Astragan's controller—I'd never even truly seen him in person. This was one of the things that kept me tossing and turning with regret on many previous nights, staring at the ceiling, hoping it would somehow show the damn face of that person.

If before that moment I had looked up to confirm what kind of vicious face that so-called *saviour* who came to inspect the New Human lab, maybe right now I'd know whose neck my blade should slice.

Besides that, I didn't know what else to do or where to go.

The lights somewhat penetrated my closed eyelids—a perfect moment for spacing out when suddenly I felt a shadow blocking the area directly above me. I opened my eyes and sighed.

"What do you want?" I asked, staring at that innocent mechanical face.

"Ma'am, it's time for us to use the arena!" 403 blinked his glowing blue eyes. "You're so awesome! You're amazing!" After speaking, he earnestly started clapping...again.

I reached out and lightly patted his face, then sat up. Muli watched with interest as Synths entered with their chain blades, taking their own positions. After a moment, she extended her hand to pull me up.

"Time to rest. I believe it would be prudent to arrange an additional meal for you. Considering your recent consumption levels and training intensity, this appears warranted."

"I have to eat another meal of that stuff?!" I wailed, letting my exhaustion bleed into my voice. "Isn't there some kind of medicine, nutritional enhancers or something? I thought this night city could do everything."

"You are literally a New Human, my lady. Your flesh is already at the pinnacle of the biological chain. There would be no such thing." Muli chuckled softly, her amusement genuine. "Do you experience hunger after training sessions?"

"Honestly, yeah." I drooped my face.

By the time I got back, showered and everything, it was already late evening. Though I felt a bit hungry, I'd just drink a glass of warm water and sleep it off. And breakfast portions plus their disgusting enough taste could solve my desire to eat.

It wasn't exactly not enough. But after nearly a month of high consumption, I could feel muscle soreness lingering longer and longer. Pure rest alone couldn't restore me anymore.

"Every ranger receives post-training supplements. Small snacks that quickly achieve muscle repair effects and provide nutrition. During past wars, these were soldiers' emergency rations. However, they now come in many forms and sizes, aesthetically improved," Muli stepped into the capsule transport, settling into the seat across from me. The door formed shut with a whoosh. "You may treat it like a midnight snack. I can guarantee it is not difficult to swallow. No particular taste."

That sounded pretty good. "Let's give it a try then."

"Excellent. You may take a shower and rest briefly. I shall come to your bedroom to notify you."

"Drop me a message and I'll come down. You need rest too, Muli." I stretched lazily, feeling my joints pop.

As soon as I entered the room, I saw my sisters had already changed into pyjamas, each absorbed in their own panels with content that interested them. Joelle looked up, and seeing it was me, made a meaningless humming sound; her strange way of acknowledging I'd returned.

I couldn't help yawning. My gaze unconsciously turned toward Evelynn on the large bed in the corner of the room. I walked to her bed and sat sideways on the edge.

"Little one, what are you looking at?" I adjusted her blanket, pulling the corner that had been kicked outside back onto the bed.

My sister looked up, flipping the module to show me. The module's title glowed with 'Secrets of Starry Skies and Constellations: Wheel of Destiny,' the page flickering with different constellation icons that painted her face in soft golden light.

"Is it about constellations?" I asked. She nodded, then put the glowing panel back on her knees to continue browsing.

But we couldn't see the starry sky; not even a single star. The night sky here was fake too, just another manufactured illusion under the Inoasis' barrier.

While for the Outside during heat waves, the sky was blood red, as if the entire Earth's surface was burning, with no clouds or starry sky, only unfiltered infrared radiation. The colour of despair itself.

"Stars tell directions. They might help me find answers and guide me home," Evelynn said gloomily, eyes never leaving the module. "This isn't my home. I want to go home."

Joelle and I both fell silent. We didn't dare speak, didn't dare shatter a little girl's dream of going home with our harsh reality. We equally yearned to return to our original 'home'—me, my sisters, Papa, singing, laughing, living together in that underground chamber where everything felt real and warm and ours.

But Joelle and I both knew we couldn't do it. Papa had literally sacrificed himself for our luxurious life here. He'd personally erased the route home but drawn a new path forward with his own blood.

I thought staying here might be the only way to honour his choice, even if it felt like betraying my heart.

"We feel the same way, Eve." I reached out and patted her leg under the blanket. I hadn't been able to resist bursting her hopeful bubble. "So have you found any clues? We would need to identify the direction of h—"

"Custos. The sword points to our home." She said, sounding very certain.

Custos? I was sure I'd never heard such a term before. I turned to look at Joelle, searching her face for recognition. She also shook her head lightly, then turned to organize the closet, clearly as puzzled as I was.

"Where did you see that?" I asked Evelynn softly. Maybe she'd just seen related information in module contents, or perhaps mentioned very similar geographical features.

Earth's surface was all similar debris now. I seriously doubted whether there was any way to identify exactly under which wasteland our chamber lay buried.

"Papa told me. The sword's edge is the answer," she insisted.

Papa? I tried hard to remember when he'd ever said that. One of his past bedtime stories?

"Hey sis, shower." Joelle called. "It'll be conservation time soon."

"Got it." I responded, looking at Evelynn again. She didn't look up anymore, completely absorbed in her research.

I put myself into pyjamas that were definitely comparable to custom-made clothes in terms of expense. The same loose, oversized artificial cotton night dress as usual. And just as I was about to pick up my module to browse current events, a small notification lit up on the transparent screen. It was from Muli.

Oh right, I'd almost forgotten about the midnight snack. "Joelle," I turned toward my sister on the next bed, "they arranged a midnight snack for me."

"Yours alone? How thoughtful of them. What's the catch?" Joelle's voice had that familiar edge.

I looked down at the pyjamas I was wearing, stayed silent for a moment, then my hand habitually reached under the pillow to grab my short blade. My fingertips lightly touched the cold handle, then hesitantly withdrew.

"Muli asked me first." I pulled my hand out and grabbed my personal module instead.

"Well, if you think it's fine, then it's fine," Joelle yawned, rolling her eyes. "You're pretty much fitting in with them anyway."

Because that's what Papa told us to.

I didn't say anything back, just turned over and slipped my feet into slippers before walking out through the dissolving door.

I knew my sisters hated this place and didn't trust anyone here, but we didn't have anywhere else to go. They needed to get that through their heads. Even if we somehow figured out how to escape or found an opportunity to leave, someone had to know basic self-defence.

My slippers hit against the floor in sharp little thuds. I didn't even realize how pissed off I was.

The elevator's warm light wrapped around me as I stepped inside. I took a deep breath, holding it until the doors opened on the first floor, then finally let out all that trapped frustration.

I was about to look up when I spotted Muli already waiting outside. Her gaze swept over my face, reading whatever expression I was wearing, then tactfully shifted toward the hallway before I could feel self-conscious about it.

"Are you feeling alright? I suggest you take tomorrow off to rest properly."

"I'm fine."

The dining room door dissolved at our approach.

Muli's suggestion was actually pretty tempting. This whole month I hadn't taken a single day off from Raven Force. I couldn't even figure out what was driving me so hard. Papa, maybe. Also meeting my Synth friends.

But after tonight's conversation with my sisters—I might, possibly, just a little bit—unconsciously wanted to escape the space where my sisters existed. They didn't like or trust this place, undeniably, so the more I became part of it, the more their resistance would eventually turn on me too.

And then I froze dead in my tracks at the entrance. There was that familiar hovering chair, that recognizable silhouette with his thin, broken frame.

Faucher sat slouched against the chair back, staring out through the floor-to-ceiling windows into the darkness beyond. The warm interior lighting cast his reflection on the smooth glass, making him look like some kind of floating ghost. So very him. A man so fragile he looked ready to crumble into pieces.

"Good evening."

He caught sight of me in the window's reflection and threw out the greeting without turning around. I quickly schooled my surprised expression back to neutral. He would see it. I didn't know if this discourteous reaction would be marked against his account.

"Uh... hey?" Whatever.

"Please, have a seat, my lady." Muli's tone was weirdly relaxed as she gestured toward the table.

Wait, hold up. Why exactly had she called me down here with him around? This couldn't just be about some late-night snack, right? Joelle's paranoid warnings started echoing in my head, but then I spotted the three plates arranged on the table. White porcelain holding what looked like... actual food? Crystal clear, pale blue, and honestly kind of tasty. Was that ...pudding?

"Oh. Okay." I shook myself out of my daze and headed for my usual spot, even though none of the plates were anywhere near it. Muli moved behind Faucher's chair, gripping the handles before slowly rotating the whole thing around to face the table. His left hand had been scrolling through some kind of holoscreen, but the second he turned, it winked out of existence.

"No signal at all?" His question was clearly aimed at Muli, voice carrying this weird undercurrent of dread.

"Nothing. We've run 65.4 billion calculations. We tried every channel."

Astragan? My enhanced hearing practically twitched at the name. I tried to keep my face blank, but inside I was all attention. Faucher just let out this heavy sigh.

"They're still linked to our world, aren't they." The way he asked made it sound like he was hoping she'd tell him he was wrong.

"According to our data, yes. The core energy readings continue to fluctuate, though the rate of decline has slowed considerably. This conclusion is based upon our analysis of the past month's statistics." Muli wheeled him toward the head of the table where all three plates waited. "Amelie, you may come sit over here."

She looked up with that particular smile that meant resistance was futile. I'd learned to recognize that expression. It was her

'I'm planning something and you're going to cooperate' face, complete with the kind of maternal authority that made arguing feel impossible.

I really should've brought a hair tie. I stood up and walked over like some kind of robot, aiming for the seat farthest from Faucher. Of course, Muli had other plans.

She caught me by both arms and steered me toward the chair right next to him instead. When she gave my back an encouraging pat, I nearly face-planted from the unexpected force and got a mouthful of my own hair for the trouble.

Faucher didn't even glance my way. He just extended his only hand to pick up a fork.

"I do hope I shall be permitted to finish my refreshment without having my fork stolen." His expression remained deadly serious, lips pressed into a thin line. Definitely not joking.

Great. I'd been summoned for a royal lecture. I dropped into my chair like a sack of rocks, mentally preparing for execution.

"I think some words could be replaced with a simple 'thank you." I grabbed my own fork, and once Muli settled into her seat, I prodded the beautiful pudding in front of me.

The texture was actually like real jelly, soft and springy, and thank God it didn't reek like decomposing fish. I leaned in for a cautious sniff. Nothing. "Muli, is this the stuff you were talking about?"

I turned to her before Faucher's increasingly stormy expression could develop into a full hurricane, pointedly ignoring how his pulse had kicked up a notch from irritation.

"Indeed. It provides concentrated nutritional components essential for muscle repair, and human absorption rates increase fourfold upon consumption. In simpler terms, it facilitates muscle development." Muli adjusted her posture with swan-like grace. "Lord Faucher achieved rapid recovery through regular consumption of this supplement. He has developed quite a fondness for it." She lifted her chin with a perfectly sincere smile, gesturing elegantly toward the man in question.

Muli's words worked some kind of magic. The tension that had been strangling the room suddenly loosened, and I noticed Faucher's death grip on his fork ease up too. He sank back into his chair's cushions by maybe half an inch, but I caught the movement. I couldn't help thinking Muli was laying it on pretty thick though. *Recovery?* The guy was literally missing half his body and both legs.

Weren't they planning to do anything about prosthetics? With all the fancy tech in this place, custom limbs should take just a couple days to complete.

He used his fork to slice off a precise corner of pudding, completely ignoring Muli's commentary. He speared the small piece, then brought it to his mouth with the kind of ceremony you'd expect at a state dinner. I watched Muli mirror his glacial pace and couldn't help wondering how the hell rich people made eating dessert into an all-day affair. How long did it take to finish something you could demolish in three bites?

I stabbed my entire serving and took a massive bite. Just a hint of salt, like high-end gelatine that had been properly set.

This was hands down the best thing I'd tasted since arriving here. It had this perfect jelly consistency, dissolving smoothly on my tongue before I swallowed. I popped the remaining half into my mouth.

If they could make all food taste like this instead of whatever nightmare fuel they usually served, I might actually look forward to meals. I absently chewed on my fork, stealing glances at Faucher from the corner of my eye.

His expression had gone distant, like he was calculating something. Then I realized I might have pushed myself into a very awkward situation. My plate was already empty, while they were still leisurely savouring it like some delicacy.

"At this rate of decline, how much time do we have left?" Faucher's voice cut through the quiet. Muli's face didn't even twitch, like she'd been waiting for exactly this question.

"Two hundred eighty-four years, my lord."

Faucher let out this bitter laugh, one side of his mouth twisting into something that looked more like a grimace. He set his fork down with finality and melted back into his chair, eyes sliding shut. I figured his back was probably killing him again.

"Muli," I jumped in, desperate to break the suffocating tension. "What exactly are you two discussing about? Can I get filled in here? This is about Astragan, right?"

"Of course, my lady. I would be pleased to explain." She shot a quick look at Faucher, who remained slumped in his chair like a broken marionette. "Allow me to simplify the situation. As you are aware, Astragan represents an artificially constructed timeline, essentially a parallel universe. However, its operational framework requires the continuous absorption of spatial energy from our reality, which consequently

diminishes our universe's longevity. Everything here becomes increasingly ephemeral."

"So they're like parasites feeding off us?" My eyes went wide. "Is that why everything's going to hell here too? Why don't we just cut the connection?"

"Thirty-four years ago, we nearly killed ourselves together attempting precisely that."

I whipped around. Faucher had cracked his eyes open, exhaustion written in every line of his face. His remaining hand supported his temple while he spoke. "Astragan and our world appear to share the same fundamental source of temporal energy. Severing the connection would damage that source directly. We would achieve mutual destruction."

This was probably the most I'd ever heard him say at once, honestly.

"Opening the portal that connects our two universes also depletes this shared lifespan." Muli smoothly picked up the explanation. "Therefore, we must avoid initiating contact whenever possible."

The subtext hit me like a brick. We were stuck playing defence in this cosmic war. The host always got screwed over. And if Astragan could just latch onto other worlds like some kind of universal parasite, losing Earth would just mean they'd move on to their next victim.

"Your assessment is accurate." Muli nodded approvingly. I blinked. I had somehow murmured my thoughts aloud.

"What about those calculations you mentioned earlier?"

"Astragan's quantum positioning, my lady. We require precise resonance with the correct dimensional frequencies and signal patterns to establish portal access."

"Wait, they can relocate too?!" They really were like cancer cells.

My enhanced hearing picked up the soft clink of Faucher's fork against his plate. When I glanced over, he was methodically working through his pudding with the kind of grim determination you'd expect from someone taking medicine.

Muli's fingers found mine under the table, a gentle but firm pressure that pulled my attention back to her. The slight shake of her head was obvious. *Drop it*.

We'd lost track of Astragan completely. They could be hiding in any crack between dimensions, and we had no way to find them. It was like playing a rigged chess game, against an opponent who could turn invisible whenever they wanted, moving pieces we couldn't even see, while our entire side of the board sat under a spotlight.

They could take all the time in the world to plan their next move, while our king was already in check.

Chapter 12

I took Muli's advice and gave myself a day off.

Last night's conversation with Faucher had actually helped calm some of the helpless frustration my sisters stirred up. We clearly had work to do. The world wasn't safe yet. My restlessness finally had solid reasoning behind it, and all that misplaced hatred that kept creeping into my dreams now had an actual target.

But I wasn't officially part of Raven Force, and I wasn't going through any kind of systematic training program. Earth had temporarily lost the key to that whole Astragan situation, and freaking out about it wouldn't help anything.

Muli speculated that the quantum positioning axis in their universe might have malfunctioned. Apparently moving to a new location would still drain energy from that same shared source anyway. Other than the usual decline slowing down a bit, the energy readings looked pretty much the same before and after the war. They'd double-checked.

Listening to their discussion got me thinking about Papa.

Had his reckless return to the battle actually done something useful? Maybe he'd bought Earth some breathing room... Of course, that was just me hoping.

I knew better than to bring up Papa. Muli had warned me not to mention him in front of Faucher, and definitely not to ask about him. I was curious. Had Faucher seen something happen to Papa? What kind of hell had he been through during that war? How had he and Papa even become friends in the first place? Well, a contractual friendship.

So yeah, Raven Force's tech team was doing their best, and we apparently had something like two hundred eighty years left. Even as a New Human, I probably wouldn't stick around that long.

Panicking was useless, we just had to wait. Wait for Astragan to land somewhere in the linkage, or suddenly pop up on Raven Faucher's quantum radar or whatever. Either way, taking a day off wouldn't kill anyone.

I ended up sleeping until nine. The room's fake sunlight had cranked itself up to full brightness, and when I looked over at the other beds, they were empty. My sisters had gotten up early and hadn't bothered waking me. Weirdly enough, instead of worrying, I felt relieved.

As long as they stayed in the mansion, they were safe. I didn't have to walk around with my shoulders permanently tensed, playing the responsible big sister. Maybe it was better if we all just did what felt right to us. Papa would get that.

I sat up and stretched, wincing at the soreness in my legs. Yesterday's training session had been a bit much. I swiped my panel open and discovered my "day off" came with strings attached.

There was a message from Muli.

Raven Force was having some kind of post-war reorganization meeting, and she'd be tied up there for the next couple days to help with coordination. I figured that after I left the dining hall last night, Faucher must've finally laid

down some actual orders. Raven Force had lost a ton of officers, including Papa. Someone had to figure out what came next.

Which meant babysitting duty for the grumpy uncle fell straight into my lap. Muli's message was all apologetic and sweet, but I could read between the lines.

I checked the timestamp: 7:30 AM. It was already 9:05. Shit.

I launched myself out of bed and sprinted to the bathroom, somehow managing to wrestle myself into that new outfit I'd been saving within five minutes.

Faucher's room door stood wide open, but he wasn't there. I jogged to the elevator, hitting the button for the first floor. Had to admit, these heels were way more comfortable than I'd expected. Actually ergonomic, unlike the torture devices Vidal used to assign us.

Walking into the dining hall, I spotted that familiar hovering chair positioned by the floor-to-ceiling windows as always, facing out toward the night city.

The used dishes nearby told the story of breakfast already consumed, with just a barely touched glass of water left behind. What caught my attention was the extra length of black, silky fabric trailing beneath his arm chair. He'd actually gotten dressed up.

"Good morning." I cleared my throat, trying not to sound as awkward as I felt. "Sorry I'm late. I see you've already eaten."

"You hardly appear remorseful." Faucher rotated his chair to face me, and he looked a lot better than yesterday night. His chin was lifted with that familiar tilt, and I could see the sharp-edged pride of a ruler filtering back into his eyes. "However, you may resume your rest if you wish. The new

butler and administrator shall assume responsibility for the mansion's operations this afternoon."

I had to wonder if the entire Faucher family had some kind of obsession with floor-length minimalist coats. Or robes, whatever you wanted to call them. Always with those precise high collars, long sleeves, more long sleeves, wrapping every inch of skin like they were afraid of showing anything human. The fabric pooled around where his legs should have been, draping elegantly over his hovering chair.

From across the room, he looked like some kind of ghost. A *rich* one.

Made me think about resources, the other thing these two universes were apparently fighting over. Guess the amount of fancy fabric you could afford to wrap yourself in was just another way to show status. And whatever he was wearing definitely looked incredibly comfortable and soft.

"Well, Muli figured you'd get bored sitting around here. She asked me to keep you company at the library." I walked over and plopped down in front of my breakfast, which had been sitting there getting stone cold. "Not like I've got anything better to do."

He drew in a breath like he was about to say something, then seemed to think better of it and clamped his mouth shut.

The silence continued while I ignored him completely, grabbed my fork, and dove into another round of shitty breakfast warfare.

"I'm told your performance as a beginner has been rather impressive." He finally spoke up. "What prompted you to pursue combat training?"

"Got kidnapped to a white hell when I was thirteen, pumped full of drugs and forced to transform, then got to stand in line waiting to be butchered, dissected, or skinned alive for science."

I stabbed another chunk of protein and shoved it in my mouth, forcing myself to chew the revolting stuff before swallowing. "Then I got hauled off to this night city full of complete strangers, where there's still a bunch of lab coat freaks after my blood, plus one seriously grumpy uncle. Can't exactly blame me for wanting to learn how to defend myself." For sharpening whatever claws I could grow. And I'd lost the one person who actually gave a damn about me.

Of course, that last part stayed locked in my head

"Grumpy uncle? You're referring to ...?"

"The former butler, obviously. Definitely not you, Uncle Grumpy."

I kept my head down, taking another massive bite while stealing glances at him from the corner of my eye.

Unexpectedly, his expression barely shifted. Calm as anything, except for his pulse kicking up just a notch. But yeah, he was definitely watching me, and that intense stare was making me feel weirdly guilty. I made a mental note that I shouldn't run my mouth teasing this dictator.

"Apparently you've inherited a certain someone's unfortunate tendency toward assigning people nicknames."

His voice was quiet, almost amused rather than annoyed. I looked away, hoping to kill this conversation before it went anywhere weird. He'd probably hold this grudge forever. Though I had to admit, he seemed way gentler than during our first scary face-to-face.

I wolfed down the rest of my breakfast and automatically reached for my napkin, ready to wipe my mouth like a normal human being. But with him still watching me like a hawk, I switched to this ridiculous gentle dabbing motion at the corners of my mouth instead. His lips twitched upward in what looked like irritation. Probably figured out I was mocking him again.

Thanks to all their stubborn "manners and etiquette", he couldn't exactly call me out on it. Or maybe he just couldn't be bothered dealing with my crap. This undoubtedly brought me greater amusement.

Right on cue, voices called from outside as the new servants announced themselves and bowed. Faucher gave them a brief nod, and they filed in to clear away the breakfast mess.

"Library time?" I stood up and positioned myself behind his chair, grabbing the handles.

"The private one." He said. "I maintain a personal collection. It's not accessible to general visitors."

"Ah." Didn't matter to me. I could park him there and come back to collect his royal highness later. "So what time should I swing by to retrieve you?"

"You're welcome to browse as well." He'd obviously caught me making a face. "Though if you prefer, the public library next door remains available."

"I'm completely free. Muli basically ordered me to babysit you for the next few days," I started pushing him toward the exit, keeping my voice low. "Otherwise, she'll hunt me down with that whip of hers and make me regret it. You got any good fiction in there?"

[&]quot;Several."

We stepped into the elevator and I hit the button for the second floor. Turns out his private library was right next to the one my sisters and I usually haunted.

When we rolled past that familiar door, I felt my grip on his chair handles tighten for just a second, but I kept moving. There didn't seem to be much point in leaving Faucher aside to spy on my sisters. Besides, I had this sinking feeling they probably didn't want to see me right now.

Faucher lifted his left hand and pressed his palm against what looked like a regular wall. Some kind of hidden scanner activated, and the black surface just melted away, revealing a glass door that cracked open with this soft whisper of sound. The arched entrance beyond looked pretty impressive.

The setup inside was similar to the public library next door, but way more intimate. Smaller space, cozier shelving, and this amazing window alcove that looked out over the night city.

Standing there, I couldn't help thinking about all those fantasy stories with princesses locked in towers, staring out at freedom they couldn't reach. Except in those fiction, the world outside didn't want to kill you with some blight.

"Feel free to explore."

Faucher glided his chair straight over to a personal desk that was covered in organized chaos. Small metal parts, what looked like an oversized tablet, a bunch of dead modules scattered around. He just sat there staring at the mess like he was trying to remember what he'd been working on.

I wandered over and started plugging the dead modules into charging ports I spotted along the desk's edge.

"Does this need charging?" I pointed at the tablet. Up close, the scattered parts definitely looked like weapon components. Metal pieces, synthetic materials, the kind of precision hardware you'd use for serious firepower.

He shook his head and touched two spots on the tablet's surface, bringing it to life.

I caught a glimpse of the screen. Blueprint for a sniper rifle, complete with technical specs and measurement details.

"So you design weapons too?" Of course, rich people had the luxury of being multi-talented. "Based on what Muli mentioned, I figured you were more of an artsy intellectual type."

"How much has she disclosed to you?" His whole posture shifted, suddenly on guard.

"Relax, she didn't mention any embarrassing stories about you wetting your pants or being a cry-baby as a kid," I gave him an exaggerated shrug that said 'missed opportunity,' then jerked my thumb toward the door. "I just spotted some of your sheet music next door when I was browsing around. Honestly, I never would've pegged her as your caretaker. I actually thought she might be your..."

I slammed on the brakes before that sentence could crash and burn. This grumpy uncle probably had feelings about certain sensitive topics.

"She is a New Human."

"Huh?"

Faucher turned to watch my jaw practically unhinge itself. "She didn't mention this? She possesses sufficient years to serve as your grandmother."

"Seriously?" That old?! "But why are her eyes completely different from ours?"

"She served as a sanctioned test subject for Etoiluene prior to its classification as a prohibited substance. According to her account, she... volunteered willingly." The way Faucher said it made it clear he had his own doubts about that version of events. "Beyond that, I have limited knowledge of the specifics."

Someone even the current ruler would obediently listen to... Muli definitely had something special. Honestly, this whole family would probably collapse without her holding things together. Hell, it pretty much had already collapsed.

My wandering attention got completely hijacked when I spotted a familiar title on one of the shelves. I forgot all about our conversation and practically lunged toward the bookcase, fingers reaching for that series I'd been obsessing over.

"'City of Dark Wings'... there's actually a sequel!" I yanked the volume 2 off the shelf without hesitation. "I thought it ended with Kaestra walking away from everyone. No romantic resolution at all." Though honestly, I'd been rooting hard for Xhyreon, the golden-haired warrior with that infectious grin.

"Excellent taste. The series comprises three volumes in total." I could hear the approval in his voice. "Zephyr's arc undergoes considerable transformation in the later chapters. His character development proves quite interesting."

"That brooding, emo guy?" One look at the tiny smirk playing around his mouth told me everything I needed to know. The guy's clearly Team Zephyr. "But she can't stand him!"

"Your comprehension of the fantasy romance genre requires further refinement. You'll change your mind." He sounded way too confident.

"Well, I'm a slow reader, so you'll have to be patient with me, Uncle Grumpy." I grabbed volume 3 as well, activating it to check the page count. "I promise I'll return them when I'm done."

"I believe there are several companion novellas located somewhere in this collection as well. And please, discontinue that particular nickname." The amusement never left his expression as he rotated his chair to browse other sections.

I honestly had no clue what else to call him. All those formal "lord" and "master" titles made my skin crawl. Way too fancy for someone like me who had none of the etiquette training.

"Okay. Uncle."

He made some noncommittal sound but didn't argue.

We ended up spending the entire afternoon in silence, each lost in our own corners of the library. I managed to blow through almost half of volume 2, which was pretty impressive for me. Eventually I found myself curled up in that huge window alcove, using the view of the night city as a backdrop while I dozed off.

Trust him. Protect him well, Amelie.

Papa's voice drifted through the soft edges of sleep, replacing the heroic image of Zephyr I'd been reading about. In the dream, powerful wings cut through darkness, carrying a figure toward the stars where a glowing phoenix circled in endless flight. I woke up bright and early the next morning, my eyes opening before my sisters even stirred. That solid night's sleep had me feeling refreshed, and Muli's weird jelly supplement had done exactly what it promised. Not a single ache or pain anywhere.

The night before had been pretty good, actually. I'd shared that late-night snack with the grumpy uncle, and yes, he had been right about the book series. The real male lead was exactly who he'd called, and the plot developments that followed were absolutely mind-blowing.

We'd spent dinner discussing some of the author's more subtle details. Every time I brought up certain storylines, Faucher would just smirk and refuse to give anything away, protecting my reading experience.

He'd eventually sent me off to bed while he stayed behind doing his usual window-staring routine. I shrugged, said goodnight, and headed upstairs.

Muli was still away today. I shot her a quick message about the new butler to ease her mind. Her reply came back in under three minutes.

Given your previous unfortunate experience, I suggest maintaining closer observation of his conduct. Lord Faucher harbours considerable mistrust toward unfamiliar individuals and shall require adequate time for adjustment.

Of course I could sense the deeper meaning in her text. Everything about her past behaviour and the concern buried in her words came from real, bone-deep worry.

Faucher wasn't naturally left-handed. I'd watch him grip his fork like he was trying to strangle it, or use way too much force for simple tasks. When he worked on holoscreens, his fingers moved clumsily across the interface, and I'd catch him picking up his stylus just to set it down again while staring at blueprints.

Sure, the hovering chair handled most mobility problems, but who could just accept waking up one day with their entire lower body dead? Especially someone who used to be one of Raven Force's most lethal fighters.

What really had Muli worried was Faucher's head space.

The possibility that he might slowly crack under the soulcrushing reality of being completely dependent on others.

Honestly, I got it. I figured all his bitterness and sharp tongue came from a perfect storm of shit. Papa's death, his government falling apart, his fiancée stabbing him in the back, and the universe's hourglass running on empty. Any one of those things could break someone. He was swallowing all of them at once.

Rustling from the bed next to mine told me Joelle was finally stirring, stretching under her blanket. I quickly typed my response to Muli and hit send, then tossed my panel aside and headed for the bathroom.

Don't worry. He seemed in pretty good spirits yesterday. His private library has tons of amazing stuff. No way I'm passing up that kind of access.

Getting ready with my sisters was like moving through some kind of silent film. We dressed and headed downstairs without exchanging a single word. In the old days, this would've been super... strange.

Evelynn had always been quiet, but now Joelle barely acknowledged my existence, and neither of them bothered walking behind me anymore. They got in the elevator first,

each absorbed in their own tablets. Could've been checking Inoasis news feeds, maybe social apps.

Whatever it was, it had nothing to do with the people we used to be.

I stepped onto the elevator platform, turned around, and hit the dining hall button. As long as they're safe, I reminded myself. We'd all changed. We weren't regular humans anymore; we weren't even normal civilians. I caught sight of our three black-clothed reflections in the curved mirror.

Yea, I'd changed too.

The new butler waiting at the dining hall entrance was actually younger this time. He gave a respectful bow, flashing a smile that seemed trustworthy. At least it's not slimy. I nodded back with my own smile. I gave him a quick onceover, though I couldn't spot any obvious weapons yet. Vidal was still lurking in whatever hole she'd crawled into, and who knew what kind of mutual destruction she might be plotting next. But I wasn't afraid anymore.

"Good morning."

Faucher occupied his usual throne by the window, exactly as I'd expected. He could've easily had meals delivered to his room, but here he was. Muli was right. He probably didn't even realize he was craving a little bit of sound, even if it was just pointless small talk.

"Good morning," I called back, noting his breakfast had already been set up at the far end of that stupidly long table.

My sisters hung back at the doorway. Our place settings weren't even on the table yet, still sitting on the hovering cart by the entrance. The butler stepped forward and gestured toward the massive dining table, inviting us to choose any seats we wanted.

No assigned spots, no protocol. They were letting us decide for ourselves. I snuck a glance at Faucher's back. His left hand was swiping through what looked like the morning news feed.

Joelle slipped her arm around Evelynn's shoulders and guided her to their regular spot, as far from Faucher as physically possible while still being in the same room. Once they were seated, Joelle sat down, waiting for service like this was all perfectly normal. Evelynn kept glancing between the man by the window and me, her expression screaming questions.

I pulled a face at her, then started my trek toward the far end of the table. Twelve heel clicks on the floor; I'd made my choice clear.

"Looks like someone's feeling chatty this morning," I announced as I settled into my chair, letting it auto-adjust around me. "Might be time to retire that old nickname."

Faucher didn't say a word, just manoeuvring his chair to face me. I'd been expecting him to look roughly the same as yesterday, but his lips were so pale they looked almost translucent. Dark purple shadows ringed his eyes, and the whites were shot through with angry red veins.

I was pretty sure he'd been crying. I tuned my hearing to his heartbeat. Still steady, at least.

I found myself leaning forward. "Are you okay?" The stubborn man actually had the nerve to look embarrassed, turning his face away. "So that's a no. Is it phantom pain? Should I call a doctor?"

"Couldn't sleep." Classic deflection, not actually answering my question. And there was Uncle Grumpy's signature evasiveness, right on schedule.

I glanced over at the butler who was carefully arranging place settings for my sisters. These people probably operated under strict rules. They could only take direct orders from their employer and wouldn't dare make executive decisions.

Based on the previous butler's ass-kissing performance, this guy probably wouldn't step out of line either. And Faucher's pride would never let him actually ask for help when he needed it.

"I'll call a doctor after your breakfast." I was probably the only person here who could cut through all the hierarchy and actually advocate for him. "What about heating pads? You got any of those?"

"No." Faucher's voice was so quiet I almost missed it. Still, he managed to lift his hand and grab the glass of warm water, though his grip looked shaky as hell.

"Sir," I turned to the butler who was setting up my place. "Do you have heating pads here?" The poor guy looked completely lost, so I started doing charades. "You know, rubber, bag-shaped thing, little cork stopper on top?"

"If such an item is required, we may acquire a thermally regulated blanket for your use. It offers adjustable temperature settings, my lady."

Oh right. I'd almost forgotten this was a tech pioneer city. "Perfect. Get me one. No, actually, make it two."

I stared down at my breakfast and let out a defeated sigh. The smell didn't even bother me anymore, which was probably the most depressing thing of all. I'd actually looked into it, and yeah, everyone in Inoasis was choking down this same nutritional paste. It solved food shortages and prevented most diseases, but it also sucked every bit of joy out of eating.

I could practically feel Faucher's irritation radiating off him in waves. He sipped his water but completely ignored the food on his plate, fingertips pressed against his forehead while his whole hand trembled.

"I trust you realize you possess privileges and luxuries beyond the reach of virtually everyone else here."

"You wanna know what else are luxuries?" I took a bite of the flavourless mush, watching his face tighten with what had to be serious pain. "Sunlight. Fresh air. Being happy. Not hurting every second of every day." I leaned in closer, dropping my voice. "Eat something, then we're getting you pain meds. Maybe take a walk afterward. Because if Muli comes back and finds out I let you suffer like this, she'll murder both of us."

Of course, with less than three hundred years left on the cosmic clock, we were all on borrowed time anyway.

"She doesn't have that kind of authority."

"Just wait until she breaks out the guilt trips and lectures, Uncle Grumpy."

He made this annoyed grunt but finally grabbed his fork. I glanced over at my sisters, who were practically inhaling their food. Joelle especially looked like she was trying to set some kind of speed-eating record, desperate to escape this room. Evelynn had paused mid-bite though; her fork speared through a chunk of protein while she kept sneaking looks our way.

I caught her eye, though I wasn't sure she could see it clearly from that far away. Her attention was definitely fixed on Faucher.

When I turned back, the sight nearly made me choke. Faucher had collapsed against his chair, eyes squeezed shut, his whole body trembling as he tried to force down another bite. His lips had gone completely white from the effort of holding back what had to be excruciating pain. His entire frame was shaking like he was freezing to death.

I didn't think twice. Fork down, chair back, on my feet calling for help.

Joelle hauled Evelynn out of there the second they finished eating, practically dragging her to the elevator.

The butler had already rushed off to contact Faucher's medical team. Once the dining hall cleared out, I grabbed his plate and fork, cutting the meat into manageable pieces.

"Sorry for the breach of protocol, Your Royal Stubbornness. But Muli warned me you need food in your system before any medications, or your stomach will hate you for it." I held the fork to his lips, trying to salvage whatever dignity I could for him. He didn't fight me on it.

We powered through the rest of breakfast as quickly as possible, then I wheeled him back to his room. Getting him from the chair to the bed was a whole production. His back was completely shot; lying flat was the only position that didn't make everything worse.

The medical team descended on us within minutes, and instantly doing their scans. Pain levels at 9.2 out of 10, and he'd been enduring that hell for over six hours straight.

The lead doctor was rattling off treatment plans. Direct morphine injection, mild sedatives to get his stress levels under control. His emotional state had hit crisis levels too, which explained the shaking and cold sweats.

They fitted him with an oxygen mask and handed me a prescription for heavy painkillers, all because I'd basically demanded they treat him like a human being instead of letting him suffer in silence.

Half an hour later, the drugs were finally doing their job. Some colour had crept back into his face, though his expression was still twisted in that familiar scowl.

"You've got a lot of nerve," he muttered, voice rough but lacking any real bite.

"Yes, yes." I kept flipping through Volume 2 of City of Dark Wings, progress bar sitting pretty at 60%. "They also suggested you need a bit more movement. Once you feel better, we can hit the library again."

"Painkillers mess with my neural pathways," he ground out, his good hand white-knuckling the sheets as he tried to haul himself upright. "I need full sensation if I'm... if the prosthetics are going to work—"

"I heard the whole lecture about why you're being such a martyr," I cut him off, not bothering to look up as I pushed his shoulder back down. "You gotta actually live long enough to get those fancy robot parts. You're literally falling to pieces, Faucher. And don't you still need to design the things yourself?"

He fought against my hand for a few seconds, then just gave up and melted back into the pillows like a deflated balloon.

"Nobody listens. Nobody ever fucking listens." His eyes squeezed shut as he clawed at the oxygen mask, voice cracking with frustration. "Everyone just... runs around doing whatever the hell they think is right. And then what? Dead. All of them, dead. Everything we worked for, gone. Years of planning, wasted."

The words came out harsh and broken, his voice barely holding together. His whole body was still trembling, but now it was rage instead of pain.

I set my module aside and moved closer to where he lay gasping. He turned his face toward the other side.

"Before Papa died, he told me to trust you."

The words hit him. I folded my arms across my chest and kept going. "I hate to admit it, but that's really hard for me to do. I still don't know what exactly you people did that got my dad killed. Especially you, You. Majesty."

I caught the strangled sound he made, barely audible. He was holding his breath, fighting like hell to keep from completely breaking down, but my enhanced hearing picked up every choked sob he was trying to suppress.

"But Papa said it anyway. Turned around and charged back into the battlefield without even looking over his shoulder. I've thought of a million reasons why he'd do something that stupid. He had millions of reasons to grab us and just run. Could've said screw this place and everyone in it. Let someone else save the world. But he didn't. He went back. Francis Faucher, I need to know why."

I figured I'd lose it here. Start screaming, demanding answers, maybe throw something at the wall. Instead, I found myself reaching for the oxygen mask he'd ripped off, carefully settling it back over his face.

"I guess he believed in you. Thought you could pull through this and somehow fix our completely screwed universe. I have no clue how you're supposed to manage that, but I trust Papa's instincts. He was never wrong about people."

"He was..." Faucher's voice was muffled by the mask, still fighting to keep the sobs locked down. "...an absolute fool."

I smoothed out the blankets he'd tangled up during his breakdown, my ears tracking the butler's footsteps as he headed for the elevator downstairs.

"You're not much better."

Once the butler delivered the heating blankets and disappeared back into the hallway, the heavier medication finally kicked in properly. Faucher's breathing evened out, becoming deep and steady, his pulse and blood pressure dropping back to normal ranges.

It was only after he'd drifted off completely that the tears he'd been holding back for who knows how long finally escaped, trailing down his cheeks and catching on those ridiculously long lashes. I pulled out my terminal and shot a message to Muli: *Done. He got painkillers and is sleeping*.

You're already more effective at reasoning with stubborn rocks than I ever was. Her reply came back almost instantly.

Wasn't exactly easy. Had to play the Papa card to win that fight.

I set the panel aside and settled back into the chair by the coffee table, reopening my module. But the words might as well have been written in a foreign language.

I must've stared at the same sentence for an hour, my attention drifting to the sprawling night city beyond the windows. By the time I realized my face was wet, my sleeves were already soaked through with tears I didn't remember starting to cry.

Chapter 13

This time, I emerged within a realm of purest white. An infinite canvas of luminous void—that despised hue which had haunted my nightmares, yet here I stood unafraid.

This white held no malice; it neither blazed nor consumed nor drove one to madness. I could even feel a refreshing breeze brushing against my skin. It reminded me of spring. I lifted my hand before my face, marveling at the delicate threads of starfire that wove between my fingers.

This radiance stirred some distant memory, as though I had beheld such beauty in dreams long forgotten.

Peering through the spaces between my fingers, I glimpsed a single point of emerald brilliance piercing the alabaster expanse. I lowered my hand and gazed at where that verdant beacon rested. It was far, but there it rested, patiently.

From its direction came the music of silver bells, the *chimes*. Their melody drifted across the boundless realm, weaving through the air like an inviting echo.

I took one step. Then another. Where my feet touched the void, life burst forth in rapturous bloom—spring's verdant carpet unfurling, seeds awakening, grasses and leaves painting the white. A thousand flowers opened their faces, their petals forming a living tapestry that stretched to the horizon's end.

The spring wind rose once more, gathering countless blossoms into aerial rivers that flowed like gentle seas toward the sky. Some petals kissed my hair as they passed, leaving aureoles of light that flickered like stars before melting.

The distant emerald grew more distinct, its song clearer. And then, it was growing, sprouting, fracturing into countless prismatic faces that caught and scattered divine radiance. Roots spiralled downward into the earth's embrace, while its core swelled, the trunk ascending toward the vault above.

There I stood, as it blazed forth with such resplendent glory. I raised my hands against the sublime brightness. The world trembled in harmony, every blade of grass and flower petal joining their voices in sacred chorus to herald this great birth.

It then softened to mortal sight; I beheld the wonder in its fullness: a world-tree of living jade that pierced the very heart of heaven.

Its branches vanished into the heights, countless limbs weaving a canopy that eclipsed half the sky above. Yet what stole my breath was the crown it bore—not leaves, but the entire galaxy itself. Countless points of stars adorned each branch, their lights forming a diadem, outshone the glory of all earthly kingdoms.

At the tree's base, roots like pillars of jade gripped the soil beneath. And beyond them stretched a mirror lake, its lilac waters reflecting the starlights while the great tree rose from its very heart. Like the axis upon which all worlds turned.

Beneath Marulrie's dominion, all fate is wrought of cause and consequence, all cycles are but the eternal dance of creation.

A voice of infinite depth resounded through the dream. The brilliance above pulsed and wheeled in harmony with its cadence.

I saw rivers of golden fire ascending within the tree—those same luminous spirits that had graced my fingertips, now flowed into torrents of lives. They flowed, silently, dividing at each branching fork to carry sustenance to every star-laden bough. The lilac lake caught heaven's radiance in its depths, its amethyst waters turning in slow, eternal circles around the great tree's roots, marking time's passage with each gentle rippling.

I knelt upon the lake's margin. Then I gazed into the water. My reflection wavered in the gentle waves—yet it was not merely myself I saw, but the whole of my existence unfolding like pages in time's great book.

There was the child I had been, innocent and bright, and in the space of a heartbeat, an ancient crone with silver hair like moonlight, her eyes holding the wisdom of ages yet to come.

But fate hath fallen enamoured of causality's design. Speak, O child of Marulrie. Might not one be made sacrifice upon the very wheel of existence?

"Who knows?" I murmured, my voice soft as morning mist. "I hold that all beings should not be bound to paths ordained before their birth. Each fall from grace, each tender love that blooms...These. These are not endings, but new dawns of possibility. What men call fate, I name choice."

My hand gestured toward the star-crowned branches above. "Behold how these limbs intertwine and separate according to their nature's will. Whether we speak of destiny or consequence, both spring from the soul's choosing. All things must wither and return to dust, becoming seeds for cycles yet unborn. Is this not the very essence of creation?"

The lake's waters continued their ancient dance, yet the cosmos held its silence.

Perhaps my words had touched upon some eternal truth, or perhaps the all-knowing itself pondered questions that had no answers.

"Who knows? Mayhap I too chose this mortal coil, willingly entering the wheel as your beloved child. Be it fate or causality that guides my steps, all springs from choices freely made. When at last my spirit burns to naught but memory, I shall return to this sacred grove and nourish the roots of eternity."

Dost thou not find sorrow in such fleeting cycle?

I lifted my gaze. Now the voice carried warmth I recognized like my own heartbeat.

From behind the world-tree's mighty trunk came measured footsteps, and soon a figure emerged from shadow into light. He walked upon the great roots as though they were palace stairs, each step deliberate and graceful. The form that appeared was wrought of living jade, his hair flowing like spun glass touched with inner fire. That beloved countenance gazed down upon me from his height, divine and distant yet achingly dear.

I met those eyes that blazed with verdant starlight, tilted my head in that old familiar way, and let my smile bloom.

"I have drunk deep of love's sweet nectar and bitter dregs alike, have felt joy's soaring flight and sorrow's crushing weight. What cause have I for regret? My answer was written long ago in mortal heart, dear Rumatevfkafvah. Though you summon me to these heights seeking wisdom, the truth already dwells within your heart. The choice has been made. That is the answer you seek."

I rose to my feet and spread my arms wide to embrace the infinite, closing my eyes to drink in Marulrie's crystalline hymn and the eternal spring that blessed these holy realms.

"Fare thee well, beloved Rumatevfkafvah. Or shall I speak the name that bound us in mortality's brief hour—my dearest Papa?"

With that farewell upon my lips, I cast myself into time's relentless current. My form dissolved like morning dew as the torrent seized me, bearing me down through layers of existence toward the lake's unfathomed depths. My consciousness spiralled through the maelstrom of becoming, tumbling through eons until at last I breached the surface of another shore.

There, in that place beyond places, the eternity I had known became but a cherished dream.

And I was mortal once again.

The soft chime of my terminal pulled me out of sleep. I opened my eyes, feeling utterly refreshed.

Whatever dream I'd had must've been amazing because all the misery from last night had completely vanished. I even did one of those luxurious full-body stretches and yawned.

After savouring the cloud-like comfort of my blankets for a moment longer, I fished my terminal out from under my pillow. 7:24 AM.

I require your presence this afternoon. There is an item I must deliver to you personally, my lady.

What is it? I shot back to Muli.

You shall discover this upon your arrival. Please also monitor Lord Faucher's condition before your visit.

If Muli didn't get her ass back to the mansion soon to check on her precious lord, I was pretty sure Faucher and I would end up in an epic screaming match.

He'd regained consciousness yesterday evening, probably dying of thirst. Watery eyes, puffy and red—I'd had the audacity to stare directly into them to check whether the bloodshot mess was clearing up. Good news: most of the angry red veins were gone. Then he'd turned away like some cranky old donkey.

When he'd yanked off his oxygen mask, he'd slammed it onto the coffee table with this loud crack, turning a perfectly normal action into some kind of passive-aggressive declaration of war.

Another tantrum yesterday. Seriously, this guy's mood was like riding a broken roller coaster.

"Did His Royal Grumpiness drag himself to the dining hall today?" Joelle rolled over to face me, squinting through sleepy eyes.

"Doubtful." Though honestly, I had no clue. "I'm going to Raven Force this afternoon."

"Mm." Joelle didn't say anything else.

Sure enough, Faucher had stayed holed up in his room. I'd cornered the butler for intel, and he'd mentioned breakfast had been delivered to the lord's chambers this morning.

I couldn't tell if the butler was deliberately hinting that Faucher might actually welcome visitors, or if it was just innocent information. Either way, I caught the subtext and thanked him for the tip.

After breakfast, I headed back to my room and swapped into training gear, then fished my short blade out from under my pillow and slid it into the back holster.

I felt amazing. My whole body was practically vibrating with two days' worth of bottled-up energy. When I hit the arena this afternoon, I was definitely dragging some Synths along for sparring practice. Sure, they looked like kids, but those little bastards packed a punch. Lightning fast too.

"Uncle... Grumpy." I planted myself outside Faucher's door, really milking that first word. "Your humble peasant requests an audience. Is His Royal Moodiness accepting visitors today?"

"Fascinating how you've suddenly discovered the concept of knocking before entering. Such remarkable character development." His voice drifted through the door, sounding surprisingly normal and dripping with trademark sarcasm. "Come in."

I stepped away from the wall and into his line of sight. One look was enough to assess his condition—definitely an improvement from yesterday's disaster.

He'd gotten himself into proper clothes, hair actually styled instead of looking like he'd been electrocuted, and there was a clean breakfast plate sitting on his desk.

The butler had obviously been busy. Fresh linens, room lighting cranked to maximum, the works. His holoscreen was cycling through morning news feeds.

As I walked in, he rotated his chair to face me.

"Alright, fine, you were right." I brandished the finished Volume 2 like evidence. "But I have to admit. Xhyreon's descent into villainy was actually pretty cool."

Honestly, I'd spent most of breakfast crafting this particular olive branch.

After yesterday's nuclear meltdown, I'd basically stormed out of his room like some dramatic soap opera character and summoned the butler without so much as a goodbye. We'd never actually resolved anything. I couldn't figure out why I gave a damn about patching things up with him. The man was genuinely awful, like someone had brought the Grinch to life and given him a superiority complex.

But something in me insisted we needed to dial back the hostility. Time was running out for all of us, and I'd probably never figure out how to properly repay what he'd done for my sisters and me.

"Ah, so you have a weakness for that archetype. Blonde. Domineering. Bulldozing through life without a plan." Faucher still had those dark circles under his eyes, but they'd definitely faded since yesterday.

I rolled my eyes hard enough to see my own brain. "I'm meeting up with Muli this afternoon. Feel like doing anything right now?"

I spotted one of those fancy heating blankets folded neatly on the chair by his coffee table and snagged it, shaking it out. The edges had these sleek touch controls built right into the fabric. The tech in this place was indeed borderline obscene.

I flicked it on and dialled it up to 35 degrees. Faucher tracked every movement like he was memorizing my technique.

"The balcony."

"Works for me." I tucked the blanket around what was left of his legs and circled behind his chair to take the helm. The balcony access was tucked right beside his bedroom door. It was probably another one of his secret passages that probably only he knew existed.

The night city's brutal cold came charging in like an angry beast by the moment that door melted away, instantly turning the cozy room into a freezer. Lucky for me, weeks of Raven Force training had turned me into a walking space heater.

Being a New Human definitely had its perks. This coldness was basically a mild spring day for me. But Mr. Broken Body in the floating chair? That was a whole different equation.

"You handle cold like we do? Or are you more on the regular human side?" I asked while manoeuvring him through the doorway. Then, because I'm not completely heartless, I added, "I can grab that second blanket if you need it."

"I share your particular curse, and I've undergone the requisite conditioning."

"That's a really fancy way of not answering my question."

"Perhaps... slightly," he murmured, so quiet I almost missed it. "Though it remains manageable."

God, this man and his pathological need to downplay everything. Peak fragile masculinity.

I'd been outside before, but surveying the sprawling night city from this ridiculous height never got old. I wheeled him toward the centre of the platform before hitting the brakes. Holy shit, there was literally nothing between us and a very long drop.

"Don't you care about safety protocols or something? Shouldn't there at least be a rail?"

"Electromagnetic containment field. Identical principles to Inoasis's defensive barrier, just transparent."

"Well, what a shame." I let out an exaggerated sigh of disappointment. "And here I was hoping to make you the headline on tomorrow's morning news."

Faucher went dead quiet. No cutting comeback, no irritated huffing, not even one of his signature death glares. He just nudged his chair forward a few inches before stopping again.

"You'd have perfectly valid justification for such an action," he said, voice barely above a whisper. "Truthfully, I would welcome it."

"Could you maybe consider my personal safety before you decide to off yourself?" I circled around to face him properly, dropping into a half-crouch with my elbow resting on my knee. "Because Muli would absolutely drag me into whatever afterlife you end up in, and I'm not ready for that kind of commitment."

"I've taken countless lives. More than I can calculate. And... your father, I've failed him," he turned away, his voice cracking. "This planet is finished. We can't win this game. Our strategy was flawed from the very inception...catastrophically so. This is merely karma."

"I might be overstepping here, but all that ancient history stuff, the sins-of-the-fathers crap—I'm probably just being nosy," I said, settling my chin in my palm. "Yeah, the damage happened. But none of us have a clue for tomorrow, right? Plus Muli keeps saying that as long as the connection's still active, we might be able to tune into the right frequencies and trace those quantum pathways back to wherever they're hiding."

"Our universe operates on finite energy reserves."

"So do theirs," I shot back. "Eventually they'll have to crack open those portals and come raiding again. Until then, you should focus on the basics. Eat nice, get some decent sleep, and once you're not held together with spite and painkillers, we can tackle the universe-saving stuff."

His head suddenly snapped toward me, then he started scanning the area like he'd caught something with those enhanced senses. I pushed myself upright and stretched my own hearing as far as it would go.

Nothing out of the ordinary. Well, except for the butler's voice drifting up from downstairs.

"What's going on?" I fired up my wrist display to run a magnetic field sweep. Absolutely nothing.

"I heard a chiming. Sharp," he said, brow furrowed as he kept scanning the air like he could pinpoint the source. "Like metal striking crystals."

What the hell? I glanced down at my boots, then knocked my knuckles against the blade sheathed at my back. Zero mysterious sound effects happening on my end.

"It started right after you finished talking. Last night I also experienced some... unusual dreams." He lifted his good hand to massage his temple. "I've been hearing those sounds consistently since I regained consciousness from the coma."

"I think you should mention this to your medical team. Might just be some ear damage? Maybe." I kept my tone casual, though I was thinking about PTSD-induced hallucinations. Combat stress could mess with your brain in all kinds of fun ways. But saying that out loud seemed like a dick move when he was finally having a decent day.

"Still hearing it?"

"Not at present... forget it." He shook his head and let out a long breath. "Regarding yesterday's intervention on my behalf, you have my genuine appreciation."

His fingers traced absent patterns on the heating blanket. Oh my, those painkillers had really done a number on him. The man was actually expressing gratitude like a normal human being. I was starting to think those weren't standard analgesics. More like some kind of personality overriding drugs.

"Nothing you've done has been wasted."

He met my eyes, and I caught something vulnerable there, like he wasn't sure whether to believe me.

"You pulled me and my sisters out of hell. Saved hundreds of other girls too. I'm just returning a tiny fraction of the favour. This is what we owe you, Faucher."

"I suspect your primary motivation is the terror of Muli's wrath."

"Yeah, well, that's definitely part of it."

When I pushed him back under the warm shelter of the eaves, Faucher said he wanted to go to his library. I bent down to adjust his heated blanket, turning it down to a comfortable 28 degrees, putting the switch where his left hand could reach it, just in case.

My hair spilled everywhere during the adjustment, and he reminded me I should tie it all up before heading to the training grounds.

He said it was protocol. Personal image management blah blah, all delivered in this weirdly serious tone. Would it kill him to just say "be careful" or "stay safe"? No wonder everyone calls him the Stone-Faced Lord. Guy's got zero tact.

That's when I realized my hair had grown almost to my thighs. I hadn't thought about cutting it short since we got rescued. Back in Astragan, not dying was pretty much a miracle.

But even with him bringing it up, I still don't want to cut it. I'd rather spend every day combing it, managing it, tying it up before training while I catch my reflection in the arena's bulletproof glass. No other reason except pure sentiment for Papa, who also had long hair, and for that little ritual he would've done every morning, waking up and braiding my hair.

After getting Uncle Grumpy settled, I headed downstairs.

The arena required catching another underground train, which took me to the real close-range combat division. The practice area I'd been using was just for rangers' sparring sessions.

Now that I'd learned the chain blade, I could start learning how to use it for take-off. Or swinging, I guess? Hook the blade tip on anchor points, control the chain retraction to pull myself off the ground, then use momentum to swing to the next target.

I'd only seen 403 do it once.

"The original practice area wasn't suitable for "flying around," he'd explained. But he'd still been eager to demonstrate it for me, only to get yanked back down from mid-air by his senior. No other reason except they were all just overgrown kids missing a few brain cells.

I hoped we could keep this kind of peaceful pace going. If we never managed to pinpoint our enemies' location in the

cosmos, never managed to wipe out the stubborn Jacques family, then quietly spent the next 200-plus years until Earth decayed, until the universe ended... that didn't seem like such a bad thing. I was discovering I didn't hate these kinds of days.

Inoasis's Starward project was destined to fail. Human civilization would end exactly as the prophecies said thousands of years ago, destroyed in wars started by humans themselves. Papa had told me this too. The war was far from over.

"War never truly ends, my lady," Muli corrected me. "It transforms. Species have always consumed one another. This is the undeniable law of existence. Humanity believes itself above such base instincts, yet we remain bound by the same ancient desire of survival and dominance. There will always be those who hunger for what others possess, always be those who would sacrifice peace for power. To accept this is not cynicism, but wisdom."

That's pretty... bleak.

I stuck in the custom earplugs Muli had made for me.

We'd clearly hit the training disaster zone. Explosive gunfire, clashing cold weapons, and heavy machinery sounds all crashed together, absolutely murdering my sensitive eardrums. With the plugs in, I felt way better. Most of the noise got blocked out, and I could hear things clearly within about 10 meters.

A group in specialized armour came toward us. I waved at these passing rangers. Their leader was the guy who'd caught me during practice.

One girl in the group suddenly froze after walking past me, spinning around to stare. She looked into my lilac eyes with the same shock I felt looking into hers. For a moment, neither of us could say anything.

Her teammate patted her arm to get her moving, and only then did she give me this definite smile, nod once, and follow her squad without looking back.

"Some New Human women, much like yourself," Muli explained, "feel that doing nothing or remaining helpless brings them insecurity. Therefore, they have proposed joining the Raven Force."

That was great. It felt nice knowing that I'm not alone.

"I heard from Joelle that you Vidals are all clones?" I thought about it and decided not to ask how she'd gotten her New Human status. Since even Faucher couldn't get answers about that, pushing the topic would be pretty offensive. "Why rely on cloning for reproduction? Doesn't that go against natural law?"

"A grave error our ancestors committed in their pursuit of genetic perfection," Muli stepped aside, gesturing for me to follow. "Such methods should never have existed."

"Oh... how's that woman doing anyway? She hasn't done anything weird, has she?"

"Not presently, no." Muli slowed her pace so I could keep up.
"Lord Faucher has no intention of pardoning her transgressions. However, he has agreed to ensure her safe delivery first. What transpires thereafter... shall be addressed in due time."

I figured it was because Faucher's mother had also been a former Lady Vidal. Joelle had dug up this little piece of history buried in some random archives in the library.

Faucher's parents had been in a political marriage too, and then his mother died in childbirth. The whole nation mourned for a day. That was it. No other details. Aurora became the next candidate to lead the Vidal family after that.

So that explained his bit of mercy toward Aurora. Though without Muli around, both the mother and child would've been screwed.

Nobody knew whose kid she was carrying, and Faucher didn't seem to give a damn. He might act like he didn't care, but having your fiancée pull something that went against basic ethics was probably pretty embarrassing for him. Especially since his father had announced their engagement to the entire world when they were teens.

Being forced into that kind of public spotlight was its own kind of curse.

"Uncle Grumpy said he wanted to die this morning." The words just slipped out, half-joking. I totally didn't expect Muli to slam on the brakes, nearly causing me to face-plant into the back of her skull.

"What else did he say?" Her voice was carefully neutral, head tilting slightly.

"Uh, I think he was just blowing off steam, honestly." I waved my hands around frantically. "We were hanging out on the balcony getting some air. Nothing weird happened after that. He even mentioned snack time tonight and joked that if I came back late, he'd lock me out."

I threw in that last bit, though something felt off about it. Faucher had said it with a blank face, so I couldn't tell if he actually meant it or if it was just another way to mess with our heads.

Muli turned back around, let out this heavy sigh, and kept walking without saying anything. I scrambled to catch up.

"Uh, maybe you should contact him? Talk to him or something." Muli's reaction told me that Faucher saying shit like that meant his mental state was already teetering on the edge. Plus, the phantom limb pains his body dealt with was probably constant torture.

Papa's words kept echoing in my head. *Trust Francis Faucher, trust him.* Did that mean I should believe every single word he said?

"That will not be necessary." Muli's gaze dropped. "I informed him last evening that I would visit tonight. Regarding positioning of Astragan. Lord Faucher has ordered complete recalibrations. Six channels, every conceivable arrangement and combination attempted. One trillion energy signatures cast into the void... yielding nothing. We cannot locate them."

"With the Raven Force's current strength... are we actually going on the offensive?" The war that got us out had cost Faucher sixty percent of his forces. Going on the attack this soon would be total suicide.

"No. We shall execute an active dimensional displacement. The enemy must not be permitted to track our location."

Muli went through palm authentication at the door. We stepped into this more spacious, open arena. Unlike the cramped practice area from before, this place had no ceiling at all.

The lighting was built into the floor edges, and Inoasis's fake night sky painted overhead. Cold air hit us the second we walked through that door. The door sealed behind us. Looked like only certain people could get in here.

"Is that because..." I started carefully, "Faucher wants to stall until the Raven Force is ready?"

"Until the cosmos itself is depleted, my lady." Muli gazed up at the artificial stars. "He... refuses to continue this war. No longer wishes to fight. Victory or defeat, we shall all perish in the end regardless."

"This..."

I started to say something but caught myself. Papa's sacrifice, all those soldiers who'd already died... centuries of war would just turn to nothing.

Their deaths hadn't brought freedom or peace. In the end, all we'd gotten was compromise and defeat. A flash of grief hit me first, but then reality kicked in. What Muli said made sense, as much as I hated it. Win or lose, we'd all be gone in two centuries or something years anyway. At least Faucher's decision would let whoever's left live out their time in peace.

A sudden cold wind hit my face, messing with my bangs. I followed Muli as we both looked up at the fake sky.

"Yeah, that's fine too," I said quietly. I pulled out my earplugs to actually listen to the wind, catching engine sounds in the distance, echoes from pilot training somewhere.

I stared at the starless night, at that faint white glow from the skyscrapers way off. If I'm never getting home in this lifetime, then let me at least explore this night city. This was probably going to be my last stop anyway.

"I brought you here to give you something else as well."

Muli headed over to a weapons storage area, doing the palm scan thing to open a cabinet next to the rack. The door lit up and just dissolved, showing all these neatly arranged boxes inside.

She grabbed one of them. The case was almost as tall as she was, which wasn't saying much since Muli's pretty tiny. But she handled it like it weighed nothing, carrying it over and setting it down gently in front of me.

I crouched down, watching her pop the case open. It was weapons storage, so seeing a sniper rifle inside wasn't exactly shocking. "Am I finally getting a real gun?" I asked. They'd let me mess around with electronic weapons in the sim room before, but those were just holographic training wheels. No real challenge, no actual ammo. Basically just fancier video games.

"This belonged to your father."

She lifted it out of the case. I just... stared. Couldn't do anything else. The black body, those chevron-shaped vents, the elongated suppressors. It was different. From the very first second I laid eyes on it, I knew this thing was special.

Unlike every sniper rifle I'd ever seen. Bigger, longer, more deadly. Papa's shadow made real. Muli touched something on the weapon, and blue lights flickered to life along the body.

"It has a name. Dawn." Muli held it up with both hands, offering it to me. "Theo achieved extraordinary precision with this weapon. An unprecedented 99.7% accuracy rate. Bullseyes on moving targets at maximum difficulty, not merely successful hits. This is... Lord Faucher's personal creation. Crafted specifically for him."

I reached out, hands shaking, and took hold of the cold metal. Up close, I could see tiny scratches covering the surface. Battle scars. Proof of everything Papa had been through.

Muli let go, and the full weight hit me all at once. I stumbled, nearly dropping it, then clutched it against my chest. And God, it was heavy. Way heavier than any rifle I'd touched before. But it was beautiful. Absolutely beautiful.

"You..." My voice cracked completely. The words just died in my throat.

"If you wish to know who retrieved it during the final moments, that would be 650." Muli answered the question I couldn't even ask. 650. That quiet-as-hell Synth who never talked to anyone, not even his own kind. One of the big shots in the Synth hierarchy. "He witnessed it floating free when Astragan lost gravitational stability. He used his chain blade to secure it."

I'd never been so grateful for chain blades existing. Ever. I shifted my grip, holding it the right way, cradling it properly in my arms. Dawn. Papa's only legacy. His dream of owning a rifle had come true, all right. Just not the way he'd ever wanted. And it cost us everything. Us sisters' whole damn world.

"Does Faucher know you guys found it? He... he made this thing." My voice came out rougher than I meant.

"He is aware, yes." Muli's gaze drifted toward the far end of the arena. "However, I believed you should possess what rightfully belonged to your father, my lady. It is yours now."

Dawn. Dawn. Some day last cold season, before he headed down to the underground caverns for mining work, he'd made me a pinky promise. When the cold season ended, the very

moment that first dawn light hit the earth, he'd take us up from underground. Just for a bit. To see the sun, to see the sky after all that wind and snow. He was going to bring us out of the darkness, even if just for a little while.

"Can I... can I try it?" I looked up, blinking hard to clear the tears. Muli nodded and showed me the safety stuff, though I'd picked up most of the basics in training.

"Dawn's recoil is quite formidable, my lady. Do be careful."

Even though it was technically just another handheld sniper rifle, feeling its weight, sensing all that hidden power... I knew damn well I probably couldn't handle the kickback. But I gently pushed Muli aside anyway, used my wrist display to link up with the distant targets, and stepped into the shooting zone.

I had to try. I needed to know how Papa had taken that punishment, shot after shot slamming into his shoulder, year after year.

Muli backed off without a word, but I could hear her heart racing. She was worried for me.

I lifted Dawn, flicked on the long-range scope. The night's chill crept up through my fingertips, and I listened to the wind patterns. Artificial, sterile air circulation from the city's system. Nothing like the real wind and snow and scorching heat we'd lived through back home.

But I could still hear it, flowing past the muzzle with this soft hum. Like a lullaby only I could catch.

When the wind dropped, I pulled the trigger. The energy-boosted round ripped through the cold air, and the explosion violently shook my eardrums. I bit back a scream, white-

knuckling the rifle, fighting the brutal recoil. But I refused to close my eyes.

I heard the impact. Bullet punching through the target, drilling deep. Through all that violent noise, I caught the bullseye confirmation beep.

And underneath it all, so faint I almost missed it, there was this other sound. Like crystal chimes. Crisp, and clear.

3830-I

Chapter 14

Francis

I lay upon the floor for what felt like eternity. Long enough for the ceiling's merciless illumination to sear my eyes into raw, stinging torment. Long enough for the blazing agony across my right cheek to surrender into cold, distant numbness.

Still, I persisted in my vigil, staring upward with obstinate resolve, fixated on those pitiless recessed lights.

I wished for them to burn me to death. Turn me into cinders, into artillery fire and molten stone pouring over my flesh. It didn't matter. If I was truly a flawed, then I deserved such.

I should never have sketched those images, never penned those phrases—those beautiful fantasies I had yearned so, so deeply. I never knew they were vile, abhorrent, disgusting and sinful.

I had believed love to be natural. I had imagined love as liberation itself, like current flowing from peaks through valley crevices below. I had envisioned love as surging tides and boundless wind. In my naive comprehension, that was love's essence. Every story's conclusion I had ever read painted it thus.

I had presumed I could love anyone, any soul. I had imagined that falling for another was like puzzle fragments discovering their perfect complement. Just as those precise, embracing contours and hidden truths, and those exact matching hues.

Yet everything lay shattered.

My private module, such a beautiful creation, was broken and smashed into countless shards scattered across the cold floor. Once-complete chronicles and aspirations rent asunder by reality's cruel fissures, each word and melody dispersed like ashes.

This sacred collection should never have been uncovered—at least, that was what I believed. It would have remained my most cherished possession eternally, the most celebrated essence of my being. Instead, its memory crystal had been ground beneath a vengeful heel, as though the dream's original fragility proved insufficient destruction. It was crushed and twisted with malicious intent, ensuring no possibility of resurrection.

I cannot remember how long I lay there.

Long enough that when the door whispered open once more, my ears had become cauldrons for tears.

"Young lord!" Muli had clearly rushed here; her breath still laboured from haste. She paid no heed to the broken pieces strewn across the floor, falling to her knees beside me with complete disregard for the sharp edges that might wound her.

Her trembling thumb traced my cheek, brushing away the tears. She whispered reproachful words under her breath, though I understood they were not meant for me. felt her attempt to cradle my neck, to lift me.

But my body had already grown beyond her strength. Within moments, the weight proved too much, and my head settled back against the floor.

"It's gone," I said softly. "Everything's gone."

"That is not so." Tears gathered in her eyes like dewdrops, her voice fracturing with emotion. "You remember. Those colours, those melodies... they reside within you now. They cannot be taken."

She attempted once more to raise me, yet I possessed no strength to assist her efforts. Sharp pricks of pain bloomed along my arms. Likely punctures from the scattered sharp fibres.

"Perhaps," I wondered aloud, "I could draw them on my arms instead?" With these once-beautiful shards. To pierce and drag across skin, allowing my mind to map each contour of pain and red.

"Get up, young lord... Francis. Get up."

Tendrils of pulsing pain coursed through my limbs. Clearly, Muli's smaller frame could no longer bear my weight as she once had in my youth.

"Father intends to consign me to the Raven Force," I stated with hollow calm.

"It signifies nothing, young lord." She forced a weak smile. "I have complete faith that you shall excel as a great warrior."

I withheld the remainder of Father's proclamation from her gentle ears. He had declared that I, as an already worthless abomination, could not be permitted to cultivate additional flaws. The men there would instruct me in the proper conduct of masculinity.

Inoasis's future sovereign had a planned course. He'd already chosen everything for me.

And the contents of my module... those were filth, forbidden corruption.

"What did I do wrong, Muli?" I turned my gaze toward her with mechanical precision. "Is it my bloodline? Are we destined to be caged?"

"No."

Her tears at last escaped their bonds, becoming the only liberated entities within these walls as they traced silver paths down her cheeks.

"Remember our conversations regarding stars? They will serve as your guides, leading you to discover the star destined for you. I promise."

"We can never leave Earth. You know that well." I choked out a broken sound. "Countless billions of calculations and expeditions launched into the void. Not one habitable planet was discovered. Not a single one. Even should such a place exist, we lack the resources and time to construct vessels capable of reaching it, don't we? You know this, Muli. No stars shine here."

"The stars await just beyond our barrier. You will reach them one day."

She drew me upward. I yielded at last, allowing her strength to guide me into a seated position. Wetness adorned my face once more.

Truly, tears alone possessed freedom in this place.

I reached toward the scattered remnants upon the floor, yearning to touch those glittering fragments. But before my fingertips could meet their razor edges, Muli intercepted my reach, clasping my hand firmly within hers.

"Francis, surely you recall our discussions of astral charts? Fortuitous numbers, stellar configurations, the threads of fate. Do you remember?"

Of course I remembered. I was equally cognizant that such notions were merely consoling fantasies and delusions. Fragile beyond measure. A single wrathful blow could easily shove them to nothing.

Perhaps I should indeed surrender to reality, turn myself into an obedient puppet. Surely preferable to existing as an unshackled corpse.

"There are no stars here," I said.

"They exist. The star ordained for you shall break any barriers to reach you." Muli gathered my hands as though in prayer, wrapping them within her smaller grasp. "They have indomitable will and flawless aim. They have beautiful dark hair; I could predict a tall frame. Almost matching your own height, Francis."

I raised my gaze, staring at her nonsensical rambling. Likely words intended for comfort, though I could not be entirely certain. Muli almost never told lies.

"No outsider may breach these walls. This person doesn't exist in Inoasis."

"They will. And they will become your most unwavering ally, one of the many stars that shall illuminate your existence. You are well aware that I never tell lies, my dear young lord. Trust me. Everything will get better."

I was assisted to the bed's edge, where I remained in contemplative silence. Muli proceeded to check my wounds. Nothing seriously cut. She then applied bandages.

Throughout this tender process, I uttered not a word, while Muli began to recite, with perfect articulation, every poem I had ever written.

Among the Vidal gifts lay their incomparable capacity for memory. She spoke aloud thirty-some verses I had crafted, including those whose titles and particulars had long escaped my own recollection, those juvenile scribblings from my earliest years.

She remembered them all. Every word. Every phrase. And every tiny grammatical mistake I have made.

The next morning, the butler and a contingent of fully armed rangers had gathered beyond my chamber. When the door opened, the butler's face shifted from expected mockery to some shock.

He clearly had not expected to see me already attired in regulation uniform, my shoulder-length locks shorn away, stepping forth.

What happened thereafter unfolded precisely as told in the stories.

Father presumed that conscripting me into the Raven Force would break my spirit. Instead, within just a handful of years, I had ascended to elite status.

None dared engage me in real combat, my accumulated bloodlust found no proper release, gradually fermenting into weaponized rage. Until Muli showed up as my designated opponent within the arena.

Of course I would listen to her every word. It appeared that prophecy was her truest gift.

She possessed an almost divine inability to deceive, and had never once been mistaken. Besides, in this fucked-up night city, she was the only one who had witnessed my written soul.

And yes. The stars fulfilled their promise.

At twenty-five, that fucking man truly did break in.

3849-I

Chapter 15

Amelie

I kept firing. Shot after shot until all 8 rounds were slammed deep into the target.

When I finally lowered the rifle, my arms and shoulders were completely numb from the vicious recoil. It took several seconds after loosening my grip for the dull ache in my joints to creep in from somewhere else in my system.

I looked up at the holoscreen above, and those blazing red numbers made me do a double-take. Perfect 10s across the board—all eight shots dead center bullseye. I couldn't help staring down at Dawn in my hands, eyes wider than my earlier expectation.

This thing really was a masterpiece. Had to be precision engineering with some kind of built-in targeting AI. This must've meant everything to Papa.

"It's... incredible." I touched the surface of it, more tender this time, then turned around. "Thank you for bringing it back—"

Muli was staring at me with these wide, freaked-out eyes, her light brown pupils filled with what looked like terror. No wait, shock, awe, maybe some other stuff I couldn't figure out. I glanced down at Dawn again.

"Muli?"

"Oh, my lady." Muli shook herself out of whatever daze she'd been in, her posture relaxing a bit. "I was simply... quite startled. I assumed you wouldn't master it so quickly, but I severely underestimated your innate abilities, my lady. You are remarkably well-suited to this weapon."

"I'm starting to wonder just how many talents Uncle Grumpy's been hiding." Before Faucher turned into whatever the hell he is now, maybe he was some kind of genius. Good with words, good with weapons, designing guns and machinery and who knows what else. "At least Papa got to use something amazing in his lifetime. That's one dream come true, I guess."

Besides this one hobby, Papa's entire world had been me and my sisters. Was that some kind of... life without regrets? If it was, then he could finally rest easy. I lifted Dawn again, cradling it against me, feeling the warmth still radiating from its surface.

"Had Theo never encountered firearms in his previous life?" Muli asked.

"He did, actually."

The weight was getting to me, so I crouched down and carefully slid Dawn back into its custom groove. "There were plenty of assholes outside our tunnel too. Roving bandits would raid our underground community for resources. Our village kept guns for the sentinels to use."

"I'm delighted you've inherited your father's extraordinary gift, my lady."

Before closing the case, I ran my fingers across Dawn's smooth surface one last time. It gave a soft locking chime, and the blue lights faded to black like it was going to sleep.

"I hope I never have to use it for real," I said. The case shut with a heavy thud.

"Should you desire practice with this weapon, you may do so whenever you wish. Your biometric data was automatically registered as its primary access key. You alone may open this case now." Muli drew her chain blade from behind her back with fluid grace. "Additionally, I have arranged instruction in rapid aerial movement techniques today."

Based on the Synths letting me mess around with it before, it wasn't nearly as hard as I'd thought it would be. I had to give credit to all that brutal physical training I'd been putting myself through.

Combined with Inoasis's absolutely gross, incredibly annoying, but stupidly effective nutrition program, my body had undergone some positive changes. Rock-solid legs, a way stronger core, and shoulders that had definitely broadened out.

These improvements meant swinging the chain blade was no longer a struggle. I'd managed to launch myself airborne pretty easily, following the blade's momentum as it pulled me up and forward. But that cramped practice room was pathetic—one quick swing and you were done. With all those hyperactive guys bouncing around and me now towering over most of them, there wasn't enough space to actually move.

Next, Muli launched into her explanation about reliable anchor points for chain blade hooks, throwing in various tactical suggestions.

I kind of spaced out during her usual formal, weirdly stiff delivery... *Had she always been this tiny?*

I flashed back to 403 joking around with me outside the train earlier. He'd actually had to look up to make eye contact with me.

I'd grown again. With these slightly heeled boots, I was already taller than most of the Raven Force rangers. Guess I wasn't done growing yet.

And then the lecture was over.

I didn't waste a second—sprinted forward and drove the blade deep into the floor. using the chain's snap-back to rocket myself into the air. The chain's violent contraction launched me like a slingshot.

Mid-flight, I ripped the chain blade free and whipped it hard toward the ceiling's edge. The hook caught, and I went flying, soaring straight up through empty air toward Inoasis's fake night.

For one breathtaking moment, I hung suspended in the air, the entire view of this night city sprawled out in front of me like some glowing circuit.

The Raven Force base sat way down below, exactly where I'd expected, dwarfed by Faucher's fancy mansion up on the ridge. Those skyscrapers I'd glimpsed from the dining room

were now colossal dark monoliths punching straight up into the void.

I caught hold of a small platform at the base's highest point and stuck the landing. The click of heels on concrete sounded right next to me.

"You are blessed with exceptional gifts, my lady."

This time, she didn't sound shocked at all.

After spending the entire afternoon swinging around above the base, my muscles were completely shot. Pretty good for someone who'd just started this glider stuff.

A bunch of rangers kept craning their necks to watch me from down below. Tons of people I'd never met were obviously curious about the mystery person mentioned in Papa and Faucher's custody paperwork.

When I finally landed, Muli got dragged off for some kind of conversation. Probably official business, or maybe just people being nosy about the so-called "honorary guest" crashing at Faucher's place.

Even though sweat was making my clothes stick to me like plastic wrap, my face stayed bone dry thanks to the freezing air. It actually felt kind of rough and chapped.

I rolled my aching shoulders and glanced at my holowatch. It's almost 7 PM already.

Muli and I caught the transport train back to the Synths division together. Halfway through the ride, feeling disgusting and sticky, I pulled my hair loose and bent over to let it all hang down.

"I would recommend contacting Stellar Atelier for properly fitted training attire, my lady."

Watching me yank at my way-too-short pant legs, Muli offered her suggestion. I straightened back up, taking in how she still sat there all elegant with her legs crossed, leaning against the seat like the perfect Vidal lady she was. Though was she even really one of them anymore?

"No wonder everything feels like it's strangling me." I scratched my neck. "This stuff definitely doesn't fit right anymore."

And I'd only been wearing these clothes for less than a month... Was my growth spurt really happening this fast?

Later, I grabbed a quick shower. My hunger was hitting hard today, this gnawing empty feeling eating away at my gut.

I also noticed my hair was growing as fast as everything else on my body. I leaned back, letting my drenched hair hang under the automatic blow dryer. Even this insane future tech needed a solid five minutes to get it dry.

Muli was probably still holed up in her guest room. She told me not to wait for her, so I headed straight for the dining room. The door sensed me coming and melted away with its usual whoosh. The moment I walked in, though, I saw something I definitely wasn't expecting.

"Oh, sister, you're back."

Joelle had dragged a floating chair over by the massive windows, and the seat across from her looked like it had become that guy's permanent spot. Faucher sat angled toward both the window and my sister, his left hand still poised over his holoscreen. When he noticed me walk in, he casually let his hand drift back to the armrest.

"Wow." I couldn't stop myself from grinning. "What happened while I was gone? I disappear for a few hours and you two suddenly become best buddies."

"You're not gonna believe this," Joelle planted her feet and grabbed the chair arms, spinning herself in lazy circles. "So like, around 4 or whatever, Uncle Stone-Face got his coat stuck in the library door. He couldn't twist around to do the palm scan thing, so the door just wouldn't budge. I happened to be coming out of the next room when—"

"The system merely required extended processing time for proper authorization," Faucher cleared his throat with obvious intent, cutting through my sister's excited rambling. "Miss Joelle fortuitously appeared from the adjoining library at the precise moment."

I shrugged, definitely not about to pop this proud uncle's dignity bubble. "It was good timing, wasn't it? Look at you two now." I'd honestly thought Joelle despised this guy, like full-on wouldn't-be-in-the-same-room level of hatred.

"Yeah, well," Joelle quit her spinning, planting both feet firmly on the floor to stop. "Turns out he knows tons of stuff. I've been digging through all these legal documents in the library, and I kept finding these weird contradictions in the energy resource policies and New Human rights. So I figured, why not just casually, super casually! Pick his brain about it."

So they'd been nerding out over law and politics for hours. Huh.

I was just figuring out that Joelle, my second sister, was genuinely fascinated by this complicated stuff. Her constant library marathons really were pure intellectual curiosity.

Knowing her personality, it all made sense now. Those early morning vanishing acts weren't about avoiding me at all. Just her brain being hungry for knowledge. That was... actually pretty awesome.

I really hate admitting this, but something inside me felt lighter at that moment.

My sister kept rambling about all the topics she'd covered with Uncle Faucher, while the man himself went back to whatever he was browsing on his holoscreen. All that animated chatter mixed with the gentle electronic beeping from his device... for the first time, this massive mansion actually sounded like people lived here.

My enhanced hearing picked up Muli's footsteps as she stepped out of the elevator.

"My sincere apologies for the delay, my lord." She'd wheeled in the evening refreshments too. Four servings this time around. I shot a quick look at Faucher's profile. Definitely his thoughtful addition.

This was perfect. Just like this. If we couldn't win the damn war, then no point fighting it. I could train my ass off at Raven Force, my sisters had enough books and data to keep them busy for several lifetimes, we had full bellies, a crew of new friends, and... one surprisingly tolerable grumpy uncle.

Papa's last words echoed in my head, and finally I got it. He'd seen this too. The compromised safety hidden underneath all the gruff exterior.

While Joelle was demolishing her jelly dessert, she redirected her non-stop chatter toward Muli. Muli was basically a genius-level scholar, so naturally she ate up every single curious question Joelle fired at her.

I stole a glance at the head of the table. Faucher still wore his trademark stone-faced expression, but somehow the tension between his eyebrows had eased up more than I'd ever seen before.

He didn't say a word until he'd completely finished his meal and set his fork down with that little clink. Only then did Muli pause her animated discussion with Joelle.

"There is a matter I believe requires your attention, my lord. Nothing immediately pressing, but you should be informed."

"Speak."

"It concerns Lady Aurora Vidal. May I discuss this matter freely?"

Joelle and I both went rigid, sitting up straighter. We'd definitely get kicked out for privacy reasons; I was pretty sure.

"Proceed."

"Lady Aurora accessed her private laboratory early this morning and... subjected herself to forced New Human conversion."

Wait, what? Why would anyone do that?

Joelle and I exchanged horrified looks. Who the hell would voluntarily sign up for this cursed immortality? Especially knowing the conversion process was absolute agony, literal torture, and... God, the survival rate was only fifty-fifty. Fifty-fifty odds of just dying on the spot. What could possibly drive her to...?

"Did she survive?" Faucher's voice remained perfectly level, but my enhanced hearing caught his pulse quickening. Definitely sounded pissed off.

"The conversion was successful, though she required immediate emergency intervention..." Muli squeezed her eyes shut and released a frustrated sigh. "Regrettably, she lost the child. The medical staff exhausted all possible measures. Lady Aurora herself has stabilized completely, displaying normal New Human physiological markers."

"But... why?" I breathed out my confusion. This was like nuking yourself to spite your enemy, except worse... Why would she choose to become a New Human? Had she completely lost it? And she was willing to sacrifice the baby too?

"New Human Rights Protection Statute, Article 23, Subsection 4..." Joelle whispered so quietly only I could catch it, uncertainly reciting from memory: "...No New Human entity may face capital punishment regardless of criminal actions or their severity... due to... the permanent nature of genetic enhancement... and its critical importance to humanity's evolutionary progress..."

I tuned out the rest of her legal mumbling. Faucher gradually lifted his left hand, pressing his fingers against his forehead like he could massage away the stress lines. He inhaled deeply, held it, then let the breath out in a long stream before his arm dropped back to the armrest like dead weight.

"So be it. I shall release an official directive to V.I.D.A.L. initiating leadership succession protocols."

Just like that, he'd found his composure again. Those stress lines between his eyebrows had actually disappeared, like they'd been erased. Was he really just... done with everything?

Muli waited several beats before responding with a careful nod.

"Understood, my lord. What are your wishes regarding Lady Aurora's immediate situation?"

"Medical supervision. Beyond that, she may do as she pleases."

Ah. Cold treatment.

He'd moved past even wanting revenge. Aurora had condemned herself to the same endless existence we were stuck with. Honestly, what punishment could possibly top this kind of curse?

Chapter 16

Evelynn still wasn't too keen on getting close to Faucher. She'd fallen into this routine: wake up, eat breakfast, disappear into the library to read or mess around with her games, turning into a proper emotionally-detached teenage girl.

Muli said our youngest sister was hitting the early stages of puberty. Give her space and time, show you care but keep some healthy distance, don't preach at her, guide her instead.

"Is it because you've been dealing with Uncle Faucher that you can drop such wisdom on me?"

We both skipped Raven Force today. Two days off per week, which I'd generously given myself, and I'd decided to spend them pillaging Faucher's private library. He'd been camped out at the library desk lately, pecking away with his one functioning left hand. His mental state was loads better than before too.

It had been six months since that day he'd completely lost it on me. We were already past the halfway point of the year. Outside was still the same never-ending darkness, nothing new there, but the difference was I could swing around above the night city now.

I'd also gotten several stern talking-tos from Uncle Faucher for sneaking out to explore. Hey, he absolutely had the right to lecture me, but he always ended up having to negotiate with Muli because of her "adolescent management guidelines."

So whenever I went out, I'd bring back little treats for them when I got home. Some absolutely disgusting artificial candy and "cakes" specifically designed to keep Inoasians from losing their minds in this hellhole.

After buying the stuff once or twice, even Joelle told me it tasted like garbage and to quit wasting money on it.

I didn't care. I was using Uncle Faucher's card anyway.

Before he started sketching out the high-tech prosthetics that would eventually be grafted onto his body, Uncle Faucher had made creating my new chain blade his top priority. Sharper and bigger blade tip, way more solid gripping power, more flexible elastic chain, and a bit longer than standard chain blades. Muli said it was to account for my height.

Muli also said he regretted it now, since I'd constantly abused my natural talent and complete lack of height phobia to go soaring around above Inoasis.

With the new chain blade's beefed-up retraction system, I could fly even faster and reach ridiculous heights.

The Synths were stuck at the base, so they all lived for me coming back and spilling about whatever cool stuff I'd spotted out there.

What interesting stuff could possibly be happening? In this suffocating bubble, just keeping everyone from going insane was already an achievement.

The Inoasians could feel it too, and they'd all given up hope that the barrier sealing off this night city would ever crack open. They'd never even get to see what the Second World looked like these days. Before everyone croaked, they'd probably never see real sunlight again. Regular humans with their short lifespans could deal with it, but me and my sisters, assuming nothing went wrong, were stuck walking this path with Muli and Uncle Faucher until the very end.

That depended on how much time the leftover universe energy would throw our way.

"I'm afraid that's not the case, my lady." Muli smiled gently. "His formative years were spent entirely within the Raven Force. If anyone truly knew him during that period, it would have been the senior officers there."

Muli still hadn't spilled the real story about her and Uncle Faucher's history. Joelle had only dug up scattered breadcrumbs in the archived records: Uncle had been recruited into the Raven Force at twelve years old, no explanation given.

While other kids were still figuring out basic words, he was already drowning in mathematics, sciences, political theory, and legal studies... God knows what kind of childhood nightmare he'd lived.

A few days back, though, Muli had handed me this locked data module. She said it contained information about Uncle's birth mother, who'd apparently been her closest friend. She also mentioned that it would unlock itself when the timing was right. I should keep an eye on it.

This whole cryptic setup, plus that knowing smile of hers... I figured it was probably loaded with Uncle's most embarrassing childhood moments and some history that never made it into the official records. Stuff only Muli had been around to witness, maybe.

"Oh, so that's why he's absolutely terrible at basic human communication." Either saying the complete opposite of what he actually meant, or just slapping on that perpetual scowl.

"You understand he doesn't intend it that way, my lady."

We walked into Uncle's library. Predictably, he was still hunched over his prosthetic designs. The whole neural interface situation, connecting everything to his spinal cord and brain, had been consuming him and Muli for over a month now.

I was pretty sure they'd slammed into a major roadblock. Muli had been spending more and more time at the mansion, basically living here permanently when she wasn't at V.I.D.A.L. headquarters. She'd made several trips back there specifically to pick the brains of colleagues who specialized in neuroscience research.

Faucher's private medical squad had been holding regular strategy sessions with him too. The mechanical stuff wasn't giving them headaches, but Uncle apparently had some very specific demands that were complicating things.

I remember Joelle rambling about nanomachines or something, though she was just as clueless about what that actually meant.

Muli slid into the chair at his desk and dove back into her research, poring over his modification blueprints alongside Uncle. Joelle was doing her usual thing next door, buried in history and geography modules. Evelynn... she was also next door, but might as well have been on another planet for all the communication we got from her.

She'd only focus on astronomy stuff these days. Or star chart things, which Muli was actually pretty fascinated by too. Muli would occasionally try to strike up conversations with our youngest sister about it.

But Evelynn would just mumble a few half-assed responses before diving back into her reading, or completely zoning out with video games. Muli was smart enough not to push it.

But two months back, when Uncle casually brought up spacetime jumping during dinner conversation with Muli, Evelynn did something totally out of character and interrupted.

"You don't need to do that. Fate has already done it for you."

When she dropped that sentence, her eyes stayed glued to her breakfast plate, didn't even bother looking up. The rest of us were stunned.

"Ah, I understand. How might we verify this information?" Muli had immediately raised her hand back then, gently pressing Uncle's arm to shut him up before he could react.

"The stars changed, they ran away. But another one showed up."

"When you say 'it,' you're referring to?"

"Custos."

"I see. Thank you for that insight, Evelynn." Muli didn't push for more details, just smiled and nodded like that cryptic shit made perfect sense. And Uncle never mentioned the spacetime thing again after that. Obviously he didn't try to make it happen either.

That's just how things were now. Our baby sister, our Pebble, our little one... had turned into this stranger we couldn't figure

out. Unless she felt like it, she wouldn't respond to anyone's questions.

More like... she just didn't give a shit anymore. She'd completely stopped participating in mine and Joelle's conversations or any of our stupid jokes.

I found a cozy corner and plopped down, doing some quick mental math. If I couldn't polish off this book before Uncle and Muli wrapped up their session, I'd just smuggle it back to my room for an all-nighter.

Half an hour in, I knew there was no way I'd finish it.

Muli and Uncle Faucher's conversation had gotten seriously riveting. Turns out they really had smacked into a brick wall. There was absolutely nothing here about prosthetic modifications for New Humans or any successful case studies. Hell, even basic New Human anesthetics and specialized vaccines had all been developed by Jacques—those fucking monsters—over a century ago, back when everyone was still playing nice.

Everything in modern medicine was just polished versions of those ancient experiments, which explained why we had working vaccines, painkillers, antibiotics, and other lifesaving treatments for New Humans. Without that foundation, New Humans getting sick would basically be a death sentence.

Muli was indeed a New Human, and a Vidal on top of that. But all the related research she knew, her entire lifetime of accumulated knowledge... it just wasn't quite enough. After she'd joined the Raven Force, she'd barely had time to keep up with her studies, and some of the stuff she'd learned way back was practically ancient history by now.

"She'd rather see me dead, Muli."

Uncle Faucher sighed.

"We shouldn't rush to such dire conclusions, my Lord." I caught the soft sound of Muli's fingers dancing across her tablet screen, probably pulling up new research windows. "All New Humans experience some degree of psychological transformation, given their dramatically extended lifespans and the burden of enduring centuries of spiritual decay... We've all witnessed her gradual metamorphosis. Everyone at V.I.D.A.L. has observed it."

We hadn't gotten a single update about Aurora Vidal in months. V.I.D..A.L. had also proved they could run like a well-oiled machine without any leadership at all. Made sense though. They were still representatives of the highest intellectual class in all of Inoasis.

"You must understand, her New Human research is unparalleled in scope and depth. She remains the sole expert in this field. Her numerous publications present comprehensive analyses and viable solutions for New Human physiological deterioration issues. Her dermatological studies are particularly groundbreaking." Muli pushed.

I could practically feel Uncle Faucher's mood souring by the second.

Even stripped of her Lady Vidal title, Aurora was still one of the most advanced research pioneers in medical achievement. If they wanted to blast through Uncle's modification roadblock, she was literally their only option. But what was eating at me was something completely different... This wasn't some ordinary prosthetic installation or minor surgery. Uncle Faucher wanted to wire every single artificial part directly into his spinal cord and brainstem, achieving response times that matched actual living tissue. He was planning to cram his skull full of software, synthetic neural networks, the whole nine yards... This was going to be an incredibly complex, high-stakes operation.

His survival odds were sitting at 70%. Not great, not terrible, but that remaining one-third kept gnawing at me like some persistent nightmare, lurking in the back of my mind like a goddamn vulture. But no matter what, I wasn't going to forget Papa's final words.

Trust him, *trust him*. For Inoasis's level of technology, this should be child's play. Besides, Muli and a whole team of Vidals were going to be monitoring every step of the process and keep an eye on things for him.

He was going to make it through this. He had to.

Three days after that tense little discussion, Aurora got her official summons to the Faucher mansion.

I made a point of suiting up in my new combat gear, strapping on my new chain blade, and ghost-walking my way into the darkest corner of the meeting room. How could this level of epic drama not include our front-row seats—mine and Joelle's?

Plus, I had no clue if this unhinged woman might completely explode and try something stupid with Uncle Faucher. Sure, Uncle was doing way better mentally, but he was still basically a one-armed guy in a hovering wheelchair.

After more than half a year, Aurora's silver-white hair had lost all that sharp elegance, now scraped back into this

pathetic excuse for a ponytail that hung like dead weight behind her. Gone was that V.I.D.A.L. leader's white uniform, replaced by some shapeless long-sleeved dress. Even her slim body had blurred under all that baggy fabric.

She'd gotten skinny. Fragile as hell too.

I settled into my spy position, leaning against the shadowy wall with one foot propped up for a quick launch if needed. Muli was stationed right next to Uncle Faucher, so I didn't need to stress about his safety. I could just sit back and enjoy the sequel to this political shitshow.

"How unexpected that I still possess some utility for your purposes, my Lord." She twisted her mouth into this bitter, exhausted excuse for a smile that looked more like a grimace.

"Do take a seat." Uncle Faucher clearly wasn't having any of her passive-aggressive performance, just lifted his left hand in this completely dismissive gesture.

Aurora finally bothered to look up, her gaze drifting toward Muli on the opposite side, but her fugure stayed firmly planted where it was. Then, after this long, dramatic pause, she lobbed a huge grenade in their entire history.

"Your ascension to Rodolphe Faucher's legacy appears to owe considerable debt to Miss Muli's... assistance. Meanwhile, the rightful heir to this throne, your elder brother, finds himself banished to the very edges of this universe. Tell me, my Lord, are you even aware you possess a sibling?"

My body went tense. Was she talking about Astragan? And Uncle Faucher had *a brother*?

"You refer to the brother who harvested tens of thousands for human experimentation? The same individual who arranged my mother's murder? Who sired that lifeless child you once carried? Who presently cohabitates with another woman on Astragan? Enlighten me with information I haven't already uncovered, Aurora."

I couldn't stop myself—I slapped a hand over my mouth to muffle the gasp that was about to escape.

Muli's eyes went wide too, clearly shocked that her boss had been sitting on this much intel. I definitely hadn't expected Uncle Faucher to drop the most devastating bombshell of the entire conversation.

Aurora's face went through this whole spectrum of emotions. Sickly green shame, deep purple humiliation, then finally this ghost-white terror. Her lips and fingertips were shaking, and there was obviously stuff in Uncle's little speech that even she hadn't known about. Especially when Uncle casually dropped that final revelation, her whole body lurched like she'd been shot point-blank with the truth.

"I..."

"What exactly did you witness?" Muli stepped closer, her brow furrowed with concern. "During... that, what else did you see?"

Uncle Faucher shot Muli with this confused look: which?

"I..."

"Whatever you saw, forget it."

Every head in the room whipped toward the doorway, following that flat, childish voice back to its source. Evelynn, standing there fully dressed with her tablet clutched in one hand.

I stepped out of my shadowy hiding spot, letting the meeting room's dim lighting reveal my position.

Aurora spun toward me, clearly having zero clue I'd been lurking in here the entire time. Her face somehow managed to get even paler, and she actually stumbled backward a few steps.

"You... it's you..." She lifted a trembling hand, pointing at me like I was some kind of demon.

"Shut up." Evelynn had already marched into the room and swatted Aurora's arm down. "Say another word and you're dead. Shut up and do what you're supposed to do."

Everyone just stood there gaping.

"Can you hear the stars calling to you?" Evelynn spun around to face Uncle Faucher, her expression completely blank. He obviously had no clue what she was getting at and just shook his head, looking totally lost.

"I'm afraid I don't understand. What are you referring to, Evelynn?" He studied my sister's deadly serious face and made a point of gentling his voice, speaking to her.

"Forget it. Doesn't matter. Just focus on getting through your surgery. She," Evelynn jabbed her finger directly at Aurora, who was still frozen in shock, "is going to help you. If she doesn't, she dies."

Right then, Evelynn's gaze shifted to lock onto Muli.

Muli gave her this tiny nod in return. From my corner, I could actually see relief flooding Muli's eyes, like some massive weight had just been lifted off her shoulders.

Three months later, Francis Faucher was wheeled into the operating room, armed with the combined research breakthroughs from every brilliant mind they could gather.

As a precaution, he'd already transferred all of Inoasis's toplevel administrative control to Muli.

And he'd handed me two documents. Told me to study them thoroughly during his post-surgery recovery period. The first was the original custody agreement between him and Papa, all the legal stuff about our guardianship. The second one though...

That was his official royal adoption documentation for us.

On the final page, in the signature section, his name was already there in elegant script. Below it sat three empty lines, waiting patiently for us three sisters to make our choice.

Next:

The Blight
Dusk til Dawn

The Blight
Meliana

The Blight
Starfall

Thank you for reading!