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The Chronicles of Aliyah Sparks
Gods of Tech

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

Jalysa Irene Conway

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CHAPTER ZERO – HI...MY NAME IS

In an office building somewhere in Alexandria, VA

So, for the second time in my young, impressionable life, I was going to get arrested. Seriously, I, Aliyah Patrice Sparks, was two seconds away from getting caught picking the lock on this office door labeled “Director of Product Design,” would have my ass handed to me by some burly rent-a-cop, and would promptly get tossed—seven o'clock news style—into the county slammer. I did not hold the title of director, nor did I remotely resemble the spray-on tan, polo shorts wearing douche bag that did. I jimmied motherboards for a living, not doors, so I felt completely out of place twirling my hairpin in the lock until—surprise—it opened. As I snuck into the office, I prayed to God they wouldn't try me as an adult.

My first brush with the law, when I was thirteen, had left me with such a cold and sickening feeling that every time I saw iron bars on first floor apartment windows, I shivered like a little biotch. I never wanted to see a holding cell again. But the fact that the police would care enough to withhold my liberty kind of validated my current act of rebellion. I guess, if I did go to jail, I could earn public support with my *Screw The Man* attitude, turn a sympathetic jury and maybe even catch a guest spot on Leno.

Guest spot on Leno. Guest spot on Leno.

This I kept repeating as the door slammed shut behind me. Luckily, Horace, the aforementioned douche bag, my ex-boss, hadn't been engaging in one of his many late night rump sessions with junior assistant of the week. I slipped on ninja black gloves and flipped on my handy-cam flashlight. It was GO time.

The safe sat in the far corner of the room. With surgical precision, I popped the passcode keypad off, revealing electrical innards and circuitry that made me giggle inside. Now this was my preferred method of breaking and entering.

I took the Lady Agnes, my homemade digital jammer, from my purse. Oh yeah, m'lady was primed. I wired the ole gal in, kissed her for good luck and let the bytes fly. It took me two weeks to configure an algorithm fast enough, primal enough, to demolish the safe's low-end encryption software. I prayed to the computer gnomes that it would actually work.

Footsteps echoed in the hallway and immediately, I cowered beside the desk. One. Two. Two and a half. Three and three-quarters. I counted the double cadence of my heartbeat until the footsteps faded into the distance. If this night ended well, I promised to never down three energy drinks before committing a felony, ever again.

While the Lady Agnes raped and pillaged, I set to work on Horace's computer.

Password please. I entered the most probable sequence from the rainbow table I ran on his profile. *Access denied.* I loaded in the second. *Access denied.* I leaned back to think. I savored this moment, when tech tried to play hard to get. Every now and then, we engaged in a perpetual dance of lust, of push and pull, when technology remained a prude and I had to buy it a couple of drinks to lull it, to outsmart the machine. I reveled in the challenge. Just thinking about resistors and capacitors got me all hot and bothered inside.

Out of instinct, I turned over the keyboard. *Hunkylova4u6969* was written on a piece of paper taped to the underside. Such a disappointment. In thirty seconds, I was in; in two minutes, I had gained access to the server share; and in five minutes, I had admin

privileges. My mission was to find files for a project titled “The Lulz.” A quick command line search found them all. Of course, they weren’t password protected. Predictable. I deleted them. I also looked for anything that dealt with a “high capacity mobile battery pack.” These too were sacrificed to the electrons.

I didn’t hate Horace; in fact, I admired his tenacity and attention to detail. My vengeance wasn’t fueled by any emotional trauma or personal vendetta. He was just an asshole—a creepy, manipulative, lying, thieving asshole. For the benefit of society, he needed to be shown this unfortunate aspect of himself. I was doing this for *the people*.

A bell chimed. Lady Agnes was finished; by golly, she had done it. The safe clicked and then opened. Victory was mine. I even did a little jig on the way to the safe. I passed up the Rolex, the financial reports and a stack of about \$1500. My baby lay all by its lonesome on the second shelf. *LSD Lulz*.

Through its high school outreach program, Nielsen Electronics had promised an “enriching experience and fun-filled introduction into the inner workings of a Fortune 500 electronics manufacturer.” Instead, they had relegated me and the other interns to coffee duty and weekly paper-shredding entertainment. So, to pass the time, I found the lab, convinced the techs that I was supposed to be there and made my own project. Hyped on too much coffee, the need to charge my cell phone on the go and a spur of inspiration, *LSD Lulz* was born. It took a solid two months to troubleshoot, but when I was finished, no longer did the steady traveler need to fight to the death, in airport lounges, for an outlet; he could carry a high capacity battery charger in his pocket. *Is your cell phone dead to calls? Charge your battery on the Lulz.*

Horace had been so excited when he found out that he had given me the day off *and* I would earn minimum wage bonus pay; but I didn't care. All I wanted to do was continue beta testing my masterpiece. I had just scratched the surface. When I had returned the next day, though, the other interns and I were given our last paycheck, told that the internship program was being cancelled for budgetary concerns and that *LSD Lulz*—renamed *The Nielsen Charge*—now belonged to the company.

I didn't even shout that I would exact my revenge. I wanted it to be a surprise.

Once all servers had been cleared of the evidence, I plugged in a thumb drive and uploaded the coup de grace: a lovely logic bomb named Khan. The minute Horace logged on the next morning, Khan intended to wreak havoc on the mainframes in the form of a SYN flood, pictures of cute cats and a ten second clip of horrible, low quality horse porn. And to top it off, a message of victory would appear on every infected computer. *Not this time Edison—sincerely, Tesla.*

I slipped *LSD Lulz* into my purse, crept out of the office and was down to the first floor before the computer even fully shut down. Maybe I wouldn't get arrested. Maybe Horace wouldn't figure it out and I would get off scott-free. Maybe I wouldn't cry soundlessly while in the fetal position on an icy jail bench at county.

“Hey, what are you doing in here?”

Maybe not.

I saw the badge first—crap—and then the handcuffs swinging against his side—double crap. He didn't have a gun—security guards at Nielsen weren't allowed such items—but I knew a hefty and debilitating can of pepper spray lay hidden somewhere on

his person. I didn't recognize the guard from my short stint as the company's mule so I was at a disadvantage.

"I'm so sorry," I said, turning the oblivious cuteness to ten, "I didn't know anyone was still here. Silly me. Can you believe I forgot to get some project files from my computer? Horace would kill me if I didn't come in tomorrow with them finished." The guard didn't seem completely convinced.

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-one," it was iffy but the first number that came to mind, "I'm new."

"Hmm." He licked his lips. "What kind of files," he said, looking at my purse.

"Excuse me, sir, but that's private Nielsen information and I'm sure you're aware of what policy says about need-to-know. Besides, I'm sure a well-put together and strapping officer such as yourself has more important things to take care of than to worry about little old graphs and data statistics. Might I add, I'm glad they have you keeping our offices safe."

"Well," the guard smiled, straightening his nametag, "I have to survey this entire building at night, by myself." I gasped for effect.

"The whole building? Well, it makes sense that they would put their most dedicated officer on the hardest shift." He chuckled.

"Hey, it's like I always say: if you ain't excited about the job, then why do it. Look," he said, stepping closer to me, "if you ever need any *personal* protecting, then you know who to call." He handed me his card and then winked. I suppressed a gag and winked back.

“You have a nice night now,” he said.

I felt his eyes bouncing off my butt all the way out the door and into the stale August air. Hopping into my uncle’s borrowed Renault that he didn’t quite know was borrowed, I gassed it until we blended into the DC traffic flow. For a split second, I couldn’t breathe. The adrenaline was too much to handle. The howl of triumph let itself out all the way down Route 1 and into the city.

Farrah Lee was going to freak, my juvenile probation officer would not approve, and Horace would definitely find out in the morning, but it was worth it. The thought of *LSD Lulz* in Nielsen possession made me want to punch every coffee breath, teeth stained, wrinkled shirt, water cooler hipster employee of Product Design.

I found an empty parking lot near the water and pulled over. The high capacity battery lay passive in my hand, filled with so much promise. It had been my joy for the past two months. It had taken me two weeks to figure out that dud in the configuration between the lithium battery and capacitor; I slept thinking about the *Lulz*. I had done a high kick when it charged its first MP3 player from zero to one hundred percent. My hands shook at the possibilities.

And yet, I couldn’t let my creation go to ruin, or worse, be advertised with some lame, generic gadget copy and offered way overpriced. It didn’t seem fair. Besides, it would be irresponsible of me not to represent the little guy on the grind. So, I did what any self-respecting, loving, well-intentioned creator would do; I tossed *LSD Lulz* into the Potomac River. It sunk quickly from the weight of its potential. At least, now, it was in a better place.

The minute I turned around, I froze, scared shitless. Some *thing* was watching me. At first glance, I thought it was a roaming security camera from Nielsen, but when I realized how far I was from the main building, I knew it couldn't have been. Besides, it was too...advanced.

A translucent orb—same consistency as the head of a jellyfish and about as big as my face—drifted back and forth in front of me. I was automatically reminded of that scene in *Alien* when the Xenomorph spider squid larva slithered out of the egg and catapulted onto the unsuspecting crewship members' face. My hands twitched, anxious to protect myself from becoming gut-ripping, alien bait.

Instead, the orb pulsed and split open, oozing saliva-like juices and aiming one lone red dot right between my eyes. The red dot dilated into a 10 x 10 laser grid, scanning from the tip of my head, probing down my body, until it reached my kicks. The whole sensation soaked like an icy mist, glazing the surface of my skin, wetting cool on my nerve-endings even though it was a balmy eighty-five degrees outside.

Once the scan had finished, the orb chimed, and then a voice, the burning bush of mother flipping God, said,

“They’re coming.”

And in the blink of a CPU process, the orb imploded on itself, scattering debris down to the asphalt, the remnants disappearing with a sizzle. No trace of it was left, no proof that I hadn't gone temporarily insane and imagined the entire thing. Uneasiness—the feeling that someone would pop out of the water or lurk in the back seat of my car—toyed with me. Who were *they*, and what were *they* coming for?

Not wanting to find out, I sprinted to the car and bulletted down the highway, wondering how I was going to explain to Farrah Lee why I stole Uncle Raymond's car, and trying to forget the feeling that someone—or some *thing*—was following me.

OPERATION: VENGEANCE

LOCATION: At the hidden rendezvous point

Axl reviewed the hyper magnetic recording, wiping sweat-soaked hands off in response to his mentor's words.

“When you find the girl, kill her.”

His weapon of choice was an ionic molecular scrambler; one blast and her insides would superheat, bubble up through her esophagus, and spew from her mouth right before her skin melted from the inside out. Galgallu would have done the more personal thing and used his bare hands.

Axl had seen his mentor kill once before, a couple of seasons ago. If Galgallu was ranked the single most prolific Engineer in Aburukur—in all the Dynasty, actually—then Maz would have been a close second: Maz, with his sharp, teeth-baring grin, the quick way he mashed syllables together when speaking *Manufilit*, and his penchant for wearing the same slimy green tunic even though he came from a prominent Namesake like Axl and could afford more variety.

Galgallu had sunk both talons into Maz's shoulders, sheared off Maz's flesh wings with a chop, chop, rip, and curled his secondary tendrils around Maz's throat until the latter's blood vessels popped and clots burst beneath the skin on his cheeks. Axl had been a boy at the time and Galgallu had never revealed to him why he had arranged the secret meeting with Maz that night. Axl still couldn't believe that they had gotten away with murdering a citizen, an Engineer at that. Most people still believed that Maz had hung himself.

Axl checked his Uberrollin. 56:47. The girl was late. Either that, or he had bad intel. Dust hung about the worn-down back room, suspended, as if the air particles awaited the start of the showdown before they decided to move again. It was a stark contrast to the whipping sand storm outside in the Aburukean heat and the torrential hurricane of rage shredding Axl's stomach.

This girl had shamed him, embarrassed him, dishonored him. She had stolen from him, and he intended to wreak payback in the worst way possible. The weapon slung heavy in his hands, but he was primed: sight pointed down in the carry position, finger on the trigger, safety off. He would give her a moment to apologize for her thievery, and then rid the Dynasty of her deceitful, Dissident ways.

Bonz, bonz chimed the Uberrollin, and then a message scrolled in the air above his wrist,

"Target en route." His informant had better be right, else Axl intended to decapitalize more than one person this evening. The back room only had a thin cloth separating it from the front of the store, so Axl positioned himself behind a table perpendicular to the doorway entry. The element of surprise would be his, just the way he liked it.

In his relatively short life, Axl had done some of the most illicit things possible while living under Dynasty rule, but this would be the first time that he would kill someone. All his nerves shot up, electrified, heightened to every sense about his body. Bread burned—scorched and charred black—in the smoke-laden chimney in the store next to him. Dry, sand-caked air scratched at Axl's throat, and no amount of nervous spit

would quench it. Heat signatures passed by the outside of the store in the infrared, people scurrying to get to wherever they needed to go. None of them were the girl, yet.

She would fight back if she had the chance, he knew this much about her. That didn't scare him since he had been trained in *Sargonian* since his early nymph stages. What did unnerve him were her motives for stealing his device. Why was she doing this? What did she have to gain? Was another person, of higher status, directing her movements?

Axl didn't have time to think about it further, because he heard the faint swoosh of the store's front door sliding open and then closed. Up his cannon went, as the girl passed through the thin veil, fast, dead-set on her own mission. She stopped completely—as did Axl's heart—when she saw the weapon aimed directly at her, an insect immobile in the face of its predator.

“Remember me,” Axl said in Bullgia, the common language. His finger clutched the trigger as the girl's eyes flitted back and forth between the barrel and his face. Slowly, her hands flared out by her sides, a signal for truce—*lying Dissidents*, Axl thought, *always calling for peace but ready to stab you in the back*. That's when he saw it, his future mirrored back at him in the opaque, cylindrical device in her hand: the Omni.

“Hand it to me and I will not hurt you,” he said slowly, re-evaluating how he was going to shoot her without decimating the very thing he came here for. She hesitated, unmoving. Axl roared at her arrogance—tilting the scrambler—and blasted the chair next to her. It shattered into thousands of high-energy shards, torpedoing in a thousand different directions.

“It was not a suggestion,” he said, aiming the weapon back at her. *Test me again*, Axl thought, anxious for the girl to exhibit the audacity of ignoring a command from him, a citizen, and more importantly the protégé of the greatest Engineer of their time. They may have been roughly the same age, but they were far from the same notoriety standing.

Understanding this—of course, she would come to her senses—the girl placed the Omni on the table in between them, backing a step or two away to demonstrate her obedience. *Good Dissident, good girl*. That piece of technology was designed specifically for him, and now it was back where it belonged. Only one more thing left to take care of.

Axl amped up the scrambler’s dial to the highest setting, the weapon ionized for mass destruction. The Dissident must have realized his bluff, because her face dropped, her mouth slacked in shock, tears welled underneath her eyelids and a whimper rolled from the small voice in the back of her throat. *How pathetic*, thought Axl. Dissidents had been known to stand proud, even in the face of torture, public whipping, and impending death. Where was the communal fearlessness now?

Axl widened his stance, placed his finger on the trigger. *It will be over in a nanosecond*, he thought, and then...nothing. He didn’t pull. He couldn’t pull. The dejection and panic on her face wouldn’t let him pull. For a brief moment, he questioned whether ending her life—her miserable, unforgiving life—was really the right thing to do. And that short period of hesitation caused him his future.

Suddenly, a canon detonated through the shop door. Two figures shot into the room, knocking both Axl and the girl over with the sonic discharge of their speed. Down the floor the scrambler slid, out of Axl’s reach, until it hit a pile of boxes, blasting the

table in the center of the room. For a split second, Axl dry-heaved spit, terrified that he destroyed the Omni, until he saw the girl catch it through flying splinters. Before he could grab her, she was up and through a camouflaged panel on the sidewall. The figures rocketed after her.

Axl had just enough time to see the end of the girl's skirt and the Mokjai's outstretched hands before the three beings disappeared into the Helix Amplifier whirling in the middle of the room. Then he cursed every living organism under the stars when the transporting time-space bridge closed behind them. Smoldering metal reeked through the room as the control panel fried from magnetic disruption—the Mokjai weren't supposed to travel through H-Amps. Axl synced his Uberrollin with the system to try and determine their destination before it crashed completely.

This wasn't good; Galgallu would not be pleased. If the Mokjai were after the girl, that meant the Philosophers were now involved. More importantly, that meant they knew about the Omni. If Axl thought he had a fight before, he had no idea what they would be up against now. Yes, Galgallu would not be pleased.

The Uberrollin chimed, displaying what it could from the H-Amp's coded destination. At first, Axl didn't know what to make of it. This whole time, he had thought the transporters could only be set to land at a specified location, but this machine was set to a specified *person*: an "Aliyah Sparks." As the young protégé reworked a new plan of operations, his biggest and most pressing hurdle now was to find out who this Aliyah Sparks was, and if she was the unknown mastermind behind the theft of the greatest piece of technology in the universe.

CHAPTER ONE – CALLING IT QUILTS

In a stuffy room somewhere in downtown D.C.

“That doesn’t even look like me,” I said, lounging in the city’s juvenile probation office. Dr. Wade—my court-appointed warden of worry—replayed the security camera footage that Nielsen so graciously provided her. I couldn’t stop laughing, but Dr. Wade was not amused.

“They showed the security guard a picture and he identified you.”

“Everyone knows how unreliable witness statements are. They barely hold weight in court. Besides, the beautiful and clearly intelligent young woman in the footage does not show her face to the camera. So, technically, the company has nothing.” I smiled. The sun beams from the window warmed my milk chocolate skin as the warmth of victory simmered in my gut. This was fun. Dr. Wade took her off glasses, then rubbed the bridge of her nose.

“Why aren’t you taking this seriously?”

“What? I am. I’m serious. Super serious.”

Dr. Wade sighed. I had known the red-head for three years, since she had taken over my case when I was fourteen. Our relationship was amicable—most of the time—except when I was being, what did she call it, impulsive?

“Look,” Dr. Wade said, “they agreed to drop the investigation if you return the stolen property. Where is it?”

“I’m by no means admitting guilt, but if I had to venture a guess, I’d say it was halfway to the Atlantic by now.”

“Oh god. Aliyah, why?” Man, she was starting to kill my victory buzz.

“I can neither confirm nor deny any involvement—”

“It wasn’t your property.”

“I designed it. I built it.”

“With their resources.”

“Which means nothing if my brain didn’t think of the thing in the first place.”

Dr. Wade seemed to be in a more ornery mood than usual. I didn’t like it. It wasn’t like I killed a box full of kittens. “What is this really about, Doc? Been a little while since you got some? A little wound up, huh?”

“I can’t do this anymore.”

She shook her head in disappointment. She did it in the same life-worn way that Farrah Lee did, except she didn’t include a personal insult afterwards. I could admit it, I was a walking cliché—Mom stuck on a drug habit, Father not around—but I hated it when people constantly reminded me that I was a disaster. I didn’t need the world’s concern. I didn’t need anyone.

“We keep doing this same old routine, Aliyah. You feel slighted, or get your feelings hurt or, worse yet, feel like someone’s challenged you, and then you act rashly without any thought to the consequences of your actions.”

“Oh, come on, Doc. This is like, what, the second time I’ve pwned someone. Yeah, it wasn’t exactly legal, but give me a break. It was awesome.”

“What about the time you hacked into and defaced the city council website because of their stance on an Internet privacy bill.” Ha. It took admins two weeks before

they could find the embedded gifs of a man kissing a donkey's ass, and take them down. Classic.

"Those charges were dropped," I said.

"And last summer, when you kept making Rodden High School's alarms go off during class." It was their own fault for hooking up the entire system into a digitally controlled grid. It was a simple matter of putting a charger onto the main cable and keying an electrical surge through a remote in my desk. The best part was when the sprinklers shot off during finals.

"Harmless school rivalry," I said.

"And two months ago, when you hijacked the central control system in Judge Micaletti's BMW that—"

"Alright, I get it, Doc. What's your point?" Most of these were pranks. No one died. Honestly, the majority of what I did was to see if I even could, to push boundaries and whatever. If I wanted to have my own spot in Palo Alto, I had to start experimenting with my skillz now.

"Do you know what your problem is, Aliyah?"

"No, but I get the feeling that you're going to tell me."

"It's a shame. I see cases like yours all the time. You're a brilliant girl, you really are. You're one of the most ambitious teenagers I've ever met, and have a creative mind that runs like its own computer. But you don't take accountability for your actions, and you never learn from your mistakes. You only care about your own self interests. You'd do amazing things for your community if you weren't such a hindrance to it."

My comeback didn't come as quickly as it should have. They were just words, but they kind of hurt. I know Dr. Wade wasn't attacking me, but that didn't stop me from flinching.

"You're almost eighteen," she continued, "you just graduated high school. You have to start acting like an adult and that means acting responsibly with the gifts you've been given."

"Look, Doc," I said, "isn't this what we do? I do something cool but misguided. You scold me for being a crazy twat—not in those exact words. I fold and promise never to do it again and say that I'll think about my actions next time. What more do you want from me?"

"I give up," she said.

"Ha ha. Funny." Dr. Wade never gave up. The phrase sounded so foreign coming from her mouth, like FORTRAN from a popped collar pretty boy from Alpha Sigma Sigma. One time, she had visited a crack house once a week for three months in order to convince one of her patients to split to rehab. Last month, she had physically thrown herself between a pissy drunk dude about to beat the crap out of his daughter. Dr. Wade didn't know the meaning of giving up.

"I give up," she said again, more resolute, as if finally confessing a long hidden truth. Dread bubbled in my stomach. Our relationship had been one of the most stable, consistent, and longest of my life. She couldn't just leave me. Too many people had done that already.

"You've never been good at this joke thing, Doc," I said, "stop kidding."

“I can’t do this with you anymore. I can’t take seeing you waste your potential. Your probation period ends in two months, but I’m signing the papers early in lieu of *good behavior*. After today, we’re done. You’ll be an adult and free to throw your life away however you want.”

What kind of sense did that even make? She couldn’t give up on me and let me screw everything up. Who would call me about the circuit pattern I was working on? Who would nag me about my future? Who would give a damn about me now? Apprehension and panic churned around my throat. Dr. Wade had been the one constant in my turmoil of a life. With my fixed point gone, who would tether me to reality?

“Fine,” I shrugged, “I don’t need you anyway. You were just holding me back. I’m glad to be rid of your constant nag nag nag. I’ll do awesome on my own.” I felt lightheaded, and dizzy, and sick. I hadn’t a clue as to what I would do from here.

“I hope so,” Dr. Wade said, “but you are no longer my problem.”

She signed the papers without a minute of hesitation. In a split second, I was conflicted, wanting to ball up into a clinging mess onto Dr. Wade’s chair leg and needing to sprint from that office, out into the bright fresh sun and suck in the toasty summer swell. I had come off my victory high a long time ago. Now, I choked on the side effects of reality.

“Here’s a piece of advice, if you’ll even listen to it,” Dr. Wade said, “apply to a local school. Get your degree. Intern for a local company without stealing their property and then aim for middle management. You probably won’t make the products you want, but at least you’ll be working. Be realistic about your options, Aliyah. You’re not a child

anymore. No one's going to protect you." She clutched my hand, but I snatched it away. She was a traitor, a cold, deadbeat traitor. When we had first met, she had promised me that she would always be there when no one else would. Today, she was renigging on that promise, and I despised her for it.

"When I invent the next super data processor and make it big," I said, "I'm going to send you a blank, white card and all it'll say on the inside is 'proved you wrong.'"

Dr. Wade looked at me for a long time, then she said,

"The fact that you don't realize how destructive you can be when you act without thinking, how you put people in danger and damage property without remorse, is ultimately going to be your downfall." She made copies of the release and handed them to me.

"You're free to do whatever you want, Aliyah. I wish you the best of luck but if you don't change soon, life will only get worse from here."

CHAPTER TWO – IT ONLY GETS WORSE FROM HERE

Someplace highly regulated in Maryland

The waiting room of the Chesapeake State Prison always smelled like urine and desperation. It was a balls sweaty ninety degrees outside, at least ninety-nine inside, and the AC hadn't worked in months. Budget cuts. The scores of people in the room panting, breathing, laughing, crying, hugging, yelling, and talking weren't helping the humidity level either. The room could have spontaneously combusted any minute now.

"I'm sorry, but there's no Aliyah Sparks on today's visitor list," the guard clerk said.

"Check it again, then." I was losing the small amount of patience that I had.

"I've checked it twice, ma'am. Your name's not on here. I can't let you in."

"Maybe it's for a different day. I'm here for inmate #237751. Joanne Mitchell. She—"

"It would've come up. You're not in here at all."

"Well maybe your system is wrong." I didn't mean for that last sentence to come out as a shout. I didn't like yelling; it was a waste of perfectly good neuron energy, but the man in front of me was quickly becoming my mortal enemy. I noticed the nametag pinned to his uniform.

"Charles, is it? Look, Chuck. I haven't seen my mother in half a year. I'll admit it, part of that was my fault because I was being a huge douche and refused to come see her. I'm over that now and if you have a heart in that great big strapping chest of yours, you will do the world a favor by reuniting a Mom with her daughter. What do you say, buddy?" He didn't seem fazed.

“She didn’t put you on the list. Sorry, ma’am, but I cannot let you in.” The emphasis on “ma’am” made me want to knock his computer off his desk with a brick.

The blatant rejection didn’t hurt me; Joanne Mitchell had done that too often for me to care as much anymore. But the disrespect of not giving me at least a face to face when I forewarned my trip with a call did piss me off. I didn’t look much like my mother—save for that Mitchell nose—but we could match one another with stubbornness. I wasn’t leaving.

“Well, Chuck, you’ve left me no other recourse. I’m going to have to shut this place down until I get what I want.”

“Ma’am, if you cause a disturbance, I’m going to have to put you in a holding cell.”

“Well-played, Chuck,” I said, moving out of arm’s reach in case he decided to make good on his promise. I took the seat on the bench immediately facing him. “I will then stage a silent demonstration here, calmly on this bench, per my first amendment rights, until I get what I want.” We had a mini stare down before Charles turned his attention back to his duties.

Three and a half hours later...

I still sat on that bench, my first amendment rights left untested. A total of six separate groups had proceeded into the visitor’s room. Chuck had barely noticed me, even when I made faces at him or coughed obnoxiously for five minutes straight. That man was a rock.

I thought he had finally given in when he picked up the phone. Unfortunately, it was just a call to a fellow guard friend, who came from the restricted area to smoke and joke with him. Secretly, I knew they were laughing about me. *Silly girl, she doesn't even want you here.*

“Ma’am? Ma’am?” I blinked to Charles shaking me awake. The waiting area was nearly deserted, save for a few stragglers here and there. Ten minutes to six. Closing time. I had sat in that same spot for four hours. “Come on,” he said, pulling me to my feet.

“Alright, Chuck. You won this time, but I’ll be back.” I rolled towards the exit, stiff as a silicon wafer. That is, until Charles nodded towards the restricted visiting area.

“No, this way. Looks like you’re the winner tonight.”

I almost didn’t want to go in there, out of spite. Pride made me do it and the fact that I had waited for four goddamn hours. My mother sat with her back facing the entrance. The only other people in the room were a tattooed guy and his girlfriend. They were holding hands, legs locked in a never-ending embrace. My visit wouldn’t be nearly as pleasant.

“You got ten minutes, #237751. Make them count.” Mom and I stared at one another.

Joanne had changed. At first glance, she looked exactly the same as she did four years ago when she was sentenced, but you had to know her to notice the subtle differences. She had always had an angular face with sharp cheekbones, but jail time had sucked the skin back to the bone. Her color had lightened a bit, from a deep, radiant

shade of cocoa to the now pallid brown dulled by regulated sunlight. Her eyes didn't light up. She didn't laugh.

I needed to say something; the silence was getting too creepy. "You look...good."

"What do you want?" Joanne was never really one for small talk. She got that from Farrah Lee.

"I..." What *did* I want? "I just figured I'd come to see how you're doing." Joanne shifted in her seat and looked away, saying nothing. I drummed fingertips against the table. "I guess I miss you or whatever. Did you really not get that from my phone call?"

Mom shrugged. "Maybe I just didn't feel like seeing anyone today."

"I'm not anyone. I'm your daughter."

"I know this. You want a gold star or something?"

The conversation was starting to piss me off. This whole place was starting to piss me off. It bore down like a high-pressure plate, with its low ceilings and cramped table to chair ratio. What the hell did they need that many tables for? The place was never more than half full. People didn't care enough. There were bars on the doors, and bars on the windows, and bars on the lights, and bars around the psyches of the people who called this place home.

"Look, hon," Joanne said, "maybe I don't want you coming round here. Some people might say I'm a bad influence on you."

"But you're an influence." I had missed the old Joanne. I had missed getting ice cream cones at McDonalds and hanging out in the parking lot to eat them. I had missed the trips to the Baltimore Harbor, just to stroll the pier. I had missed the afternoons spent

sorting through comm components from the junkyard to see what we could create. I had missed my Mom.

“Well, I can’t be much of anything since I’m stuck in this hell hole. Honestly, I’m surprised I’m not dead right now. Not grateful, just surprised.”

We sat in silence for a while. The pain of the release papers stung a hole through my backpack. Why did it seem like everyone was giving up on me?

“You said something about an internship in your letter,” Joanne said, trying her hardest to sound cordial, “how’s that going?” I drummed my fingers a little faster.

“I got fired, because the company stole my idea and wanted to get rid of the evidence.” My mother laughed, not entirely without humor, but not entirely without a sharp sense of pain.

“Get used to it, hon. If you have any constant to look forward to for the rest of your life, that’s it.” I didn’t like the tragedy in that statement.

“I’m never going to let that happen ever again.”

Joanne laughed harder this time, but it wasn’t a laugh, it was a cackle, like a witch who had realized the naivety of her enemies, or like a hardened monk who was privy to a secret the rest of the world would forever remain ignorant of. The mocking tone boiled my insides. That laugh made me feel stupid, insignificant. I curled my fingers into a fist to ease the rage.

“Still want to be Bill Gates, huh?” she said, “News flash, hon, that’ll never happen. You will never be that successful. You’re not the right color. You’re not the right gender. And you weren’t born with the right amount of money in your pocket. Face it,

people who come from where we come from, they'll be lucky enough to make ends meet to survive, let alone impact the world. Do yourself a favor and let that fever dream go."

At this point, my body radiated tension. If I moved, I probably would have collapsed from atomic instability. Tears fused around my eyelids, but I wouldn't let them go. I'd be damned if I let them go. I refused to be that stereotype or statistic. I refused to end up like her.

"That's not true," I said.

"It's the truest words I've ever spoken." One look at my mother's face told me that Joanne really believed it. "You don't have a choice. The world's not going to give you a hand-up, a handout, or a handclap. The world is literally going to fight against you, with every fiber of its being, and you will lose." I couldn't take it anymore. I had to leave. I could hear the cracks dislodging my self-identity.

"I'm better than that. I'm better than you." I wanted the words to pierce right through her superiority complex. I was destined to be the most l33t tech inventor this world had ever seen. I had to be. The only thing that chilled me more than abandonment was being a nobody; of being so insignificant that people forgot me the moment I introduced my name. I had to be better than her, a jailbird, someone ignored and left to rot in the dark corner of a ten by ten cell. Right?

With the calm and sincerity that only a mother could muster, Joanne answered, "No, you're not."

My mother had always been a strong and intelligent woman. She had survived a childhood with no father, an overbearing and sometimes cruel mother, a volatile and

violent neighborhood whose body count was ten times higher than its number of college grads, and a sexual assault by a man claiming to be her cousin. She had talked her way out of sixteen arrests and could compute how much money people owed her in six seconds flat. Hell, when the police had finally caught up to her, she was running a successful, albeit self-destructive, heroin operation, moving four kilos per week. Under different circumstances, given better opportunities, she could have done great things. I was wrong to think I was any better than her.

“I’m done. We’re done. This conversation is over,” was all I could say. I pushed from the table. “Chuck, we’re finished. You can escort #237751 back to her cell. I’m sure she misses it.”

Joanne smiled. “Don’t come back.”

“I won’t,” I answered.

“I’m serious. This place isn’t good for you.” I stood, seething, as another guard grabbed hold of my mother and began leading her towards the inner bowls of the penitentiary.

I left the visiting room, and when I had left the waiting area, when I had left the security checkpoints and metal detectors, when I had left the constant fluorescence recoiling off the bleached linoleum floors, when I had left the iron bars on the doors and windows, when I had escaped the sinkhole that was Chesapeake State Prison, I finally let a single angry tear drop, but nothing more, for fear that someone behind me was watching.

CHAPTER THREE – MURPHY’S LAW IS A BIOTCH

Somewhere in the not-so-nice part of Washington DC

I couldn’t hear my name being called over the roar of my makeshift soldering iron. Or it could have been the blaring kick drum and electronic bass of the dubstep pounding from my stereo, the one I had built out of used car parts. In any case, I didn’t hear my cousin calling until my homemade door alarm sounded. Jimmy—or Jason, I couldn’t tell—stuck his head in the doorway.

“Farrah Lee says to come downstairs.”

“What does she need?”

“She needs you to bring your butt downstairs.”

“Tell her I’m slaying Trogdor.” I already had too much of a crappy day with the Dr. Wade and Joanne debacles to get into a guaranteed argument right now.

“Farrah Lee! Liyah says she ain’t coming,” Jason—or Jimmy—yelled downstairs with a slam of the door. I didn’t have time for shenanigans. *PCP Lulz: The Sequel* wasn’t going to engineer itself; though, my Muse was having trouble reaching me. My brain refused to wire in. Although I had been plugging away in my room, I actually hadn’t accomplished much. In fact, I wanted to impale my pillow with the iron due to the lack of inspiration.

I roared when the plate connecting my lithium battery pack overheated and congested the entire room with the smell of burnt iron. Just then, Shenae barged into my room.

“Farrah Lee says—”

“Got it. Thanks.”

“But you gon’ get in trouble if—”

“Noted. Thank you.”

“Whatever, weirdo.” Shenae rolled her eyes and slammed the door shut. Maybe, if I kept beating my head into this table, a workaround for the dud battery would magically squat out of my ass. Or maybe what I really needed was a workaround for my life. Maybe Dr. Wade was right. How could I possibly sustain this cycle of making something cool, having it stolen or wrecked, getting fired, getting arrested, and having to come up with something cool again? Where was I going with all of this? What was the point?

Derrick stalled my inner turbulence when he bent his head into the room. That woman would send all eleven cousins, perpetually, one at a time, to get her way.

“Tell her I’m busy,” Aliyah said.

“You don’t even know what I’m going to say.”

“Fine, Derrick,” I snatched off my goggles, Muse gone, defeated, “how can I help you?”

“I accidentally broke your laptop,” he said, tossing the remains of my two year old Dell Inspiron—my pride and freaking joy—across my doorway, with a gaping crack in the screen. I didn’t have time to be crushed and peeved because Farrah Lee shouted,

“Aliyah Patrice Sparks!” from the kitchen. Wanting this to be over quickly, I hopped the basement steps two at a time. Well, I may not have known where I was headed, but I knew I didn’t want to get trapped in a dead-end, no mobility job to support eleven kids—a majority of which weren’t mine—like my Uncle Raymond. He had brothers who were off in the world in various stages of being plastered, jailbirds or just

plain deadbeat, and him and Aunt Shelly were the breadwinners of this house. Farrah Lee's checks came in every month, but the family would be a recursive function of fail without the two working adults.

Except for me. I had greater ambitions than that.

Into the kitchen I went, and there stood the volatile tempest. Most grandmothers insisted on a cute name, like Nana, G.Ma or Grams. Farrah Lee scoffed at the disrespect. *I was born with this name so people, especially children, will call me by it.* She had incredibly wrinkly hands and forearms, as if the skin was so exhausted it could no longer hold onto bone. Part of it stemmed from old age, part of it from washing dishes for the better part of a lifetime. She went to church every Sunday, without fail. She talked smack about you, if you did not. She never smiled.

I had met Farrah Lee for the first time when social services dropped me off as the next in line for parental supervision. No, we weren't the type of family that had reunions or summer bbqs. The only time Joanne had spoken about our family was when she was pissed and blazed out of her mind. Consequently, the only time Farrah Lee spoke about my Mom was when making a point about how Joanne ruined her life.

"Cut the green beans," she said when she saw me enter the kitchen. She was currently elbow-deep in cold water, washing cornhusks. I looked around, annoyed that there were at least five others in the house and none of them were summoned to hard labor. Iman even came into the kitchen, grabbed some water from the sink and strolled back out without so much as an acknowledgement from Farrah Lee. "You heard what I said, little girl. Those greens ain't going to clean themselves."

Steeped in defeat, I fetched the knife and started cutting. We worked in silence; it was better that way. She never understood my passion for binary and circuit diagrams. On our best days, we had an unsteady treaty built on a mutual ceasefire. On the worst days, things could escalate fairly quickly.

“You find a job today,” she asked.

“I didn’t look.”

“Humph.” Naturally, the sound came out like a spit. It came out like doubt and condescension and irritation.

“I mean, I didn’t have time to look. I was officially taken off probation,” I said.

“Humph. That won’t last long.” I cut the green beans a little harder. I stabbed those stalks until my fingertips went numb, raw, like how my pride felt. It seemed inevitable, didn’t it? I would do something stupid and I wouldn’t have Dr. Wade to protect me and slap me on the wrist. I’d actually go to jail and be left with nothing, as nothing.

“Well, a secretary position opened at Raymond’s job yesterday. You start on Monday.” There was no emphasis or inflection. She could easily have said ‘the sky is cloudy.’

“Excuse me?” That was a whole ‘nother type of jail.

“You don’t have anything remotely like decent clothes, so you’ll wear your cousin Kendra’s Sunday slacks. And I know you don’t have any useful skills for this job, so just shut up and say *yes, sir* and try not to be an embarrassment to this family.”

Useless skills? I designed a Turing machine out of Legos at ten.

“Glad this family practices fairness,” I said, “what’s Marcus’s new job, by the way, since he graduated last year, is still unemployed, still sleeps in this house, eats more than his fair share of food, and shits more than his fair share on your toilet?”

“Little girl, you better watch your mouth. This isn’t about him. This is about you contributing to this family.”

“Like hell.” Everything always seemed to be my fault. If the youngest played around and punched a hole through the wall, it’s *Aliyah, why weren’t you watching them?* If the electricity shuts off, it’s *Aliyah, what did you do?* I couldn’t breathe without having the seven gates of hell imploding in on me, so I said,

“Unless you’re coming off retirement to take a side job as secretary, you better call them up and tell them *thanks, but no thanks* because I won’t be showing up.”

“You don’t have a choice. You don’t like my rules, the door is right there. I’m sure your next stop will be the jailhouse, just like your useless mother. I swear, children these days. Lazy, ungrateful, and a waste of space.” That jab rocked me more than I would like to have let on. Farrah Lee didn’t say it with the pain of someone who cared. She said it matter of fact, like a social worker who had seen the train wreck one too many times to know any other outcome. She said it like a statistic, one guaranteed to fail. I had no focus, no direction. She might be right.

“I don’t know what my Mom did to you to make you this way, but I can’t apologize for her mistakes. I’m not her,” I said. Farrah Lee didn’t seem convinced. Maybe she would never be.

“Give it time,” she said, “the job starts at 7:30am. Don’t be late.”

I slinked from the kitchen, green beans chopped in jagged, uneven patterns, knife teetering on the edge of the counter. I wouldn't be like Joanne. I couldn't be like her. Like *LSD Lulz*, I brimmed with potential. Dr. Wade had said it herself: I was brilliant; I had ambition. *But so did she*. With that thought, I saw my potential sinking down into the rank, murky depths of the Potomac. The minute I bolted into my room, I slammed the door shut and cried until my head hurt.

Farrah Lee, the one and living god of 10th and Shady Oaks Road, commanded that we all sit, so we lowered butts to chairs. She sat at the head of the table because no one—absolutely no one—questioned her divine control. Uncle Raymond and Aunt Shelly were ordained enough to feed on either side of her. They were her puppets, her source of income. They seemed content enough to suckle on the scraps of power she threw their direction.

Down the line the children went, in no particular order. None of them held any value in this fiefdom; yet, they all seemed okay with it. They ate merrily, heartily, boorishly, completely unaware of the bleak fate that had already been decided for them. The most scorned of them all, the one who actually showed some awareness of the truth, sat at the very end of the table.

I didn't eat. I'd probably puke if I did. My stomach ran raw, as if my insides emptied in a puddle of helplessness beneath my chair. The world held no meaning, no purpose. Dr. Wade was right. My Mom was right.

“Liyah, you gonna eat that?” I couldn’t comprehend words so I just nodded my head.

“Dibs.” Marcus swiped the pathetically small piece of meat from my plate. Without warning or permission, Ahmed scooped my macaroni. The green beans lay there, unwanted.

Farrah Lee clung to us like a packet sniffer. Her eyes constantly shifted from left to right, zero to one, analyzing everything we did. With one ear, she intercepted and responded to a conversation with the only “good child” she had, Uncle Raymond. With the other ear, she logged any disruptions—*get your elbows off the table, Elijah*—and disobedience—*you better eat that macaroni, little girl, or I swear it’ll be the last thing you eat for a week*. Her word was absolute.

Suddenly, I felt the shift, a peak of inspiration I hadn’t felt since my Muse had eluded me. It cooed. It seduced. It felt good as hell, like a weight freed. I had purpose. I had a heading, a direction, and although my mind hadn’t time to conceptualize the consequences, I jumped up and held onto my resolve for dear life.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Farrah Lee primed the fork in her hand like a dagger. The resolve began to ebb away with intruding fear, so I blurted it out quickly.

“I have a choice. You said it yourself. I have a choice.”

“Sit down, Aliyah.”

“No.” The entire table had gone quiet. A couple of “oohs” and “aahs” and “she’s gonna get it” seeped out, but died instantly with one look from Farrah Lee.

Fear wrestled with freedom, grappling, pushing, and heaving. The torrent nauseated me. The almighty goddess gripped her fork so tight that it nearly bent in half. Physically, I'd be able to protect myself if Farrah Lee ever attacked; yet somehow I knew the old woman could destroy me. So I clung to the moment, else I'd disintegrate from the pressure. "You said I had a choice, so I'm choosing. That door has my name on it."

"Aliyah," Uncle Raymond tried to speak but Farrah Lee waved him silent.

"No," she said, "if the girl wants to leave, let her go." Freedom? Was it only a door away? My motor spun on adrenaline. I rotated towards the basement to pack but was immediately stopped. "No," Farrah Lee said, "if you go, you go with nothing but the clothes on your back. Everything in this house belongs to me."

"But—"

"But nothing. Those are your options. Now, what's it going to be?" At this point, the fear was pwning. What would I do? Where would I go? I had \$22 in my pocket and maybe \$170 in my bank account. How would I fend for myself? Suddenly, visions of Joanne peddling heroin out of a jail cell choked me. Then, I nearly gagged to death when they were replaced by images of me haggling makeshift mp3s out of the same cell. But nothing, absolutely nothing, paralyzed me more than donning a \$30 Kohl's business suit and slaving for minimum wage in the prison of providing for this family; a life sentence without parole.

With final consideration and a nod, I made my choice. I walked towards that door.

"Don't worry, you'll be back. Either beat up, strung out, or in a box, they always come back," she said. I flung that door wide open, and sucked in the dank, summer stank.

It smelled like heaven. As I left from that godforsaken house, I knew that, secretly, Farrah Lee wanted me to prove her wrong so she'd never have to see me again.

The humidity hadn't changed from the day, but I didn't notice the heat. Sweat had started to coalesce on my forehead and under my pits, but I still didn't notice the heat. Inside, I burned with the rage of a thousand quad core processors. I was on adrenaline times ten.

I sped on for blocks, wandering aimlessly, until I found myself cutting through the local park. I had probably walked halfway deep before noticing how unusually empty it was. Typically, there'd be at least one homeless person sleeping on a bench or a drug deal in the midst of an exchange, but tonight it was deserted. One lone, erratic streetlamp illuminated the creeping shadows. Talk about prime rape territory.

Discomfort set in first, then anxiety, then fear, and then panic. At this point, I was in a near sprint. Someone was watching me. Someone was following me. Someone was running after me. Someone was gaining on me. Someone was right behind me. Their hands reached for my neck.

I tripped—horror slasher flick style—and flew headfirst into the gravel. I yelped, scraping my palms like a mofo, and rolled onto my butt, bracing for the masked man who would machete my intestines. No one. No one was there. No one was chasing me. I had imagined the entire thing. A breeze rustled through the solitude. My jeans had ripped. Blood bubbles welled up on my palms. A little laugh escaped from my lips. Dumb ass. And then a louder, more hysterical laugh bellowed out. What the hell was I doing?

Before I could stop them, my feet began the shameful trek back towards Farrah Lee's house. The apology forming in my mouth both sickened and saddened me. That feeling of freedom no longer tugged; reality had put a swift cut to that. I'd be damned, though, if I'd wear Kendra's ugly khaki pants on Monday.

Everything that happened next occurred in the span of fifteen seconds. A flash of blue-white light blinded me. Then I heard the running, a rapid *crunch crunch crunch* of feet digging into gravel. Squinting, I was spooked to find a teenaged girl speeding towards me. Immediately, she seemed out of place. She wore a tunic and skirt, like she had just left some college Toga party. A fleshy appendage—which looked oddly like a fin—flapped behind her. But the more bananas part was that she was scared shitless, panting and heaving, though unrelenting as if stopping would mean the end of her. That was all I had time to notice before we collided.

Neither of us could maneuver out of the way before the crash, though we both tried. It was loud, hard, and painful. For the second time tonight, I smashed into the ground and skinned myself. The girl, in a feat of agility, rolled and was back on her feet before the wind fully left me. She continued on, unfazed.

Suddenly, two black clad figures flashed over me with inhuman speed. I thought they were animals at first, or machines, by the deadpan way they sliced through the air. Their outstretched hands and the very human way they caught and manhandled the girl indicated otherwise. She hadn't stood a chance.

Last year, I had tried to break up a fight when bangers from the Bloods cornered one harmless Salvadoran kid they thought was in MS13, and almost got my teeth

knocked out because of it. The purple eye and busted lip made me rethink any future plans of being a hero, to include now. I could leave; you know, use this moment of preoccupation to make my escape. What could I do against two meathead dudes? Maybe the girl deserved whatever punishment she was about to get. Besides, I would be as much a victim as her. Instead of getting smacked around too, I could sprint like hell in the opposite direction and be safe. It wouldn't be my problem.

The scuffling and muffled yells raged behind me. Although the girl was putting up a valiant effort, the men had her mouth covered and her arms locked. She was outnumbered, helpless. I scanned around the deserted park and knew I couldn't leave. I'd never be able to live with myself. So I picked up the biggest branch I could spot and sprinted towards the three before my inner weak sauce could dissuade me.

"Hey! Stop! Leave her alone. Fire! Help! Fire!" The men ignored me. Either they were deaf or they didn't care. One had the girl restrained while the other was searching her. Neither blinked or looked up. The girl, on the other hand, faced me in horror.

I wound up the slugger, ready for the pitch. When the searcher stuck his hands underneath the girl's clothes, I swung. It slammed into the side of his head, sending him reeling to his knees. I swung for the other, who caught the branch mid-motion. Then I gasped when he squeezed it into kindling and nearly crapped myself when he wrapped fingers around my neck.

He didn't squeeze, though. In fact, his grip was as light as a necklace, though I could barely move my head. Unfortunately, that wasn't the most mind blowing part. The guy's skin was black and white, though not like an extremely tanned African or a pale

Caucasian. He looked gray scale, like a three dimensional version of a black and white photo. His clothes held a hint of off white tan, yet his body had no color at all.

His eyes, also gray with box-shaped pupils, scanned and probed—like the translucent orb—and suddenly he recognized me. A series of clicks issued from his mouth, to which his partner answered in the same fax machine-like tone. The other man had the girl tightly secured with her arms connected in front of her. He barely seemed to register the concaved dent in the side of his temple, or the pitch black liquid streaming from the wound.

My captor turned back to me and spoke in a way that a foreigner would if repeating English syllables for the first time.

“A-li-yah Sp-arks.”

I bucked against his grip. How did he know my name? Who was he? What was he?

I wanted to break free and return to the comfortable confines of Farrah Lee’s house, where everything made sense. Unfortunately, the man slapped magnetic strips onto my forearms, which immediately joined in an immobile embrace.

While he and his partner spoke clicky gibberish into a remote, the girl whispered to me in heavily accented English, “Ignorant, sape. You will mean the death of us both.”

“What? Who are you?”

“Stop speaking to me.” Before I could prod the girl with more questions, her captor pressed a button and an incredibly bright blue-white light illuminated the entire park. In an instant, the four of us were gone from this world.

OPERATION: VOLCANO

LOCATION: Ek-Galgallu, the Compound

Axl didn't want to go home. He considered hiding out once he had arrived back at the Engineer's estate, blending amongst the massive throng of workers in the materials plant, or joining the other member citizens of the compound in the midday romp session, disgorging his frustrations in an orgy of bodies and eroticism. Instead, he headed straight to the withdrawing chamber and found Galgallu where he usually was, hanging upside down from the wall post, contemplating power moves. He swayed from side to side, which meant that he was annoyed. It would not be an easy conversation.

Galgallu did not open his primary eyelids when Axl neared, but the protégé dropped down to one knee anyway, crossing his arms across his chest, offering the proper show of respect in the manuflect position. He, then, stood quietly until he was addressed.

"Do you know why this season's *Anpa Akitum* is a monumental one, Axl-maru?" Galgallu asked.

Axl did not. In fact, he could have slapped himself for not remembering that today was the start of the Festival of All-Knowledge. But how could he celebrate at a time like this?

"I do not know." Galgallu opened his eyes, and hopped down to the floor. He sauntered around the room, heading to the cabinet to pour himself a drink, in no rush to clothe himself, in no rush to do anything. Axl hoped to have that cooled, confident sense of self, one day. Though, he feared that Galgallu would soon flip once he informed his mentor of the failed operation.

“It is the sexagescentenary,” Galgallu said, “6000 seasons since those first exo-Pioneers survived the Razonite Epidemic, tapped into the power of *Anpa*, and founded the greatest technological Dynasty this planet has ever witnessed. 60 is a good number, a strong number, semi-perfect. I believe it represents new beginnings. Yes, this year’s festival will be one for the ages.” Galgallu closed his eyes once again, reveling in a fantasy Axl wasn’t privy to.

“I was unable to retrieve the Omni,” Axl blurted out, embarrassment spread wide across his rumpled eyebrows, bent head, and tense shoulders. Galgallu lifted his hand to sip his drink, looking over the glass at Axl.

“Do you think I am unaware of that? Why else would you come into my chamber empty-handed? Also, you project your guilt so easily. What did I tell you about that?”

If it made a difference, Axl would have trudged beyond the city, into the desert, and buried himself alive to cover the shame. This was not the first time he had disappointed Galgallu. This whole delay in his namesake debut had to be gnashing away his mentor’s credibility; Axl was a whole three seasons behind his birth group. Axl strived to make him proud, to use everything he had been taught in Engineering to come up with the greatest tech the Dynasty had ever seen. But he could not, he had not. Every time he sat at that lab chair, he drew a blank. The inspiration would not come. The plans, the drawings, the ideas would not manifest. The Omni had been Axl’s chance to demonstrate the cutting edge, and he had blown it.

“I take it the Dissident girl is still alive then,” Galgallu said.

“Yes,” Axl replied, twitching at his past moment of hesitation, a true sign of weakness. Anger strained at his heart; he would not hesitate again. “The Mokjai crashed in before I could finish her off.”

“The Mokjai?” And that’s when Axl felt it, the molten rage that always surged beneath Galgallu’s cool, hardened demeanor. For the most part, he lay dormant, almost impassive, in the presence of his colleagues, subordinates, and even enemies. But, every now and then, with the right catalyst, he exploded in a fit of fury so destructive, he obliterated everything in his wake; the rage erupted on the night of Maz’s murder. This same rage also crested in every encounter with Pforum, the fraternity of Philosophers.

“Yes, mentor, Mokjai guards, two of them. They were trying to capture the Dissident as well. The three of them travelled through an unregistered Helix Amplifier to the planet *Ki*, and returned through the Transpo Center twenty minutes ago, with an additional person.”

“An unregistered H-Amp that travelled all the way to *Ki*? That had to be a powerful machine, powerful enough that only a select few would be able to afford it,” Galgallu said, all attention directed at Axl now, mind analyzing their current situation. Axl admired how quickly his mentor connected the correlations, all while he was still reeling from being made a fool of.

“I could not get anywhere close to the Transpo Center, especially with the late tracking notice and no authorization. But I wager my birthright that the additional person is a sape by the name of Aliyah Sparks,” Axl said, happy to be of some use today.

“Hmm. The girl breaks into the lab with pinpoint precision and goes to the exact location of the Omni, and then a transporter is conveniently waiting for her at the rendezvous point. This reeks of something more complicated and covert than a disgruntled ex-worker looking for something valuable to take,” Galgallu said.

“That is what I thought. But who would have access to that much information? The Omni was hidden under Routine Projects; only a few of us knew about it. Same with the schematics for the lab.” Axl shivered at the thought that someone stalked them hard enough to go unnoticed. How could someone accomplish such a feat under Galgallu’s always present eye?

“The Omni stands to alter the course of technological innovation as we know it. Any number of workers or even members of this Compound could have seen or heard something they should not have. And any number of players could have offered the right amount of currency for that information. Urmah, Halbahazi, or even the Great One itself, could be behind this plan,” Galgallu said.

Axl could understand Urmah wanting to show off the device as her own, as she was an Engineer and the closest Galgallu had to competition. Or Halbahazi—their lead resource supplier—wanting to use it to increase their Namesake’s notoriety. But what would possess *En-Lu*: the Great Philosopher, the moral compass of the Dynasty, the purest of the pure, to commit such a crime? The thought was borderline blasphemous, but Axl kept his mouth shut. He didn’t want Galgallu’s rage unleashing on him.

“So, are you displeased with me?” Axl had to know.

“Displeased? No. You were ill-prepared for the turn of events. Anyone would have been,” Galgallu said, handing Axl his glass to refill. The protégé took the glass quickly, nearly sprinting to get the spicy, mahogany *meta-kash*—Galgallu’s favorite liquor—from the cabinet. He poured the drink, ecstatic, relieved to be forgiven. Then he handed it back to Galgallu as he said,

“I will get the Omni back, mentor. On my name, I promise.”

“Of course you will. Your livelihood depends on it,” Galgallu said, swishing the drink around before engulfing it in one vicious swallow. Axl didn’t know what to make of the statement—was it faith in his abilities or was it a threat—but he was more unnerved by the fact that he had no idea how he intended to find the device, let alone get it back. If the Dissident had the Omni, and the Mokjai had her—which also meant Pforum now had her—then what chance did he stand?

“Mentor,” Axl said, knowing he would regret asking his next question but having no other recourse, “how exactly should we go about doing so?”

“Are you asking what I am going to do about this situation, or are you asking me to tell *you* what *you* need to do?” Galgallu was about to challenge him, Axl just knew it. He didn’t want to face the challenge; it was different every time, depending on what mood Galgallu happened to be in. He stood across from Axl, swirling his liquor glass, face like a corpse, completely deadpan. Whatever the challenge happened to be today, Axl knew he would end up in pain and with bruises.

“I am asking for your advice, sir.”

“Have you done anything today to earn my advice?”

Axl had probably done everything wrong today, but the temptation to say *yes* was strong enough to have him drumming up an excuse in his mind. Unfortunately, Galgallu would detect the lie in seconds. Disappointment was one thing, but nothing made Axl's blood tremble cold like Galgallu's punishments. He chose the safer route.

"I have not." Galgallu, still unclothed, still swirling his *meta-kash*, strolled over to the twin sickles crossed as decoration on the side wall. Axl's stomach plunged into his intestines, and he could have defecated it out, when Galgallu put down the glass and yanked the sickles off the wall.

"*Sargonian* combat in exchange for my advice. You need to practice anyway. For every hit, you can ask me one question. For every hit I get, you make no sound and project no emotion, else the fight is over and I give you nothing. Understood?" Galgallu threw one sickle to Axl, who caught it, tossing it side to side, forcing down the fear and vomit. He had to think clearly, maintain his composure. His mentor may have had strength and weight on his side, but Axl was a member of the species *Nama Lamazu*—a proud citizen species—and boasted speed and agility. That would make up some ground, but not much. In order to win, Axl had to strike and do so quickly.

So he lunged. Galgallu countered, clinking metal against metal, spinning to the outside around Axl. The young protégé knew the counter well, sidestepped, and sliced downwards, cutting a superficial slit into Galgallu's thigh. Blue blood welled, then trickled. Axl had hoped for Galgallu to cry out or grunt, but he should have known better. His mentor's eyes rolled back, muscles slack, a hint of a smile tickling at his lips. To Axl, part of Galgallu almost seemed disappointed that the cut wasn't deeper. *Pain, Axl-maru,*

separates the strong from the weak. Those that cannot take pain will fall at their first limit, while those that can are invincible.

“What should I do about the newcomer,” Axl asked before the fight started again. Galgallu chopped the sickle towards Axl’s head, who ducked and hopped back, out of arm’s reach.

“Find her,” Galgallu said. “The newcomer is the key. Whoever planned this used the Dissident because of her knowledge of our plant, but I venture that the sape was the real target. You must find out why.” He sprinted towards Axl, feinting down, and then slashing up. Axl fell for the feint and moved in the direction of Galgallu’s weapon. His quick reaction saved him from taking the blade to the chest, but it still tore through his tunic sleeve, cleaving into his shoulder.

It took all the willpower in the Dynasty for Axl not to scream out. Galgallu lunged again, so Axl rolled, but the movement shocked every nerve ending in his arm, causing him to bite down hard on his lip in order to keep quiet. When Axl stood, his face had gone blank, expressionless, even as his blood, red and thick, dripped down his side.

“How do I find them?” Galgallu shook his head, wagging his finger at Axl like a child.

“Questions only if you land a hit.” *Curse every mentor on this planet*, Axl seethed. Why couldn’t Galgallu just answer his godforsaken question? Was the game necessary? Did he even care that the Omni was in the hands of his enemies, their enemies, that pitiful, dirty Dissident girl who would sell it to the highest bidder when she had the chance, and the unknown sape. The only thing Axl hated more than thieving

Dissidents were filthy sapes. The whole gamut of them. They trotted up and down the streets of Aburukur, uncivilized, stupid, a waste of space. They fought for no reason, spat for no reason, were more treacherous and backstabbing than Dissidents, and contributed no useful tech to society. Maybe if the exo-Pioneers had never let sapes migrate to the Dynasty, then his father would never have done the unthinkable and bred with one. His dead father...

In a rage, Axl roared and surged forward, flinging his sickle at Galgallu, unleashing his flesh wings, striking with the end claw of one, and rebounding with the end claw of the other. Galgallu backed up, sidestepped, backed up, sidestepped, dancing lightly on his toes, dodging each of Axl's attempts as if he was swinging in slow motion. This enraged Axl further.

"Why. Won't. You. Help. Me. Find. My. Invention," he yelled. Suddenly, Galgallu's entire demeanor changed. He dropped down to all fours in hind stance, and kicked off with the momentum of a speeding comet. In an instant, he blasted through Axl, sending them both into a table, it bursting into wooden splinters on impact. The sickle flew up and then down into Axl's chest, not a death blow, but deep enough to carve a gash Axl wouldn't soon forget. Even though Galgallu's rage had blown full on, his voice remained calm, almost eerily like a whisper.

"Let us clarify one thing, *maru*, although you were the guardian and test lead for the Omni, it was still *my* invention. I designed it. I constructed it. My resource supplier contacts. My workstations and lab. All of the members of this estate follow me. All of the Dissidents work for me. These," he said, gesturing to the room around them, the high

ceilings, the trophies, the ancient war artifacts draping the walls, the cabinet filled with precious liquors, “these are the spoils of the notoriety achieved by the name Galgallu. My name. And you are learning from me in order to, one day, earn a similar place in our Dynasty’s history.” He pulled the sickle blade from Axl’s chest, who sputtered in pain, sharp, unrelenting pain.

“Until that day,” Galgallu said, looking down at his protégé, the embarrassment and shame rushing back to Axl as air rushed into his lungs, “remember what your place is.” In an instant, his mentor’s rage was gone. Galgallu gathered up both sickles, ripped off a piece of cloth from the window’s draperies, and began wiping both their blood off the edges. Then he tossed a strip at Axl’s feet. The young man tied it tight around his torso so that his wound wouldn’t bleed out all over the wood-carved flooring.

“I told you,” Galgallu said as he buffed out his weapons, “you need to stop projecting. Emotion, even rage, clouds your tactical judgment and gives your enemies a path they can exploit.” Axl picked up his shattered pride, limping towards the door in order to get to the emergency tub quick. The edges of his vision seemed to be creeping in on their conversation faster than he would have liked. Before he left the room, Galgallu said,

“Good luck finding the girl. For your sake, you better do it quickly.” With that, Axl stormed out, agitated, anxious, because after this whole ordeal, he still had no idea how he would find her. Knowing that the Dissident girl, the Mokjai, and this Aliyah Sparks were somewhere roaming the city, with his ticket, his claim to earning the

notoriety that he so desperately craved, knowing this made Axl want to grab his ionic scrambler and blast anyone who stood in his way.

CHAPTER FOUR – WHERE THE HELL IS KANSAS?

Somewhere in the Transpo Center in the esteemed technicapital, Aburukur

I've been around long enough to know that you should never go into the light, but they never said what to do if the light was an all-encompassing inferno threatening to tear apart the time and space surrounding you. A little advice or heads up would've been nice. Instead, I had to deal with the decimation of my existence on my own.

My body was ripped apart limb by limb, muscle by muscle, protein by protein, amino acid by amino acid, carbon atom by hydrogen by oxygen by nitrogen, nucleus by electron. Once I consisted of a cesspool of unstable, though ridiculously good-looking quarks, I was bridged to a receiver quite some distance away. All of this really sucked.

The process of fusing me back together again sucked worse. I became aware of myself as my skin was growing back. I think I was screaming. Endless laser needles stabbed every millimeter of open tissue as an epidermis cauterized on top of my scorching fat and collagen cells. I couldn't move, paralyzed from a chemical-induced stupor that would've been awesome had it not left me in raging agony. I was definitely screaming.

In the midst of my ordeal, a chipper female voice reverberated around the coffin-like tube I was burning in.

"Greetings and welcome to Aburukur. You may be experiencing a bit of discomfort, but do not worry. This is only temporary. We have downloaded your genetic makeup and are in the process of re-building your physiological structure as we speak."

I immediately hated this lady, not because she sounded like a loudspeaker yelling right next to my head, but because she sounded too damn happy.

Out of nowhere, a metal piston rammed into my chest, and again, and again. Suddenly, my body constricted as if wrapped by fifty feet of coax cable, digging into my skin, a mass of thin, metal wire. As quickly as the beating started, it stopped, and a blast of air rushed into every open orifice above my waist. I hadn't even realized that I wasn't breathing.

"In order to survive in our atmosphere, we have made adjustments to the cellular pattern in your lungs. We have also isolated and removed anomalies in your right calcaneofibular ligament and liver. You can receive a listing of all genetic adjustments made after the transportation process is complete."

I yelped when an electrical pulse tore through my foot, forcing my toes to squirm and ankle to pop. I yelled again when the same thing happened to my knee and I kicked the top of the tube. Up and up, electrons shocked my joints until my body spazzed from the pulse through my spine. I tried to cry but my tear ducts were being annoyingly uncooperative.

After a while, the machine slowed and the pain subsided until it felt like I had a mild sunburn all over. The woman—whom I had discovered wasn't a woman at all but a computer projection on the inside of the tube—winked at me and smiled.

"As your new body copy stabilizes, we will begin re-implanting your memories from our transport server. You should experience little corruption in your memory bank as our systems are the most sophisticated that Aburukur has to offer."

They erupted all at once in a heaping pile of brain vomit. I was learning how to walk by feeling my way across a chipped pool table in a bar. I was bartering with Tony,

the neighborhood five finger discount dude, to let me have his AM radio transmitter in exchange for my box of animal crackers. I was setting my mother's boyfriend's house on fire. I was waking up from my first night in Farrah Lee's house, cold to the world, but blazing with the desire to engineer a new realm for myself. The memories kept coming and coming, spewing like a drunk college freshman until my mind throbbed, ripe to explode at any second.

Instead, a dull bell chimed. The computer attendant waved and said,

"Although this step has completed, your journey is not over. Please proceed to the Immigration Desk to finish inprocessing. Again, welcome to Aburukur, where *Technology is Progress*. I hope you enjoy your visit." As the tube beeped, vibrated, and slid open to reveal the emotionless face of my grayscale captor, I got a pretty good feeling that I would not enjoy my stay at all.

He—she—or whatever it was shuttled me out of the tube, which was an opaque, coffin-shaped chamber in a large room filled with about one hundred or so identical tubes. Each one had a series of snake-like wires encircling it, converging at a central point in the middle of the room. From there, the wire mass shot up into the ceiling and off to god-knows-where—probably to be controlled by some loser who got off on causing unsuspecting incomers tremendous amounts of pain.

All at once, I realized that I was naked, like butter ball, *did I blackout last night* naked. The grayscale captors didn't seem fazed by it, but I was horrified, so I hunched over to cover up as much as I could.

“Where are we? Where are my clothes?” The words came out in a tremble. Was I frightened? Hell yeah, I was. I knew I wasn’t dreaming because no one could sleep through the shit-storm that I had endured. But where was—Aboorooker?—located? How did we get here? What happened in the park? And though they hadn’t harmed me yet, something about these grayscale guys didn’t click with me. How did they know my name?

Out of the corner of my eye, I peeped the pile of fabric on the shelf next to my open tube. I tippy-toed over to it, keeping two eyes on the grayscales and two hands over my business. The garment was a red one-piece. It fit snug like a wet suit but had the texture of satin. Even though I looked like Santa’s helper, I didn’t care, as long as the grayscales couldn’t get a free show of the goods.

As I secured the zipper, another tube beeped, buzzed and slid open. The same annoying greeter waved goodbye, but this time she spoke in a language that sounded like a lullaby. The girl from the park lifted out of the tube, not as shaky as me, but with the same miffed expression after being tortured. Obviously not shy to bare it all, she strolled to the shelf by her tube and grabbed her jumpsuit as if she’d done this a million times before.

It took my brain a minute to catch up to normal thought, because she wasn’t what I was expecting at all, in an anatomical sense. Sure, she was the normal height of a teenage girl and had all of the normal facial features—besides the purple eyes and tiny nob of a nose.

Her body was a whole ‘nother story, though. She had no vag. Like seriously, it didn’t exist, nothing but skin from the navel to the tip of the ass crack, like a Barbie. In fact, she didn’t even have a navel, or nipples for that matter. Her skin was cream colored, with large clumps of cycloid scales along her forearms, neck, hips, thighs and calves. Her lady musk hinted of salt water or the spring air right before it’s about to rain; and both her toes and fingers were slightly webbed. Not just that, but I swear to God the creepy, nude colored fin trailing her lower back wiggled at me.

“What are you?” I knew that was kind of a rude thing to say, but I couldn’t stop staring. “I know you speak English,” I said, “you called me ‘stupid’ back in the park.”

“Of course I speak English, sape,” she said without looking in my direction. “I am fluent in eleven languages, as required of me,” she added. Eleven languages? Holy hell.

“Okay, so where are we?”

“Transpo Center,” she spat, saying nothing more, tuning me out while getting into her suit. All of the other tubes had their lids flipped up; it was just us and the grayscales, and the translucent cable nest, and a static atmosphere. Both of our captors had whipped their hoods back, so I could peep them clearly now, though I really didn’t want to. They scared the crap out of me.

I couldn’t suppress their stench of burning coal, a real fire and brimstone kind of attack on the nose. They stared at us, unblinking, unwavering, much how a serial killer would, ragging hard for his victim from across a crowded mall food court. The box shaped eyes burned holes into me, but the grayscales didn’t have a nose or mouth, just blotched skin cauterized to where the nose and mouth should have been. Had I been a

braver haxor, I would have strutted out of that room, not giving a damn about these chumps, instead, I whimpered in a high-pitched voice,

“You know, kidnapping is illegal. You could, uh, go to jail and face real punishment for this kind of thing.” The girl cackled beside me; she had been deliberately taking her sweet time, donning her suit at a 1970s processor pace, all the while zoning in on the grayscales in her own eye obsessive fashion.

“Ha. Like I said, ignorant. You do not have the currency to back up such claims,” she said, “I do not know or care for your status from your world, but in my world, sapes have less notoriety than we, Dissidents. You threatening punishment amuses me.” In my world? What was she getting at? I had no idea where on Earth Apoorooker(?) was—according to the lady in the tube—but this girl obviously did. Did that make her an ally or a possible participant? The girl hovered back and forth, doing a two-step shuffle between here and the door.

“Besides,” she said, “the Mokjai cannot understand you. They do not speak in any vocal language.” As soon as the girl secured her zipper, the grayscales snaked hands under our arms and dragged us out of that freakish room, through some double doors. The blinding hallway wasn’t much better. There was so much light bouncing through that endless stretch of corridor, that it would short-circuit Vegas. The grayscales beamed us down that hallway at breakneck speeds.

For some reason, I felt like I was missing out on a key piece of info. What the hell was actually going on? My world? Her world? Mokjai and no languages? I swear I heard a fax-machine conversation in the park. How did they emit that then? A circus act had

come into town, and I seemed to have been invited as the guest of honor. Why couldn't I shake the feeling that I had been pwned?

"What's your name?" I asked the girl while simultaneously dragging my weight against the pull of my grayscale; you know, just enough to see how much wiggle room I could get away with. It wasn't much.

She didn't want to answer. It didn't take a cyber-system security analyst to note the projection of annoyance and disdain flashing across her face. Whatever silent prejudice she had downloaded against me, it ran deep. But when she tested the kung fu grip of her own grayscale, she must have realized that we were in the same boat, and said,

"Nai-Citizen Dissident Holo 339 dry-mu Kizurra."

"Uh, okay, Kizurra. Hi, my name's Aliyah."

"I did not request your name, sape," she spat, turning her attention back to our direction of travel. What was this chick's deal? I had risked getting punched in the face and beaten to death to rescue this girl, and yeah, my attempt had failed, but where was the gratitude?

"Why do you keep barking at me like that? I saved your life."

"I did not ask this favor of you."

"Well, excuse me. I should have let these guys murder you and dump your body into some bushes, then. If you have a problem with me, then speak up."

"I do," she squared off, yanking her grayscale with her. It slowed momentarily, but recovered speed. There was no stopping these guys from barreling us down this

endless corridor of suck. We took a hard left, and shot down another bright hallway. My eyes wouldn't adjust to let me see the end of it. I didn't care, though, I was pissed.

"You are a huge douche canoe, you know that. So what, is it because I'm black?" That tended to garner enough flak from enough bigoted idiots over my lifetime. Either that, or the fact that I had a cave of wonders between my legs.

"No, I despise you because you are human." What a load of crock. Sure, she had some gross, *hard to look at* deformities, but she didn't need to take it out on me.

"Newsflash. Have you looked into a mirror lately?" Pure repulsion. That about summed up the look she gave me. I probably should have feared for my life, because she could take out both grayscales with the amount of outrage she firehosed in my direction.

"Never compare our species again. I am not human. I am of the species *Zizi Kulullu*, a proud Dissident of the Dynasty of Aburukur. I am better than you in every aspect. In fact, if I were a sape, I would drown myself to rid our Dynasty of the pestilence." Okay, so I pretty much figured out why the grayscales were chasing Kizurra; biotch was cray. In all honesty, I should have noticed the nuances before, but the crazy was displaying full blast now. We didn't see anyone on our trek through the endless hall, but I could hear thumping and voices behind the walls. So, she must have escaped whatever mental institution she went Shawshank Redemption on, and now the grayscales were returning her. Made sense.

"So, what you're telling me is that we're currently on another planet in space, your home planet, called Aburukur or whatever, in some kind of transportation center

where we shot in from Earth. On your planet, humans are lame and your species, *Zizi* something, runs things.”

“Not entirely. We are Dissidents. The *Nama Lamazu* and *Niggi Kusari* are the actual citizen species with notoriety,” she said. Yep, this girl was plum out of her mind.

“Alright guys,” I said to the grayscales, “you’ve found your man, so to speak. Lock her up; toss that key somewhere where the sun don’t shine. Good job. Now, you take good care of her and you can let me go.” They didn’t budge; we didn’t slow down. They continued on, with purpose, with determination, without letting me chuck deuces. Did they consider me an accomplice because I helped her?

“Look, guys,” I said, panicking, “sorry about attacking back in the park, but I’m good. I don’t know her, and definitely wasn’t involved in her escape. You can let me walk out of here. You’ve done your job.” At the sound of *job*, Kizurra perked up.

“Sape, do you have the device?” After subconsciously looking down and seeing the red jumpsuit, I was about to ask “what device,” but then it dawned on me; all of this made perfect, sweet-loving sense. She wanted my pride and joy, my greatest accomplishment: *LSD Lulz*.

“How much is Horace paying you for this? Did he set this whole thing up?” I could picture his glee right now, brimming with excitement as he mapped out my demise; grinning when he passed over whatever briefcase filled with cash to this obviously imbalanced, hit-for-hire girl and these two burly, deformed guys, giving them the okay to acquire me by any means necessary. No wonder Kizurra had been treating me like an underwear stain; he had probably instructed her to be as nasty as possible.

“Whatever he’s offering, I’ll double it.” I really couldn’t but she didn’t know that.

“I do not understand who or what you are referring to,” she said. “Do you have the device?” It was my only leverage on busting out of this situation.

“I might, but what’s in it for me?” She thought about it long and hard.

“I will maintain your innocence when we are judged by *En-Lu*: the Great Philosopher.”

“Judged? For what?”

“Accompanying me and theft.” Iron bars rattled in the distance, and all I wanted to do was hunch into the fetal position. I could deal with a mental institution; at least they had edible jello and an endless supply of daytime tv. Jail...I couldn’t go to jail. I wouldn’t last. But Horace had nothing on me. No real evidence, just circumstantial video and possible motive. How could I be judged?

“What would *En-Lu* do if he found us guilty?” Kizurra clicked her tongue, obviously annoyed with my ignorance on this judge, but lowered her eyes in a move that was both fearful and vulnerable.

“*When* he finds us guilty, we will be sent into the streets and beaten with blunt objects by any citizen who happens by. They will not stop until we fall unconscious or worse.” One time, I had watched a video of a woman in Saudi Arabia who was flogged to within a millimeter of her life. She kept screaming for them to show her mercy and continue the lashing later. Instead, the man lashed harder, and with every slash of the whip, a flap of skin would be ripped off, spraying blood across the ground. I shut up

completely, frozen, unable to shed that image and the real possibility that I would replace the woman once we made it to our destination.

After rushing through hallway after hallway for what seemed like forever, we finally reached an enormous pair of bay doors. My grayscale guard faced a wall communicator. Suddenly, I heard the fax-machine sound again, but its mouth didn't move, almost like it had transmitted directly into my mind. Once it finished, the panel doors crept open.

A lot of things happened once the doors had opened. I yanked from my guard and sprinted outside, straight into dry, sand-soaked air slapping me in the face. A whiff of salt water tinged the hairs in my nostrils, as the grayscale recaptured me. My eyes adjusted to the less threatening brilliance of the sun and I could finally put faces and objects to the sounds. My heart stopped. If I were the fainting type, I'd have been sprawled all over the floor.

Kizurra was right; every freaking thing she had said was true. We definitely weren't on Earth anymore. The sky stood out first. If you had asked a kid on this planet what color the sky was, he'd have said violet, a deep, out-of-place violet, and that the sun was burnt orange, almost red even. He would also be sure to point out the moon, which I probably could've touched if I stretched out my hand far enough. I had seen Earth's moon out during the day, but not where it looked like it was minutes away from crashing into the planet.

The Transpo Center, which looked like a huge airport with clear glass panes as large as houses and had an asymmetric metallic architecture, sat on top of a hill at the

foot of a mountain. Below it laid a city that reached into the desert, with two massive rivers flowing on either side that disappeared out over the horizon. Random skyscraper tall buildings shot up here and there, with random cubic architectural structures that would have made Picasso proud.

Canals channeled water from the mountain and rivers, crisscrossing throughout the city, making it a sparkling maze of blue and green amongst the sand-colored brown. Transport shuttles zipped through the air overhead, people shuffled by on machines with spider legs, and a woman laughed at a HUD projecting the face of a kid right in front of her. This place was a futuristic oasis in the middle of a desert.

Kizurra was right about the other species as well. At first glance, the population and surface area had to surpass that of DC. There were people everywhere; but they weren't "people" per say. They all had human-like features in them, sure, but these couldn't have been normal humans. The scaly, webbed people, like Kizurra, stood shirtless and wore short linen skirts similar to photos of the Egyptians. As they conversed, argued, and bartered, it merged as one harmonic melody, each person contributing symphonic verses to the whole. The Dissident species *Zizi Kullulu*.

People with gray, cat-like eyes and fleshy, bat-like wings, sprinted by on all fours or strolled by, walking in the normal bipedal way. They too had skirts on—though theirs draped down to their ankles—and wore tunics with complicated geometric patterns and cool, crazy colors. I swear, one girl had the visual representation of the quantum computing theory angled all over her chest, in a fashionable magenta and yellow. The citizen species *Nama Lamazu*.

Probably the most abnormal of the residents were the ones with no nose or mouth and elongated ears, like the grayscales. They didn't have one speck of hair on their bodies, as far as I could see, and stood the tallest and thinnest. I was reminded of how Holocaust survivors looked when they were rescued by Allied forces, except these people had inverted knees so it looked like they were walking backwards. They wore the same outfits as the cat-eyed, winged people, and glided on their two feet like they had no care in the world. The jewelry, though, that was the real kicker. Using the amount of colorful jems, diamonds, gold chain necklaces, platinum bracelets, fat pimp rings and twinkling, star-studded sandals from two of them could fund the Children's Hospital fund for a year. The citizen species *Niggi Kusari*.

"Close your mouth, sape, you are beginning to drool," Kizurra said from beside me. I actually did. This was incredible, like something out of a summer blockbuster that had way too much of a CGI budget. I had always believed that there was life somewhere else in the cosmos. The idea just made sense considering the infinite amount of stars, planets, moons, comets, asteroids and other extraterrestrial masses in the universe. You just need some water, some atmosphere, some source of energy and some good weather, all mixed with the right amounts of each, and voila. But I never thought that I'd be the one discovering it. It suddenly made me feel very insignificant in the universe.

"I thoroughly apologize. I see what you were talking about before. I—" Wow, just wow.

Kizurra clicked the roof of her mouth. "Save your apologies. I only want the device."

“Well, I don’t have it,” I said, not caring what she thought now, not really able to process anything other than what I was seeing, smelling, and hearing. Kizurra bucked against her grayscale, furious, until she bumped into something in its upper robe pocket. I made out the outline of something cylinder, but didn’t care so much about that either. I was still in shock.

The grayscales hailed down an automated, open-air transport shuttle, nudged us onto it and dialed in coordinates. As we swept off to receive our punishment, all I could do was stare all around me, wide-mouthed, open-minded, mind-blown.

I was shaking, and crying, and laughing, and gasping, and awe-ing. If Farrah Lee saw me right now, she’d have yelled at me to stop being a hot mess. I couldn’t help it. I was currently standing on an alien planet. Correction: I was currently hurtling on a moving platform, speeding towards the compound of a guy who would order people to ice me, all while standing on an alien planet. Spielberg couldn’t even make this stuff up.

My heart thrummed with each passing block. Kizurra was getting antsy as well, her fluid movements evolving into spaz-like jerks by the second. Her eyes never left the upper robes of her grayscale, though. There was something in there, something she wanted badly.

My eyes darted back and forth between where we were going and what we were passing. We travelled parallel to one of the canals, where people frolicked or traversed the greenish-blue water with a myriad of gadgets, like thruster packs and single-person speedboats. Shops whizzed by on the opposite side of us, selling things like wing sheaths, utility belts, holo-comm devices, and a watch-like object that had over 131 different

features. Translucent ads appeared in front of people for a couple of seconds, disappeared, and then reappeared in front of another person.

A couple of humans shuffled by here and there, which gave me hope. At least I wasn't the only one. They wore short skirts and plain tunics—if any—like Kizurra and her species, and had the same paranoid, antsy look on their faces. So I did have hope, but not a whole lot.

While taking it all in, my mind also formulated the perfect plan of escape. It was pretty meek at the moment. I had no idea where I was or how everything was organized or located, or even where a human could find safety and solace. So far, my plan consisted of pleading to this *En-Lu* guy, and insisting that I had absolutely nothing to do with stealing. Needless to say, I was hosed.

Our transport slowed as the mix of shuttles and foot traffic boiled over near a canal crossing. Once we passed the waterway, we picked it back up again, but not by much. Kizurra leaned towards me.

“On my command, tuck your head and bring your knees up like a ball,” she whispered.

“What?” I didn't like where she was going with this.

“On my command, tuck your head and bring your knees up like a ball. It is easier to roll that way.”

Before I could question her further, she lunged for the grayscale, yanking an opaque cylinder out of its breast pocket, and rammed into me. The combined force of her push and my body weight knocked her, myself, and my grayscale captor off the shuttle in

one fell swoop. I was able to tuck my head, but had only curled into an oddly shaped box before slamming into the pavement. I blacked out during the subsequent somersaults.

I thought I had seen stars when I came to, but it was only the neon twinkling of an ad for bouncing shoes. My body felt like a semi had smashed into it, and my arms looked like I was a cutter with a huge case of depression, but otherwise I was doing peachy. The grayscale hadn't fared so well, and was currently figuring out how to release itself from the jagged, six-foot pipe it had impaled onto. Black fluid leaked from the hole in its abdomen and a small crowd of people had started to gather around it. The grayscale seemed unfazed.

The other grayscale had continued forward, but was sure to be turning around at this point. I looked around for Kizurra, who was nowhere in sight. What I did find was an opaque cylinder laying about a foot from me; this was the device she was looking for. It had blood all over it, no doubt from the lashes on my arms.

Suddenly, the device emitted a sucking-like noise and the blood was gone. I moved closer to the cylinder. I don't know why; it just compelled me. Once I kneeled, it dinged, trembled, jumped, shook and then broke into pieces.

"Shit," I said, about to grab the thing before it decided to spontaneously implode on itself. But I stopped and froze. A long, thin, metallic cord slid out of the cylinder like a serpent, followed by a swarm of beetle-sized machines, scurrying on six legs. I scooted backwards, but it was too late; they were on the hunt.

In hindsight, I probably should have just turned, stood up, and booked it from there; but I couldn't take my eyes away from the machines. Instead, I scampered back as

quickly as I could until the beetles hopped on my feet, at which point, I screamed. When they reached my thighs, I swatted them off, but there were too many. I didn't even notice that the cord had slithered around me until it was crawling up my back.

To the people walking on the street, it must have looked like I had a nervous break down. I scratched and clawed at the beetles and the serpent. That did absolutely nothing. When the sharp end of the metal cord bulleted into my brain stem, I fell limp. A liquid sensation rushed through my head and I temporarily experienced the euphoria I had felt the first and only time I had tried marijuana. The front of my lobe, behind the forehead, tingled, tickled, and then the feeling subsided.

My hands had gone numb, because the beetles were digging into my fingertips and settling there, smoothing over into a thin, metallic plate over my fingerprints. Each of the plates connected to a small conduit that ran along the creases in my hands. The end of the metal cord sticking out from the back of my neck had transformed into a plate, conforming to the back of my skull.

"Sape," someone echoed in the distance, "Sape, where are you?" The sound edged closer and closer until finally, the noises of the city returned to me, and all my senses had restored to normal. "Hurry," Kizurra yelled, pulling me off the ground.

I thought I could have been dreaming, until I touched the back of my head and came into contact with the metal plate. This wasn't going to be good. Kizurra picked up the opaque cylinder—which was now back intact—stared at the intricate pattern of metalwork on my hands, and looked up at me.

"What is this? What happened to me?" I said. The fear crept back again.

“You initiated it. You linked biologically with the Omni.” She seemed more surprised than angry, more amazed than annoyed.

“What does that mean? What does it do?”

“I do not know,” she said.

“What do you mean, you don’t know?”

“I am unsure as to what it does. I only worked on one part of it. It is supposed to be magnificent though; the greatest creation that Galgallu has ever engineered.”

More and more people were starting to gather around, and a group was helping the grayscale guard slide from off the pole. If there weren’t so many witnesses around, I would have tried to strangle Kizurra right there.

“Why would you steal something and you don’t even know what it does?”

“Because someone told me to.”

“Are you serious? We’re going to get beaten because someone told you to steal, and your crazy ass did it?” Kizurra withdrew and I could tell that this was a touchy subject for her.

“It was not just anyone. This was someone I had trusted, someone who deserved the favor he asked of me.”

“Well, you may need to rethink your friend list, because—“

I didn’t get to finish the thought. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the second grayscale, sprinting straight towards us. It didn’t have a look of anger on its face—they hadn’t shown any emotion yet—but you could tell by its body language and the speed at which it was aiming at us, that it was pissed. Kizurra and I were goners.

Everything that happened next occurred so instantaneously that I didn't even have time to blink. The grayscale was within fifteen feet of us. I quickly wished that there were a wall between it and us. The cylinder buzzed and shook in Kizurra's hand. I flung my hands up as a last minute protective mechanism for when it ran into us. A physical brick wall erected in seconds an inch from where my hands were. The grayscale collided with that instead.

We heard the thump, saw the wall shake, and sneezed when a bit of dust fell from the other side. Then we looked at each other, Kizurra speechless, and me with only one thought.

"I just created that with my mind."

OPERATION: REVELATION

LOCATION: Elite Section at Pforum Court

Sometimes Axl wished he could fly through the clouds and into the stars. When he was a nymph, and his father worked late nights at his lab or in the research centers, and the halls echoed with the silence of slumber, he would sit cross-legged on top of his sleeping chamber and watch the stars rotate by. Even though he knew they were sweltering fusions of gas and elements, he imagined spreading his wings and flying out to one, basking in its brilliant power, combining our energies, and becoming part of that star.

They were one, a massive combination of elementary particibles, formed together at just the right temperature at just the right time. And, even though, they differed from the rest of the stars in shape and size and lifespan, to the nymph looking up at them from Aburukur, they were all identical. All untouchable and all-powerful. At this moment, surrounded by the most prominent Engineers, Namesakes, and Philosophers in the Dynasty, Axl wished he could fly to those stars.

“I should be out looking for the girl, not standing here, bumping elbows with these ilk,” Axl said to Galgallu. The young protégé could not stand to look around. He could feel the disappointment bearing down, the scrutiny, the patronizing air, the judgmental undertones. Every time he looked up, eyes darted away or would make eye contact long enough to send him a lecture’s worth of words in a single glance. It was as if they all recited over and over, *three seasons behind, three seasons behind, three seasons behind.*

“In due time,” Galgallu said, picking a date-grape from a plate and grinding it between his fore-teeth. “But it is customary for us to attend the first event of *Anpa Akitum*: the Public Judging. The goal is to have your plan working behind the veil even when you are not.”

Axl had set a plan into motion after their challenge. He had put a call out to all of his private contacts, especially the *buke* assassins. The great part of being the protégé for the most prolific Engineer in the city, also meant sharing in whatever notoriety Galgallu garnered throughout Aburukur. Axl’s contact list spread far and wide. It shouldn’t have been long before someone spotted her.

Citizens, Dissidents, and even a couple of sapes filed into the square, anxious to witness the Judging. Would Pforum unleash a new invention into their eager palms, or would they be denied and deemed not ready? From this distance, he could hardly tell the people all apart. They ebbed and flowed, always returning to the same position, like a lake. He felt lost among them.

“Galgallu, *ahu*, does all bode well for you,” said Urmah, exchanging the formal fist-to-chest greeting. This was all a lie, of course. Urmah did not really want to know how Axl’s mentor was faring. In fact, since they were rivals, she would have actually preferred if Galgallu were not boding well at all. Because of the recent theft, Galgallu had not been, but he displayed the confidence and finesse of a man who owned the world.

“I could not have asked for a better season, Urmah. Production is up twenty-five percent and citizens have been pouring over themselves to own the latest pair of our Vacato-zones. Business is thriving.”

“So I have heard,” Urmah pursed her lips. Axl wondered if anyone had ever told her that she should not do that. It made her look like a common *Zizi*, not flattering in the least. She continued, “I also heard that you have an unveiling coming up soon. Any words on what it entails?”

“In time, *sisi*,” Galgallu patted her on the back, a clear sign that the greetings were over and she should move on.

“Well, try not to keep us waiting too long,” Urmah said. “I heard it is a real game changer, and competition is starting to get ruthless these days. Apprentice,” she nodded to Axl more as an afterthought and went on to mingle with the rest of the crowd.

“I despise that woman,” Axl said once Urmah was out of earshot.

“Your sentiments are shared, but remember, socializing with her has its uses. Always anticipate the intentions of your enemies. When you know her desires, what she needs, then you control her. She could also be the mastermind behind the theft, so keep her close.”

Know my enemies’ wants. In their dynasty, one would think that everyone would desire the most prolific tech, but Axl was beginning to think that was rarely the case. The Philosophers would rather judge an invention unfit than let the public decide if they want to use it. Also, he was certain that Urmah would rather see Galgallu embarrassed over a recall or defect in a product line than to come up with something magnificent of her own. Everyone seemed to have an ulterior motive lurking just beneath the surface.

“Citizen Halbahazi Holo 336 wet-mu Axl,” someone yelled, coming straight towards Axl. He could have ducked away. He could have hidden in the crowd of

notables, using conversation as cover, deciphering subtext and social cues. Instead, he stood there, straight posture, silently, honorably, deadpan expression, as Halbahazi—his birth Namesake—bound for him like feral cats in a rage.

“I will afford you some privacy, but remember, keep your enemies close,” Galgallu said and relieved himself of the situation. Secretly Axl wanted him to stay, to absorb some of their frustration with small talk, but he could not admit that aloud. It was a sign of weakness.

They were furious, Axl could tell, else they would not have used his full name.

“What did we do to deserve such an *asbal* like you?”

Axl could not tell which one had said that. They were *Niggi Kusari*, no mouth, no vocal cords, no auditory indications whatsoever. Their words struck you, hot and magnetic, through the electric pulses in your brain. Their audoglands emitted a signal when they wanted to say something, but unless you had the same genetic makeup, you could not send one back the same way.

They were also identical, the only difference being the male and female genitalia and—typical for the species—her standing a whole head higher than him.

“Ma’am, sir, I—“

“Stop talking,” they said, “you do not get to speak.”

“You are the only Apprentice to be this far behind in the past twenty seasons,” he said.

“Do you know how embarrassing that is and the stain you have smeared on the name Halbahazi,” she said.

“We traded a manufacture center, two distribution stores, and five hundred and forty workers in exchange to buy you study under Galgallu,” he said.

“And what have you learned so far,” she said, “to lose?”

“You are a disgrace. If your father were alive, he would not acknowledge you as his offspring.”

It was true. He had barely acknowledged Axl when he was alive. Axl was required to walk two paces behind and one pace to the right of him, no matter where they went. He could not call him father in public, only *Zano*, his special name. Axl did not speak unless spoken to. He could not ask a question unless he came up with three possible answers on his own. The only part of their relationship that did not include formalities or pre-established rules was during his work hours. On the days that Axl did not have development training, he could watch his father work for as long as he had desired.

And he did, for hours. Axl’s father had a quiet intensity about him when he created and designed. Many days he would speak maybe two words, watching the production lines, analyzing the daily acquisition figures, and silently managing the people and work flow. Then, right at the end of the day, he would change a minor process here or there that would optimize the next day’s throughput by double. Rumor had it that most people in the Namesake believed that it should have belonged to Zano as an Engineer estate.

Halbahazi made their notoriety as material gatherers, scouring and mining and quarrying throughout the Dynasty in order to supply natural resources to the Engineers;

material gatherers were the lifeline of the Dynasty's technology. As the head researcher and production director, Axl's father's mission was to make Halbahazi the largest, fastest, and most efficient of them all. Before he died, he did his job exceptionally well.

If he were alive, Axl's father would not be disappointed. How could he disappoint someone who had barely acknowledged his existence? He would not yell; he was not the type to do so. Instead, he would momentarily look up from his numbers and charts, say,

"Hmm, figures, I probably should not have expected as much from you. I will not make that assumption next time," and turn his attention back to more pressing matters.

Axl wished that he had done better to prove him wrong, but the reality made his stomach churn and head feel dizzy.

"I apologize for failing you. I will not let it happen again," Axl said to Halbahazi.

"You are going to have to do a lot more than apologize to make up for your dishonor, Axl," they said. And then their demeanor changed, softened, almost parental. In lowered voices, they said,

"So, tell us about this device that Galgallu is planning to unveil. How does it work?"

"Will it really revolutionize how technology is created," she asked.

"I heard it can only be controlled by a select few elite members. Who is on that list," he asked. Axl said nothing at first, red flags popping up in his mind. Their line of questioning was specific, almost as if they acquired the device, but had no idea how to use it. Split between his loyalties, Axl said,

“It can only biometrically bind to a select group of people,” though he left out the part where it can only bind to himself, since he was the singular test subject for the project. Should he share more for the sake of fixing the dishonor he had shown them, or should he remain quiet, respecting the relationship he had with his mentor? He had a responsibility to both and, according to customs and courtesies; neither was supposed to hold precedence over the other. Axl was torn.

“We want that device, Axl. You owe us that much.” By custom, they were right. Axl looked at Galgallu and a wave of nausea pressed tight. Somehow, they were still right.

CHAPTER FIVE – DON'T BLINK, YOU'LL MISS IT

Somewhere in Pforum Court

We careened right into the edge of a crowd, and when I say *crowd*, I mean a massive cluster of bodies, BO, and a whole heaping of mob-like fervor. It was as if every member of the city decided to have one big block party in this little square. Every species was represented ten-fold—to include humans, lots of them. They hung out on the outskirts of the cluster—all plain skirts, no geometric patterns, lame colors, nothing cool or flashy about them whatsoever—but still swayed and shoved and shouted like everyone else.

At the northern end of the square stood a huge stele, similar in color and shape to the Washington Monument, but much smaller and shorter. Etched deep into the stone was a cuneiform-type language, with pictographs depicting historical scenes like the three alien species crawling out of a broken orb, or a no nose/no mouth dude handing what looked like a sickle to a crowd of people.

Along the eastern end, ran a four story high wall. It continued in either direction, all the way to the boundaries of the square, and disappeared into two more walls that ran perpendicular in the opposite direction. It reminded me of the Forbidden City in Beijing. I didn't know what it was about walls; they always made me want to jump them and see what was on the other side.

“What's behind there?”

“That is the Fortress of Pforum. The Philosophers live there. It is located in the east, where our star sets, signifying the Philosopher's authority as the final say in the birth of our technology. Normally, they do Judgings privately within the walls, but

everyone once in a while, they bring their decision out to the masses. *En-Lu* lives behind those walls.”

It made me jittery knowing that the guy who had sicked his killer grayscales on us was maybe fifty feet away. Oh, and let’s not forget about the pending flogging. I sunk into the crowd to hide.

Boxing us in on the southern end of the square was the most colossal and unusual structure in the whole place. A ziggurat shot high into the air, made of steel, glass, and diamond, and larger than the pyramid of Giza. It reflected the sky, the sand-stained ground and the crowd. It could have almost been invisible, blending perfectly into the environment. Stairs and escalator-like apparatuses lined up and around it. At the top—the very pinnacle—a projector casted one word into the clouds: *Anpa*.

“Anpa?”

“Yes,” Kizurra said whimsically, almost dream-like, “the total technical knowledge of the universe. What we all strive for. The only reason we exist in this plane.”

“Like God?”

“Like a state of being. Becoming one with tool and machine; a constant synergistic flow between *Anpa*, our minds, and our creations. We praise the Engineers because of their relationship with *Anpa*; they show us the possibilities. We exalt the Philosophers because they keep us in line with earning that relationship for ourselves.”

It seemed strange to me, praying to the tech. I loved inventing stuff as much as the next girl, but their adoration bordered on fanaticism. That must’ve been what the crowd

reminded me of, a church of worshippers. They all faced the south, towards that ziggurat, offering raised hands, whispered promises, and the hope of designing something extraordinary. But tools were tools, and electronics were electronic, nothing more. I jumped when the mob started to chant.

“What are they yelling for?” Kizurra dragged us through the bodies. She seemed intent on getting us towards the middle.

“They are eager for the Judging to begin,” she said.

“Who’s the lucky bastard?”

She pointed to a platform in the distance. This had to be the VIP section. These guys were so decked out in geometric arrangements, gold and sapphire spear necklaces, ornamental headpieces with fifty different styles of jewels in them, belts that looped and looped, earrings that fell to the collar, and an arsenal of flashing, beeping, whizzing electronic accessories that it looked as if they were headed for combat. On a separate, smaller platform in front of the other stood a heavy-set *Nama* guy, cat eyes wide, wings on alert, obviously the owner of the Namesake that the tech had come from.

Lined up along the back of the VIP section were twelve metallic thrones, all covered in a crystalline sheen that gave the appearance of ice or glass. Eleven butts sat on those thrones, connected to the no nose/no mouth *Niggi*, but these weren’t just any typical *Niggi*.

For instance, they were completely hairless and stood the tallest of them all, probably clocking in at a good eight feet or more. They wore light periwinkle togas—the same color as the sky—that draped so far to the ground you couldn’t see their feet. The

robes were probably that long to cover up the fact that they wore no shoes or sandals—and my god, those claws they called feet were treacherous. They didn't wear any accouterment or accessories, except for one tiny, incidental ring that identified them as Philosophers of Pforum, guardians of the morale virtue of a helluva lot of people.

The one next to the empty chair in the center rose, straightened out his toga, and proceeded to the front of the platform. In one fluid motion, the crowd dropped to one knee, crossing their arms over their chests in a funky, cult-like type of manner. I looked like kind of an idiot, so I quickly fell and pretended the best way I could. He—or she, I couldn't quite tell—stuck a silver, pill-shaped cylinder to its temple, worked some telepathic magic, and spoke.

“Rise.” We did.

“Please give a moment to let *Anpa* seep through your core.” We did, silently.

“Welcome.” The mob went insane. The announcer let the shouts proceed for a while and then raised its hand to stop them.

“Thank you for joining us on this monumental occasion. Unfortunately, En-Lu, our Great Philosopher, could not preside over this ceremony, but we will make it a memorable one, regardless.” The crowd exploded in praise; it didn't take much to get them riled up.

I don't know what it was, but I got excited with them. It was like being at a football game, regardless of whether you liked the home team or not. The collective thrill of the square swept into a frenzy. We hopped up and down. We waved our hands. We laughed. We shook our fists and chanted, “Judgment. Judgment. Judgment.”

After a moment—enough to build up the suspense—the announcer said,
“Let the Judging commence.” We lost it. Hell, it felt good to let loose.

As the Philosopher went back to his seat, the heavy-set *Nama* placed a similar device to his throat and yelled,

“Bring forth the machine.” Something in the distance rumbled, followed by a screech and a blast. Soon after—coming in hot from the western sky—was a person with a single-rider helicopter-like pack on her back. She shot in fast, making sure to perform a couple of aerial laps above the crowd—for added effect, of course. After doing a backflip barrel roll—much to the applause and howls of the audience—she descended with control and poise, parting the crowd, and landing with a bit of a curtsy.

We erupted with cheering while the members of the VIP section clapped and nodded their approvals. The *Nama* turned towards them.

“Most gracious Philosophers, I present to you the Helio-quip 9000. Sporting the latest advancements in rocket propulsion technology, the Helio-quip has registered at 9.6 sects faster than any of the packs currently available. It features automatic custom fitting that conforms to the wearer’s body type, ambidextrous control mounts based on preference, and has even solved that backwards incompatibility bug that was so prevalent last season. It has an updated safety net extension for those unforeseen crashes, and comes in black, red, blue, green, silver, pink, and white. Ladies and gentlemen, the Helio-quip 9000.”

I had waited so long to see the jet pack come to fruition. It sucked that so many sci fi novels and movies had promised its prevalence and yet, we still had nothing close,

especially not on a consumer level. I nearly cried from the sheer joy. Whatever it took, I had to snag me one, current fugitive status be damned.

We applauded as the Philosophers used their telepathic language to converse secretly with one another. After a while, our cheers turned into murmurs and side conversations about what the verdict would be.

“I think they’ll approve it,” I said.

“I am not so sure. We have had many accidents involving packs lately. They may deem it unsafe to expose yet another to the overcrowded air ways,” Kizurra said.

“Yeah, but that’s what the added ‘safety features’ appease. Did you see the crowd go wild during the demonstration? They were totally down for it.”

“Yes, but the Philosophers have made unpopular decisions before.”

It didn’t take them long to deliberate. The mob silenced when the announcer stood again. It proceeded to the front, similar to last time, heightening the suspense with every timed step. When it stopped, so did our breaths. It raised its arms and said,

“After reviewing the specifications of the Helio-quip 9000 and its suggested uses as designated by its Engineers, we have decided to—“

The blast rocked the square, causing a number of people to stumble over. I flinched, moving just enough for the bullet to miss me and strike someone in the crowd ahead of me. It hurled the guy back a couple of feet, who landed with a crash on the pavement; if he ever woke up, he would have a wicked bruise.

I anticipated the second shot, turning and falling onto my butt simultaneously, as the bullet breezed over my head. I don’t know whom that hit, but I could hear the

screams and shuffling from the aftermath. We currently stood in the middle of the square, which was quickly parting as two very pissed off grayscales sprinted right for us. Kizurra swore under her breath as I whispered a little prayer. We were goners.

The announcer, who seemed as shocked as everyone else, kept yelling over and over, “Mokjai, stop. Mokjai, stop.” By the looks of it, they answered to a different puppet master; their speed and trajectory didn’t falter once.

I sat on the ground, frozen, resorting to my second natural response: *freeze*. I couldn’t think. I wanted to tell my body to move, get up, do something, but the thoughts wouldn’t formulate. I couldn’t even think of all the horrifying acts those things would perform on us once they caught up. I was a sitting duck, useless.

Luckily, Kizurra had a lot more sense than I did, and yanked off the metal leg of a nearby food cart. She settled slightly ahead of me, poised, ready to do some business. We couldn’t run this time. The crowd was too massive and volatile. People ran in every which direction, some shrieking, some swinging, some getting trampled. Others just stood there like we did, waiting for the final response of the violent intruders. There was some shuffling in the VIP section, mainly from the Philosophers who seemed to be coming up with a plan to stop their renegade guards, but the rest of the platform participants just watched in horror, frozen like me.

In a matter of seconds, the grayscales were upon us. Kizurra swung, connecting with air as the grayscale feinted to its right and spun around her swing. It caught the weapon from behind. Before it could snatch the metal leg from her, it was bombarded by stones, sandals, and any other projectile object being thrown from the surrounding mob,

who felt like the grayscale could target them at any second. The crowd also attacked the second guard—the one who had stopped in front of me.

Both grayscales turned towards the interlopers and slammed their hands together, emitting a sonic boom that knocked everyone in a fifteen-foot radius off their feet. Kizurra used the momentary interruption to hit her grayscale in the head with the metal leg. Unfortunately, mine couldn't be knocked over with cowardice and inactivity. It stepped towards me, a blank stare on its face, gaping hole in its abdomen, and black fluid streaming down its legs. It grabbed for me and—though I'm ashamed to admit it—I peed a little.

Immediately, my mind went to the Rock Em, Sock Em robots that the rec center used to have in my neighborhood. Everyday, after school, for like a year, Andrew Parker and I would go there and engage in vicious hand-to-hand combat. There was a lot of name calling that I wasn't proud of. Eventually, that set had become so worn from overuse that the red robot's head would never stay on, and the blue robot's left arm just jiggled instead of extended when we batted on the controls. But those days, when I could delay getting home to a blazed, cruel mother with mindless child's play, those memories would never wear out.

I didn't even feel the cylinder vibrate in the pocket of my makeshift wet suit. I noticed the tingling in the back of my head as the particles around my arms formed into two, hunky, weapons-grade, combat ready robotic arms. My left hand jumped, sending the grayscale sliding back a couple of feet. Though bulky, the arms took little effort to maneuver and control. I was back in the sixth grade.

“Sweet,” I said, popping up for a fight. The grayscale crouched, ready to reciprocate. “Game on, holmes.”

We moved at the same time, me throwing a left hook and the grayscale parrying and attacking. I threw up my arm to block its hit, which hurt like hell, sending sparks flying out into the flabbergasted audience. The blow gave me time to counter with a jab and right hook, connecting with its nose and temple. The grayscale stumbled. Then it spun and tried to knife hand past my arms to punch me in the chest. I caught its arm just in time.

“I don’t think so, buddy.” I spun, and spun, and spun, using the momentum and my beefed up arms to lift the grayscale off its feet. At the proper moment, I let go, shooting the guard towards the wall, hoping no one would get hurt in the process. It slammed into the fortress and landed with a thud.

The other grayscale had crushed Kizurra’s metal weapon and was holding her by her neck, suspended in midair. Using both arms to push off the ground, I leap into the air and Jean Claude Van Dammed the side of that grayscale’s head. It dropped Kizurra, staggering in the process and trying to keep its balance. I followed with ten quick jabs to the body, a right jab, left hook, and the finisher move: an uppercut straight through the chin. That one I learned from playing Mortal Kombat.

Up the grayscale went, momentarily shadowing us from the sun, and back down it came, giving me a new appreciation for how kick ass gravity was. I went to high five Kizurra with my cool, bionic arms, but the particles returned to their state of rest and back into the cylinder before I could fully blink an eye. Besides, the look of dread on her

face said that she was clearly not in the high-fiving mood. Once I followed where she was staring, though, I immediately knew why.

Every pair of eyes in that square was on us. The crowd had gone still again, as if reveling in the newfound meaning of life. No one laughed, no one cheered, no one applauded. No one even gasped or made those small squealing sounds when caught off guard with your pants down, figuratively speaking. It was like they didn't know how to react; they couldn't figure out what the appropriate response was. Even the people standing on the VIP platform could do nothing but stare. I couldn't predict what would happen next, but I got the feeling that it'd be between the people giving us gold stars and ripping us to shreds.

"We have to go, now," Kizurra whispered, using this time of respite to make our escape. The eyes followed. We found jet pack girl who, in her moment of stupor, simply handed the gear over to us. "I am unsure if this will hold the both of us," Kizurra said.

"Doesn't matter. Let's just see what happens." She slipped on the Helio-quip 9000, clutched me around my waist, and off we blasted, fugitives with a stolen invention, using an unauthorized transportation device. We heard the roars—of jubilation or fury, I wasn't sure—as we lifted over the buildings and out of view.

So we had overestimated the trajectory of the jet pack...by a lot. The weight too, and soon our free flight turned into a free fall. I was still stoked to be flying though—my childhood dreams realized in a mess of jet fuel, rising heat, and aerogasm. Kizurra gave a quick "brace yourself" as she released the thrusters, sending us crashing into a vendor of

dirt cabbages. We left behind a wreckage of twisted metal and produce, the vendor yelling, “you pay, you pay,” until we were out of earshot.

“We must change clothes. We need to blend,” Kizurra said.

“Agreed. How?”

“I have an associate who works nearby. She is discreet. She will provide us clothes and safe passage back to The Wilds.”

“The Wilds?”

“My home, where the rest of the city’s Dissidents live. South of here.”

“Is she a Dissident like you?”

“No, she is a citizen.”

“And you can trust her?”

Kizurra hesitated for a second, which made me a little nervous. Living in DC, anytime someone mentioned an *associate* of theirs, it was either their dealer, their shady ex, or some rando they knew from down the street that they went to middle school with.

“Absolutely,” Kizurra said, “she owes me a service.”

“Okay, let’s find this chick and get the hell out of dodge.”

We hustled down alleyways that had canals straddling on both sides. This part of the city was much more compact, with apartments crowding in wherever the waterways didn’t. The street was narrower, allowing only two lanes of traffic, one on the ground and one in the air directly above. A faint whiff of cleaner fluid, something like bleach, settled around the canal. It did look unnaturally blue—like a window washer blue—unusual, since sand coated just about everything around here.

“What’s the plan when we get to your place?” I liked having a concrete strategy to cling to. I needed to be organized. To-do lists were taped all around my room. When I had a clear set of goals, I flourished. When I didn’t, it was freaking chaos.

“We talk to Uri.” Kizurra said the name with oomph, like announcing the entrance of a distinguished guest.

“Oh, Uri, huh? Is he your special someone?”

“Uri is my mentor,” she said, embarrassed, blushing, and appalled, “and he was the one who told me to take the Omni.”

An inner fire ignited and all I could think about was kicking this guy in the shin. *He* caused this fiasco? *He* was the reason I was going to get publicly beaten? Was this entire thing a sick joke some asshat was playing on his student, to include my kidnapping? With each passing moment, I grew angrier at the lame reasons Uri could give for stealing the Omni. I needed to meet him in order to ask him outright. Then I would kick him.

Suddenly, another thought bumped through my mind. If this Uri knew about the Omni, maybe he understood how it worked, and if he knew that, then he could answer why it chose me. Surely, I wasn’t the intended target for this device, yet we had merged perfectly. We clicked. The machine felt as natural as a second arm or replacement heart. It functioned as an extension of me.

At the same time, it had a life of its own, a pulsing hum beneath my flesh. It warmed and cooled on its own schedule. Isolated images would creep into my thought pattern, caused by the foreign entity that had a controlling stake in my neurological and

nervous systems. I was sharing my body with a parasite, and Uri had the answers on why I was chosen as its host.

“Let’s find the bastard,” I said, moving that priority to the tippy top of the to-do.

We continued through the maze of alleyways. Initially, I didn’t look at faces as I passed people. It was easier to pretend like no one had faces, like they didn’t exist as individuals. I minded my business; they minded their own. But as we started passing more and more people, I couldn’t ignore their recognition of me, or the gaping mouths, or the whispering, or the pointing.

“Kizurra, everyone’s staring at us.”

“I’m aware,” she said.

“You think they know who we are?” A cat-eyed lady was dumping scorpion carcasses out of a second floor window. When she saw me, she shrieked, whipped out a circular palm shaped recorder, and yelled to the companion in the room with her.

“I was afraid this would happen,” Kizurra said, “though, I did not think it would spread this quickly.”

I was going to ask her *what*, but then I saw it. A store was selling monitors that could shrink to pocket size and adjust back to normal with the push of a button. They lined up in a perfect box pattern from the floor of the store all the way to the ceiling. There had to be at least fifty identical monitors hanging in that glass window, and I was on every single one of them. They had captured my performance from the square using three different angles, and each one looked more badass than the previous.

“I’m...famous?” You know that feeling you get when something totally unexpected blindsides you and your brain goes into slow motion? That was happening. I couldn’t process a single thought. All motor function had ceased. My blinks had even slowed to an open-wait-close-wait mechanism. I tingled all over, the electricity sparking at my fingertips and in the pit of my stomach.

I was both small and large; two halves wrestled for dominance inside of me. One side repeated that I was *a nobody*—an insignificant atom in the expanse of the universe. The other side argued that I owned the universe; I owned every person currently watching me on their own personal monitors.

“The Judgings are broadcasted for those who cannot make it to the square,” Kizurra said, “you are probably all over the waves now. To us, you used the Omni to ward off the Mokjai. To them, you created technology with your mind. After today, you will be the most sought after person in the Dynasty.”

She wasn’t kidding. People grew bolder and screamed and waved for us as we walked by. A vast majority still didn’t know who I was or hadn’t heard the news yet, but the numbers that did steadily increased. The little palm-sized circular device that the scorpion lady had—infographers or info-gogs for short—transmitted action shot upon action shot of my Judging debut, along with commentary from popular Engineers and newsworthy Namesakes. The number one question on everyone’s mind: Who was this mystery sape that was a technological enchantress?

The attention started to get to me, in a good way. I found myself waving back at the outstretched arms and grinning at the hoots and cheers. They thought I was awesome.

Nobody ever thought I was awesome. Sure, people had acknowledged my technical expertise, but no one had ever applauded it. Maybe this world wasn't so bad after all. Jet packs, body reanimation, and personal groupies. I could definitely get used to this.

But suddenly the crowd poured in, harder, faster, more frenzied, more gleeful. They were feral, clawing their way over one another to get to us. Before long, we couldn't move, trapped by the enthusiasm engulfing us.

"We have to get through." Kizurra started spewing some foul, black liquid from a spout in her inner lip. Still, people rammed into the alleyway, obstructing our path with their questions and compliments. They nagged the hell out of Kizurra, or maybe she was pissed with me. In fact, with every passing admirer, she grew more and more irritable. We couldn't get through. Man, we tried, but the crowd dominated.

When a Dissident hopped in front of us, she was two seconds from cold clocking him. Instead, she threatened him with one short phrase in her native gurgle language. He didn't seem to hear or care what she had said, though. The way he stumbled and swayed like the world floated unstable beneath him hinted that he didn't care what anyone said.

"It is you. You are her. Praise *Anpa*. Fate has brought us together," he said, knocking into me, breath heavy with the musk of wheat, spices, and oranges.

"Move, kash slosher. You are not within your right mind," Kizurra said.

"I am in a right mind to know a goddess when I meet one, *sisi*. And you," he said, slopping both hands onto my shoulders, "are a gem in the sand."

He may have been abrupt and overly handsy, but I liked this guy. I couldn't hate on his ability to spot natural born talent when he saw it. I did create a high-powered machine with my mind, after all.

"Thanks." I wasn't normally shy, but if black people could blush, I'd have been as red as the storm on Jupiter.

"No, thank you. I have not seen such an exciting demonstration like that in many seasons. And to come from a sape, no less. I am at a loss for words." He, then, proceeded to give us his life's story about his ultimate goal of building a kash drinking apparatus that would facilitate the creative euphoria needed to invent great tech. He had found the perfect blend of kash, he just hadn't figured out a way for users to easily ingest it.

"Well, you'll need something hands-free, so people can drink and use tools to build at the same time," I said, "though, they may regret that choice later when they fry their hand off or something."

The guy had gone completely still. I swore he had fallen asleep standing up. His primary pair of eyelids drooped shut, and his mouth lay slightly aloft in a more relaxed position. His hands sagged next to his body, which held itself up from sheer willpower.

"Let us go," Kizurra said, "we are wasting time."

"That is a brilliant idea," he screamed at the sound of her voice. "Hands-free. You are a genius. Everyone will surely want one."

"Always glad to help. Remember me when you put in your patent," I said, with Kizurra nudging me forward. But there was nowhere to go. The overbearing crowd

stretched from one side of the street, against the buildings, to the other side of the street, against more buildings. Our means of escape was completely blocked.

“Wait,” he said, “will you show us your tech again. I must witness it in person. I will not likely have the opportunity in the future.”

The crowd nodded and whistled in approval. A similar vibe to the square had spread about the alley. Individuals became one, a single unit eager to drink, thirsty for gears and steel and innovation. They shouted, and stomped, and rallied fists, and pushed. Back and forth, they pushed, getting rowdier and rowdier. Suddenly, they were in a frenzy and people started to get trampled on. Kizurra and I were getting mauled, yanked to one side, thrown to the other. For a second, the crowd pushed so hard that I couldn’t breathe.

Kizurra pulled at my elbow. This was my audience. I had to calm them down. I had to appease them.

“Fine, fine, fine,” I said.

The crowd had swelled into something more substantial, and a few people had pulled out their info-gogs to record history in the making. The anticipation fueled my own fervor. Lights, cameras, and eyes were all on me. Although the crowd almost suffocated me, their attention awoke a side of me that I didn’t know existed. I was a performer.

“Ladies and gentlemen, gather in close, you don’t want to miss a thing.” They did, hanging on my every word and gesture. They didn’t just eat out of my hand; they licked the leftover crumbs from my shoes.

“I know some of you saw me at the Judging. Well, I’m here to give you all an exclusive, private show. If your friends aren’t here, then unfortunately they have missed out.”

I only felt slightly bad that I was hamming it up; though that feeling quickly faded. Finally, people appreciated me. Farrah Lee had never shown me one ounce of gratitude, not for babysitting six over-sugared cousins practically everyday, not for driving Uncle Raymond—her golden child—from the hospital when he had blacked out from “working too hard,” the smell of Jim Bean seeping through his pores, and not on those Monday nights when I opted to cook dinner for the family because she was passed out from her Type II Diabetes medication, something that she had never admitted to us and tried her hardest to ignore.

Professionally, I had received the same lack of gratitude. My teachers acknowledged that I had a skill for electronics, but my projects were too complicated for them to care past the marked A in the grade book. Horace had been my only boss to get excited about my work, and that was right before he stole *LSD Lulz*. Who knew if this moment would ever occur again in my lifetime?

Once I had the crowd amped and silent—poised to implode from the anticipation—I said,

“Now, the moment you all have been waiting for,” and immediately I thought of the scene from *Back to the Future II*, where Marty dishes out some high speed aerobatics on a hoverboard while escaping terribly dressed, “futuristic” punks. I envisioned him latching onto the car’s tail, flying sideways around other cars and conveniently placed

sidewalk equipment. The hoverboard was my focus; I didn't know if it existed here, but today this audience would catch a glimpse of old school 80s Hollywood imagination.

The familiar cylinder vibrated in my pocket.

The familiar tingling sensation tickled the back of my neck.

I closed my eyes, primed to open them at the moment of creation for added effect.

The crowd collectively held their breaths.

And nothing happened.

I opened my eyes to no hoverboard and an uninspired showing. Maybe it was a fluke. Again, I shut my eyes hard, concentrating on the heavy pink pastel color scheme, the metal plates on the bottom, and the intricately designed "Hoverboard" Mattel logo on the surface. I could practically touch the board; surely it would materialize at any moment, allowing me to fly high over the crowd, inciting lots of *oohs* and *ahhs*.

Again, nothing happened and I was left looking like jackass of the month.

"What is going on?"

"Where is the tech?"

"You promised us tech. You need to deliver on your promise."

"I think this is a scam."

"She made the whole thing up."

"No sape is capable of that kind of brilliance, anyway."

"Give us tech."

"Give us tech."

"Give us tech. Give us tech. Give us tech. Give us tech."

Excitement fizzled into outrage, and in the flip of a switch, my fans became my enemies. That cramped alleyway had filled wall to wall with bodies, who now pushed against one another, sweat intermixing, fingers clawing for air, and voices demanding compensation for wasting their time.

When the first sets of hands grabbed me and shook, I froze, like back in the square. I had failed. I couldn't believe it. I had my opportunity to inspire the world and I blew it. Who knew why the Omni chose that very moment to malfunction; it didn't matter. When all was said and done, I couldn't cut it.

More hands pulled at me, each going in opposite directions so that it stung like those medieval torture machines with the ropes and cranks. The mob screamed in my ear, some in English, some in the gurgle language, all of them saying pretty much the same thing, "You are a failure." Farrah Lee was right.

At this point, I wanted to sacrifice myself to the crowd, let them do with me as they pleased. I deserved it. I underperformed. All of this promise, this ambition, and what do I do with it? I lame out. They had every right to be angry.

But then the part of me that clamored for survival cried out and forced my body to lurch away from their grips. I reached out for Kizurra, who had since been pushed to the side by people more enamored than she, and found her beating through two kash sloshers that were more sauced than stunned. She wrenched me through the gap, and now the crowd directed their aggression at each other.

Punches flew, knees connected with lower torsos, heads butted, and claws ripped their way through uncovered flesh. I took one such blow to the shoulder, the nails tearing

through the red jumpsuit like a knife through plastic. All I could do was holler out in pain and keep it moving, lest I become target numero uno again.

Kizurra and I ducked, dipped, dived, and dodged our way through that mob, until we escaped down an adjoining alleyway, along with a handful of stragglers. I grew nervous that this smaller crowd would notice me and take their revenge. My fears compounded when a burly, Amazonian of a woman screamed at us, though she didn't yell with her mouth—she was of the *Niggi Kusari* species, completely hairless, no ears, no nose, no mouth. She screamed at us telepathically.

I turned to run in the other direction, but Kizurra yanked me forward. This must have been her associate. The woman judged me for a brief second, and then led us away from the mob-infested alleyway, towards an unassuming canal that ran perpendicular to the alley. We headed down stairs that seemed to go straight into the water, but entered through a concealed door before reaching the moat.

After a series of tunnels—and enough time for my heart to slow and the feeling of safety to seep in—we reached a room cluttered from floor to ceiling with used gadgets in varying states of disarray. A table sat in the middle of the room, bright light pointed at it from above, like an operating table, where a drill and surgical saw lay within the guts of a dying virtuobox. This was my kind of lady.

“Clothes are in the trunk. Hand me the immigration robes and I will dispose of them properly,” the woman said. Kizurra dropped trow, unabashed, walking over to a chest in the corner of the room. The Amazonian didn't blink an eye. Man, these people were bold.

I found a slightly more private corner of the room, trying to shield my body behind a locality transporter.

“Do you have anything plainer than this? We are trying to blend as much as possible,” Kizurra said, sifting through tunics of mauve and magenta, with patterns like constellations.

“Towards the bottom.” Kizurra threw me an ordinary brown tunic and white Egyptian style skirt. The tunic was about two sizes too tight and the sandals she handed me were two sizes too big.

“Hi, I’m Aliyah. Thanks for helping us,” I said to the woman, who now stood awkwardly against the operating table, eyeing me up and down, trying to decide what kind of person I was. She said,

“Bumma,” and continued to stare at me, silently. Kizurra—now decked out in the most plain looking shawl and skirt set that no one would ever notice—slipped me a small waistband case to hide the cylinder in. I tied it underneath my tunic where Bumma couldn’t see. I didn’t need her asking questions.

“We will need safe transport to The Wilds, and we need it to be as discreet as possible,” Kizurra said.

“What will you offer in return?” The woman didn’t move one inch; she rested butt and hands against the operating table, relaxed, in control.

“You owe me.”

“Nai. A simple smuggling routine does not equate to what you are asking of me. Her face is plastered all over the waves,” Bumma said, pointing at me, “this will not be a simple job.”

Kizurra let out a guttural grumble, clicking her tongue in response. I now understood why she called this woman an associate and not a friend.

“What do you want?”

Bumma tapped fingers against her chin, taking her sweet time deliberating. I started to share in Kizurra’s impatience. The woman should have already known what terms she would bargain for, especially if she was a professional barterer. This was Trading 101.

Besides, I had a renewed interest in pursuing plan #1 and getting to Uri. In addition to explaining why the Omni chose me, maybe he could tell me how to use the damn thing. I wouldn’t be giving free demonstrations in the park, but if I was going to have this thing for god knows how long, I might as well become an expert on it.

“Free transports for at least one season and a quarter of all of Uri’s trades,” Bumma finally said.

Even though it took everything she had not to blow up, Kizurra said,

“Fine.”

“Fantastic. Help yourself to any tool you will need for your journey. No extra price.” Kizurra hurried over to a shelf filled with relatively working objects, chucking everything she could grab into a satchel. I didn’t move from Bumma, not wanting her to think me cowardly for ducking from her never-ending gaze. She was one of those people

who dished out respect—or rudeness—based on physical displays of strength or weakness. I knew her type because they ran around DC like the plague.

“So, what are you willing to trade, magic sape?”

I could count the number of natural abilities I had on one hand, and bartering was definitely one of them. The whole exchange was a lesson in logic and manipulation. I could outwit any vendor down to a price that she wouldn’t even offer to her dog. Most assumed I was a naïve young girl who knew nothing about the value of trinkets, and I’d play into that prejudice. If I ever entered into a celebrity poker contest, I’d clean house within the first hour, tops.

“I don’t have much to trade. I’m not sure what I could offer,” I picked at my borrowed clothes, going for the Oscar gold in best dramatic performance.

“We have everything we need,” Kizurra said, “let us go.”

“You must have something,” Bumma said.

“Information, I guess,” I said, laying my bait down like a champ.

“In our dynasty, information is the most valued commodity,” Bumma said, taking it like a chump.

“We can discuss terms on the way. We need to leave now,” Kizurra said.

“Does this information have anything to do with manufacturing tech,” Bumma said, ignoring her.

“Well, more like a new way of creating it,” I said with just a hint of wariness in my voice. I had her hooked.

“Are we going to spend all season discussing this, or can we actually accomplish what we set out to do,” Kizurra threw up her hands.

And that’s when I knew that I had been duped. I had completely misjudged Bumma’s goals. She could care less about bargaining terms with us; she was actively working to achieve terms she had set out with a third party.

“It’s a setup,” I yelled, “she’s setting us up.”

Kizurra had just enough time to realize the stall tactics and scream *ASBAL* at Bumma before the door slammed open and a team of citizen species rushed in. I seized the nearest gadget and chucked it at the first person to run in my direction. It beamed her in the face, but the next two guys linebacker-tackled me to the floor. Air had begun to settle back into my lungs when a sharp pinch pricked the side of my neck.

Suddenly, the room blurred around the edges, and darkness steadily crept in. As my eyes closed to Bumma accepting a package from a young *Nama*, I thought that even though I didn’t know what *asbal* meant, it was probably the perfect word to describe what an incredible asshole she was being at this very moment.

CHAPTER SIX – THE WORST THING EVER

Somewhere in Ek-Galgallu, home of the greatest Engineer in the Dynasty

I regained consciousness as we passed through the double gates of a fortress. No kidding, this place put Fort Knox to shame. A paved patchwork of sidewalk and small reflective pools covered the entire expanse of the outer grounds. Greenish-brown desert trees were arranged in a symmetric spherical pattern. The entire place reeked of oil and exhaust, as if work carried on here 24/7. Periodically, a bell rang, though it happened at such random intervals that I couldn't tell what it signified.

My forearms were magnetically bound once again. This time, it rubbed in all the wrong ways, purposely tied in that manner by our newest captors. Once our transport shuttle arrived in front of a small entranceway, Kizurra and I were thrown from the vehicle. Two more ornery muscle men came out and yanked us inside.

With every step, I mentally kicked myself. My track record in Aburukur was like zero out of one hundred. How could I not have seen that setup coming? I was from Southeast DC. In my neighborhood, that kind of crap happened all the time; deals gone bad or friends setting up another to get jumped. I was supposed to be street smart, and yet I had continuously been stupefied left and right.

I hated being out of my element. Give me a carbon generator, a motherboard, and a circuit design, and I was golden; give me a mind-reading cylinder and a crap ton of people that wanted to capture me, and I had no idea what the hell I was doing. Kizurra should have ditched me from the beginning. In this group, I was the weak link. I hated being weak.

The men led us down hallways that smelled less like oil and more like a tangy, floral perfume. A flavor of orange hung in the air, unavoidable, so that I couldn't stop tasting it. Moving frescoes covered the walls, depicting the exploits of a large man with green eyes, flesh wings, and no ears.

In one section of the mural, a younger version of the man held up a pair of shades with dreams flowing from them. Lightning struck all around his head, while Aburukur sat shaded in the background. In another mural, an older, more recent version of the man rammed a spear through a crazed robot carrying body parts in each hand. Oil and hydraulic fluid bled through the venous tubes spilling out of its abdomen and pooled in death around it. The man had such a look of ecstasy on his face that I was reminded of deranged sexual deviant.

We were led into a room that could have fit all of Farrah Lee's house. Enough low sitting tables and cushions lined the walls so that an entire village could have been fed in style and comfort; and enough rubies, diamonds, sapphires, and opals glittered in decorative pieces along the tables and walls that they would have been able to pay for a village amount of food with just this one room. In the center stood the man from the frescoes, flanked by a few close associates.

"Galgallu," Kizurra whispered in both awe and anxiety. So, this was the guy that had designed the Omni. He looked more like a professional football player than an Engineer. This dude had to clock in at a good six foot five and could have crushed me with his left thigh. I couldn't see his bat wings—they were covered in his three-piece tunic shawl combo—but they had to be massive in order to carry him even two feet in the

air. He dwarfed the people standing next to him, yet exuded a confidence and power that clearly stated that he was the one giving commands, not carrying them out.

He spoke briefly to the head guard before acknowledging our presence. Even then, he said nothing. After replaying a video on his info-gog, he strolled up to Kizurra, scrutinized her further to ensure that she was indeed the person from the footage, and slammed a giant-sized hand across her face. The smack was so loud that I couldn't hear her cry out; all I saw was her fall down in a crumbled heap.

“What the hell? Was that even necessary?” I didn't have a chance to get the rest of my words out, because that colossal hand swung back and struck me in the side of the face. My hit wasn't nearly as hard as hers but I was still seeing stars.

I had only witnessed one instance of violent abuse in my life, so the fact that I had just gotten clocked in the face by a 200-pound creature seemed surreal. My mother had a lovely boyfriend by the name of Darren that liked to use her as a personal punching bag. I was only ten when he stayed at our apartment, but I was old enough to understand the dangerous situation she was in when he punched her to the floor, stomped on her until she stopped fighting back, and threatened—with a knife held to her throat—that he would kill her if she ever left him. Luckily, he was arrested and sentenced to twenty-five years for an unrelated incident, but I had a feeling that Galgallu would have no trouble outdoing Darren if he felt crossed. I kept my mouth shut.

Things suddenly got real. This wasn't hide and seek from some grayscale goons anymore; this guy had every intention on doing us harm. I immediately felt like throwing up.

Galgallu stepped over Kizurra, snatched a fist full of her hair, and jerked her head towards his face. I cringed when she whimpered in pain. I wanted to do something, to help her, but the sting from the hit still prickled my cheek.

“I accepted you into my Namesake,” he spat in her face, “I invited you into my home. I allowed you to work in my development center so that you could be free from the incompetence of your garbage species and do something meaningful with your life. After all of this generosity, how do you return the service? By stealing from me.” He threw her head down.

“Pathetic,” he added. “Do you deny the allegations?”

“No,” Kizurra said, small and contained. I hadn’t seen her so vulnerable before; she had never pegged me as the type that could be. A braver person would have spoken up for her. A person with courage would have vouched for her. I stood there, silent.

“You *Zizi* are nothing, if not honest. At least you have that trait in your favor.”

Then Galgallu rounded on me. The fact that I flinched was embarrassing. I don’t know why he had that effect on me—why I instantly quivered in his presence—but I couldn’t stop it from happening if I tried.

“So this is the sape that has been causing a stir across the city?”

A sharp pain reverberated throughout my entire skull as he yanked the plate on the back of my neck. I yelled louder and louder but that only made him pull harder. A jackhammer of a headache started once he realized his efforts were futile and stopped.

“Hmm. Interesting. She is completely connected to the Omni. This is a surprising predicament, do you not agree, Axl-maru,” he called to a cat-eyed guy that didn’t appear

to be much older than I was. I couldn't bring myself to look Gagallu in the face; wild animals attacked at direct eye contact. As long as I could trail his torso, though, I'd know where he was at all times.

"Very interesting," the guy responded, "I am curious to understand the biometrics behind it."

"Yes," Galgallu said, trailing my body with his eyes, making me want to crawl into a ball until this nightmare went away, "as am I."

"You are from *Ki*, correct," the young man asked me. In most cases, I would have blurted something sarcastic or witty or cool, naturally, without thinking. But all I could do now was pray that they would let us go. It was a long shot, I know, but the dread wouldn't let me think clearly.

"Earth," was all I could manage.

"And did this Dissident set up this theft as a front to get you here," he asked.

"No."

"Then what is your purpose here," he yelled, balled fists, moving closer to me as if he were ready to cold clock me in the face. I couldn't help flinching, yet again, and I hung my head at the shame. Haxors would have the courage to fight back. I couldn't. I was petrified.

"Now, now," Galgallu said, trying to calm this dude down, "what did I say about keeping one's emotions wrapped up." That seemed to have placated the young guy a little, because he backed away again, reeling to his previous spot, fisting hands in his tunic pockets.

“But I am supposed to be wearing the Omni, not her.”

“Yes, I understand your frustration. In due time.” Galgallu turned back to me. “I wager you would love to get out of here and go on your way, is that right, Aliyah Sparks.” I would sprint out of that place in a heartbeat, if I could.

“Yes.”

“Alright, then let us have a challenge. If you win, I will let you and your miserable friend leave without any disturbance. If I win, well then, you both belong to me.” A large, blaring voice in my head told me I would regret it, but I didn’t see any other alternative. Kizurra looked up at me from the ground, but I couldn’t read the expression on her face.

“Okay. I’m in.”

“Outstanding.” Galgallu walked over to an oak cabinet, skipping a little on the way, and he hummed a tune as he ruffled through whatever the crap was in there. None of the other people in the room said a word, but they waited on baited breath, as if they knew personally the shit-storm that I would soon endure. When Galgallu came back with a serrated knife, my body buckled in terror.

“The challenge is simple,” he said, almost gleefully, “you will cut me once, shallow of course, and I will cut you, same shallow depth. The first one to make a sound or cry out in pain is the victor.”

“I...I...I”

“You agreed to the challenge. Here in the Dynasty, we honor our agreements.” He brought over two chairs, sitting them down facing one another. Two guards forcibly

pushed me down into one, Galgallu eased into the other. He had a slight smile on his face. I didn't.

When he shoved the knife into my hand first, my whole arm trembled. Farrah Lee's verbal abuse may have been rough, but this was plain old sick. No one told me how to handle such psychotic behavior. I didn't think Dr. Wade would have known how to deal. Everything in me told me to run now, to get out of there, screw everything, I was in danger. Instead, I sliced a thin slit down Galgallu's forearm, wincing with the splash of blue blood, part of me reveling in the fact that I was causing this douchebag pain. Or so I thought.

His eyes had rolled back, jaw slacked. All of him shivered—and that was a lot of man to move. This nut was enjoying it, and I was the dummy who agreed to it. The minute he cut me in return, I knew it was a done deal.

Fire, a whole blowtorch worth of pain, blazed up and down my arm when he cut me. I had experienced nothing worse than a paper cut before and—after this agony—I prayed to God that I would never die of a stabbing. I think he went deeper than he said he would, because I could see dark, thick red blood oozing out of my arm. My eyesight clouded, my stomach churned, and I even peed a little. I also screamed, loud and hard.

Galgallu pushed back from the chair, wiping the blood off with the bottom of his tunic.

"I am disappointed. I thought you would last a lot longer than that. Shame. Word of advice, Aliyah Sparks. Conquer all pain. Conquer all fear. Conquer the world." He

motioned to the guards, and they immediately bumrushed my space. Then he sauntered over to Kizurra, kicked up, and shouted,

“Get up.” She did, slowly, sadly. “I will not kill you because I have some use of you. Count that as a favor. There are many ways that I could, discreetly, and many places that I could hide the body parts to never be found. In any event, your punishment will not be merciful, it will not end quickly, and I will record it to display to the rest of the members of the Namesake. You will be made an example of.”

He gestured to the guards, who grabbed Kizurra on either side.

“*Pulhu*. Three nights,” he declared.

“No,” she screamed, fighting against their grip, “please, no. Please.”

He nodded and they led her away, with Kizurra dragging her feet to try and forestall the unimaginable by at least a couple of minutes. She looked at me and I looked at the ground. I said nothing; I did nothing. I let her go without even attempting to help her, taking part in her punishment by tolerating it. It was my lowest moment, proof of my own doubt and cowardice.

“Only cut off the right hand,” Galgallu hollered after the exiting party, “we do not want to render her completely useless. And you,” he turned to me, “what to do about you?”

I could have shit bricks right then and there. It was like a terrible game of Spin the Wheel. Which psychologically traumatizing torture method will you win today?

“Axl,” “take our guest here to the lab. We need to surgically retrieve our device back. Try some experiments while you are in there,” he said, “B Series. High voltage. I’m

curious as to what type of results we'd get." Tears welled at the thought that I would become someone's experiment. I wanted to fight, to plead, to beg for my life, but I stood, frozen. I couldn't do anything.

"Some of those tests can be fatal, sir," Axl said. I noted his hesitance.

"Then we will tell the court that the sacrifice was necessary for the advancement of new technology we are working on. Besides, no one will miss a sape, especially an illegal one that came directly from *Ki*." And with a nod, I too was led away, to face something that only grew more and more horrific as I imagined the worse.

They dragged Kizurra screaming down the hallway to the right. Axl shoved me towards the left. The lights were dimmer here, eerie, low enough to cut sharp shadows along jagged corners and walls. The murals of great Engineering feats didn't stray this far; these walls were bare, sand colored decorum of endless desert, the kind of desert you would walk through forever and rot of starvation and the vultures would flay your tissue off, piece by piece. Just looking at those walls made my skin sweat.

Axl pushed me into a room straight out of the Texas Chainsaw Massacre on sci fi steroids. A serrated knife that stunk of vomit and diarrhea swung midair at neck level. Laser scalpels and razors and a furnace that jolted and shuddered quivered like the jerky ticks of a psychopath. A piece of skin, flung carelessly, hung to the table. Finally, a large, fused cylinder pulsed in the center of the room, with opaque edges so you could barely see the shadows behind its veil.

"Get undressed," Axl said.

“No,” I answered, my body shaking, both steaming and chilled at the same time. He crept closer, lurking just outside my peripheral.

“You seem to think that this is negotiable. You do what I tell you to do. Now, get undressed.”

“No,” I said, not looking directly at him because that would be insane.

“Fine. As soon as the Terminatrix begins probing your molecules, the cloth will be burned to your skin. I warned you.” He slammed a button on the control panel and I was rendered completely immobile, my knees and elbows locking, my stomach hardening, and my shoulders plastered in the position I was standing in. My head was the only part of my body that could move.

I willed the Omni to save me, but it buzzed for a second and shut down, just like in the alley. Why wasn’t it working? Why wasn’t it stopping this? I couldn’t think straight. Fate—the cruel bastard—squeezed my mind with both hands and shook like a madman. All kinds of images jumbled around, colliding with each other, unsteady, unstable, like my last couple of hours running around Aburukur, my last couple of months being Farrah Lee’s mule, my last couple of years without my mom, without a point of stasis.

It all clouded when Axl slid out the twelve-inch needle. Chunky vomit churned around my bladder, threatening its way up. My breathing quickened and hitched, and quickened, and sputtered. Each breath stung from my lungs thrusting against a hardened torso. I hated needles. I avoided doctors like the plague because of my abject fear of needles. I had to get away from this freaking needle.

Maybe Axl had a sympathetic ear. He did hesitate at the mention of experiments. Maybe he didn't want to do this as much I as didn't want him to. Maybe his threatening stance was a front. Besides the cat eyes and the wing sheath, the rest of him seemed overwhelmingly human. Maybe we had enough in common for him to relate to me.

"You don't have to do this," I said.

"You heard Galgallu's orders." He swelled the syringe with a light purple liquid. It sizzled.

"But you have a choice. What happens if you screw up and kill me? The law won't allow that," I said, unsure if it was even true. Axl paused.

"Then we will plead it as an unfortunate accident in a perfectly legal experiment. Once we show them the Omni and the technological progress it promises to deliver, then they will have no choice but to accept your death as collateral. You saw everyone's reaction at the Judging. We could kill ten sapes and still be excused. Besides, I never mess up."

"But you don't want to experiment on me. That'd be like experimenting on yourself." In psych, they told us that if you were ever kidnapped, try to build rapport with your captor and put them in your shoes. When Axl's shoulders tensed and he slammed his hands on the table, I figured it was a pretty stupid suggestion.

"Do not compare us, sape," he spat, lurching towards me and snatching my face to his. "We may share half the same genetic pattern, but never confuse us for equals. I am a *Nama Lamazu*. I am a citizen, by birth. I am protégé to the most esteemed Engineer in this Dynasty. You are a stain."

When he grabbed my body, I screamed. I tried to run, but I couldn't move. I didn't know what else to do. He yanked me towards that machine and all I could think about was what mother could raise a son that seemed okay with torturing a helpless female. At once, the cylinder in my pocket detonated and rocked the hell out of both of us. Axl was thrown into the table panel and I was thrown into the machine. I didn't feel anything at first. It intensified slowly, first as a tickle, then as a pinch, then as a sting, then as fire and suddenly I was back in the visitor's center, in that reanimation tube, my insides boiling and burning and exploding into my throat.

"Please, stop!" They were the only words I could get out. I don't think Axl had heard me though. He was propped on the table, both hands supporting his weight, staring agape at a woman who had materialized out of thin air in front of him. He had a horrified expression on his face, like her very presence defied all laws of physics and celestial bodies. She was human—100%, not some science project hybrid—she was gorgeous, and you couldn't deny the resemblance. The freakiest thing was that she mimicked my writhes of pain. Every buckle of my body, every contortion of an ankle joint or elbow, every spasm of my spine, every wrench of my neck, she did the same exact thing.

"Please, honey, help me," I said, desperate for the pain to go away. The woman reached out her hand towards Axl, whispering my words. Out of straight reflex, he tapped a button on the panel. I was released in an instant as the machine whirled down to a complete stop. He didn't move.

I felt all around my body; huzzah, my clothes hadn't seared to my skin. When the pain subsided, I stood. Monitors all around the control panel spit out readings about my

molecular structure and the fusion with the Omni, and my brain synapses when it was in effect, and all kinds of physiological mish-mash that I didn't care about. This was my moment to get the hell out of dodge. Axl was immobile, eyes never leaving the woman in the room, who was also looking at the monitors.

"I know this is not real. How are you doing this?"

"The Omni." Finally.

The sound of the words *Omni* broke Axl out of whatever trance this family reunion had put him in because he spun towards me, pissed. Then, he charged. I thought of Monday night football and the woman materialized into a 300 pound left tackle, slamming into Axl before he could reach me. I was out the door after I heard the crash, knowing my window was hella short before Galgallu was alerted and emerged from whatever lair he was lurking in. The left tackle collapsed back into the trillions upon trillions of nanatoms that comprised the Omni, and returned to their home in the cylinder in my pocket. When I ran back up the hallway, I made the right, all action in a rush to save Kizurra.

So now I had an idea of how this stupid device was triggered: I had to be in deep shit where my heart was pounding through my chest and adrenaline was flowing like Skittles; at the same time, I had to be clearly thinking of one object. Man, adrenaline rush *AND* thinking clearly—mastering that was going to be insane.

I didn't have much time to think about anything once I heard the thumping of blunt force trauma, no screams. I followed the pounding until I came upon a metallic door, half ajar with light crashing out of it. I only had one chance to get this right.

Into the room, I sprinted, taking a quick once around to survey the scene. Kizurra lay on the floor, hands over her head, a blue liquid I could only imagine was her blood draining all around her. Luckily, she still had both her hands. I looked up at Pockmark Face and concentrated on rage and the first thing that came to my mind. It was a battering ram.

In a flash, a SWAT style, black onyx ram swung out in front of me and knocked the goon backwards into the wall. His bones splintered as they smashed into the cement. A puff of dust fell along with him. Bowling Arms almost grabbed me but I thought *whip*, and it lashed at him like a slave. He hollered and swung but that whip shot down, fast, hard. Eventually, he fell and took it like a biotch, whimpering in the corner. One good clock to the head with the butt of the whip and goon #2 was out for the count.

Now, I've seen someone jumped before. It was part of an MS-13 gang initiation. I had used the dumpsite they held it at as a place to scrounge for electronic parts, and hid inside one of the dumpsters until it was over. This kid was standing in the middle of a rowdy crowd, most of whom were already plastered or geeking on meth. They didn't tell him what was about to happen, no bells, no warnings, but we all knew. No matter which crew you joined, the process was still the same. Some guy came at him from the side, and then another, and then another. Poor kid held his own for awhile but once his boys outnumbered him four-to-one, they beat the living god out of him. He had gone unconscious, bleeding from the head, and lost two teeth before anyone decided to call it off. Although her beating hadn't been part of some sick ritual, Kizurra had fared a little better than the gang kid...but not by much.

She wasn't unconscious but she was delirious, confused by her surroundings but not the circumstances. The left side of her face was swollen, including her eye where the lid had puffed up all around it. The blue blood streamed from her nose, her lips, and the tiny scales lining her cheeks. Her shoulder wasn't quite twisting the right way, her arm loosely hanging there, like her joint wasn't connected to it anymore.

"Come on, buddy, we gotta go," I said, pulling her up, laying her weight over my shoulder. She nodded but said nothing. We hobbled as one team out of the room.

"Which way?" It took her a couple back-and-forths, and a couple of head shakes but eventually Kizurra titled her head straight, back to the room where we met Galgallu. Knots bubbled in my stomach, but I held down the puke and led the way forward.

The big, ornate room was empty; the Great Linebacker must have retreated for privacy, where he could plot what other tortuous deeds he intended on doing. We bolted through that room like lightning, and came out on the opposite side clear. The halls were also empty, and I didn't know if that was a good or bad sign. Axl should have recovered by now and signaled the brigade.

We zigzagged through the maze of hallways, my heart arresting every time we turned a corner or pushed through a door. After awhile, we did pass people, Kizurra's people, Dissidents working in gyrotechnic suits, controlling room-sized oscillators or robotic arms that coupled various parts together. We passed Dissidents covered knee deep in hydraulic fluid from a busted gear shaft, and Dissidents towing industrial pipe-sized metal rods with nothing but their bare hands and chains. All of these people were behind one-way glass and "Restricted Area" signs.

Kizurra told me that each Dissident was assigned a skill and job when they reached Level Six past their nymph stage, and they would do that job for the rest of their lives. None of them were paid, they could only enjoy the perks of the Namesake they worked for, and none of them could have a Namesake or notoriety of their own, no matter how expert they were at their skill.

“We have to get off the property before someone sets off the alarm system,” Kizurra said, hacking up a blood spitball and lobbing the loogie to the side. We ducked out a back door and found ourselves smacked with sandy wind and a slowly setting evening sun. I halfway expected an army of muscular beefheads with assorted assault rifles to tear from behind the trees, but there was nothing, silence. It was almost the perfect moment for a sunset.

“The alarm system is active,” Kizurra said.

“How do you know,” I listened for a low hum or approaching footsteps.

“If they knew where we were on the compound, then they would have captured us already. They are waiting for us to set off the quadrant and then they will hone in.” That exceptionally groomed garden of expendable wealth seemed so peaceful, so bountiful, and yet it was a plod of undercover evil. I feared the worst.

“If we can reach the river and steal a diver, we could possibly escape this.” She nodded to a small dock about a football field away. I could barely make out the shuttles and transports and craft-gliders. A nervous twitch pricked at my right eye. I couldn’t make it that far. But what was the alternative? I escaped body defragmentation before; I highly doubted I would cruise by that again.

“Whatever you do,” Kizurra said, “do not stop running. The ground will attack so move in a zigzag pattern, but never stop running.”

Off we sprinted. We got maybe one hundred meters when the rumbling started. It was like the entirety of the grounds had awakened into a teeth-curling monster and was pissed that Kizurra and I had the audacity to eff with it. The lawn rolled, a tidal wave of artificial grass and sand. It knocked me up and I nearly lost balance, but my footwork was pretty skilled and I regained control before face planting. Kizurra—normally an agile spider monkey—tried to hop over the wave. She did, but landed funny and almost head dived as well, but caught herself. We kept running.

The bees came out of nowhere. One minute I was focused on a transport ship in the distance, and the next a robotic, gold and silver bee landed on my arm. It stung the crap out of me, but I couldn’t even get the scream out before three more arrived on target.

“Don’t let them land. Their stingers are filled with noxos,” Kizurra said, swatting and crisscrossing like a madwoman. I crushed the first bastard between my fingertips, electric guts crunching down to scrap. Two more stung me before I found a rhythm in whacking them mid-air, but that noxos sucked and the edges of my vision blurred in and out. I ran harder.

Voices yelled behind us and, suddenly, bullet-like electric bursts flooded by. Kizurra was struck in the leg and stumbled to the ground. I yanked her up and we raced ahead. She couldn’t give up, because if she did, I’d surely throw that card in.

“Let’s go. No weak sauce shit,” I said. We were almost there. I could smell the salt and moss of river water. I could feel the breeze of the shore.

“Diver,” she said, pointing to a coral, egg-shaped vessel bobbing near the dock. An electric bullet skimmed my elbow, shocking my entire left arm. It was like someone had taken a Taser to my bones and cranked it full blast. It hung to my side, much like Kizurra’s. I had to concentrate on running, not on pain.

We were almost there. I could practically touch that diver. I didn’t look behind me but the voices sounded far enough away that they would never make it to us in time. We were going to escape, once again, like bosses. No one in this world could touch us. Relief washed in, a tide of unbound joy. We had done it. We were there.

The electro-bullets stopped, but baseball-sized orbs replaced them. One shot above our heads and landed about ten feet ahead. Kizurra curved to the left, but I hadn’t expected the thing to land in the air and stay suspended there. When I was within a foot or two of it, the ball glowed bright orange and erupted.

I was blinded. Or my eyes were closed, I don’t recall. Heat scorched the side of my face, and my breath was sucked from my lungs. Then there was the lifting off my feet and somersaulting. My eyes were definitely closed, but through the darkness I felt the disorienting motion of flipping upside down and again and again. I didn’t feel myself hit the ground, but I heard it. It sounded like a sack of potatoes being hurled onto a kitchen floor.

My eyes opened to hands grabbing at me. I fought them until I realized it was Kizurra pulling me forward to...to...where were we going? My arms were charred, skin peeling, probably from where I threw my hands up to block whatever that glowing orb surprised me with. I looked back and saw the army of meatheads clamoring after us.

Galgallu stood on the precipice of his compound, waiting for his goons to retrieve his property and ready to dish more punishment. I immediately reneged my previous statement: we weren't going to make it.

"Come on," Kizurra gritted through teeth. We had made it to the docks. The spray from the river splashed my face but I couldn't react to it. My legs had stopped working. I couldn't feel them at all. I should've been more worried about that kind of thing, but I couldn't concentrate.

Think. I had to focus. I had to think. So, I looked back at the goons, who were almost at the docks as well. I didn't like them. I don't know why, but I knew that I didn't like them or the way that they were looking at us. It was too menacing, too vengeance-driven. They had to cool down. And that's when it came to me.

It emerged right out of a horror-comedy B movie on cable tv. It thrashed out of the water as I imagined the tentacles uncoiling into the air, looping around the unsuspecting cruise ship. Octo-squid hybrid sloshed around and roared through row upon row of teeth. Every goon halted in his tracks. No one would come within spittle distance of that magnificent beast. They shot their weapons at it as Kizurra pulled me into the diver.

It must've been the noxos mixed with my explosion injuries because my vision dipped, mental surge on low. I hadn't felt anything after the fall, but now a burning, pins and needle sensation sprung up all around, starting with my thighs, then my forearms, then my face. As I went in and out, so did the monster, yanking up goons with huge tentacles, and then having the tentacle disappear. That happened a couple of times, and

then I set the monster's rampage onto the divers and transports next to us. I flipped those bad boys like they were toy ships in a bathtub.

Sea Monster Omni sent one crazy wave to ward off the remaining goons—like Pocked Marked and Bowling Arms—before dissipating back into nanatoms. Kizurra and I blasted off towards the other side of the river, the hatch closing to a dumbfounded and recovering army of meatheads. We submerged before they could find a way to track us. We had made it. We had escaped. I smiled at Kizurra at the control helm. She was bleeding all over, but taking it like a G.

Pain echoed in waves, but by golly we had done it. We weren't weak sauce. I wasn't weak sauce. Lying on the small bench in the diver, I figured this was as good a time as any to rest my eyes. I was so very sleepy. Too much excitement, too much of a rush. The shrapnel hole in my side leaked blood down to the diver bottom, but why didn't I care? I couldn't keep my eyes open, so I shut them and fell into unconsciousness.