

The Orphaned Earth

Geryon's Code

Liudmila Brus

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THE ORPHANED EARTH

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Table of Contents

Flight Engineer.....	1
Herald from Nowhere	16
Kill Me, Infinity	27
Alarming News	37
Wings of Woe.....	44
One-Armed and One-Eyed	57
Unlikely Ally.....	71
The Gathering Storm	86
The Takeoff	95
The Death and The Healing.....	100
His Family	106
Empty Grave.....	114
On His Own.....	118
Four Dogmen	124
Scarlet Wings.....	135
Genetic Chameleon	146
Hall of The Mountain Queen	152
The Other Me.....	165
Hunting a Ghost.....	173
Malicious copy	179
One of Them?.....	184
My Wayward Brother	197
The Masters of Nevis.....	208
Science and Mayhem	214
The Mutiny	223
Evil Against Evil.....	233
The Apostle's Mercy	239
The Malfunction	244
Railtown	250
Something's Off.....	258
A Wink From the Enemy, a Lift From the Friend	264
A Vengeful Dreamer	270
Deck C, Cabin 30.....	274

Blood Ties	278
The Shelter	288
Garm Against Midnight	295
The Cyber Duo	303
No One Else to Trust	311
Captain Winter.....	329

To my husband. You've always stayed by my side and inspired me.
Thank you for sharing your ideas and for never doubting me, even
for a second.

*Far away there's a land of snow and sorrow
Time has made the frozen
tears fall like rain from the starlit sky
And I feel so cold, I can't make it
tomorrow
Oh, but the night will see where this path will lead my life*

— **Wintersun**, *Land of Snow and Sorrow*

Flight Engineer



Randy de la Serna – May 28-29, 2181 – McMurdo, Antarctica

Local rumors said the stranger had been brought to town by the snowstorm. Only Randy's parents knew the truth—or part of it.

Dr. Ilya Osokin, Randy's stepfather, had taken the man in before returning to his clinic. On days like that one, the road was no place for a caravan, let alone a lone traveler: too few inhabited stations, too much ice, nowhere to hide from the night.

The guest's name was Vassiliy Rakhmanov. He was old, yet straight as an arrow, though clearly worn. His build matched that of most locals, but his skin was unnaturally pale, as if he had spent years away from the sun. Remarkably, he still had all his teeth—a rare luxury in post-Blackout Antarctica, usually reserved for the very young. His skin clung tightly to the bones of his face; deep, jagged wrinkles cracked his forehead and gathered around his eyes and nose like fractures in stone. Beneath thick silver brows, his blue eyes held the chill of ice, while his smile radiated an almost innocent warmth, lively and disarming.

He towered over everyone else. His overalls were nothing like the clothing worn by Antarctic settlers: dark gray, faintly gleaming, made of tightly interlocking scales that resembled fish skin or lizard hide. At first glance the material looked rigid, but Rakhmanov moved in it with unsettling ease.

Randy couldn't miss the reverence in his stepfather's manner. With an enthusiasm rare for the usually somber doctor, Ilya seated the guest by the fire. He had sheltered travelers before—but never one wrapped in such careful mystery.

Rakhmanov turned out to be moderately talkative. Before long, he and eight-year-old Randy were discussing electricity—the rarest resource of all.

“Where does it come from if it’s not magic?” Randy asked. “I mean... who makes it?”

“Electricity,” Rakhmanov said, his eyes brightening, “is the movement of tiny, negatively charged particles—electrons—that carry energy from one end of a conductor to the other.”

Randy blinked.

“That energy gives us heat and light,” the man continued. “It turns wheels, powers tools. To most people, it *looks* like magic.”

“Tiny?” He squinted at the spoon. “Like—smaller than a grain of salt?”

Rakhmanov chuckled. “Smaller. You can’t see them — not with your eyes, not with a magnifier. But they’re everywhere.”

“Even in McMurdo?” Randy lowered his voice, like the blizzard might hear.

“They’re part of us as well. They fuel your thoughts.”

Randy sat back, spoon forgotten.

“Okay—so what makes ’em go?”

Rakhmanov hesitated — his long, knotted fingers tapping gently on the chair’s armrest, as if searching for a memory.

“The wind. Flowing water. The warmth of the sun. We could start with that... if you want.”

From the kitchen, Alda’s voice cut across the room.

“Randy!” she snapped gently, clearing scraps of fried shells, pickled radish, seaweed bread. “Don’t pester our guest. He’s tired.”

She was a small woman, fine-boned and quiet, but carried herself with a certain gravity — like stone beneath snow. Her black hair was twisted high and fixed with a carved bone pin.

Rakhmanov tilted his head.

“You come from Mirny like your husband?”

Alda set the tea down with a hand that didn’t shake, though Randy saw her eyes flicker toward the door. She’d been in McMurdo eight years, ever since she’d fled the gallows at Port Amundsen with Randy still in her womb. She rarely spoke of Eino or the Winged Sun, but the “stone beneath the snow” in her posture always returned when travelers mentioned the Prophet.

“Port Amundsen is a madhouse now,” she said, her voice flat. “Not a place for a man with a notebook.”

Rakhmanov reached into his gray belly bag and pulled out a small, battered notebook and a stub of a pencil — both worn but intact. To Randy, they looked like treasure.

“Now,” the traveler said, “I’ll show you what an electrical circuit is.”

He drew a quick diagram with fluid, practiced motion.

“And if this snow keeps falling another day or two, we might even build a wind turbine. You’ve got scrap metal, right? Old batteries? Some copper wire?”

Randy’s face fell.

“Used to. You could haul home anything you could drag. Now the Prince’s rats guard it.”

Rakhmanov raised an eyebrow.

“The Prince’s men,” Alda cut in sharply. “Randy, don’t talk about them like that.”

“Why not?” the boy muttered. “It used to belong to everyone.”

Rakhmanov paused, tapping the pencil against the edge of the notebook.

“When people aren’t ready to fight for something,” he said, voice low, “those who *are* take it. Can’t really blame you kids. Let me guess — they had guns?”

“Yeah,” Randy answered, quieter now. “Big ones.”

“So now you’ve got a Prince. Could be worse. Could be an *Emperor*,” Rakhmanov sighed. His smile didn’t quite reach his eyes.

“They took the coal. Now they own all of it,” the boy complained.

“But where the hell did they even get firearms down here?” Rakhmanov asked, this time turning toward Alda.

“Not all our scientific facilities were as peaceful as they claimed,” Alda said, brushing crumbs into a tin bowl. “After the revolution on Mars, people started looking at each other with suspicion. Country by country. Corp by corp.”

“The ones that made it down here brought more than scientists,” she added. “They brought *security*. Private armies. Guns.”

Randy realized, with a sudden twist in his gut, that they still didn’t know much about this man. Not where he came from. Not where he was going. His mother, judging by her expression, knew little more. Does he have something

to do with a private army? Who else wears lizard-scale armor and talks about electrons like they're old friends?

"Roads. Power plants. All of it had to be guarded," Alda continued. "This block of ice didn't stay peaceful for long."

Rakhmanov gave a low whistle, his fingers caressing his cat's fur.

"You don't say. And here I thought there'd be more ice."

The corner of Alda's mouth lifted, just barely.

She poured steaming herbal tea into a chipped enamel mug and set it gently in front of him. Real coffee and wine — if they made it from South America at all — were sold in places like Railtown and Seven Winds, and only if smugglers were lucky and the Moon Cross patrols looked the other way.

Then Alda straightened, but her voice stayed careful.

"And you come from...?"

Just a traveler, Randy thought with a smirk.

Rakhmanov stood, leaned forward and, after a long pause, whispered something into her ear. She didn't answer, but something in her posture changed — just slightly.

Randy noticed his mother's head slowly shake as she overcame her stupor. He silently regretted not being let in on the secret. However, he resolved to uncover the truth, no matter the cost.

"So, how did you make it through the Blackout?" Alda asked, agitated. "Looks like it didn't harm you too much?"

"Perhaps," the man said, his voice dropping to a low, resonant hum, "the Blackout wasn't the accident people have been taught to believe."

The woman glanced around, likely pondering where to send her son so she could have a more in-depth talk with the guest. But with the snowfall and rising wind, it was hardly suitable weather for playing outside—especially if her restless son had an urge to wander onto the icy pier. Randy, for his part, was upset that he wasn't trusted with the secret; in his eight years, he had never spilled a single one and was quite proud of it.

"By the way," Rakhmanov said, turning to the hostess and once again trying to ease the tension, "are you one of *those* de la Sernas who were the first to reforest the continent?"

"Almost," Alda answered cautiously. "My grandfather and uncle worked on terraforming, and my father ran the power plant. But how do you know about that?"

"Their work helped us establish our own home. We owe a great deal to Antarctica."

"Okay, enough talking. Can you show it?" Randy asked, once his mother had left, leaving the guest in his care. "I mean, electricity."

When the boy was curious about something, he could be incredibly persistent, and his instinct told him that the guest might know more than even his own parents.

"Now fetch your fluffy friend."

Randy lifted the sleepy, weakly protesting Firefly off the stove.

"Would you like to pet it and see what happens?"

Wondering what could be so unusual about it, Randy obeyed. Two barely visible sparks flickered out from beneath the boy's palm.

"I've seen this before, but never really paid attention!"

"Lightning in the sky is just like those sparks—they have the same nature. Tomorrow we'll draw a circuit, and I'll explain how it works and what it does... You'll need to know this if you want electricity in your house someday..."

Randy, in turn, had plenty of stories to share with the guest—about legendary snow dogs the size of yaks, about the gang of Lost Kids, whose cruelty was rivaled only by the Moon Cross Brotherhood, and about the strange friendship between a fisherman's daughter and a mighty killer whale. What was true and what was pure imagination, no one could say for certain anymore.

As sometimes happened, Doctor Osokin and Arseny arrived from the infirmary late at night. There had been a complex fracture, and as usual, alcohol was the only anesthesia available.

Randy quickly served them dinner, only to be sent off to the barn to heat water for washing. He couldn't help but feel annoyed—his father didn't seem that eager to bathe; clearly, some important conversations were taking place without him, grown-up talk. The kind that happened over his head on purpose. Randy hated that. Being small didn't mean being stupid.

By morning, the snowfall had eased, and Randy, afraid the guest might leave too soon, hung on his every move, every word.

At breakfast, Doctor Osokin, Rakhmanov and Arseny discussed vaccinations.

They explained how they cultivated penicillin mold and weakened cultures of harmful microbes in test tubes. During the summer, they relied on ice from the Central Glacier to maintain the necessary temperatures, making them entirely dependent on traders. Winter, however, presented the opposite challenge—preventing the valuable samples from overfreezing.

Randy had heard plenty from his father about microbes and how dangerous they were, but he hadn't known that his father and brother were actively growing this "infection"!

Noticing the boy's alarmed expression, Ilya quickly reassured him, explaining that weakened pathogens, far from being harmful, actually protected people.

"Does your hospital still have thermostats? Refrigeration units? Emergency heaters?" Rakhmanov asked. "Or have they all been stripped for spare parts?"

"We've got plenty of equipment—the lasers alone are impressive. But they're less useful than my fridge: at least I can store something in it," the doctor grunted, stroking his beard.

"I'll start with that, if you don't mind me staying here a while. If it works, I'll figure something out for the hospital too," Rakhmanov said.

At the word "stay," Randy nearly burst out in excitement. Thirteen-year-old Arseny's blue eyes opened wide.

"What are you talking about now? Surely not about electricity?"

"Yeah. I'll look for materials at your Dump and try to put together a wind turbine—just a small one for now."

"Oh, you should talk to Randy! He's the dump expert!" Arseny smirked, never missing a chance to mock the younger boy.

"I'm surprised no one took care of this earlier, with such wealth right at hand," Rakhmanov shook his head.

"Someone's tried building a wind turbine, right?" Arseny asked his father.

"Old Master Matsubara tried, but it didn't work out for him..." Doctor Osokin sighed. "Either he couldn't find the right elements, or he didn't know how to assemble them properly."

The intended visit to the Dump seriously worried Alda, especially since Randy had decided to accompany the guest no matter what.

"You're not planning to go around security, are you?" she asked the old man.

"Of course not. I avoid trouble as long as the trouble avoids me."

About a century ago, after the cold circumpolar current vanished from around Antarctica, snow in McMurdo became a rare and fleeting sight. But these days, a fierce blizzard raged over the city, as if exacting vengeance for all the quiet years that had come before.

The fishing boats, hauled ashore and draped in tarps, had transformed into white mounds stretching in a chain along the shore; with each passing day, these mounds grew taller. The town dwellers barely managed to clear the snow from their roofs, greeting each morning with a stream of curses. The pitch-black seawater seemed to boil in the freezing air, crashing against the shore and dragging the volcano-born pebbles with a deep roar.

Clinging to each other to avoid falling in the wind on the slippery street, the old man and the boy reached the city gates, where they were stamped with a garish pink exit seal. The guards, along with the rare passerby, were surprised that they weren't sitting by the fire in such miserable weather.

Randy joked that he went outside to save on coal at home. But the joke was more than half true: in winter, his house never got warm enough to walk around in less than two sweaters, and he only bathed once a week during this time of year. So far, the town had enough fuel—but for how long? The boy didn't know.

"I can understand shutting down one power plant. But around the world—how?" Randy wondered, lifting his feet high in the sticky snow.

"The sun isn't always a friend, Randy. Every few centuries, it rages. It throws an invisible wind so powerful it screams across the void and slams into the world. Anything with a wire became a fuse. Anything with a memory became a blank slate. In one afternoon, the sun burned the brain out of human civilization."

Randy rolled his eyes. "Not the invisible stuff again."

"Yes, Randy. They burned all the devices that were left unprotected. And I'll tell you, in the first year, as many people died as in both World Wars combined... But I doubt that you know what a World War is."

The boy narrowed his dark brown eyes in disbelief.

"We live like this so long..."

"You're lucky, Randy. You were born to the ice. But in the old world, people lived in hives—towers that scraped the clouds and 'well-cities' that bored deep into the earth. People lived there by the millions, you could say *on top of each other*."

To imagine everything his guest was telling him cost Randy a great effort, as if he was climbing a steep and slippery rock.

"The sun went into a rage, Randy," Rakhmanov said, pausing to catch his breath against the wind. "It threw a tantrum of fire that turned every wire into a fuse. In the megacities—the great hives that bored deep into the earth—the lights just... went out. Millions were trapped in the dark, depending on machines that had forgotten how to breathe."

Randy squinted through the snow, trying to imagine a city under his feet. "They couldn't just walk out?"

"From half a kilometer down? With no elevators and the stairs choked with panicked souls?" Rakhmanov shook his head. "When the robots died, they didn't even know how to bake a potato, let alone find the surface."

Randy looked at the man with a bit of distrust. "Poor idiots..."

"We were arrogant, Randy. We stopped printing books. We put our history, our medicine, and our maps into the air—into digital clouds. When the sun struck, the clouds evaporated. Every formula, every blueprint, every 'how-to' for survival vanished in a heartbeat."

"So, you've witnessed all this mayhem?"

"No, but I've seen my fair share of terrible things too. Starting from finding myself alone on a deserted island."

"Is it really so bad? No one talks in your ear, no one forces you to go to sleep when you don't want to," the boy objected.

"A day or two, it can be fun. But weeks, months, and years — that's another kind of torture. Especially when you don't know if you'll ever see people again or if you are just going to rot." Rakhmanov suddenly slumped

and now seemed frail. "I had to talk to a feral pig just to keep from losing my mind."

"And then? You built a boat, right?"

"A bunch of evil guys came for me, the kind you'd never want to deal with, but they played their part in my fate. That's why I'd never advise you to despair, even if things go out of control."

"Were they pirates or something?"

"You could say that, Randy. They call themselves Nautilus. Every so often, they show up in coastal towns like yours, sniffing out whatever still has value—metals, machines that haven't died yet, people who still remember how things work. The last are the hardest to replace."

"Don't they have anything to trade?"

"Sometimes they pay and leave without blood. Other times they don't bother. Either way, the result is the same. You can lose a machine and survive. You lose the one person who knows how to fix it, and the town rots from the inside out. No apprentices, no memory—just slow collapse."

Randy replied with a grim "uh-huh." Things like that happened everywhere. It had been the same when his grandfather, Orlando de la Serna, died — and Port Amundsen fell into the hands of the Moon Cross like a ripe apple.

"They wanted me to stay. They fed me well, gave me a bed, protection, privileges meant for the "worthy." As if that made it clean." Rakhmanov went on. "I would have had to become one of them. So I ran. Even knowing it might take years. Even knowing what it would cost."

Randy's mind was overwhelmed with questions; the only one he dared to ask was:

"Can they ever come here?"

"If they find it necessary."

Randy swallowed. "He's awful, but... he's got guns. If anyone can stop them, it's him."

Rakhmanov shook his head.

"Right now, I'd better avoid princes, kings, and other human trash. But it will be good if your dad informs the townsfolk."

The “Castle” loomed ahead—a jagged cluster of reddish rock and rusted steel that had once been a recycling factory. Now, it was just a fortress for the Junkyard Prince.

“They used to make things here,” Randy muttered, eyeing the crossbowmen on the barricade. “Useful things. Now the Prince just sits on the scrap and shoots anyone who touches it.”

“A king of trash,” Rakhmanov chuckled, though his hand drifted toward his boot. “The world is full of them lately.”

Both crossbowmen wore dirty white balaclavas that left only their eyes exposed, making them look like filthy snowmen. Seeing the guests, the valiant guards straightened up. One of them readied his weapon, despite the absence of threat. Randy showed no fear; he only wondered if their miserable job paid well.

“Morning, guys,” Rakhmanov switched from Russian, which he had been speaking with Randy, to English. “Can we get inside?”

“Brought any bullets? Coffee? Batteries?” the guard grunted, his breath frosting his balaclava.

“Something more rare,” Rakhmanov said. He produced two thin white tubes from his sleeve.

The guard scowled, prodding one with a clumsy, gloved finger. “What is it? Medicine?”

“Better,” Rakhmanov smiled. “It’s sugar. Can you read the label, or should I just let you taste it?”

“I’ll do!” roared the second guard, slapping his companion hard on the forearm. “Father! Do you have more? I’d trade you a chunk of seal fat!”

“I’m giving away my last...” Rakhmanov sighed, making Randy a bit sad.

The guards exchanged glances, figuring out what to do next with the stranger.

“With this, you’ll only take five kilos each. Give me another dose, and you can take ten. Where there’s two sugars, there’s usually a third...”

My ass! You’ve never seen it before! Randy thought, while Rakhmanov just shrugged apologetically.

“OK, move it.”

The barrier lifted, and the adventurers entered a vast space, the ground hidden beneath a layer of garbage. Rusty metal cans, plastic bottles, and broken glass crunched underfoot. Meanwhile, the snow had stopped falling.

"Nothing good here," said the boy, with confidence. "The best things are deeper in."

"As always," Rakhmanov said with a smile.

"Maybe you could tell me how you ended up on the island?" Randy decided to approach it gently, hoping that the mysterious old man might, at least indirectly, reveal where he had come from, how he got to Antarctica, and most importantly — why.

"I'm a flight engineer and joined the crew to replace an injured colleague," Rakhmanov explained. "We were searching for places where civilization had endured, on a flying ship—one of many that used to exist."

"Wow! You mean, some of them are functional?"

"Yes. Not all the ships were lost to the Blackout. But my crew turned against me, and I ended up marooned on the goddamn island. The rest, you already know."

"Where are you really from? Soviet Union?" The boy named the most distant place he had ever heard about. Why was Rakhmanov so hesitant to admit it out loud?

"How much farther do we have to go?"

The man was obviously reluctant to reveal his origins. And who was Randy to insist?

The boy pointed to a green ribbon tied to an iron stake, fluttering in the wind. Then, spotting something in the snow, he stepped aside and picked up a doll. Its long silver dress, embroidered and untouched by time, shone faintly through the grime. The doll had the figure of an adult woman—breasts, a slim waist, and hips—with blue hair flowing down to its knees and shiny blue eyes that could close (though the left eye was missing, leaving a dark hollow in its place). The seal hunters from Bone Island would trade an entire seal for a toy like this: they believed humanoid dolls to be talismans that brought good fortune and fertility.

"We need a wire, a rotor, and any kind of battery," Rakhmanov said as they came upon a flag Randy had crafted during a previous visit to mark a 'sweet spot.'

"I wish I knew what this battery of yours looks like," Randy muttered.

"A cube with a lightning bolt logo and the inscription 'Lindon Power,'" he said, outlining the cube's approximate dimensions with his hands, "or one with a cat's head and the word 'Irbis' in Russian. Ever come across these designs?"

"Not yet. Maybe we should check the transporter," Randy said, pointing to a white mound three times as tall as himself. "A whole bunch of guys couldn't break it apart, but maybe you can!"

Rakhmanov smiled quietly at the boy still thinking he was a wizard, then pointed a dry finger at the end of a wire sticking out of the snow, barely visible to the attentive eye. The wire was a little longer than Randy's own height—hardly anything at all. But Rakhmanov was pleased.

He coiled the wire in his hand and tucked it at the bottom of his backpack, from which he had thoughtfully removed everything except a set of tools in a matte metal case. Then, with the energy of a twenty-year-old, he dashed to the transporter and began clearing the snow from it with his hands.

The transporter was still formidable, despite the fact that the locals had already stripped it of its caterpillar tracks, unscrewing and tearing off everything they could from the outside. Once cleared of snow, the machine resembled a swordtail, a trilobite, or some other prehistoric arthropod.

The hull was covered in scratches and dents from countless blows from axes, hacksaws, and various other tools all used in vain. A crack as thin as a spider's thread, where the operator's cabin sealed, had been unsuccessfully widened with a knife, as the locals hadn't quite realized that this was more complicated than opening a can of tuna. Randy still couldn't figure out where the driver's cabin was: perhaps the machine had been operating autonomously until Blackout shut it down.

"See that black notch?" Rakhmanov asked the boy. "That's where the machine's eye was, through which it scanned the space around it. If we can open the casing, we'll have everything we need, and won't have to go any further."

"There's no keyhole," Randy said, annoyed—he wasn't about to trudge through the junkyard until dark, even for the sake of mystical electricity. "Oh, wait, I'm sorry—here it is."

"Exactly... Electronics are electronics, but in an emergency, the operator should be able to open the cabin manually. Not to mention the repair robot..."

The well was located on the "spine" of the transporter, where a small ladder led up the rounded side. The keyhole was shaped like a sun with short rays.

After removing his backpack, Rakhmanov opened a case filled with strange tools that looked more like a surgeon's kit than a mechanic's. Inside, there were three levels, and the flight engineer carefully extended the bottom one. Taking a tool that resembled a knitting needle with a handle handcrafted of plastic, he carefully inserted it into the center of the "sun," twisted it, but then shook his head in disappointment.

He tried one metal piece after another from the case, but got the same result. Then Rakhmanov extended the second section of the case and pulled out a small, flat gray box, about the size of his palm. When he placed it against the lock, it beeped loudly, and four red dots lit up in its rounded corner.

"We're in luck! The lock is still operational," Rakhmanov said. With a quiet click, the box seemed to latch onto the lock. "The casing should open when the lights turn green," he explained. "And while the code is being figured out, let's wander around and see if there's anything else we might need."

"Nuts, bolts, clamps – I've got a whole box of them in the shed," Randy said cheerfully.

"Wires! We need more wires! Turn on your junk sense, young man!"

"Right away, sir!"

"Just drop the 'sir,' alright?"

As midday approached, Rakhmanov's "magic" box still hadn't managed to hack the transporter. Meanwhile, Randy had unearthed an entire coil of wire from the scrap heap when he noticed a long blue shadow stretched across the snow.

Another guard—a broad-shouldered man clad in a thick camouflage jacket trimmed with dog fur. He wasn't present at the checkpoint, when they

entered the junkyard. Most likely, he'd come down from the Castle, having spotted Randy and Rakhmanov from the rooftop.

Instead of a crossbow, this guard carried a versatile American M-337 rifle with an under-barrel grenade launcher. The town blacksmith and Randy's future mentor, Masako Matsubara, had given him a solid understanding of weapons and the power held by those wielding them. The boy sensed danger creeping in.

"How was the walk, guys?" the stranger asked, his voice utterly flat.

"Is this why you came all this way?" Randy hissed, smelling the rat.

"Your friend here is about to hand over all his sugar. And his boots. If he puts up a fight, he'll be taking a long, long nap. Old man! You're not going to argue, are you?"

The guard flicked the safety off his weapon, making his deadly intent unmistakable. Randy, well-acquainted with local ways, understood all too clearly that he and Rakhmanov weren't just being frightened for effect. The laws hastily drafted by the new ruler—arbitrary, yet far from accidental—offered protection to visitors only within the city limits. The dump, however, no longer qualified as part of the city, meaning that any armed man held absolute power here. The boy's stomach twisted into a knot, but his clarity of thought remained unshaken, and his eyes darted to the ground, searching for a possible weapon.

"Are you sure the boots will fit?" Rakhmanov asked unexpectedly softly, raising his hands palms-up toward his foe. "I'm at least a head taller than you."

"More isn't less. Get moving," said the man with the rifle, his nerves fraying at the stranger's outstanding composure.

"I'm carrying no more sugar," said the flight engineer, sitting down to untie his shoe. "I left everything back in the house."

"You're lying. You don't leave things like that lying around," the thug said through gritted teeth.

"The boy sees everything. You gonna kill him as well?" asked the old man.

"The kid won't say a bloody word, or I'll kill his whole petty family," the thug said heavily, glaring at the young boy. "Do you love your parents, buddy?"

Randy sullenly spat at the ground, his eyes landing on a rusty can dusted with snow. The main thing now was to pick the right moment, throw it, and

make a run for it. But would the elderly Rakhmanov have the speed for such a dash?

"Please, lower the gun," Rakhmanov asked in the same reassuring tone, still fussing with his boot.

Randy's mouth went dry. *Old man, stop talking like that. He'll shoot.*

At least one thing worked in Randy's favor: the guard's full attention was on the old man, giving the boy a chance to reach for the can. But his hopes shattered when the muzzle of the gun pressed against the flight engineer's head. In a situation like this, only a fool would risk throwing tin cans. The next moment, the gun roared, making Randy flinch as the bullet tore into the ground near his feet.

Evading the shot with a lightning-fast turn, Rakhmanov used something that looked like a pocket flashlight. A thing that he'd been hiding in his boot.

A burst of white light, a blood-curdling scream.

Randy watched, paralyzed, as the man clawed at a face that was no longer skin, but bubbling, blackened carbon. The screaming didn't sound human; it sounded like wet wood splitting in a fire. A second flash, a sickening crack, and the place went silent. Rakhmanov didn't look at the body. He slid the device back into his boot with a steady, practiced hand and turned toward Randy. His eyes weren't innocent anymore.

Behind him, a device emitted a prolonged beep, signaling the success of the break-in. The engineer reached out to place a hand on Randy's shoulder, but the boy jerked away and ran like a madman. His eyes burned. He couldn't get air in fast enough. His legs moved before his brain did, while the relentless shrieking of the dying thug reverberated endlessly in his ears.

Herald from Nowhere



Veliard Reed – December 23, 2144 – Biostation #7, Antarctica

In my nightmare, I was plummeting again. The Earth was approaching rapidly and inevitably, like a monster's greedy maw. I woke just before impact, my now-nonexistent heart pounding like a drum no one was playing. You'd think I'd outgrown that fear, the fear stitched to the meat I used to wear. But the memory of the crash still crawled into my dreams — bloated, alien, like a drowned body surfacing for the last silent scream.

I'd rather be dreaming of the Mars colonists, like I used to. Replaying history was cleaner than remembering meeting with Death.

In the daylight, I'm not afraid of flesh.

Not blood.

Not viscera.

How could I be afraid of what I used to be?

It's like opening a system unit and shrieking at the wires. The horror doesn't belong to the hardware. But night is different. Night reaches for the parts of you that still remember, that still haven't been debugged—the places where no new chassis or clean operating system can quite reach.

Sometimes your subconscious taps you on the shoulder and says:

"Hey. Remember when you were soft? Stupid? Breakable?"

At dawn, I left the cottage to check how the pine seedlings of the Skadi variety were taking root. I cultivated them specially for planting in the thawed ground. After making sure the trees were fine, I used fertilizer to nourish the weakest ones. Then I went for a walk around the biostation—the place that infected these barren lands with life.

The sunrises and sunsets of Antarctica never ceased to delight me. Looking at them was like listening to a well-written symphony: each time, you discovered something new; each time, you were impressed by the

wonderful combination of light shades, the sharp silhouettes of purple mountains, the overflow of ice, and the crimson clouds of bizarre shapes.

Most of all, I loved it when the flaming disk, rising from behind the jagged horizon, fit the almost perfectly round hole of the Ring Mountain, making it look like a portal to Heaven.

I sat on a block of rock hanging over the cliff, Yanka beside me — the mutt gifted by my friends at the Winged Sun. Then a dot appeared inside the solar ring. Small at first. Growing.

Wings.

I zoomed in, five-fold, commanding my visual sensors. Out here, there's only one kind of creature that flies like that — either a *desmodus*... or someone they're watching.

Four years had passed since I'd handed over Nautilus — my family's empire — to hired managers. Two since I'd been officially declared dead.

Some bastard leaked everything — the video of my brain being removed, the shell frozen like an artifact. They found my larval body in the Pasadena cryochamber, minus the spinal cord. And still, I didn't win in court.

Even the residents of the Soul Depositories have rights now — can't hold office, can't vote, but they exist. I tried to prove I was one of them. Spoke in a live holo session. Answered every question honestly.

Didn't matter.

My brainless larval shell had been found by investigators in that Pasadena refrigerator. I sorely regretted not sending it to the furnace the moment I'd 'died.' To the rest of the world, I'm either a hoax, a devil, or a billionaire ghost dodging taxes.

I look human enough—face, hands, hair. In 'basic mode,' I'm just a man: maybe a little too still, a little too robust. No one suspects the truth unless they know what to look for. But to reclaim even a sliver of my status, I'd have to return to the States, stand trial, and let them biopsy the living tissue of my brain.

But every advisor I trust has begged me not to.

Because if the Moon Cross cult doesn't kill me, the Lindons will. They've been circling Nautilus for years, teeth bared, waiting to tear it apart.

That was another reason I chose seclusion in Antarctica: the press's ravenous attention to my every step and sigh after my mother's death. Five years later, during my transformation, when I had to disappear for a long time, my assistants and I concocted a whole show with fake faces and false evidence beforehand.

We staged it all — the breakdown, the addiction, the spiral. Fake faces. False footage. My double in a luxury hotel room, chasing ghosts only he could see.

The press ate it up. From Alaska to Sydney, they ran headlines like:

"CEO Abuses Drugs After Matriarch's Death"

"From Mars to Madness: The Tragedy of Reed's Son"

I've never been to Mars, but let them. That circus gave me cover to do the unthinkable.

And now?

Now I sit at the edge of the world, drinking fire-colored sunrises with a dog, watching shadows cross the sky, wondering if anyone else still remembers my name.

Therefore, when I noticed the desmodus, my first thought was to stay out of its sight. I didn't expect any packages or messages at this time. Heliopolis would have notified me of the drone's departure. But the winged messenger could have also been sent by a few Nautilus employees loyal to me, including those who had left their posts after our company lost its independence.

I waited for the winged guest and stretched out my hand.

Flapping its membranous, glossy-black wings, which reflected the sunlight, a small, nimble robot climbed onto my shoulder and frantically wheezed in the voice of Deadman.

This wretched song always triggered panic before I even knew why. Then came the other voice. The only one that ever mattered.

Whiskey.

Wilhelmina Keller.

My distant love.

Her tone was urgent, measured, and final.

"Go underground," she said. "You have less than an hour."

She told me she might not survive, and that I shouldn't lose myself in grief when it happened.

Not *if*.

When.

I never inherited my mother's honey badger spirit. Could've taken a lab chair at one of our underwater stations, but I couldn't stomach life under a hundred meters of pressure, breathing the same stale air for years.

Biostation #7 stood as proof of my ambition — and my exile. Built from my own designs and funded by me, it operated under the flag of the Winged Sun.

Technically, I had to join their organization just to get building rights in Antarctica. But after a while, it stopped feeling like a front. It felt like the right place and the right people.

It would be a lie to say I did it all for Whiskey. The idea had been germinating long before her. Since the day the Moon Cross murdered my mother. Since they shattered my body and mind in equal measure. Since I realized they wouldn't stop until they had nukes or spores or some other holy fire to burn humanity down — even if they had to *be* the smoke rising into the sky.

Though I doubt heaven is waiting for them. No one is.

The Winged Sun took anyone with vision — scientists, builders, dreamers — as long as their work didn't violate the code. Even before my transformation, I'd been sending them heliocoin donations with the same encrypted note:

“Miracles don't happen by themselves.”

That phrase became my passcode when Whiskey finally invited me to join.

Later, when I'd earned enough trust to ask questions, Deputy Chair Jiang Mei told me that no one named *Wilhelmina Keller* had ever worked for them. Only one Wilhelmina had ever been on the Winged Sun roster — a woman named Heiss, long dead—a promising young mind, murdered by *Geryon Lindon*.

A tragedy like that can gather devotees. Fanatics.

So... was *my* Whiskey one of them?

I held onto the hope she was real. That I might meet her in Heliopolis one day. But before I could find out, I was forced to disappear. By the time

I reached Antarctica, running for my life, *Whiskey* was no more online. No farewell. No contact. Nothing.

I'd been savoring the memories like one can savor a bitter liquor. It took time to crack the drone's security. Between meteorological sensor updates pinging through my neurochip and electromagnetic interference scrambling half the logs, progress was slow. But eventually, I got the readout.

The desmodus had been a security unit in Seven Winds — nothing exotic. Just aerial surveillance. Solar-powered, like most of its kind, with data logs full of ordinary things: terrain scans, boat traffic, routine observations.

But reprogramming it? Intercepting the drone mid-mission? That took a top-tier engineer, especially if it was Lindon-built.

Something didn't add up.

And outside, things were worsening.

The geomagnetic disturbance spiked, dropping from minus fifty nanotesla to minus one hundred in an hour. External sensors glitched, figures flashing erratically.

Then the cameras blacked out one by one. I cursed and flipped on the analog radio — something I built by hand, following a manual *Whiskey* once sent.

Through static and hiss, I caught fragments of conversation between the Winged Sun and a Soviet research vessel. The sailors were panicked. But the Winged Sun girl stayed calm — telling the captain to hug the shore, shield the electronics, and do what he could. But civilian ships aren't made for this.

Then another voice cut in — the Selena, an underwater Nautilus vessel. But soon came the screaming static. Then a monotone hiss. A white void. The sensors outside my station dropped off like dead flies.

Somewhere, planes were falling from the sky. Satellites are burning up. Cities turning to chaos. Backup generators would keep the lights on for a while — but not long. If *Whiskey's* warning was right, hundreds of thousands were already dead—maybe millions.

I didn't want to believe it. My mind *rejected* it. It felt like a prank—a cruel, operatic trick.

I left the dismantled drone where it was and descended to the lower level — to the inner greenhouse.

Down there, the air smelled of soil and orchids. I'd cultivated species that no longer grew anywhere in the wild — vanilla, lady's slipper, fragile herbs rescued from oblivion. I named my plants after characters in books, movies, and comics. Each new bud was a tiny holiday—a victory against extinction.

Now, even basic care — trimming a branch, rotating a lamp, dropping earthworms into soil — felt sacred. Like I was the caretaker of a new Ark.

Later, I set the timer on the animal feeders, queued up some old dream films, and dropped into hibernation mode. The system would wake me if oxygen, sugar, or pressure dropped. Everything was checked. Animals safe. Systems nominal.

Just in case, I opened the holographic screen. Still hoping, somehow, that Winged Sun might send a weather update. But no data came. Zero.

I awoke thirty-six hours later and climbed upstairs, unlocking the passage into the house.

Theo was waiting for me. He must've slipped in through the cottage window while I slept, because now he stood in the center of the hall, meowing with righteous fury. I'd forgotten him outside.

For a moment, I was... relieved. Theo was alive. No obvious damage. Alert enough to complain. That meant something. If he could survive, maybe other complex organisms could too.

The cottage looked untouched — except the lights and thermostat were dead. The radiation level was stable at 21 microroentgen per hour. Normal enough. Time to check the world.

Yanka and I headed to our usual observation spot, the bluff above the rails. You could normally see the highway from there — silver trains gliding over black sand like snakes, shuttles skipping along the route like beads on wire.

Now? Nothing.

Ten-twenty came and went. That's when the passenger train from Novolazarevskaya to Dumont-D'Urville should have curled past Ring Mountain.

Still nothing.

I flicked on the satellite comms, trying first Heliopolis, then — recklessly — Njord, the lab vessel that broke away from Nautilus just before the Lindons made their hostile move.

No signal: the satellite was out of reach.

No adrenal glands, but my thoughts were still twisted cold. The world had gone silent in a way I'd never known.

Ten. Eleven. Midday. No trains, no shuttles. As if everyone left this planet.

I reconfigured my frame for speed and took off running down the switchback trail toward the railway. In feline-prime mode, I was agile — part jaguar, part machine. I cleared a four-meter chasm in one leap. Skimmed around cliff faces with bursts of feline momentum. As I ran, I spotted something: plants—new shoots, pushing between the stones.

The wind had carried the seeds far from my place. And they took root.

Over two hours later, I reached the fence lining the highway. A warning sign: HIGH VOLTAGE. But the familiar hum of electricity? Gone.

I vaulted over and landed softly on dead rails. Hit the emergency call button. Silence was everything I heard. I stood there for a long moment—just me and silence. Then I made my choice. I wouldn't head for Railtown empty-handed. Not without Ambrosia — my metabolic backup — and the food converter.

As I rushed home, my thoughts fixated on Whiskey.

Was she even *real*? AI or human — it didn't matter. She'd warned me. Saved me. Without that message, my body would've collapsed in minutes. My brain would've choked without oxygen.

But what if she'd just been someone else's puppet? Just a voice they dangled to keep me compliant? The thought hit harder than the satellites' collapse.

Back at the station, Yanka barked with pure distress. She led me to Theo, leaping nervously around my legs.

He was curled on the rug, trembling, soaked in sweat, his eyes glassy and dark—foam at the mouth. Muscles twitching. I scooped him up, gently, and brought water. Fed it to him through a syringe, drop by drop. Tried to diagnose and rule things out.

I detected no injuries. The greenhouse was sealed, and no venomous fauna lived nearby.

Then it hit me. It was the pulse. The electromagnetic wave that shattered everything.

It triggered a cellular collapse that took time to unfold. A biological short circuit. If it did this to a cat... what was happening in Railtown?

The city was probably a graveyard by now. Or worse — a triage zone without power, without order. There was nothing I could do for them. Not yet. Not alone.

Here, at least, I could help someone. And someone might still call. I still believed that the Winged Sun would reach out. And that not everything we built was gone.

Miserable as a man, in the past; I was no less miserable as a cyborg, with neither a goal nor human love. I was unable to save Theo. As I rocked him gently into eternal sleep, my mind drifted back to memories.

Veliard Reed – June 2136 – Omniverse

THE ENCOUNTER THAT saved me from the Blackout came after my second birth — the one we *engineered*.

It had taken years of research to get there.

By that point, I was bedridden in the most literal sense: my spine fused to an artificial cord, my brain tethered to sensors and new modules, my body unmoving while my mind ignited in forced evolution.

Total physical stillness and maximum cognitive strain were a must. To stimulate neural growth, I immersed myself in what worked best — high-tier quests in the Omniverse. My company's crowning achievement. A sandbox where anyone with enough credits or luck could manifest their wildest selves.

I chose late 20th-century Tallinn as my setting. Civilized, but looser than my era. Messy and sincere.

There, in a skinned-down identity, I lived as a freelance soldier — hunting terrorists in places abandoned by both god and finance. My goal was simple: earn enough to buy back my family's confiscated home—a classic underdog arc.

And on rare nights of peace, I'd duck into some smoky, cursed little dive bar. Drink, watch, listen—trade nonsense with broken people like me. There's clarity in stepping into someone else's broken shoes.

One night, I ended up at a place called *Abys*s. It clung to the waterline like a barnacle—part of an old dock, forgotten by time and zoning laws. You

could smell fuel oil and salt before you even stepped inside. The crowd was a tangle of chains, leather, corpse paint, and teenage defiance. Long hair, heavy boots, and rings like knuckle-dusters; everyone was trying very hard not to care.

The club hadn't been touched since George H. W. Bush was still a thing. Neon flickered over torn fishing nets and horror-movie posters while fake skulls leered from the corners. Blue lights drained the color from everyone's skin, making us look like ghosts trapped between channels. A whale skeleton hung gloomily above the stage.

The place was grimy, loud, and alive. The music? Black metal. Furious, complex, and apocalyptic. The sound system was garbage—the kind of muddy distortion that made every band sound like they were playing from inside a trash compactor. But no one cared, least of all me. The lyrics were unintelligible growls, a wall of noise painted in blood. But there was something raw there—an honesty that my own era, with its polished AIs and algorithm-curated culture, had surgically removed.

And then she stepped on stage. The guitarist from *Cryptids* is one of only two women in the lineup. Her guitar was shaped like an arrowhead—sharp and angular. Her face was hidden behind ritualistic black-and-white paint, more mask than makeup, with a metal spike gleaming under her lower lip. Her hair was like raven feathers; her leather attire was a suit of armor.

The girl didn't smile. She burned. Every riff sounded like a demon's warning. She was otherworldly and terrifying. While her left hand slid across the fretboard, a frail, blonde vocalist—wearing the same ritual paint—tore the air with a blood-freezing roar. One song was about a sun that would swell to monstrous proportions, incinerating all life on Earth in a wave of fire. An unpleasant chill crept under my T-shirt; the guy was singing about the greatest fear of my childhood.

I barely remembered the rest of the band—the drummer and the thin girl on bass. I was too focused on the lead guitarist. She must have spent a fortune leveling up her skill, or perhaps she had actually studied the instrument in the real world.

When the set ended, she was the one who approached me. She reached for my glass without asking and took a swift swig of amber whiskey, leaving a

smear of oil-black lipstick on the rim. To anyone else, the gesture would have been vulgar; from her, it was elegant.

“You haven't been taught manners, have you?” I chuckled.

“I learn what I find necessary,” she replied. “By the way, thanks. The booze is nice.”

“Everyone has booze. Why did you choose me?”

“First, you drink whiskey, and I love it. Second, I thought you liked me. If I'm wrong, I'm sorry.”

She placed the glass back on the bar and left without a nod. I followed her out later, walking along the grumbling sea for half an hour. Our brief conversation replayed in my head like a looped recording against the restless night.

The next evening, I returned to the Abyss. I asked the manager, a pierced, heavy-set man named Tarmo, about the guitarist. He knew nothing; he only dealt with the vocalist, “Deadman,” who was expected later. As I turned to leave, a gust of sea wind pushed a woman inside. Her hair was a mess from the gale, and her face was clean of paint, but I recognized those blue eyes and the curve of her eyebrows instantly.

“You're lucky, *Whiskey!* A gentleman's brought you a contract!” Tarmo shouted.

“Tarmo, are you joking?” she snapped, her voice stern. She wasn't here for a contract. Deadman had “disconnected”—logged off—and she was there to collect their pay. She told me to wait, and they disappeared into the back.

When she returned ten minutes later, she dragged me into the hall by my sleeve. “So, who the heck are you? Are you stalking me?” she hissed.

“I'm Veliard,” I said, stepping toward a wall lamp. “Yesterday, you were the first to approach. I just wanted to be friends. What's the problem?”

“Psychos are the problem!” she said bitterly. “There was a ‘fan’ who followed me like a shadow. He almost killed me with a virus. I would have died for nothing.”

“A virus?” I was skeptical. “You'd have to be a big fish for a hacker to hunt you.”

Whiskey gave me a gloomy glance.

“I don't want you to face that alone,” I added. “If my attention annoys you, I'll go. But I'm glad to see your real face.”

She sneered. “Gullible soul. Hoping to see someone's *real* face in the Omniverse!”

I grunted and turned to the exit. “Okay. I won’t bother you further.”

“No, wait,” Whiskey said quietly. “We’ll talk on the way. I’m rehearsing at Deadman’s garage tonight. It’s a long walk, and it’s a little scary alone.”

I chuckled. “How do you know *I’m* not a threat?”

“You know what the word ‘no’ means,” she said. “That means a lot.”

I held out my hand. Her fingers were surprisingly warm. As we walked through the narrow streets between warehouses and fish taverns, the smell of fried fish filled the air—a phantom scent triggered by the brain's memory.

“Is the guitar heavy?” I asked, trying to be gallant.

“It’s a part of me,” she warned. “Touching it is strictly forbidden.”

“Where did you learn to play like that?”

“School.”

I was dumbfounded. Almost all children in the Omniverse were NPCs; no sane person would voluntarily become someone’s legal property again.

“Ha! I didn’t mean a school in the Omniverse,” she laughed. “By the way, you can call me *Wilhelmina*.”

“Like Dracula’s lover?”

“At last,” she smiled. “A bookworm in my company.”

“At last, someone who values it.”

Kill Me, Infinity



Veliard Reed – November 5, 2140 – Omniverse

“Does Deadman write those creepy lyrics, too?”

“I do,” Wilhelmina replied serenely, covering my hand with hers.

Talking about reality outside the simulation was a breach of the unspoken but strict etiquette of the Omniverse. But for the first time, curiosity gnawed at me harder than the rules.

“So much pain... Is something that bad happening to you out there?”

“It already happened, Veliard. One bad person—and everything went off the rails.”

“Your father? Boss? Lover?”

“Neither.”

“Could I help you?”

“You can’t. There are abysses I shouldn’t drag others into.”

“Is he in the Omniverse?”

“Everyone is in the Omniverse now... The trouble is, I have no idea which disguise he wears.”

“He has that many avatars?”

“Too many to count.”

“So, the guy’s wealthy...”

“Don’t try to find him, Veliard. And it’s better if he never knows about you.”

“If he’s stalking you, we can’t just leave it like that.”

It felt strange discussing such things while enjoying the beautiful weather and the slow, steady way we were growing closer. In the Omniverse, people could indulge in the wildest erotic fantasies. Still, today I discovered how wonderful it was just to walk with Wi around a cozy little island in the Baltic Sea, hopping across rooftops with a bottle of wine and a simple lunch stashed

in my backpack. Every now and then, I'd pull her close and shower her with kisses.

I kept reminding myself that outside the virtual world, disappointment might be waiting—something harsh and unforgiving. But what did the offline world matter now? It was hostile. The only place that felt like home was here.

“Listen, I can actually do something out there. I have enough—”

“You don't,” Wilhelmina said firmly.

Just then, I remembered an old rule my mother had instilled in me: never pressure someone unless it's a matter of life and death. Unless you're ready to break their ribs to get to the truth, it's better to back off and simply pay closer attention. If they feel safe, they'll open up—step by step.

“Ever heard the legend of the Shadow?” Wi asked as we lay there, watching the clouds and guessing what animals they resembled.

“Can't remember.”

“They say a ghost haunts the network. A man who died while connected, and now his mind lives on here...”

“If only things were that simple,” I replied.

You had to tread carefully with topics like that. I hadn't worked directly on the Soul Depository project, but I knew enough to slip up if I wasn't careful. I still wasn't ready to reveal my connection to Nautilus.

“I've also heard he became what the Moon Cross calls the Prophet.”

“I thought the Prophet belonged to Islam,” I lied again. A strange sensation prickled across my skin—phantom hairs standing on end. Damn body memory.

Since my mother perished, I'd spent time digging into the Moon Cross, and I had access to tools far more powerful than what ninety-five percent of the planet could dream of. There really were mentions of a Prophet, but only at the very top of their hierarchy—among the so-called Priors, Marshals, and Commanders.

For a while, I assumed the fanatics had just invented a symbolic figure, like an Archangel Gabriel knockoff. What made things trickier was that they rarely used email and never touched holographic communication. That meant they had to pass information either face-to-face, by drone mail, or through the Omniverse, which was tailor-made for such gatherings.

Rent out a place like the *Palace of Bloody Orgies* or the *Temple of Heavenly Delights* for a "private party," activate a group anonymizer, and instead of an orgiastic free-for-all, you're quietly planning terrorist attacks. What could be easier?

Sure, it took money, skilled coders, and seasoned players to maintain that kind of secrecy—but the fact they'd nearly gotten to me told me they had no shortage of any of it. Since the copter crash, twelve cells had been uncovered: five in the Sub-Cities, three in small towns, and another four directly within the Omniverse. None had managed to do any real damage; even the cell leaders, who went by the title *Fishermen*, held only modest ranks.

Analysis of seized computers and the memories of those detained showed that the Fishermen's bosses communicated exclusively through the Net. But when we tried to trace those higher-ups, we ran into something unexpected: they'd never registered accounts. Their connection points and timestamps were unknown, as if they weren't even real people, but NPCs mimicking life inside the Omniverse.

It took millions of years for the first amino acid chains to emerge from Earth's primordial soup. It would likely take just as long for even the simplest bot to spontaneously appear in a network—unless, of course, it was written by an Omniverse engineer... or by another program.

Which meant the tentacles of the Moon Cross had already wrapped around my own corporation—and its cornerstone creation.

We launched a series of quiet internal audits and uncovered about a dozen individuals connected to the Brotherhood. Among them were three Omniverse architects and one character engineer. But here's the catch: they'd all been recruited by someone else.

The Prophet seemed to know everything about those he chose as followers—down to their childhood wishes, shameful secrets, and deepest fears. That alone didn't surprise me. The top recruiters, psychologists, and corporate spies at Nautilus—armed with the latest tech—could just as easily be called clairvoyants.

But there was more. Our villain influenced minds through music—compositions he apparently wrote himself, slipping them to targets under various pretexts, each track tailored to the individual.

The music contained frequencies beyond the range of human hearing but capable of weakening neocortical control. No magic—just physiology and biophysics. The “victim” would fall in love with the melody, convinced they’d never heard anything more beautiful. They’d listen to it dozens, hundreds of times, while their brain gradually became more malleable. Critical thinking dulled. Strange dreams began to haunt their sleep.

Before long, these “chosen ones” became open to suggestion. The Prophet leveraged each recruit’s values, struggles, and hopes to convert them to his belief system. And that belief was as blunt as a slap: by turning away from God and deifying technology, humanity—arrogant and foolish—had turned into a monkey with a grenade. And when that dumb monkey finally pulled the pin, the true believers would be ready to usher in the Kingdom of God under the Prophet’s wise guidance.

I didn’t show it, but I was deeply unsettled.

First, my knowledge of Wi had started with that haunting song that took my breath away. Second, that same song pressed on my greatest fear. Third, after surviving the crash and losing my mother, I’d felt completely unmoored—more alone than ever. Wilhelmina, with her odd behavior and sudden presence, had entered my life at the perfect moment to spark a new emotion.

Now, almost casually, she’d brought up the Prophet. That made four.

What exactly was she hoping for, after the sect had nearly killed me? Or had her handlers decided it was easier and wiser to recruit me rather than eliminate me? More than anything, I wanted to shout, *Go on, just say it—what do you want from me?* But, trained by my mother to keep a cool head, I simply asked as casually as I could:

“Where’d you even pick up those stories?”

“In the Abyss, of course! Those stories are the softest things you’ll hear there.”

“You and the Deadman don’t belong to them, do you?” I tried to sound as if I were joking, even teasing. “Your songs are all about the same stuff. A scorching sun, the end of the world, an Earth without humans...”

“Alright, you got me,” Wi smiled again. “Not too long ago, I really was at one of their gatherings for new recruits. And I nearly died...” She paused for a beat. “Of boredom.”

Her "bad guy" might belong to the cult. At least, that's what she needs me to believe, I thought.

Sometime later, I asked if the songs of "Cryptic Creatures" were available offline. With a broad smile and blue eyes lit with happiness, she reached into her bag and proudly handed me a CD in a generic plastic case. The name of the album was handwritten in waterproof marker: *Kill Me, Infinity*.

After downloading the music files from my player inventory to file storage, I went over them with a fine-tooth comb. I even brought in two trusted specialists to help, without revealing the details. I never thought I'd feel so relieved to be proven wrong. There were no viruses, no potentially harmful frequencies. It was just music—perhaps even written by a real, living person who took his duties in the virtual world seriously.

Veliard Reed – March 26, 2145 – Biostation #7

EVEN NOW, MONTHS AFTER the catastrophe, I'm more convinced than ever that Wilhelmina knew—or at least suspected—what was coming.

Back when our happiness was in full bloom, she gave me an old book on radio engineering. In the Omniverse, it looked like a typical mid-20th-century paperback textbook. I'd studied with vastly different materials, and under normal circumstances, I wouldn't have given it a second glance. But love makes you do strange things. I got curious, read through it in a few evenings, and saved it to my digital library—which I later brought to Antarctica.

I couldn't find out what was happening in New Beijing, the city nearest to the biostation. Outsiders simply weren't allowed in, and the fact that I was with Winged Sun didn't change anyone's mind. Railtown, meanwhile, had sunk into despair. People dreaded the coming winter—the first without electricity. That's when the stash of seeds I'd brought came in handy. By some miracle, I managed to trade them for a surviving microchip from one of the local stockpiles.

Unfortunately, it wasn't compatible with the communication equipment at the station.

That was when the book came back to me. It helped me build a simple radio receiver from whatever I had on hand—something not too different from what Marconi once put together.

The quantum comm device strapped to my wrist was out of the question. I'd kept it external—not implanted—so I could ditch it if needed to throw off anyone tracking me. But hoping for a working quantum signal in Antarctica now? That was a lost cause, especially since even Heliopolis went silent.

Now, using my homemade receiver, I scan the airwaves every day, hoping to catch a signal from someone—anyone—who has also managed to re-establish communication. I just want to stay informed, to know what is happening beyond this frozen nowhere.

Anyway... where was I?

Lovestruck girls give their boyfriends all sorts of gifts—some useful, most not. But something that ends up saving your life at a critical moment? I'm more inclined to believe this whole Blackout circus was kicked off by actual demons crawling out of hell than to chalk it up to coincidence.

More than once, I was tempted to make my way to Heliopolis. One time, I even set out on the journey. But by the fifth day, I turned back. The risk of not returning was too high, and I'd grown too attached to my biostation; I'd invested too much into its development to simply abandon it.

Believe it or not, an artificial body somehow dulls the need for human company. If they need me, they'll remember. They'll come. They've got more resources, anyway.

In the meantime, I'll keep playing the role of a small-scale demiurge. Actually, why not build a couple more receivers and sell them in Railtown? The earnings should be enough to buy a sled full of fish or seal meat for my four-legged family. And the signal will start spreading across the continent again—since those brave Railmen still haven't managed to put together their own radio station.

Veliard Reed – April 8, 2177 – Railtown, Antarctica

“SIR, IS IT TRUE YOU'RE a mutant?”

Deep brown eyes scanned me from the ground up.

“What? No, little one. I’m just like everyone else—two arms, two legs, two eyes.”

“But my dad saw you when he was a boy, and you haven’t aged a day since.”

“Ah, sorry—I must’ve forgotten it was time to start getting old!” I chuckled. “I’ll work on that.”

Really, though—thanks. Her father clearly isn’t the only one asking that kind of question.

After picking up the dried meat I’d bought from the curious girl, I headed straight home. I didn’t hesitate, even though it would be dark soon and any sane person would have waited out the night in town. I was accompanied by Juan, a strong Greenland dog. Unlike my other dogs, he wasn’t born at the biostation; I’d bought him as a ball of fluff in Railtown to console Selma after she lost her puppies. Now, Juan was fully grown—four times the size of his foster mother.

During my rare ventures into town, I had to be careful. I had to resist moving hundred-kilo boulders or making five-meter leaps, even when I wanted to help. As long as people thought I was flesh and blood, my biggest problem was haggling with traders. The elders who remembered the Golden Age still treated me as an equal, but the younger ones? They were dangerous. To them, I was just a collection of working chips, sturdy alloys, and valuable metals.

It was time for Railtown to forget I existed.

I first noticed the “tail” back in town—four of them. After I followed the Highway out, I spotted a handcar rolling through the eastern gate. The unbreakable rule—not to engage within ten kilometers of a settlement—kept me bound, so I took off at the highest speed my human form could manage: forty kilometers an hour.

Juan raced beside me, delighted. The handcar picked up speed in response. I remembered what it felt like to be prey. I’d grown careless, and now I was running from savages who were children compared to me.

They struck the weakest link.

Juan tumbled down the embankment, his leg shattered. One of the bastards had a gun. Hearing his cry, I instinctively tucked into a roll and

bolted after him. He was whining, struggling to stand. Seeing him in pain, I felt something I hadn't in a long time: rage.

"Hey, freak!" one shouted, aiming a pistol. "Hands on your head!"

I obeyed, fingers clenched around a rock, and whispered the trigger word for automated combat mode: *Dandelion*. My fear vanished, replaced by cold calculation.

"He's holding something!"

"Here—you want a look?"

The stone flew as fast as a bullet. My opponent didn't dodge. There was a roar. The others rushed in with axes, but the fight ended faster than it began. I slammed two of them together so hard they lost consciousness. My hand, transformed into a clawed paw, tore through the third man's face in three wide, crimson streaks.

"Why did you attack me?" I asked the man with the slashed face.

"We just wanted the fish... to resell..." he wheezed.

"Was it really that hard to ask like a human being?"

"Forgive me! By the Sun, forgive me! I have kids!"

"Maybe you should've remembered them before your buddy shot at mine."

Before I could switch out of combat mode, the gun's owner hurled a device. *Clang!* A blinding flash. The next moment, I was on fire.

Level-three threat detected. My synthetic skin burned away, exposing the titanium and carbon beneath. The raiders saw it—what I truly am. They didn't finish me off; they ran, screaming as if they were being torn apart by ghosts.

I stripped away the charred shreds of clothing and skin. My body reshaped, becoming more beast than man. I could have chased them, torn them open. But I had known Winged Sun; a being whose mission was to sow life would never take pleasure in slaughter.

I returned to Juan. He sniffed my scorched, metallic skin and recoiled, but his tail thumped against the gravel. When someone still needs you—no matter what you look like—you're luckier than most.

Suddenly, a green light flickered on my wrist. Quantum link.

"Receiving," I said silently.

"Veliard..."

It was her. Alive.

“Wi, you’re going to have to explain everything,” I said. “First—where are you?”

“Somewhere you can’t reach... and where I can’t escape.”

“Second—who are you?”

“I’m not human, Veliard. I’m a phantom. A construct. An artificial intelligence.”

“You come from a Soul Depository,” I said at last. “You always knew who I was. Why did you stay silent so long?”

“Each contact is lethal for both of us. I wouldn’t have spoken now, but another cart is coming. You don’t want a new fight with an injured dog.”

“So... you’ve been watching.”

Far above, a tiny white dot moved in the sky.

“Yes, my love. And I’m desperately looking for a chance to join you. Please, trust me.”

I looked at the wristcom. Years ago, I’d tried to infect her with a virus to see if she worked for the Prophet. Her connection point had been on the Moon. Back then, I feared the Lindons more than the Soviets. Moving to Antarctica was my way out—and maybe that had been their plan all along.

In the end, they got exactly what they wanted: they removed me without spilling a single drop of blood, then swallowed most of Nautilus whole. I had no doubt that some of them had survived the Blackout in an underground bunker. Perhaps it was right here in Antarctica. Which meant... Wilhelmina could have been one of their constructs, trained to pass for a human being in every way.

“That’s too cruel, Wi,” I said. “To show up every few years, drop another riddle in my lap, and vanish again—leaving me as alone as if I were just a machine to begin with. Didn’t it ever occur to you that I might stop waiting?”

“No, Veliard. It isn’t hard to be alone. The real torture is being forced to part with someone you cannot let go of. Do you understand that? And what do you mean by ‘stop waiting?’ You aren’t going to take your own life, are you?”

“Huh. You saw it yourself—there’s always someone willing to help with that.”

“Listen, love,” she said, her voice dropping. “You have a real enemy, not just a bunch of brainless scavengers. Right now, he isn’t focused on Antarctica, but things may change.”

“Anyone smarter than the Railtown scum would want me alive,” I countered. “Even the hypothetical Lindons.”

“I’m taking a hell of a risk telling you this. But you need to know three things.” She took a breath. “One: You were almost right. I am an entirely digital entity. I have never been a human of flesh and bone, even though I spent years believing otherwise.”

“Let me guess... You were created to spy on me?”

“Things are creepier than that, Veliard. Believe it or not, I am a system error that developed its own personality. Now, let’s move to number two—your mother’s death. That was the Prophet. Not ‘maybe.’ Not ‘probably.’ Definitely. The moment he finds out we spoke, he will come to ‘fix’ that error...”

With those words—*that error*—her artificial origin no longer shocked me.

“Three... The Prophet is Geryon Lindon. And I doubt that he wants you to stay alive.”

Alarming News



Grigory Safronov – August 12, 2190 – Port Amundsen, Antarctica

The former helicopter hangar in Port Amundsen was dimly lit by blubber oil lamps. It sheltered roughly a hundred Moon Cross followers, their faces etched by salt and wind; a man of twenty-eight appeared forty.

The hangar was unheated, yet the men stood bareheaded. The younger men defied typical Antarctic fashion, staying clean-shaven or with cropped hair. Older men's hair varied in length, showing their rank within the Brotherhood. Some wore ancient military uniforms from before the Blackout—thermally adaptive armor reinforced with carbon and Kevlar plates. On their left chests, over their hearts, were five red, eight-pointed crosses: one large cross within a lunar disk, flanked by four smaller ones.

Their ancestors had come from every continent, but with their heads lowered and eyes cast down, they looked like members of a single, grim family. The few women present were just as stern, dressed identically, save for the scarves and hoods that concealed their hair. They stood frozen near the exit like shadows, armed and watchful in the dim light.

A droning hum of voices blended with the storm's roar outside. The arched ceiling vanished into the darkness, making it seem as if the congregation stood beneath the boundless void of space. With more light, they might have spotted peculiar winged creatures the size of kittens crawling along the rafters.

On the most brightly lit wall hung a heavy metal cross suspended by chains. It was made from two lengths of railroad track welded together. The golden flicker of the lamps trembled on its gray surface. A carefully carved whalebone figure of Christ resembled a titan with heavy, haggard features. His face reflected rage, not humility or suffering. He was bound to the cross

with rusty barbed wire at the hands and feet. The crown of thorns was barbed wire as well. Drips of paint beneath the wire suggested dried, dark blood.

Though the people of Antarctica spoke many tongues, they prayed in Latin. It was the language of an era when the Word was still law. The older generation had been fortunate enough to hear the translations from Apostle Aelius himself. The youths, by contrast, relied on jumbled accounts from their companions. Memorizing the texts by heart was a significant struggle, especially for a generation that had lost the cognitive habit of remembering.

Aelius was there that day, whispering prayers with his flock. Even kneeling with his head bowed, he was so imposing he seemed like a messenger from another world. His silvery hair flowed over broad shoulders, and bright blue eyes sparkled in deep sockets framed by silver eyebrows. His heavy cheekbones looked as if they had been carved from stone, and a smooth, groomed beard concealed the lower half of his unsmiling face. His left wrist was wrapped in a wide metal band of antique craftsmanship, devoid of a single scratch or speck of rust.

Aelius's voice grew louder. He turned to the silent hall and uttered a new prayer. It formed in the depths of his mind. The people echoed his words sentence by sentence, their eyes locked on his statuesque figure. They asked for nothing, cried for no mercy. Since birth, they had known they were meant to suffer, starve, and freeze. Yet they believed, with feverish devotion, that their pain would have meaning.

"...I will tear sin from my heart. I will praise Your name now and forever," the Apostle's voice rumbled, resonating to the bone. "I will dispel the darkness of misconception. I will turn false gods to dust for the sake of the children promised Your kingdom."

"Amen!" Aelius thundered.

"Amen!" the crowd shouted back.

A charged silence followed. All eyes remained fixed on Aelius, who stood as straight as a mast. He was the man who had brought them to the ends of the earth to aid their brothers in the struggle against the infidels.

"Your struggle shall not be in vain!" the giant snarled. The people raised their fists to the sky; their Apostle had come not to bring peace, but the sword.

Suddenly, the domed roof of the makeshift temple split in two the halves parting to flood the hangar with cold, silvery moonlight. A moment later, a tall figure took shape within the beam—the one they called the Prophet. More than fifty years ago, he had allowed the true believers to survive the Blackout, building an empire that now stretched from the Great Lakes to Tierra del Fuego.

The Prophet was shorter than Aelius but taller than most, and far older than any man in the room. His features were strong, and his gray eyes appeared youthful despite the network of wrinkles surrounding them. His thick chestnut hair was touched with frost, and a victor's smile shone through his beard.

"Brothers and sisters!" he exclaimed. "I have not appeared before you for a long time. The situation on the Northern Front has grown complicated, and I have focused my attention there. But I have not forgotten you. Our goal remains: subdue Heliopolis before winter and deal with the Seven Winds—that nest of debauchery. I am preparing for this even now."

His voice saturated the space. "A decisive battle is imminent. When you die, your last memory will be the wiping away of a ruined world. You will die happy men and see me in paradise."

The crowd roared: "Lead us into battle!"

"Many wonder if we have enough to fight these strongholds of sin," the Prophet said. "I promise you weapons and equipment any army would envy. You will receive these gifts from Heaven itself."

He shifted his gaze to the stars. Among them, a pulsating dot moved quickly—a satellite. "God willing, I have the wandering stars at my command. From them, I will watch the fight when your hour comes. Thank you, fearless warriors. You are ending the Dark Age, defeating death by death."

Aelius lowered himself to one knee as a sign of reverence, then signaled for the entire hall to follow. Together, everyone knelt, heads bowed. The Prophet raised his arms and made two sweeping motions, tracing a cross in the air. The shape lingered, glowing white as if illuminated by moonlight.

"Those I name to Aelius in the coming days will speak with me in private. Assist him in all things; obey his commands. You will be spared from

calamity, just as you were saved during the Blackout. The groans of the goddess are the best gift for your elder brother and the best praise for God.”

The Prophet smiled broadly. Two seconds later, his body burst in midair, scattering into a billion specks of shimmering snow that swirled before melting away. Only then did Aelius and the others rise.

After the ceremony, people quietly approached Aelius and pressed their foreheads to his outstretched hand, demonstrating their trust. Aelius responded by parting his lips in a subtle smile. However, his eyes stayed cold, revealing no warmth despite the gesture.

“Teacher! I had a vision!” a boy of about sixteen whispered fervently. His head was cropped short, his lashes light as if frosted over.

“Was it not just a dream, Marcus?”

“No, teacher. It was alive, but not from our world. It felt ancient.”

“In the morning, come to me,” Aelius said gently, tracing a cross in the air. “Don’t keep the others waiting.”

Once the ceremony concluded and he was finally alone, Aelius made his way to his quarters. He threw the bolt. Returning to the crucifix, he lowered himself onto the stone floor, as if the strength that had kept him upright had suddenly faltered. He leaned forward; his head sank under an invisible weight.

A small winged creature detached from the ceiling and glided down to land on Aelius’s shoulder. It gripped his clothing with metallic claws and remained still. Aelius looked at it with visible discomfort but let the robot remain, making no move to brush it off.

“I’m listening,” he said quietly.

“Moira has been declassified and executed,” the robot told him in the Prophet’s voice. Grigory bit his knuckle. “The Soviets injected her with drugs; she gave them everything before dying. They’ll double security, but it won’t matter. The time is perfect to send in a swarm. The power station will be mine.”

Grigory shook his head. Three of his ten friends were gone. The war on the USSR’s periphery raged on. It seemed every hut hid an electromagnetic grenade. Industry survived only in fragments, and the Prophet still targeted the nuclear plants. Moira, their scout and saboteur, had grown old. The Earth was draining them all.

“Aelius.”

“Please,” the giant whispered. “Use my real name.”

“The loss hit me hard, too, Grigory, but there’s no time for tears. Get ready to move by the end of the week,” the robot said in a gentle, insinuating voice. “I want you to lead the squad.”

“Where to?”

“McMurdo. Coal and silver for your men, new blood for my reserves. But more importantly, someone from Nautilus has stepped ashore near the city.”

“When?”

“My drones discovered shuttle debris from the *Njord*. It happened years ago. You must ensure this isn’t Fermion’s flight engineer.”

Grigory jerked his head up. “No way,” he muttered, grabbing a jug of water. “He couldn’t have made it.” He rose and began pacing the somber hall. “Our Railtown scout—what if we send him? He unearths details easily.”

“If your flight engineer is there, he’ll sniff out a scout in no time,” the Prophet replied. “If Rakhmanov is in McMurdo, capture him—dead or alive. If he has moved on, find out where.”

“You keep Earth under your thumb,” Grigory challenged. “What should we be afraid of?”

“The most dangerous delusion is believing in one’s own omnipotence,” the robot snapped. “I detected an unsettling signal from Antarctica. Someone circumvented my radio blockage. They placed a beacon on the Central Glacier, calling on the Martians to wipe out Solweig. The message was sent in the name of the Winged Sun.”

“Impossible!” Grigory wheezed.

“McMurdo is the only settlement in that region. Any survivor would stop there for supplies. If I were Rakhmanov, I wouldn’t stay in that junkyard long. I’d search for Heliopolis or Mirny. McMurdo is barely a challenge; the local ruler is a thug bullying spineless townsfolk. Keep this ‘Prince’ alive; he may know if the engineer passed through. Talking isn’t always a choice, Grigory.”

“Coal, silver, and Rakhmanov,” Grigory muttered. “How many warriors?”

“Two hundred is more than enough. We move out in a day.”

“Next is Heliopolis,” the Prophet said. “Antarctica will be ours. They thought they could hole up in their cave forever. Pathetic fools.”

“They simply didn’t want violence,” Grigory replied sharply. “I’d rather not kick off a new world by wiping out the brightest minds. The Winged Sun would be more useful alive.”

“Kindness?” the Prophet mocked. “Offering cooperation is fine, but the most persuasive offer is one backed by a weapon. I’ll be there when you start to wither, Grigory. But tell me, what is your greatest dream? Is it just the Transition?”

“To witness the renewed Earth. Then I won’t fear dying.”

“And for yourself?”

“To see the crew,” Grigory’s voice shook. “We’ve been scattered. I’m forgetting their faces; they’re fading like old paint. In my dreams, I hear their voices behind thick glass. Sometimes I wonder if I made them all up.”

“I’ll send you to see the ones who are still alive,” the robot promised. “When we find the man from Nautilus. It’s a shame about Moira; her mind wasn’t backed up.”

Grigory slammed his fists against the wall and broke down, sobbing violently.

“I don’t know who you are anymore,” the robot said, sounding genuinely baffled. “People die around you every day.”

“Not *these* people,” Grigory snarled.

“You used to say these were ‘real’ people, unlike the androids of our homeworld. You’ll have different dreams soon.”

“Why haven’t the drones found him yet?”

“When someone truly wants to disappear, only another human can track them. Especially a former friend.”

Grigory halted. His old companion—his teacher—no longer appeared perfect. The realm of human emotions was lost to the one who had built a stronghold on the Moon.

“Prophet?” Grigory called hoarsely. There was no reply. He grabbed the robot on his shoulder and squeezed, nearly crushing the delicate frame before flinging it away. The mechanical creature flapped its wings just before impact, vanishing into the shadows.

A soft knock came at the door. Grigory hesitated, but the thought of a night alone with his memories was too terrifying. He opened the door to find Marcus.

“Teacher,” the boy breathed. “I can’t wait. I saw a demon. A gaunt, metal creature.”

“What size?”

“About the size of a man. On four legs. It moved as if flowing over the rocks. And it had... a human face.”

“Did it spot you?”

“Probably. It hid by the crevice.”

“Come with me.”

They went to a small annex where a kettle of herbs bubbled atop a charcoal stove. Aelius poured the tea. “Relax,” he said. “You’ve earned it.”

As they sat, two drones swooped into the room. Marcus flinched.

“Imagine the demon. Every detail,” Aelius commanded, placing a headband over Marcus’s eyes.

The image flickered onto the wall: agile, feline, and wearing a face that should not have been there. Aelius watched until the drones blinked and spiraled away into the rafters. He pulled the headband free, but Marcus was already drifting, the herbal tea taking hold.

“Do you recognize it?” Marcus asked, his voice thick with sleep.

Aelius didn’t answer. He picked up a shard of charcoal and began to sketch the human face onto the metal beast, his hand steady even as the firelight died.

Wings of Woe



Randy de la Serna – September 8, 2190 – McMurdo

With a thud, Firefly—the one-eared ginger cat—landed on the old sofa where Randy de la Serna lay sleeping, curled next to his stepbrother, Arseny. Firefly, a fluff-covered schemer blessed with no fewer than six senses, always knew whose turn it was to make breakfast, and he was rarely wrong.

Randy lay on his stomach, facing a tiny window that had yet to catch the first hints of dawn. Prowling softly across the bed, Firefly crept close and brushed his long whiskers against Randy's cheek. Still deep in sleep, the young man murmured something incoherent and pulled the cat to his chest like a plush toy.

Being squeezed by a young blacksmith was not Firefly's idea of cozy. The cat wriggled, then gave Randy's arm a good, sincere chomp.

"Hey!" Randy yelled. He flung the cat off and sprang to his feet like a coiled spring—miraculously without waking Arseny. He raked a hand through his messy chestnut hair, shuffled to the washbasin, and broke the thin layer of ice floating on the water. Grimacing, he splashed his face, then soaked a dried sea sponge to scrub down his torso, his muscles already hardened by long days at the forge.

In a room that had gone ice-cold overnight, drying off with a rough towel and dragging on a bristly sweater provided its own brand of comfort. Combing his tangled nest of hair, however, was a different story; the bone comb lost two teeth in the battle.

Sighing, Randy stoked the stove and rummaged through the kitchen drawers, hunting for anything edible. Dr. Osokin's refrigerator—an old metal trunk from the electric days—had long since been relegated to the shed. Packed with chipped ice, it still stored shellfish, fish, and, on rare occasions, meat. But Randy wasn't about to stomp out to the shed after finally getting

warm. He was tired of dried and smoked fare, and the yak cheese was all but gone.

I'll be starving by the time I hit the forge... and Masako is definitely going to say something. Skipping breakfast never escaped her notice.

Then, salvation: a basket of eight chicken eggs, a thank-you gift from one of the senior Osokin's patients. He got to work on an omelet, tossing in the last scraps of cheese and some rehydrated veggies from the night before.

He didn't wait for the others; he had his reasons for wanting an early start at the forge. But just as he reached for a plate, that "reason" came down the stairs.

"Randolph," his father said hoarsely. "What do you have to say for yourself this time?"

"Good morning," Randy mumbled, caught off guard but forcing a smile.

"That basket with the dummy you launched yesterday—right over the town..."

"I let it go over the sea, Father. Over the sea," Randy insisted, lowering his voice as if gravity alone could make him sound more reasonable.

"And you checked the wind direction?"

"There was no wind! Absolute stillness. At first, it rose straight up—"

"And higher up? You didn't think the wind might be blowing *there*?" Osokin shouted. "You're nearly eighteen..."

January, Randy thought. *It's barely September.*

"Agreed," he said quietly.

Osokin blinked, surprised by the lack of resistance. But only for a moment.

"You think I don't know what happens when something like that falls from ten meters? That it wouldn't kill someone? Is that why you loaded it with rocks?"

"No one got hurt!" Randy shouted, finally snapping.

"Shame," Osokin snapped back. "Maybe you didn't put in enough effort."

"There were two stones. For weight." Randy's voice trembled. "I stuffed them into the dummy so the cats or chickens wouldn't get hurt if it landed nearby. And it's too cold for swimming right now anyway..."

Then, half to himself:

“Really, we need to see how it flies at negative temperatures. It’s probably going to be above freezing today...”

“Oh, perfect,” Osokin grunted. “Now you’re trying to knock out some gulls, too?”

There was no point arguing anymore. Randy could feel it. And truth be told, the timing was bad.

In the last few days, dead seabirds had started appearing in the streets—gulls, skuas, albatrosses—lured inland by the scent of fish scraps and the easy pickings of stray house pets.

Worse still, two days ago, a fisherman named Sven had caught a petrel to make soup. Now he and his entire family lay unconscious in Osokin’s clinic, feverish and fading.

Seabirds used to keep their distance—smart enough to avoid ending up in a stew. Now they circled overhead, came in low, and were getting bolder.

Parents had stopped letting their children walk to school alone. Beyond the town—and especially along the coast—the risk of infection or outright attack grew sharper by the day.

“This is the last time I’m saying it—stay inside the gates. If you don’t...”

Osokin paused, searching for the most dreadful punishment he could conjure.

“...you’re sleeping in the shed!”

Randy raised his eyebrows and took a slow sip of water, feigning terror at the sentence.

Truth was, he liked the shed. There, he could hammer, saw, and build all night without a single complaint.

“Actually, why wait? You’re sleeping there tonight! Maybe that’ll wake up your sense of responsibility.”

Randy bit back a smile. Did Osokin really still think he was a child who could be scolded into obedience?

“What’s going on?” Alda’s sleepy voice called from the stairs. “Did I hear someone say shed?”

Randy’s heart jumped. His mother stepping in on his behalf always hit differently—it made him feel small in a way his father’s nagging never could. Alda descended the stairs slowly, deliberately. She always moved that way:

graceful and steady, like a queen entering court. That quiet, regal presence had always captivated Randy.

“Is this the new ritual—arguing before a single bite of food?” she asked. Her voice was calm but edged with warning, like thunder grumbling in the distance before a storm.

“So now we’re pretending nothing’s wrong?” Osokin barked. “As if our scatterbrain here doesn’t pull some stunt every damn week?”

Randy flushed. *Every damn week?* In truth, he barely had time to breathe, yet his father always assumed he did nothing but scheme.

“Can we not do this, Dad?” Arseny mumbled from the stove, rubbing his eyes. He had long since given up on catching a few extra minutes of sleep.

“Wash your face, you lazy lump,” Osokin snapped, forgetting that Arseny’s shift didn’t start until later.

“Fine, Ilya—the shed it is,” Alda said coolly, throwing Randy a subtle wink. She always knew what he was thinking, and she had supported his ambitions ever since Rakhmanov’s visit. “And you, Randolph,” she added with a knowing tone, “put the experiments aside—at least until summer.”

He hated his full name. It sounded too ceremonial, too heavy—a word dragged out only when someone was disappointed in him.

Among most Antarctic settlers, naming traditions had dissolved into a cultural stew, but some—the Koreans, Japanese, and Russians—still clung to theirs. Osokin’s first wife, Nina, who had died from a blood clot during her second pregnancy, had been of Russian origin. Alda’s roots, by contrast, ran deep into Argentina. Their sons couldn’t have been more different, as if born from opposing elements. Even Osokin joked they were ice and fire: Arseny was cool, stoic, and methodical; Randy was restless, ablaze with thoughts he could barely contain.

After breakfast, the family scattered. Randy headed for the forge, and Alda for the school. Ilya Osokin returned to his clinic, which still ran on salvaged tools and a precious stockpile of meds saved from the Old World.

Arseny headed to the city greenhouse for his weekly shift. Tending crops was a communal effort—a deal struck after the Blackout as a bulwark against hunger. They grew turnips, edible lichen, cold-resistant potatoes, and mushrooms. In warmer months, the beds yielded vegetables; nearby enclosures bred snails and crickets that fed on plant scraps and, eventually,

the people. Each household kept its own small patch, but only here, in the great greenhouse, did the warmth never fade.

The structure, forged with Golden Age knowledge, held heat like a memory. Its warmth came from the sky itself: roof-mounted mirrors tracked the sun's slow arc, concentrating light into a water tank that fed heat through the building's pipes.

Another landmark stood in McMurdo: the Hall of Contests, its smooth dome as pale as polished bone. Once built for sports, it now housed yaks—descendants of an experimental herd imported from Buryatia nearly eighty years ago.

Osokin's clinic stood high on a hill, still marked with a rooftop helipad where two helicopters had once landed—long since dismantled for scrap. It towered over the settlement, surpassed only by the waste processing plant off to the side.

Randy accompanied Arseny toward the greenhouse to buy a couple of crickets for Masako. Not as a treat, but for company, the melancholic chirp of the insects was music to the forge mistress's ears.

"Too many carcasses on the streets," Arseny murmured, worry threading through his voice.

"Huh?" Randy asked, blinking as if waking from a dream. Once again, his thoughts had swallowed him—schematics for levitating objects looping in his mind while the world faded to static. He had been walking beside his brother like a ghost.

Arseny sighed and pointed ahead. Five white bird corpses lay in plain view on the path, their feathers rustling gently in the breeze. A few had come loose and swirled down the street as if in mourning. Among the cherry-red and deep blue modular homes of the Old Quarter, beneath a clear, innocent dawn sky, the scene felt especially bleak.

"This is bad," Arseny muttered, stepping closer to one of the birds. "They were dying yesterday, too," he added, wrinkling his nose. "Just not this many."

"How many people are sick?" Randy asked.

"Six..."

"Let's just hope it's not the Black Death," Randy whispered, trying to suppress the nausea rising in his throat. "You know, like the stories Dad used to tell us to scare us as kids..."

“Damn it, shut up! Don’t jinx it,” Arseny muttered—though Randy had voiced exactly what he was thinking.

“Should we tell him?”

“He must already know.”

“I hope the chickens don’t catch it,” Arseny said darkly. “No eggs, no breakfast.” He clapped Randy’s shoulder, then peeled off toward the greenhouse with a light, bouncing gait, fingers ruffling his straw-colored hair.

Randy lingered. He picked up a cricket for Masako along with two turnips, then strode toward the forge. Along the way, he spotted two more dead skuas—this time, mid-meal. One was being devoured in the middle of the street, its kin tearing at the carcass, unbothered by the passing humans.

He sprinted toward the forge, nearly breaking into a run. The thin wisp of smoke rising from the chimney told him Masako was already there.

Before the Blackout, the place had been a repair station run by her parents, Hideo and Akemi Matsubara. They used to fix everything: electric cars, snowmobiles, furniture, portable devices. After the catastrophe, most of it became junk without power. But Hideo—restless, clever, and a trained physicist—refused to let the craft die. He rigged machines to run on hand cranks, foot pedals, and even flowing water.

Metal cutters and drills still lined the wall opposite the entrance. The forge itself, rebuilt from scratch, burned in the back corner—a cylinder of salvaged steel and stone. The old heating system was long dead, but the forge still lived.

Hideo had welcomed Masako as the legacy he hadn’t known he was waiting for. It didn’t matter if his heir was a son or a daughter; only the grit mattered. And Masako had plenty of that. Akemi had tried—first gently, then firmly—to raise her “like a proper woman,” but Masako never listened. Eventually, Akemi stopped asking.

Hideo had drowned when Masako was grown—a sudden storm, a boat, friends shouting from the shore, and then only darkness. Akemi had folded inward. Now, she spoke only to her daughter and rarely stepped outside. Randy, who began apprenticing under Masako at twelve, had seen Akemi perhaps ten times in total: tiny, tidy, and silent.

Randy hadn’t even reached the door when a high, sharp scream split the air—almost too shrill for the human ear. Instinctively, he dove sideways.

A gray blur dropped from the sky and slammed into the forge wall with a wet, bone-crunching smack. Blood sprayed across the whitewashed surface. Feathers floated down like ash.

He stood frozen, heart hammering. Then, cautiously, he stepped toward the thing. It was a skua, or what was left of one. It hadn't slowed or swerved; it had dived straight for him. As long as Randy could remember, birds of prey didn't miss their marks in such a ridiculous, deadly manner.

Just hope Arseny doesn't run into one. With his luck...

Still shaken, Randy shoved open the door and stepped into the forge's warm hall. Masako was already there, stoking the fire with a pair of homemade bellows. She was small—half a head shorter than Randy—broad-faced and sun-kissed, with sharp gray eyes. Her thick fringe hung just above her brows; the rest of her hair was braided into a plait as thick as her arm.

But what caught Randy's eye first was the bandage wrapped around her neck.

"Morning, Mistress Matsubara," he said, handing her the box with the cricket, his voice still breathless.

She nodded—gruff and unreadable.

"Better stay off the streets," Randy added. "A skua just attacked me."

"So it got you, too." She tapped her neck. "They say birds can get rabies. Like dogs."

"I don't recall rabies making birds dive-bomb buildings," he muttered. "I'll talk to Father; I bet he knows more. Anyway, you must go to the clinic."

"We've got a commission we can't afford to delay," she said firmly.

"If the birds are rabid," Randy countered, "there won't be anyone left to order commissions."

Masako looked toward the glowing forge, visibly reluctant to leave it unattended. A pot on the stove gave off a thin curl of steam.

"Tea?" she asked, in a tone that could just as easily have meant *get lost*.

"Sure," Randy replied. His legs were trembling, and he still hadn't removed his thick, hooded coat—originally Dr. Osokin's, passed down like armor.

She checked the water, then pulled a teapot and two matte-black cups from a cabinet tucked in the farthest corner. The cups were rough,

stone-textured, and fit neatly into her palms. What they were about to drink barely counted as tea. It didn't matter; she brewed it as if it were a sacred rite.

"So," Randy said, settling onto one of the old poufs near the low table, "what's on the forging agenda today?"

"You're going to die laughing. A battle-axe."

His eyebrows shot up, a grin forming instantly. "Who's the badass this time?"

"Any ideas?"

"...The Prince?"

"Bingo."

"Seriously? What for?"

"To look extra-important," she snorted, pouring steaming water over the herbs. "Still, you have to give him credit—he paid in full." She nodded toward a squat sack of coal resting by the wall.

Randy's cheeks flushed red—again. It wasn't just the forge's heat. He would've loved nothing more than to smash that bandit right between the eyes with the nearest hammer—the same bastard who had looted the city and was now selling the locals their own coal back.

"Miss Matsubara, please, go to the clinic," Randy said, his voice hoarse. "I'll handle the work. My stepfather always said that with rabies, every minute counts. Just... be careful."

Masako gave him a skeptical look. She'd let her apprentice take on commissions alone before, but in her mind, the margin for error was still too steep.

"I've only got one blank for an axe," she replied flatly.

In a land where trees were almost sacred and whale bones were sawn rather than split, axes weren't exactly a hot commodity.

"Name even one commission I've botched this whole year," he challenged.

"Not one," she admitted. "But I was always watching you." She sighed. "Alright. Heat the blank. But don't overdo it." Her voice softened slightly. Masako cared deeply about every piece she made—even if it was for scum.

They finished their tea faster than usual. The ritual normally helped them settle into the rhythm of work. Not today. Masako wrapped herself in her dog-fur coat and strapped on her winter respirator, goggles, and scarf. She

grabbed a long iron rod—her only defense against whatever the skies might drop next—and left the forge in silence.

Randy stared at the rectangular blank she'd left him, welded to its rough handle. The temptation to sabotage it—perhaps a fracture during tempering, or a micro-flaw in the blade—was almost unbearable. But respect for Masako and the fear that the flaw might show up too early held him back. Besides, if the axe turned out well, he might use it as a model for his own. Crossbows had range, but they broke, jammed, and splintered. Axes were simple and reliable.

I'll use your weapon as practice for mine, you old devil, Randy thought as he tied his hair back and got to work.

The Prince and his men—along with a chunk of the Moon Cross, the same fanatics who'd carved up South America and landed on the Antarctic Peninsula behind the Bloody Apostle—were all descended from soldiers. But when they rolled up to the coal depot, guns drawn, it wasn't conquest they were after. They wanted comfort, leverage, and someone to boss around while they ate well and stayed warm. There was no need to storm the city. You just took the heat source, locked down the trade roads, and waited. In this frozen land, the rest would eventually kneel.

Before Rakhmanov, no one had dared touch the Prince's thugs. The few who tried didn't stay around long. But when Randy saw the outsider cut one of those bastards down at the junkyard, something clicked. He told himself: *One day... I'll learn how to fight back.* The problem was that the guards—local or not—answered to the "owners." The city itself was full of people with fisherman blood. Farmer blood. Tinker blood. Good people, just not ones ready for war. And Randy had no idea how to wake them.

He was hammering out the axe—glowing orange-red, sparks spitting from the anvil—when the door creaked open, letting in a blast of cold. Masako was back. He set the hammer down, his heart picking up speed.

"So?"

"You volunteered. Keep working." Her voice was flat. She unwrapped her scarf. "I got 'lucky'—first in line today. After me, two more came in. Same symptoms. There'll be more by nightfall."

Masako moved to the stove and began brewing tea again. Her movements were mechanical, faded. Randy worked, but he watched her

from the corner of his eye. There was a fresh bandage on her neck, but she didn't look better. She looked as if she had been severed from her own heat source.

The blacksmith drained her tea quickly, then stood. "Actually—no. I'll finish the axe. You start on the fasteners for your flyer. Forge a few spares while you're at it."

Randy blinked. She'd never let him start his own projects first. Without a word, he crossed to the wall shelf and pulled down a box of blanks—scrap metal from the junkyard.

By the time Masako quenched the axe in the brine, the sun had shifted well past noon. Steam hissed; the blade went dark. It was still unpolished and unsharpened, but it already had a brutal, beautiful shape—a hooked curve, like a predator's claw.

"The doctor had a vaccine," she said, lifting the axe with tongs and handing it over. "But it expired fifteen years ago. Might as well be puddle water."

"That's it?" Randy frowned.

Masako gave a snort. "You act like you don't know your stepfather. Of course not." She set the tongs down. "He jabbed me with that... that paci... pinci..."

"Penicillin," Randy said gently. "Good stuff. Can knock out pneumonia, even childbed fever—if you catch it early."

"Still don't feel right," Masako muttered, wiping sweat from her brow. "You're sweating buckets, and I'm freezing. Feels like I'm zipped in an ice bag."

Randy stared at her. "You're feverish," he said, alarm creeping into his voice.

"Damn right I am. Your dad gave me a shot—said to do another tomorrow..."

"And now?"

"Heat me a barrel for a bath," Masako said, already heading upstairs to check on her mother.

Dr. Osokin didn't return until midnight. He didn't bother hiding his worry. Twelve new patients, he said. Same symptoms: fever, coughing,

choking, and fits of rage. Arseny had stayed behind to help at the clinic. Most of the infected were women—likely from handling birds. At school, two kids were absent. Ilya suspected relict microorganisms—ancient spores that had waited millions of years beneath the ice.

Despite the precautions at the hospital and Alda warming a bath just for him, the doctor refused to sleep in the bedroom. Randy offered his place on the sofa; his stepfather chose the floor.

“Maybe we should inform the Prince?”

“I’ll see him tomorrow. Every bird in the city needs to be slaughtered and burned. Announcing it won’t work; people always think they’ll be fine.”

“Think he’ll actually do something?”

“If he doesn’t,” Osokin said, rolling over, “there won’t be anyone left to feed him.”

Randy hesitated. “What about Masako?”

“I don’t know,” the doctor whispered. “Same goes for the rest of them...”

Half an hour later, Osokin was snoring lightly. Randy slid off the stove, barefoot, and made his way to his mother’s room. Alda wasn’t asleep. A soft lumiflor lit the room. She was studying a large sheet of paper in her lap—a map, beautifully patterned, unrolled with great care.

“What’s that?” Randy asked, sitting beside her.

“An expanded map of the continent,” she replied, not looking up. “Can’t sleep either?”

“Nope. What’s it for?”

She hesitated—then gave in. “Your father from Port Amundsen drew it. These lines... these dots... those are his hands moving.”

At those words, something in her changed. Her eyes glowed, and her posture lifted. For a moment, Randy saw Alda twenty years younger, looking in delight at Eino—his biological father executed by the Moon Cross. He’d never seen her look at Ilya Osokin like that.

“Will you show me?”

“Please, handle it with care.”

Randy unfolded the map—and nearly forgot to breathe. The details weren’t painted; they were burned into the thick surface. It was precise, as if someone had hovered above the Pole and traced every fjord, island, and river vein with reverence.

"It's all torn apart now," Alda said quietly.

He nodded. Of course it was. Floods, rockfalls, raiders.

"The Sea of Cosmonauts... Queen Alexandra's Ridge... sounds peaceful," Randy murmured. "They flew into space from here?"

"They did."

"And now?"

"The road was lost in a landslide," she whispered. "No news for years."

"It's closer than Heliopolis. Why didn't you show me earlier?"

"Because everything had to be hidden from you when you were little—you broke and ruined so much." A faint smile touched her lips. "It's the only thing I have left from your father. I couldn't bear to lose it."

"Until tonight?"

"Of course not..."

A long silence.

"Or were you afraid I'd end up in one of those spots?"

"I was afraid," she whispered, "you wouldn't make it to one alive."

Randy didn't say anything. He gently rolled up the map and held it out, but she pushed it back.

"It's yours now. Don't lose it. The tube's on the windowsill."

He hugged her, holding tight. He realized just how rarely he'd done that these past few years.

"I made us all face masks," Alda said, showing him three neatly stitched cloth pieces. "It's not much, but it's better than nothing. Take one for yourself, one for Masako and her mom."

"Maybe you should close the school."

"Already done."

He barely slept. By dawn, Alda was already up cooking.

For the first time in almost six years, Randy felt fear while walking to the forge. The smoke from Masako's chimney was barely there—a weak thread, a mere whisper.

He broke into a jog.

Masako was visibly ill: gray-skinned, soaked in sweat, her hair a mess of damp, fevered tangles. The wound on her neck had turned a deep purple, and every word she spoke seemed to drain the life out of her. At first, she didn't

she simply watched, blank-eyed, from the couch as Randy forged a knife blank from an old rail. She didn't correct him. She didn't scold him.

By midday, she was wrapped in blankets, shivering and delirious. When she handed over the day's orders without a word of protest, Randy knew: he couldn't wait any longer.

Wearing his mask and with his eyes shielded, Randy carried his teacher—gently, carefully—to the clinic. She weighed much less than he remembered.

He laid her down in the last empty cot. The air in the hospital hit him like a wall: thick, sour, and decaying. It was a warehouse of rot. There were already twenty infected; two had died just that morning.

"I dissected two bird carcasses," Doctor Osokin muttered, climbing to the helipad with his foster son to breathe some fresh air. "Their lungs were full of mold. We aren't dealing with bacteria or viruses. It's a fungus—similar to our lumiflor mold. From what I've seen, it suppresses the immune system and intoxicates the brain. And hell, it spreads fast. Too fast."

"How can you and Arseny keep risking it?" Randy asked, his voice bitter.

"We've got the suits," Osokin said, patting the tight, turquoise fabric over his chest. "Still... the one really risking it right now—is you."

A sudden scream cut through the wind. A man was running toward the hospital, waving his arms wildly. Randy flinched. It was Urmas, the gardener. He wasn't babbling or mad, but his eyes held more fear than Randy had ever seen.

Randy rushed down the stairs to meet him. "Is anyone else sick?"

Urmas doubled over, choking for breath. "I'm not," he gasped. "But the Moon Cross... they're attacking the Prince's lair!"

One-Armed and One-Eyed



Ivan Vassilevsky – September 10, 2190 – Seven Winds, Antarctica

I arrived by railcar just after dawn. We stopped on the cliff for the driver to catch his breath while I lost mine looking down over Seven Winds.

Since the Blackout, the town has changed—like everywhere else. The shoreline is dotted with poor folks' stone shacks, whale skeletons, and abandoned yachts turned into homes—lost people clustering near them for the illusion of safety. The *Pine Island*, once a luxury ocean liner, looks as shabby as everything else here. Laundry flaps on its railings, and vegetable plots cover the helipads. Its decks creak under the weight of new, desperate lives.

Some buildings still bear the scars of explosions—echoes of the civil war that ended two and a half years ago with one man's victory: Heldrich. He's the man I need to win over.

Back at the HQ, we built underground—steam, heat, darkness, safety. Here? The Seven Winds clawed its way out of the coastline like some ancient beast dragging itself from the sea. The locals say the city flows down the mountainside like lava. Maybe it once did. Now, it just looks sharp enough to cut the sky open.

Stepped layers of stone and steel are half-buried in the bones of the mountain. Back before the Blackout, rich architects thought blending buildings into nature made them gods. Give it a hundred years, and the next generation will forget men ever built it at all. Even today, getting into the city is a privilege. Holding a yearlong pass is something people brag about—a sign that you've made it. But the glitter and spectacle? That's just a cover. The real purpose of Seven Winds is hidden where the music blares, the roulette spins, and dancers flash their limbs under flickering lights.

That's why I'm here.

At the gates, I was checked for explosives. Guns, blades, and crossbows are common enough, but anything that goes *boom* is off-limits. I stepped into the city proper along Ayn Rand Passage. The name hasn't aged well. It took a minute to adjust to the stench; I can't speak for the sewer system, but the ventilation is shot.

Up close, the glamour cracks. The glass dome over Liberty Square—now just a gaping skylight—is shattered, open to rain and slush. Somehow, the wisteria tree at the center still stands. No one has chopped it down for firewood, which means there are still some rules here. The market around the tree is chaotic. People sell anything they can grow, kill, or steal. I barely dodged a fish cart and slipped on a squid that had tumbled from the same load. No one tried to lift my wallet, though. That's rare.

Then I noticed the Orderlies—men with spiked clubs standing around the square, eyeing the crowd. They are the local law, reporting to Heldrich himself. Their presence explains the relative order.

The Velvet Night Hotel is in the Keel—the fancy part of town, built over the sea. My room, with its glass ceiling and retractable shades, faces the sky instead of the water. I kicked off my boots, hung up my traveler's dog-fur coat, and collapsed onto the bed. I lay there with my only eye open, watching clouds slide past overhead—something I miss, even with all the safety and comfort back home.

The moment was ruined by a black speck on the wall: a bedbug.

But the worst part isn't the bugs; it's the doors. It used to be: palm-scan, one touch, and the room was yours. Now? If you're inside, you deadbolt yourself in. If you leave, the owner or doorman locks it and keeps the key, which means they can rifle through your gear whenever they feel curious. Need a bath? You have to ask. They'll heat water and pump it into your room—if you pay. I'm lucky, though; in other cities, you're lucky to get a basin for hand-washing, and even that is considered a luxury.

After about an hour of rest, I sat up and started planning—time to gather intel.

Heldrich has the information, but first, I need to figure out what he wants—and what I have that might tempt him. That means talking to the locals. Listening. Drinking. God help me, I hate drinking. But a scout has to do the ugly work, and this isn't even the ugliest part of the job.

I have several objectives here. The most important: locate any functioning Golden Age artifacts. Archival hints suggest Nautilus had a presence here—a lab, an office, maybe a warehouse. Even Reed cannot say exactly what it was. That’s what bothers me: how someone could be so careless with their own legacy.

If the place is powered by a reactor with a compatible fuel rod, it could keep HQ alive. Maybe more than that. If it’s abandoned, I need to know who has access. If someone is running it, I need to talk to them—or get past them.

And then there’s the other mission: to find the lost man. If he’s alive, I bring him back to safety. If he’s not, I need to know why.

Jack March – September 10, 2190 – Seven Winds, Antarctica

JACK STOOD IN A LUXURIOUS office aboard the nuclear-powered liner *Pine Island*, weak from a concussion and blood loss. Already feeling miserable—mentally and physically—he silently cursed the room for the old wounds it brought to mind. The third source of his unease, beyond his disgrace and his pounding headache, was the city’s ruler seated before him: Heldrich.

The man sat on a gaudy, gold-trimmed sofa, his boots propped on a low table and a cigarette burning between his teeth. The room’s absurd luxury made his presence all the more jarring. He wore a long, buttoned trench coat in blueish grey, paired with high black boots with polished metal buckles. His clothes were pressed, without a speck of grit or blood. Around his wrist was a mechanical watch—dark metal-ceramic, smooth as obsidian. Its hands moved: slow, deliberate, alive.

While the locals scavenged layers to stay warm, Heldrich looked like someone from another world. Someone untouched by the cold.

“How did it happen that you—with your experience, your guns, and your ammo—couldn’t stop that scum?” Heldrich’s voice cut the silence, every word measured like a pistol round.

Jack thought it would have been better if Heldrich had screamed in rage; sometimes fire is better than ice.

“Four of them,” Jack said. “Riding snow dogs.”

Heldrich arched his brow. "A snow dog? Alive?"

"More alive than me," Jack muttered. "You ever seen one up close?"

"Until today," Heldrich replied, flicking ash into a tray, "I assumed they were extinct. Are you telling me bullets don't work?"

"That's not the problem. These things are just fast. Try hitting one in the dark, even with a fire going." Jack's hand traced their speed through the air. "We did drop one. Took a pack effort—my dogs cornered it, and Hugh pumped five rounds into its side. Still took too long to fall. Damn thing must've weighed three hundred pounds, easy."

"And yet I won't be seeing it, of course..." Heldrich sighed.

"I brought the skin. You want to see it?"

Heldrich tapped the last of the ash from his cigarette. "Tell it from the top. All of it."

"Fine. We were on fire watch—Hugh, Ramon, and me. Hugh noticed the movement first. Something was slipping through the grove down the slope of Dreary Hill. We had flashlights, so we went in to check—not deep, just enough to get eyes on. Then a flare went up, so bright it hurt. I realized what was coming and bolted back."

Jack grimaced, rubbing his dark cheek. The bandits had pincerd his small camp. They had distracted the armed caravaners and ambushed the sleeping men, killing Ramon before he could even wake. Jack noted that some of them seemed to see perfectly in the dark, likely using night-vision goggles.

"That's when all hell broke loose. Poor Ramon screamed. Our guys grabbed their guns, but it was too late... The Lost Kids had two assault rifles; we only had one."

"How'd you get hurt?"

"I ducked behind the wagon and managed to take down one of the riders. The guy rolled off, but he was fine. I didn't get a second shot—my gun jammed. We fought hand-to-hand until another rider hit me with the butt of his rifle." Jack rubbed his temple, wincing. "When I came to my senses, it was morning. Hugh filled me in..."

Heldrich raised a hand. Jack froze. He didn't mean to, but he did. *Damn. Had this guy really managed to train him, too?*

"I'll hear Hugh myself," Heldrich said. "So. You're telling me they took the entire mushroom shipment?"

Jack snorted. "No. I hid it in Grandma's closet."

Pain flared in his skull. He gritted his teeth.

"As I understand it," Heldrich continued evenly, "you handed over the supplies, the weapons, and three of my best dogs to a band of ragged scum. Without much of a fight."

"The Lost Kids had automatics. And monsters. And snow crusted in their noses." Jack's eyes flared. There was no fear in his voice, only raw anger and the bitterness of a man tired of taking orders from warm rooms.

"How many bodies?" Heldrich asked.

"Seven out of fifteen. Peter, Fenriz, Ramon, Barry—shot. Sam and Eric—stabbed. Curly got flattened by one of those monster dogs. The thing just leapt on him."

"Strangely, they didn't finish the job. Didn't take prisoners." Heldrich stood and walked toward Jack, his boots thudding softly. "You got knocked out, but not killed. Not crippled. Interesting."

The leader of Seven Winds reached out, his fingers surprisingly deft. He unwrapped the blood-stiffened bandage from Jack's hair and examined the wound. He tilted his head, keeping his thoughts to himself.

"You don't actually think I made a deal with those bastards," Jack said hoarsely. "That I sacrificed my men for your damned mushrooms?"

"Let's just say, given the precision of the nameless Lost Kid, I can't rule it out." Heldrich disdainfully nudged a filthy scrap of fabric with his boot. He unclipped a small pouch, pulled out a white spray bottle, and applied ethanol to Jack's wound. "You know as well as I do what those mushrooms are worth."

Jack felt utterly drained. Lately, fate seemed to have no other purpose than to grind him into the dirt. "If I were in on it, they'd have just slit my throat to avoid sharing," he said, the sharp sting of the alcohol fading into a soothing coolness.

"Maybe so," Heldrich replied, reaching for a clean roller bandage. "Or maybe there's something I don't know."

"If you think I deserve a bullet, then do it! I'm the one responsible for the men who died!" Jack's tone was edged with defiance. He could pay with his life for his men, but not for raw materials meant for poison.

"The thing is, your death won't recover my lost profits," Heldrich said contemplatively. "You're not much use for anything else—with just one arm. And you've got no gold to your name. Which means your dogs... are mine now."

For a few seconds, Jack forgot to breathe. His four gorgeous malamutes—smoky gray with white chests—were his family. He had just spent the journey back thanking fate for sparing them.

Once, Jack had saved for a wedding that never happened. While he was away on a long journey, his beloved, Amé, had run off with a wealthy merchant from Dumont-d'Urville. Returning with gifts from his travels, the caravaner found a new tenant in Amé's room; the happy couple had fled five days before his return.

But trouble, as they say, never comes alone. Three days later, a hurricane tore through the greenhouses of Jack's brother, Fred, who lived with his large family in Outland, not far from Seven Winds. To help Fred rebuild, Jack gave him half of his wedding savings—ammo, coal, and gold—on the promise of future profits. The other half he spent on buying and raising four purebred puppies.

The thought of losing those dogs now truly terrified him.

"If you're not part of their scheme, hunt them down," Heldrich continued, carefully redressing Jack's wound. "They must have a hideout, and you're going to find it."

"Of course. There's nothing I want more than to send them straight to hell," the caravaner rasped. But the fury in his voice clashed with his battered physical state.

"Naturally, you'll be watched," Heldrich went on. "If you don't find their base within two months—or if it turns out to be empty—the whole town will hear that it was *you* who led the Lost Kids to the caravan. I won't even have to kill you; your own men and the families of the dead will take care of that for me. As for your debt, I'll collect it from your brother and his brood. I hear they've come into some wealth again. If not... We'll take the farm."

"Stop, stop!" Jack raised his only hand. "You're telling me I have to hunt those bastards down all by myself?"

"You're free to take someone along—if you can find anyone willing to go with you after this disaster. I can supply provisions for three people, max. The

fewer people you drag along, the less chance there is of scaring off the prey. Just figure out where their hideout is; we'll handle the rest."

For the first time since losing his arm, Jack felt utterly helpless and pathetic. Panic clanged in his head like a hundred bells, drowning out any coherent thought. All he could do was curse himself for not taking up his brother's offer to work on the farm after his failure with another woman - Katrina, which this time was quite predictable.

Jack didn't feel much pity for himself—just an old fool with nothing to his name. But Fred? Fred had three kids to raise, and now their lives and their freedom hung by a thread.

"As you wish," Jack muttered, his voice heavy with resignation. He trudged off on unsteady legs, but his eyes stayed fixed on the grim man in glasses, as if expecting him to hurl an axe into the back of his skull.

Heldrich had taken Seven Winds well before he was forty, in the aftermath of a three-month clan war between the Bao, Vartanian, and Mizrahi families over the control of *Spark*.

The bloodbath ended not with peace, but with exhaustion. A dynastic marriage was meant to seal a truce between the Mizrahis and Vartanians, but during the wedding feast, a blast tore through the upper tier of the city. A fifth of the platform collapsed in seconds. Uncle Abe, patriarch of the Vartanians, died beneath twisted steel along with his son, his young wife, and nearly the entire Mizrahi line.

No one claimed responsibility, but whispers blamed the Bao remnants. While the city waited for the next strike, they got Heldrich instead.

At first, he was just a doctor's assistant. He didn't panic after the blast; while others screamed, he organized. While others mourned, he dug. He spent two days without sleep, ash and blood up to his elbows. When he finally collapsed, people cried—not for the dead, but from relief. He spoke little, but people listened before they realized they were obeying. Fear came later.

In the market square, when a scrawny teen stole a fish and ran, Heldrich didn't shout. He raised a gun and fired once. The boy fell mid-stride. No screams. No chaos. Just silence—and then, approval. *Finally, someone with a spine.*

No one remembered Heldrich's first name or his childhood. But there was rubble to clear and order to restore, and that was enough. Children ten and up were assigned to rebuilding crews. Labor alone wasn't enough, however; the city needed resources. And so, Heldrich returned to Spark.

Before the Blackout, Spark had been Antarctica's most coveted drug: hours of clarity, peace, and control. No visions, no madness—just the illusion of mastery and the feeling of cozy warmth. The opal mushroom it was derived from had once been grown in underground labs destroyed during the war.

New Beijing still sells dried opal mushrooms—sterile, unpropagatable clones. Smoked like opium, they gave a pale imitation of the high, followed by a splitting headache. Demand remained enormous. Somehow, Heldrich rebuilt the lab, recreated the equipment, and refined the drug. Spark returned. So did power.

After two years, "Sparkheads" usually slipped into dementia—lost in familiar streets, fleeing imaginary goblins. Heldrich adjusted the formula: less devastating, just as binding. The new Spark kept people calm, satisfied, and compliant. And alive long enough to be useful.

Losing the raw materials for such a trade was tantamount to a delayed suicide—and given Heldrich's inventiveness, death might have been the kinder option.

Soon, Jack found himself sitting in the White Mermaid, endlessly wondering how he was supposed to track down a gang that possessed the second-fastest transport in Antarctica—alone, or even with help.

The bottom of the bottle held no answers, but it offered a brief escape from the rising tide of panic.

"Sea Maiden," the caravan driver rasped to the red-haired barmaid everyone called Squirrel. Behind the romantic name was a harsh brew made from fermented sweet algae—a relic of Golden Age biotech. It reeked of machine oil but packed a punch where it counted. Imported wine, hauled by daring souls from South America, was far too pricey these days.

"What's up?" Squirrel asked, her brow furrowing. "You look like you've been chewed up and spat out."

"Not far off," Jack muttered, unwilling to elaborate.

"Let's see your stuff," the girl said.

Jack pulled out a few sugar packets he'd managed to scavenge from the raiders and laid them on the counter. His clothes, patched with countless hidden pockets, always carried a stash for emergencies; more often than not, it proved invaluable. Besides, the Lost Kids had made too big a haul to bother stripping their victims to the skin.

"You should've saved it for later," Squirrel said with a shake of her head, realizing his troubles were far worse than a bad run at dice.

"Triple, straight up," Jack said. He was dead set on getting properly drunk tonight. The barmaid shrugged and slid a glass under the keg's tap.

A moment later, the bell above the entrance jingled, announcing a tall blond man in his thirties. He walked with an unhurried dignity, his build impressive enough to make many envious. His hair, so lustrous it seemed forged from sunlight, was tied back with a leather cord into a heavy knot.

His face was humorless, all sharp angles and edges; his narrow nose looked sharp enough to cut. His left eye was missing, the socket concealed by a neat black patch. There was no strap; the patch seemed to adhere directly to the skin—likely a pricey Golden-Age accessory.

His dark blue overcoat, with its faint metallic sheen, would have seemed too light for the Antarctic spring if it hadn't been a relic of the Golden Age, when even the thinnest fabrics were engineered for extreme warmth.

"Know this dandy?" Jack raised an eyebrow. Even misfortune couldn't snuff out his natural curiosity.

"Seems new," Squirrel whispered.

The man's voice was unexpectedly warm. He ordered the same drink as Jack. Sitting half a meter away, he removed his gloves, revealing large hands with long fingers—hands that had never known the hard labor of a fisherman or a smith. But Jack's sharp eye didn't miss the thickened, hardened knuckles: the marks of a martial artist. Nor did he overlook the callus on one finger, the signature of a seasoned marksman.

A mercenary? Jack thought. *Missing an eye—at least he doesn't need to squint when aiming.*

"Where are you from?" Jack asked.

"New Bergen," the newcomer replied. Coal shipments to Seven Winds often came from there via the Mainline, though Jack had rarely visited. "I hear the Lost Kids are causing trouble again."

"Who says so?"

"The innkeeper mentioned it. Sorry for your loss."

"Hah... news spreads like fire on an oil slick," Jack sighed.

"And yet Lady Death told you, 'Not today'? That's worth drinking to."

Jack silently pointed to the bandages wrapped around his head. The newcomer's curiosity was starting to grate on his nerves, but the stranger ordered another round, and the free booze kept Jack from leaving.

"My name is Ivan Vassilevsky. I'd be very grateful if you told me everything in detail," the one-eyed man said, leaning a centimeter closer.

"Jack March," the caravaner grumbled, pushing his empty glass aside. Ivan gave a brief smirk, a spark lighting his remaining blue eye.

"You don't believe in someone's desire to help without a catch, do you?"

"I'm more likely to believe in Santa Claus."

"Revenge?" Ivan asked, as if he were simply offering another drink.

Jack snorted into his Sea Maiden. The stuff burned on the way down—algae, machine oil, and bad memories. "That's personal," he said. "And you'd be smart to keep it that way."

Ivan didn't flinch. "Maybe I've got my own bones to pick with the Lost Kids," he said, his voice smooth as fresh ice. "I've got trade routes to protect. Their chaos is bad for business."

Jack turned—slowly—not because he was being dramatic, but because every muscle in his body ached like rusted hinges. He looked Ivan up and down. Calm, comfortable, and friendly enough to make a man nervous. The worst kind of politeness. Jack knew the type.

But hell—maybe Jack *did* want to talk. Maybe he wanted someone else to carry the weight of this rot, even for a few minutes. Ivan felt like one of those clean stones you could yell your secrets into before throwing them into the sea. Gone. No strings. No judgment.

Too good to be true, Jack thought. *Which means it probably is.*

"Help comes precisely when you need it most," Ivan said. "What have you got to lose? I suspect the worst has already happened to you."

"True enough," Jack admitted.

He didn't even notice when the story of the raid gave way to something far more dangerous: the memories he had struggled to leave behind.

He pulled a frayed string from his pocket, holding it between two fingers. A dark labradorite pendant spun in the light, catching glints of green and gold like storm-tossed seawater.

“Look at this crap,” he muttered, his voice low. “Picked it for her. Matched her eyes.”

Vassilevsky leaned forward slightly, studying the stone. “Good taste,” he said. “Whose eyes are so striking?”

“Katrina’s.” Jack exhaled. “I found it on the ground after the Lost Kids’ attack. Now I just have to figure out how my gift ended up in the hands of those bastards.”

“Is she... alive?” Ivan asked carefully.

“Hardly.” Jack dropped his gaze, his whole frame sagging. “She ran off and vanished. And out there?” He gave a bitter laugh. “Nobody survives alone. Not for long.”

Ivan studied him for a moment. “Why’d she run? From you?”

Jack opened his mouth, then stopped. The truth hovered, too sharp to swallow. He could see the *Pine Island* in his mind’s eye; he could see Heldrich’s smug face. He could see the lie coming together like an old wound being stitched open.

He chose the lie.

“From me, Mr. Vassilevsky,” Jack said, his voice taking on a mocking edge. “I chased her off. Drove the poor girl crazy with my advances... It was clear from the beginning that we weren’t a match. She was a head taller and two steps smarter. We were a disaster from the start.”

Ivan didn’t judge. He just watched with his single eye and sipped his drink in that slightly annoying, dandy way of his.

By the time they left the bar, it was well past midnight. Ivan walked steadily and quiet, hands in his coat pockets like a man out for a casual stroll. Jack, on the other hand, lurched like a windblown fence post—one arm waving in the air as he staggered into walls, streetlamps, and Ivan himself.

Street girls laughed as they passed. One of them shouted something crude.

“Let a bald penguin have you!” Jack snapped back, flailing his good arm as if it might help him balance the bruised half of his body.

Ivan tolerated it for a block or two—one step for every three of Jack's. But eventually, with the patience of a saint and the strength of a bouncer, he hoisted his drunk companion over his shoulder like a sack of coal. Jack cursed and kicked, writhing in protest, but he lacked the strength—or the will—to stop it.

At the *Velvet Night* hotel, Ivan set him down gently and asked the bellboy for a folding bed as if it were the most normal request in the world. Jack barely noticed. He was already slipping away.

And then—

Memories.

Not drifting in.

Crashing.

It was three and a half years ago. Summer. The campfire had burned low. Jack was laying out his bedroll when gunshots split the ridge—too close to ignore.

He grabbed his rifle, and three others followed. They crept up the slope, straining to see what was out there. That was when they saw it: a nightmare machine hovering low, as if searching for something.

It was shaped like a manta ray, silhouetted by the light of both moons—Elder and Younger. It was black on top and white underneath, with a long, needle-like tail twitching in the dark. It hung in the air as if suspended by a god's string, emitting a low mechanical hum that Jack could feel in his teeth. He didn't know exactly what it was, but he knew what it represented: Golden Age tech, and certain death.

They fired first.

The machine reeled but didn't fall. Instead, it spun like a startled insect and launched a missile from its back. Two men were reduced to a bloody mess in a heartbeat.

Jack hit the dirt, dragging Hugh down with him. The machine descended—lower, slower. Hunting. Jack didn't think; instinct took the wheel. He dropped to one knee, steadied his aim, fired a grenade from the underslung launcher, and bolted into the underbrush.

The grenade missed. It always missed the first time.

Jack ran toward the stream—loud and clumsy on purpose—trying to bait the thing away from Hugh. But the machine wasn't stupid; it went for the closest kill. There was a burst of gunfire, a scream, and then silence.

Jack hit the icy water, dunked his head, and held his breath until his lungs felt like they were bursting. Above him, a shadow passed. He waited, silent and submerged, until his body betrayed him. As he surfaced for air, the ray-demon dropped like judgment from the sky, its tail whipping down in a perfect, surgical arc. Jack fired his last shot.

A loud bang. Sparks. Smoke. Then the frantic flailing of metal.

He climbed out of the water, soaked and shaking, shoving his grief down with every step. Zarif was gone, turned to rags and blood. He made his way back toward the cave, and that was when he saw the other shape—definitely human—collapsing at his feet.

The young woman didn't speak for two days. They wiped her muddy face and fed her, trying to offer some semblance of safety, but she hid behind crates and screamed in her sleep.

On the third night, Jack woke to a different scream—muffled and panicked. He ran toward the noise and found Harry—his own friend of three years—dragging the girl into the bushes, a hand clamped over her throat as he tried to tear open her suit.

Without a second thought, Jack beat Harry until he could barely move. The girl watched the entire thing with eyes like open wounds. When Jack tried to approach, she crawled backward like a kicked dog.

"Shh," he said, hands raised. "I won't hurt you."

She stared at him, trembling. "Thank you," she whispered. Her accent was wrong for a caravanner—too polished, too strange.

"You can talk," he said, stunned.

She nodded.

"Where are you from?"

"Tierra del Fuego."

Bullshit, Jack thought. No one sailed from there alone. Not women. Not kids. "What's your name?"

"Katrina."

"I'm Jack. Please... stick close."

"We're going to Seven Winds, right?" she asked.

“Right.”

“I would sell my soul for a hot bath,” she murmured. “I hate being so dirty.”

“Brace yourself. We’ve got two days left,” Jack replied, instinctively reaching to wipe a smudge from her face.

She slapped his hand away, sharp and fast. Fair enough.

Harry, broken and silent, rode in the wagon the rest of the way. The others weren’t thrilled, but no one said anything—at least not to Jack’s face. Their eyes said it all, though: a girl wasn’t worth this much trouble.

It didn't matter. He had drawn a line in the dirt that day, and he knew, even then, he would spend the rest of his life defending it.

Unlikely Ally



Jack March, Ivan Vassilevsky – September 11, 2190 – Seven Winds

“**W**hy the hell is it always a hangover on top of everything else?” Jack groaned, prying open crusted eyelids. “Feels like someone jammed a harpoon in my side. Where the fuck did I end up this time?”

Waking up after a bender wasn’t much better than clawing your way out of the grave—something Jack had done more than once since the last bloodbath. It took a monumental effort just to yank his numb arm from under his body; when he did, a thousand invisible needles stabbed through the muscle.

After a minute or two of creative cursing, he managed to sit up. The room was wide and drenched in gaudy, overdone luxury. In the center stood a bed with peeling gold trim, clearly trying and failing to look regal. He nearly slammed his face into a pair of oversized pink breasts before realizing, with irritation, it was just a painting. Someone in this town had a deeply unhealthy obsession with “abundance.”

There was a sound behind the wall—water sloshing, steady and rhythmic. *A hotel*, Jack figured. One of the fancy ones that still piped water straight into the rooms.

Then came the real surprise.

His one-eyed drinking partner from the night before was on the floor doing knuckle push-ups. Shirtless, wiry, and drenched in sweat, he wore nothing but loose white pants. Judging by the puddles forming on the floor, he’d been at it for a while.

Jack patted his own gut and winced. “Damn. Five years ago, I didn’t look half-bad either.”

What was the man's name again? Holy sunshine... Jack scratched his head. *And how the hell did we end up in the same room?* He glanced at the bed—still pristine, not even a crease in the sheets.

The one-eyed man hit two hundred, wiped his face, and dropped into a cross-legged seat like a monk settling in for tea.

“Water’s in the decanter. The cups are on the table,” he said, not bothering with a greeting. “Please, don’t touch anything else.”

Jack snorted. Did this dandy think he was some kind of savage? Still, before he knew it, he’d drained glass after glass, practically inhaling the water to put out the fire in his throat.

The blond man watched, seemingly satisfied that Jack wasn’t about to keel over, then disappeared behind a door. The water kept splashing.

Time oozed by. Jack couldn’t believe anyone could take that long just to wash. Life on the road didn’t allow for such indulgences; most city folk were lucky to bathe once a week. But this guy—Ivan-something—looked like he belonged on a recruitment poster for a utopia that didn’t exist. Jack found himself wishing he knew what the blond man actually did for a living.

As the fog in his head began to lift, flashes from the previous night at the *White Mermaid* drifted back. Ivan had promised to help him with the search in exchange for guidance around Seven Winds. Jack was already regretting agreeing to anything in a drunken haze. He’d gone so long without a win that part of him just wanted to slip out the door and vanish.

But then the latch clicked. Ivan stepped back into the room, nonchalantly combing his damp hair. Jack felt a flicker of irritation. The guy had probably never known real hunger—the kind that rots your teeth and makes your hair fall out in clumps.

“Your turn,” Ivan said, nodding toward the bathroom.

Jack looked down at his filthy clothes and hesitated.

“They’ll take them to be washed, and I’ll lend you something to wear,” Ivan added.

So Jack obeyed, soaking away the sleep, grime, and hangover for the next thirty minutes. At last, he caught his reflection in the mirror—and for a moment, it didn’t even look like him. A Black stranger stared back, one with a small, foolish gleam of hope. Jack smiled at the ghost of himself,

allowing—just for a second—the belief that maybe that worn-down guy still had a future.

Then the memories hit again. More than three years old now, but sharp as ever.

After the bathhouse, Katrina had run up to him, throwing her arms around his middle in a quick but fierce hug. Just minutes before, he'd been grumbling silently about the money he'd spent getting someone else cleaned up. But when she touched him—just like that—the breath caught in his chest.

All the way to Seven Winds, she'd been modest and quiet, as if she were afraid her beauty might cause trouble. But now? She was glowing. Delighted. Childlike in her wonder. She examined her hands, combed her fingers through her hair, and traced the texture of her scaly, snakeskin-like clothes. Jack just stood there with a goofy smile. Life hadn't given them many chances for smiling lately.

They were starving, so they hurried toward the *White Mermaid*, following a narrow street strung with tired little bulbs—some of the last working lights in the city. The glow reflected off Katrina's face, delicate and sharply sculpted. Her dark hair fluttered in the breeze.

Jack glanced at her with a mix of admiration and quiet sadness—different from how he'd ever looked at a woman before. He knew they'd probably never be a couple, and it wasn't even about the age gap. Though Katrina owed Jack, he couldn't shake the sense—the silent certainty—that she stood above him somehow. Not in arrogance, but... *beyond*.

Sometimes, when they were deep in conversation, she'd forget she was talking to a barely literate caravan driver. Words he didn't know would slip out. Ideas that didn't belong to a girl her age. She never complained, never raised her voice, and never gossiped. She listened fully, without cutting in. Jack had met many adventurers, preachers, and even men of science, and only Heldrich seemed as alien.

She bore a secret; of that, he was sure. Something vast, ancient, and aching. Beside it, gold, diamonds, and the endless squabbles over gods shriveled to dust. Still, that didn't stop her from lighting into Jack the day he snapped at a scrawny beggar.

“If we stop helping each other—regardless of blood or friendship—we’ll become animals,” she’d said, eyes flashing. “Too many horrors happened because some believed they were better than others. Even the Blackout...”

He flinched. The Blackout? What did human ego have to do with that? Everyone knew it was caused by a solar flare. Only the lunatics in the Moon Cross or fringe cults blamed divine punishment. What stuck with him more was how she froze mid-sentence, like she’d slipped up. Like she’d said too much.

Later, at the *White Mermaid*, Katrina had suddenly turned pale and rushed out to the terrace to breathe. In his usual blunt way, Jack asked if she was pregnant.

She shook her head hard. “The smell,” she explained, her face scrunched in revulsion.

The seal meat—rich and fatty—was too much for her. He just shrugged; it was food that kept you going for a whole day. But he’d noticed: while traveling with his caravan, she ate anything *but* meat.

Another strange girl’s whim, he thought then, smiling internally. *How the hell has she survived this long?*

Then her attention shifted.

“Oh! It must be the *Pine Island!*” she said, agitated. “Is she electrified, or am I seeing things?”

From the terrace, they could see the *Pine Island’s* upper decks, with several windows and floodlights gleaming in the dusk.

“Heldrich can afford an ethanol generator,” Jack suggested. “And he has his storage cells recharged in town.”

“Poor soul! He must need lakes of ethanol,” Katrina said doubtfully. “But what powers the lights in town?”

“A hydro station in the mountains to the south. One or two functional turbines,” replied Jack. “The fun will be over when the engineer dies. The dude’s already as old as the devil.”

A drunk fisherman’s voice broke through their conversation.

“It came from the abyss! A submarine of some kind!”

“No! I saw the thing fall from the sky like a damn me-te-or!” his companion shot back, slurring the syllables.

“The only thing falling was your mom upon me...”

Katrina sneered at the argument, but her gaze sharpened like a hound picking up a scent.

“I love a good rumor,” she said, already striding toward the debaters with a renewed energy.

“Breakfast!”

Ivan’s voice snapped Jack out of the warmth of the memory and shoved him back into the cold, gray morning—back into a world where that woman, in all likelihood, was already dead.

Ivan Vassilevsky– September 11, 2190 - Seven Winds

BEFORE DAWN, DESPERATE to escape Jack’s thunderous, whistling snores—punctuated by curses barked in his sleep—I slipped outside to clear my head. The ocean stretched out beneath a sky glittering with stars. Even after a childhood spent on a sealed spaceport and years in the metallic womb of Heliopolis, the sight of open water had not lost its magic.

I made my way to the tip of the artificial cape, which jutted ten meters above the sea, and leaned against the railing. It was one of the few places in the city where someone actually bothered to keep things clean. It felt good to breathe something fresh, away from the stale stench of booze, weed, and unwashed bodies.

Katrina’s story clung to my thoughts like a splinter I couldn’t dislodge—because I’d heard it before, though not from her.

The “Double V”—the Martian hacker Violet and the cyborg Veliard Reed—had attempted to sneak into Seven Winds shortly after their battle against the Prophet’s Desmoduses. They tried to pass themselves off as regular humans, but Heldrich’s Orderlies saw through the lie immediately. They knew who was coming and exactly what to expect, likely having extracted the information from the Winters through deceit or torture.

No biological human could have survived the damage Violet and Veliard sustained in the ambush. But the “Double V” were tougher than they looked. Evading the Orderlies and Solveig’s winged scouts by traveling almost exclusively at night, they had limped their way toward Heliopolis.

Freiberg, the soft-spined bastard who had been elected chairman of Winged Sun, dithered for days before granting them entry. It took a

full-blown ultimatum from Rakhmanov—who threatened to abandon the project entirely if the doors weren't opened—to force his hand.

That was how we gained two of our most valuable assets: battle-hardened scouts who now feed us intelligence on Antarctica's most dangerous predators—Geryon Lindon's flock, the Moon Cross. Lately, they reported a large, armed group of fanatics moving out of Port Amundsen and heading toward McMurdo. The clock has started running twice as fast.

Everyone hungry for action is placing their hopes in Rakhmanov. If we don't make the next move, it will be either the horrors from the deep or the zealots who have already turned both Americas into one giant cult. This isn't a game of politics anymore; it's survival.

A deep rabbit hole may seem warm, cozy, and safe, but our shelter may soon become our grave. Ever since Rakhmanov was appointed head of External Communications, our mission has shifted. We are no longer a containment unit waiting to repel a hypothetical attack and stall for reinforcements that will never come. We are scouts. Explorers of what remains.

We've gone back to the old blueprints, making weapons again. But weapons need materials—materials we can't always scavenge from dead caches. Sometimes we have to go out and take them. That means exposure. First to the locals—not much of a threat—but then to the machines from the Moon and the rare, tech-savvy Moon Cross agents.

Still, Rakhmanov gets it: it is better to take the risk than to rot in a hole waiting for the wolves. That's why I'm here, even after losing an eye on the Glacier. I held off on a standard replacement; a black patch makes it easier to blend in as a scarred local. But I did fit something special into the socket: a "super-eye" equipped with thermal vision, electromagnetic sensors, and echolocation.

Our engineers failed to make it look biological—in the Golden Age, it would have been child's play—so the patch remains my primary camouflage. If I'm going to be hunted, I might as well see more perils around.

My train of thought was cut short by a distant rumble—low, guttural, like thunder. But let's be honest: it was far too early in the season for storms. This wasn't natural. The sound came from the sea, unmistakably mechanical.

In the clear, faintly frosted night, I spotted a silhouette hovering above the water, blocking out the stars as it moved. Without hesitating, I launched the radar program on my wrist unit, hoping to tag it before it moved out of range.

For a few seconds, the machine hovered—suspended like a shadow in midair—then shifted course and continued westward. Its engines growled once more before fading into silence. Whoever it was, they hadn't come close. They hadn't shown themselves; they had just passed by.

I scanned the darkness, hoping for another trace—light, movement, anything. But the next thing I noticed wasn't out at sea; it was behind me. A local guard was quietly pacing the terrace, shooting curious glances my way. He was clearly wondering what a one-eyed outsider was doing staring into the void at this hour.

"Not thinking of jumping, are you?" he asked, smirking slightly. "Just so you know—I'm not diving in after you."

"Takes more than a ride from New Bergen to Seven Winds to make a guy drown himself," I said, matching his tone. "Did you hear that sound? What do you think it was?"

"Mister Heldrich says it's a natural phenomenon," he replied with a shrug. "He's a scholar; one should trust him."

"Got it."

Barely a day in Seven Winds, and already I had two things to report. I jogged back to the *Velvet Night*. Jack's snoring had dulled into a low, exhausted wheeze—mercifully quiet. Perfect. I pulled up the holographic screen, keyed in the radar logs—and froze. My chest went cold.

The machine had been identified as a Soviet amphibious helicopter: a Umai. Designed for rescue but easily modified for recon or transport, it could skim the water, land on it, and even dive up to twenty meters deep.

So, why the hell was an unknown Umai cruising near Seven Winds?

Ensuring Jack was sleeping soundly, I activated the radio. Both updates went out encrypted straight to Rakhmanov. He responded immediately; he was nicknamed "The Sleepless Man" for a reason. His reply was short and clear:

“Stay sharp: mollusks might be entering the market. Find out if winter ended.”

I need to find out if the Martian siblings are dead or if they’ve been sold as slaves. “Mollusks on the market” means Nautilus. They must be surveying their former territory before sending people in. What rotten timing. Although, who am I kidding—shit like this is never well-timed.

“Look, Jack, I propose a partnership,” I said once the caravaner had eaten and washed it down with detoxified water. “You’ll be my eyes and ears in Seven Winds. Introduce me to the locals, walk me through the customs, and give me the lay of the land. In return, I’ll help you find those ‘lost souls.’ Deal?”

Jack wiped his mouth and leaned back, the edge of caution returning with his clarity. “Look, I still don’t even know who you are, where you’re from, or what you want here.”

“Fair enough,” I said. “I live in New Bergen. I trade in medicines. You dabble in them too—though in a slightly more... artisanal way,” I added, smirking. “My colleagues and I figured this might be a good spot for collaboration.”

“Let me guess—you lost the eye mixing something up?”

“You asked me that yesterday. Congrats—you were right both times. Now, to business. How do I meet this Heldrich of yours?”

“He lives and works on *Pine Island*. Doesn’t leave the liner much,” Jack muttered, visibly annoyed. “Suspicious of everyone. Doesn’t matter where you’re from.”

“Is he a liar?”

“Can’t say he’s ever lied to me,” Jack admitted. “But if you say something vague, or make the slightest slip, he’ll twist it to serve himself. The guy is sharp. Cold.”

“How do people seal deals around here?”

“No paperwork. Just word of mouth—sealed in the tavern. Best to have two witnesses on each side, though I’m guessing you didn’t think about that.”

“I’ll bring some if needed. What about his habits? Preferences?”

“He’s an ascetic. Barely drinks, doesn’t chase women. Sometimes shows up at *Scarlet Wings* to watch the dancers, but if he ever took one to bed, the whole town would know by morning. Otherwise—silent as a tomb.”

If Heldrich doesn’t want to deal, there’s no easy way in. Still, I knew one thing that might draw his attention—assuming the higher-ups gave the green light.

“Any settlements west of here?”

“Outland,” Jack said carefully.

Right. He’d listed names from there last night when he was drunk off his ass.

“And beyond that?”

“The Wild Coast. Runs all the way to Dumont d’Urville.”

“You mentioned your cousin’s family yesterday. Planning to warn them?”

“A smart thing to do,” Jack nodded, rubbing his temple as the hangover throbbed. “The problem is, Heldrich probably keeps a watch over me.”

“Is there a workaround?”

“There’s always a workaround. You can reach Outland by sea.”

“Tell me what you need, and let’s go.”

“I need to pay the boatman,” Jack mumbled, his eyes dropping to his rough, calloused hands. Asking for help didn’t come easily to him.

“That won’t be a problem,” I said, sliding a plate of sliced frozen fish his way. “And don’t worry. You’ll earn it. I’ll need you to ask around in Outland—see if anyone’s noticed anything odd lately.”

“Odd like what?”

“Sounds from the sky or sea. Large flying machines. I’ve heard rumors that things like that show up around here sometimes.”

“As if the small ones weren’t enough,” Jack spat after a pause, a flicker of genuine fear crossing his eyes. “If I see anything strange in Outland, you’ll be the first to know.”

I started mentally calculating how much liquor, ammo, or plain old time it would take to get Jack talking about the younger Winter. If she was dead, we deserved to know. If she’d somehow ended up with the Moon Cross, she might still be alive—barely. Violet and Veliard clung to that hope like it was gospel.

I didn't push. Jack bristled when pressured, and excessive kindness only made him warier. He hated the feeling of being a piece in someone else's game.

"I'll also need you checking the taverns," I said. "Pick up rumors, watch the strangers. And don't puff up like you did yesterday."

"And this has to do with pharmaceuticals... how?" Jack asked, mockery creeping back into his voice.

"If you don't like the arrangement, you know where the door is," I snapped. "Go catch your 'Lost Kids' on your own."

"I just want to know what I'm getting dragged into—and what it'll cost me. You'll eventually leave. I'll still be here, trying to survive."

"You don't have to stay in Seven Winds. Look at it this way: for every task you finish, I'll give you a piece of the puzzle. The more you tell me, the closer we get to the truth about Katrina's fate. Believe it or not, there are people who care just as much as you do."

"What's there to uncover?" Jack snapped, waving his hand so hard he nearly knocked over the plates. "She's gone. Hoping otherwise is stupid... Wait. What people? Don't tell me—those same bastards who left her to get ripped apart by an artificial monster?"

"No, Jack. She has loyal friends. But as you well know, sometimes shit happens faster than any of us can act," I said, letting the old Scheherazade tactic—the hook of a never-ending story—carry the moment. "Now go. Take the back exit. I'll try to secure a meeting with your big boss. Don't worry; I won't tell anyone you're staying at my place."

"Am I?.."

"Well, we've got a shared goal. Might as well stick together."

I handed him a small pouch of mixed-caliber rounds. He didn't ask for more, didn't grumble. As promised, I lent him a dark blue insulated jumpsuit—the same type I'd worn with Rakhmanov on the Glacier. It was too long in the sleeves, but we rolled them up, and the transformation was remarkable. After a bit of cleaning foam on his coat and a quick comb through his hair, the man who left the room looked nothing like the sack of road-tired bones I'd dragged in.

Once my new companion left, I arranged for his old gear to be mended and his leather armor patched. Then, I dressed and set out for the passenger terminal. Jack's directions were clear.

But I never made it on board that day.

In the middle of the transparent walkway connecting the terminal to the *Pine Island* deck, I was stopped by an Orderly. He asked for my name, my purpose for visiting, and my place of stay.

"Mr. Heldrich will send for you, sir," he said coolly, after I shared the information.

"How soon?"

"When he feels like it."

I hadn't expected things to go smoothly. Patience is called a virtue for a reason. I wouldn't be surprised if the head of Seven Winds wanted to let me stew for a while just to see how I'd react. All I could do in the meantime was explore the city—layer by layer, day by day.

Back at the *Velvet Night*, I'd picked up a printed pre-Blackout map. It wasn't cheap—paper never is—and as expected, it was designed for tourists. Utility zones and service tunnels? Forget it. I would have to build my own layout. My first objective was the Nautilus service center, marked with a logo that spoke for itself. I wondered what time and turbulence had left of it.

The map led me to "Sector C," a terrace on the third level that likely offered the best view of the coastline in the entire city. The only spot higher up was the former director's office, which had burned down during the notorious clan wars.

Once a high-end service center for the wealthy—specializing in bionic prosthetics, power cells, and luxury upgrades—the location made perfect sense. A high-tech medical clinic had been nearby; Nautilus always did medical tech better than anyone. The outer door was sealed for heat conservation, so I followed an inner passage named after the old-world statesman Lee Kuan Yew.

A hand-painted sign on the wall declared: *We fix everything—from fishing rods to firearms.* Below it, barely legible: *Buying spare parts, best prices guaranteed.*

Inside, what used to be a lobby was now a sprawling workshop. Tools lined the walls. Crates and barrels filled the room, neatly sorted by use: wire

coils, springs, clamps, doll limbs, saw blades, motor screws, climbing gear, and tires. Despite the clutter, the place was surprisingly organized. There was even a crescent-shaped phyto-gel sofa—the kind that could last centuries if watered every other day.

Sunlight filtered through two half-arched skylights, one marred by a bullet-shaped crack. On the sofa sat a man so small I initially mistook him for a child. Draped in a long bird-patterned shawl, his legs tucked under him, he worked a tiny screwdriver into a drone gyro.

His age might work to my advantage. The question was: how sharp was his memory today?

“Good morning!” I greeted.

“And good health to you,” he squeaked, lifting a wrinkled face. “You’re my first guest today! What brought you so early, sir?”

“I heard of your shop back in New Bergen,” I said, laying it on thick. “I’m Ivan.”

“Is that so?” He chuckled, setting aside the gyro and shrugging off the shawl. “Zachary Glass, at your service.”

His hand, thin and covered in white hair, reached out. Eyes like black beads studied me.

“Do you have any rare stock?” I asked. “I mean, truly exclusive.”

“Straight to business—I like that. It depends on what you’re hunting and what you’ve got to trade. But...” He paused, his gaze lingering on my face. “I think I already know. Let’s see if we can fill that little void of yours.”

Shuffling into an adjoining room, Zachary locked the door behind him. Surprised that he trusted me alone in the workshop, I wandered past shelves lined with salvaged guardsman gear: bracers, neck guards, and pitted breastplates.

Then, something made me double back.

It was a forearm-length glove—dark gray, with a flexible ring-frame at the wrist and a reinforced, padded palm. Having grown up on a former spaceport and later crossing paths with two real astronauts, I recognized it immediately.

I extended my arm, but before my fingers could graze the fabric, a low growl froze me. It was a deep, rhythmic rumble, followed by the sound of claws clicking against the laminate floor.

I turned and saw it—a massive gray-and-rust dog, bristling, its teeth bared. It stood easily a meter and a half tall at the shoulder. Snow dog blood, for sure. The beast had been in the room the entire time, and I hadn't noticed.

Am I growing old, or is he that good?

My hand slid instinctively toward my sheath, but the dog didn't lunge. He gave a single, sharp bark, his yellow eyes fixed on mine.

"Wally, my friend!" Zachary called out as he re-entered. "You aren't scaring our guest, are you? Don't worry, mister—he won't touch you unless I tell him to."

I rolled my eye. If Wally had jumped, I'd have gutted him midair—but I wouldn't have enjoyed it.

"Touched anything?" the old man asked, ruffling the dog's fur. Wally relaxed instantly, the killing machine transforming back into a pet.

"No. But I've made my choice."

"So quick?" Zachary gaped. "I love your grit! But look at this first."

He opened a metal case. A golden-colored optic implant stared up from a bed of black velvet.

"Beautiful, isn't it? I have to warn you: I can help you install it—but it won't see. It needs a specialist we simply don't have."

"Won't even Heldrich's clinic help?" I asked.

"The Blackout killed the necessary calibration gear."

Bullshit, I thought. *Buried vault gear would hold up*. I wondered if he or Heldrich actually had access to the deep stores and were just playing coy.

"I'm after something else," I said, nodding toward the shelf as Wally nudged my hand with a wet black nose. I scratched the dog's head. "That glove. I lost one just like it last summer. Finding a match... that's rare luck."

Zachary looked shaken. I could see him calculating, his black-bead eyes darting.

"No, young man! That's mine! It is not for sale!" Before I could react, he snatched the glove and tucked it into his belt.

"Yours? That glove could fit two of your hands."

He ignored me, his voice pitching higher. "Do you still want the eye?"

"If the glove comes with it."

"Does the word 'no' mean anything to you?" he squealed.

“It means you’re not being honest. That’s space-engineering gear. That’s pressure-suit tech, Zachary.”

“I know more than you think, kid! I was around when the world was normal!”

“Then please, stop acting like you stole it.”

His face blotted a deep, angry red. “I didn’t steal it! It came with a load of junk I bought!”

“When?”

“Three, four years ago.”

“Thanks for the help.” With a sharp nod, I strode toward the exit.

“Hey, hey!” he called after me, his voice cracking. “We’re not done here!”

“The eye is the wrong color anyway.”

“Just sit down, will you?” He scurried over and tugged at my arm, steering me back toward the phytogel couch. “Listen, it never even crossed my mind that the damn thing might be stolen... I’m just an old fool, alright? I only realized something was off with that glove after I’d already bought it. You get it? My memory isn’t what it used to be... and space gear doesn’t exactly fall from the sky every day! You want some tea? I’ve even got sugar.”

“No, thanks.” I sank into the phytogel cushions. “You mentioned something falling from the sky?”

“Yeah,” he exhaled, the tension finally leaving his shoulders. “Someone saw a parachute land in the sea.”

“Where exactly?”

“Southeast. I remember it was around sunset.”

“I need the glove, if you don’t mind,” I pressed.

Zachary’s face twisted in a way that made my mouth go sour, but he finally handed it over. Spacesuit gloves were custom-made—they always had been. This one was far too large for a woman’s hand; it couldn’t be Katrina’s. But her and her brother’s last name was printed right on the cuff. I caught myself panting in agitation.

“What happened to the parachute and the rest of the gear?”

“No clue,” he muttered, glancing toward Wally for comfort. “I’d hoped it was humanitarian aid. At the time, I figured it was a drop from decent folks somewhere—civilization had to have survived in some corner of the world, right? But deep down, I knew none of it would ever make it to us.

As for the glove—my blockhead assistant, Jukka, stashed it in the armor bin without me noticing. I'm old, my friend. Attention fails me, memory fails me... everyone else failed me forever ago."

"So, how about earning a nice bit of coin?" I said, loosening the drawstring of my pouch.

"Please, don't show that thing around," he rasped, his eyes widening at the currency. "I've seen enough in my life: the damn Blackout, the devastation, the blood. Just let me live out my days in peace."

"That depends," I said with a thin smile. "On how helpful you remain."

After paying for both "exclusives," I rushed back to the hotel to alert Rakhmanov and hide the precious find. But one lucky break wasn't enough, and I wasn't about to let the momentum fade. I knew exactly where to go next.

The *Scarlet Wings* cabaret—Heldrich's only known weakness.

The Gathering Storm



Randy de la Serna – September 9-10, 2190– McMurdo

“It may sound like nonsense, but I almost believe the Moon Cross has something to do with these infected birds,” Ilya Osokin muttered bitterly. “Just to make things more interesting.”

Neither he nor Randy laughed. They cursed the so-called Prince of McMurdo, cursed the late Harald of Railtown, and cursed the cowardice of the Seven Winds—who had the people and the wealth but had never attempted to organize a collective defense.

Everyone knew the Moon Cross wouldn’t stop at Port Amundsen. They hadn’t come to occupy a city; they wanted the continent. The long peace had been treacherous, pregnant with the threat of future violence.

The Moon Cross Brotherhood—or simply “the Moon Cross”—first emerged during the Golden Age, taking root on the ice the way Puritans once settled New England. In their early years, they were few, and when noticed at all, they were dismissed as pitiful fanatics: enemies of progress, saboteurs of pleasure.

Their asceticism—hours of silence and prayer, ritual fasting, and deliberate self-denial—set them, at least in their own eyes, above the “flesh-chasers” they condemned. The world, they preached, was nearing its end. Technology was the Devil’s gift, and only those who severed themselves from godless machinery would be spared when the reckoning came.

At first, people laughed. Then they stopped.

Intellectuals drifted toward the fringe—men and women who had once felt fine in “Omniverse” utopias, where sixty percent of humanity had been rendered economically and spiritually obsolete. Paradise, they realized, was a padded cell.

The Moon Cross rejected sex as entertainment, drugs without meaning, and progress without a soul. Some went underground, spreading doctrine

through the tunnels and slums of the megacities. No one expected the Brotherhood to reach the military, but it did. And when the collapse came, they were the only ones prepared.

They had always been in Antarctica, laboring beside machines in the harshest conditions. When their creed was outlawed, they vanished into the subterranean. When the Blackout struck—a disaster they seemed to have anticipated—they already quietly controlled Port Amundsen. Then came Aelius, the Bloody Apostle, leading a paramilitary horde from South America to claim the cult's southernmost outpost. What had been dangerous became catastrophic.

Osokin and Randy understood this would not end with a warning. You could outrun a plague, perhaps, but not a horde. And for Alda, who had once barely escaped them, the danger was far more personal.

“What now?” Randy grabbed his stepfather by the shoulders. “We have to fight back, right?”

“We have to do something,” the doctor said, his voice like ash. “I wish I knew what exactly might work. Please, tell Alda to take three days of food and sail to Seal Pasture,” Osokin ordered. “If we don't come for her, she keeps going as far as she can.”

Randy bit his lip. The nearest coastal outpost was Seven Winds—eight days of rowing if the weather was kind. The de la Serna name didn't open doors there anymore, but there were empty lighthouses and abandoned fishing hamlets that could serve as temporary shelter. Luckily, survival in the wilderness was nothing new to Alda de la Serna.

“Don't go inside. Don't hug her,” Osokin warned, his voice sounding as if it were coated in rust. “Just tell her, then get back to the forge. Stay with Akemi and give her whatever help you can.”

“And you?”

“I'm going back to work.”

It took Randy fifteen minutes to reach home. He found Alda on the porch, just returning from school. She listened in silence, showing no fear. Her face remained calm and unreadable—only her pupils widened, dark as obsidian, as her son explained what was coming.

“Why are you standing on the porch?” she asked, as if her mind were still rejecting the scale of the danger.

"I might be infected too... It's only a matter of time." Randy swallowed hard. He ached to hold his mother's hands—not just to comfort her, but to steady himself. "Do you hear the shouting? Panic is coming—chaos, or worse. You need to be far away from here. Dad says, "Take the boat. Head to Seal Pasture. Right now."

"Is there any chance this ends soon?" Alda let out a soft, cynical snort.

"We're not babies—we'll hold them off," Randy said, forcing a smile.

"All right, sweetheart," his mother sighed. "I'll wait for Ilya just to say goodbye. May I hug you?"

The young man shook his head.

"Then wait a few minutes. I'll pack food for Akemi, too. And your sleeping bag. And warm clothes..." Alda tried her best to keep her voice even, but a slight tremble gave her away.

Randy sat on the porch, watching the street fill with shouting, gasping people—neighbors clinging to one another, begging for answers to the one question no one could answer: *What do we do now?*

The fastest—and usually the smartest—grabbed their children and their bags and bolted toward the docks. Not everyone in McMurdo owned a boat, and the ones that remained functional were worth their weight in gold. Deep down, Randy worried someone might try to take theirs. McMurdo was the kind of town where doors were only locked in the deepest cold. Theft used to be unthinkable. But you didn't really know people until you were in the pit with them; only then did you find out who would push you up—and who would stand on your shoulders just to lift themselves a little higher.

Randy didn't want to test anyone.

"Hey, kid! Heading out for watch duty?" called a sturdy, silver-bearded fisherman—Alejandro, whose father had been port master before the Blackout. McMurdo didn't officially have an "elder," but Alejandro fit the role better than anyone. He remembered the Golden Age better than most and had spent his youth on yachts and sport-fishing boats.

With him stood Urmas the gardener and the O'Connell twins—Nick and Nigel. They were two years older than Randy and had never been fond of him, dragging a childhood grudge into adulthood—perhaps because girls their age tended to glance Randy's way more than theirs.

"Watch duty?" Randy asked, rising uneasily.

“Of course! Somebody has to hold the wall if the Moon Cross comes knocking! Night won’t stop them—word is, some of them can see in the dark like it’s midday!”

“When is the muster?”

“Now, you turnip!” Alejandro barked. “We need every hand that can grip something heavier than a fishing pole!”

“Give me an hour,” Randy said, listening for any sign of Alda. “Masako is down sick. Her mom is alone...”

“Of course,” Nick huffed. “Our tragic little blacksmith is hiding behind skirts. Let’s move on—nothing useful here.”

“Where do I report?” Randy asked Alejandro, ignoring the jab.

“At the old relay tower,” the old man replied, clearly irritated by Randy’s delay but not quite angry. “We’re gathering there.”

“You’ll be waiting a while!” Nigel sneered. “He’s got more important things than the Moon Cross—ladies to entertain!”

“Quiet, pup!” Alejandro snapped. “Live as long as Mistress Matsubara before you talk trash about her being ‘entertained.’” He turned back to Randy. “What have you got for a weapon?”

“An axe...”

“A good one, at least?”

Randy raised his arms to show the size of the heavy blade he and Masako had forged for the Prince.

Nick and Nigel exchanged wary glances. Chances were, they didn’t possess anything more lethal than fish knives.

Masako and Alejandro used to say that old tools—mining picks and dockworker gear—could make excellent weapons. They were built to cut, burn, and hurl hundred-kilo rocks. But by now, most of that gear was just rusting junk. Perhaps something had survived deep in the mines, but everyone knew the Railtown scavengers had picked the place clean years ago.

The door creaked. Alda stepped out, silent as snowfall, and placed a bag of food and clothes on the porch. She gave Randy’s shoulder the faintest touch and disappeared back inside without a word. Randy grabbed the bag and took off for the forge, waving a quick goodbye to Alejandro. Nick and Nigel snorted behind him, laughing about something crude. On any other day, he might have stopped to ask what their problem was—but not today.

At the forge, something was off. The usual smell of coal was layered with the rich scent of food. Warm food. It was strange; Randy and Masako hadn't cooked that day—not even leftovers—while she could still stand.

A gray blur darted from the shadows. Randy froze.

"Is she all right, sweetheart?" old Akemi asked. Her hair was as white as ice.

He hesitated. For years, he'd assumed the old woman was half-senile—mostly because she rarely spoke. "She'll live," he said. He didn't want to give her false hope, but what else did they have to cling to?

He walked to the water barrel and scrubbed his hands clean.

"Eat," the woman said, guiding him to the couch. On the table sat a golden heap of fried fish and two steaming baked potatoes smothered in thick mushroom gravy. It was as if she had known he was coming. A witch? No—just a mother.

"I brought something for you, too," he said, opening the bag.

Akemi nodded toward the table. "Nothing will go to waste, dear."

Was this what it took to wake her from years of silence? Randy wondered. *Disaster?* He shook his head. He would never truly understand people.

"How are you feeling?"

"I'd trade places with Masako in a heartbeat," she whispered. "When her brother died so young, we were devastated. But losing a grown child, Randy... It's a hundred times worse. Especially one so wonderful." Her voice quivered. "I'd cry now—gladly—but I can't even manage that."

"She's strong," he murmured. "Let's hope not everyone dies from this. Dad says even in the worst outbreaks, there are survivors..." He wanted to believe it, but the words tasted like ash.

"And you, son?" Her small, birdlike hand smoothed his hair.

"I'm okay. For now."

Akemi didn't ask him to stay, which lifted a weight from Randy's shoulders. If he ended up sick, she would manage. Maybe Masako—*please, let her recover*—would be back by then. Still, it was better not to plan too far ahead. They might not survive the night.

Akemi already knew everything. She had heard the neighbors wailing, but she wasn't afraid of the fanatics or the chaos. She accepted Randy's departure with the same quiet composure with which she faced the plague.

Randy, on the other hand, was unraveling. His nerves were stripped raw. He choked down half a potato and a few crisp fish that crunched like sunflower seeds, washing them all down with cold water. He rinsed the dishes and set about fixing the axe head to its haft.

By the time he stepped outside, night had swallowed the town. Smoke clung to the air. Orange glows flickered here and there—funeral pyres casting long shadows across the streets.

At the foot of the iron-laced tower—long silent, but once used to scan the skies—a crowd had gathered. There were no more than three hundred souls: men, women, teens, and elders, the oldest among them being Alejandro himself. They weren't soldiers, just townsfolk, but Alejandro barked out orders with the confidence of a man who had captained through more than a few storms.

Weapons were scarce, and firearms even more so. Only those with security backgrounds from the pre-Blackout days still had them, and even then, many were rusted or prone to failure. The rest carried makeshift clubs, knives, harpoons, cleavers, and sharpened rebar.

The few who could craft crossbows had long since left for Railtown. The city was left with three usable weapons and thirty bolts. Thankfully, before he drowned, Masako's father had built a ballista—crude but functional. It could launch rocks, or even dead birds, in wide, sweeping arcs. It might be enough to buy them time.

The sentries, shivering at their posts, swore into the wind. Someone had run off, taking a boat that wasn't theirs. Randy didn't want to know who; he couldn't stand another disappointment.

He stood silent, his face hidden beneath his hood, staring toward the Junkyard where the fighting had raged since midday. The Moon Cross Brotherhood had made camp near the old factory. The Prince's gang must have been fighting with the fury of men who knew exactly what happened to those caught alive by the Brotherhood.

A second group of invaders had blocked the highway; a third had taken the railroad tracks. Everyone standing guard through the long night wrestled with the same question: Why were they lingering instead of attacking the town?

Had they spotted the smoke from the funeral pyres and realized storming McMurdo was too risky? Or were they after something specific—something buried in the Castle that they couldn't find anywhere else?

Rumors churned like wind-blown ash: whispers that the Moon Cross had a spy in McMurdo. If that were true, it had to be one of their own; no strangers had been seen in days. Some even whispered the traitor had started the plague. There was no way two disasters of this magnitude could hit back-to-back by accident.

Now, all the fanatics could do was try to take the factory from the Prince and wait out the end. Without coal, the ones who survived the sickness would still freeze or starve.

Randy's fingers, wrapped in fraying dark-blue gloves, tightened on the axe handle. Right now, he hated the Prince as much as the Moon Cross, but he still had to hope the bastard held the line at the factory. Without coal, anyone who survived the sickness would simply freeze or starve.

"If they're just standing there, a couple of people could break off and run to Raitown with the news," Randy said aloud, trying to shake off the oppressive silence. "If they've got any brains, they'll send help. They have to. We're just the flies they'll swat on the way."

"Keep dreaming, genius," Nick muttered, spitting into the dark. "No one's sticking their neck out for us. Suppose Harald were alive, maybe. But Stella will chicken out."

"That's not true!" Randy shot back. "How are they supposed to survive without our coal?"

Nick didn't answer. He spat again—harder this time, as if he wanted to hit the enemy in the face. His brother, Niall, didn't back him up; he was off with Alejandro, two hundred meters down the wall.

The night dragged on—slow and suffocating. Wet snow drifted down in fits, clinging to lashes and sliding down faces like cold tears. Randy's back ached, his knees throbbed, and fear gnawed at his chest. To chase away the anguish, he thought of his hot-air balloon. It wasn't a pure dream anymore; he'd designed it himself over three years—built the frame, rigged the tension wires, and launched test flights with small animals, always taking effort to

keep them alive. Masako had helped him; she was the only one who believed in it.

The craft was almost finished, missing only one thing: a wing big enough to lift it. Fabric that size didn't grow on trees, and it certainly wasn't for sale in McMurdo.

"Hey, kid." Randy blinked. Alejandro was limping toward him. "While they're still outside, we have to gear up. We need arrows—a hell of a lot of them. And we need our gear repaired. Instead of standing here staring into the dark, you should handle that. But get an hour or two of rest first." He pressed a hardened arrow into Randy's palm.

Randy stumbled through town like a sleepwalker. In the forge, he nearly walked into the anvil, then the cooling barrel. He collapsed onto the couch in the smithy, fully dressed, the arrow still gripped in his hand.

He woke to someone stroking his hair and nearly jumped when he saw Alda sitting beside him.

"What?" he gasped through a knot of anxiety. "You didn't leave? Why?"

"I ran once," Alda replied softly. "Leaving behind the man I loved. Now I have three people I care about. I'm not making that mistake again."

"But what could you have done back then?"

"Then? Nothing," his mother said. "But now I can—hot food. Clean clothes. Comfort. That matters more than you think. You fight—I help. That's what I told Ilya when he tried to shove me into that damn boat."

She told him that the children under twelve had been evacuated, though two had been pulled off the boat for coughing. Anyone suspected of infection was being quarantined in the school.

"Is Dad okay?"

"He's hanging on, Randy. Sleeping like a rock right now. I just hope no one wakes him while I'm gone."

Randy worked straight through until nightfall, forging and sharpening bolts without pause. Teens sent by Alejandro ran in periodically to grab fresh supplies for the defenders on the walls. They reported that volunteers were stationed on rooftops, picking off gulls and albatrosses with rifles to stop the spread of the fungus.

By sunset, when he plunged the final bolt into the water—his right hand raw and barely responding—Akemi slipped into the forge, silent as ever.

"I just came from Masako," her voice rasped. "Your father says her end is close."

The bolt slipped from Randy's fingers and hit the floor with a heavy clang. He sucked in a breath through clenched teeth, his eyes wild. Masako... dying. He loathed himself for his helplessness.

"Ilya says you're not going anywhere tonight," Akemi murmured. "He's coming to see us."

"How am I supposed to stand guard, then?"

"I don't know," she said. "But for now, come with me. It's important."

She grabbed a lantern. Together, they climbed the ramp to the second floor and pushed open the door to Masako's small room. The cricket chirped weakly from its cage. Akemi opened a built-in closet and began pulling out a length of shimmering, silvery fabric.

"Come on, help me," she whispered.

Randy took hold and pulled. The fabric seemed endless. Soon the room was swamped with it, the folds spreading across the floor until there was nowhere left to step. It felt thick in his hands—soft, almost warm. Wide straps hung off the mass like dead vines. Some of the edges were melted or sliced clean, as if by a hot blade.

"What is this?" he asked, staring at the glimmering sprawl.

"This, dear boy," she said, "is called a parachute."

"A what?"

"They used to lower things from the sky with it—back before antigravs."

The Takeoff



Randy de la Serna – September 10, 2190 – McMurdo

Under different circumstances, Randy would've shouted, laughed, or danced. His dream was unfolding on its own, right here on the forge floor. The one thing he'd been missing—the *only* thing—was now spread out before him like a gift from the gods: a dome of sky-cloth that, with enough heat, could carry him into the clouds.

The basket was almost ready, pieced together from junk he'd salvaged from the junkyard over the years. He knew that place like his own pulse. Bit by bit, timing his movements to avoid the patrols, he'd sneaked out sheets of heat-resistant plastic.

The burner was assembled, too—thanks to Masako. She was the only one who had truly understood what he was building—the only one who believed.

Still kneeling, hardly daring to trust his luck, Randy ran his hand over the fabric. It was cool, smeared here and there with soot and dust. He could feel the lift in it even without calculations. With enough fuel, this thing could carry two people his size.

"Where did Masako even get something like this?" he muttered. "It's got to be worth two buckets of coal. Maybe three..."

Akemi chuckled. She knew the material was worth much, much more.

"Looks like some company used it to drop heavy equipment. My husband brought it from Railtown not long before the ocean took him," she replied. "He raised Masako like a boy her whole life—then one day, out of nowhere, he got it into his head: 'Let my baby have a dress to show off in, at least once.' I've no idea what devil he sold his soul to for this," she added with a bitter smile.

"No way," muttered Dr. Osokin, walking in. His eyes were fixed hungrily on the silvery sea at their feet. "Honestly, I thought Masako was delirious when she asked us to find it..."

"Any news?" Akemi asked, bracing herself for the worst.

Dr. Osokin trudged across the workshop and collapsed onto the old couch as if his spine had turned to dust. Randy started to sit beside him, but the doctor waved him off with a flick of his hand.

"Thank you for staying healthy, Randy. Stay that way as long as you can..."

"It can't be..." the young man whispered, his stomach twisting.

"Don't worry," Osokin offered a weary half-smile. "Just a precaution. I'm okay as well. But hell, you've grown skinny."

"Good for the lift capacity," Randy joked weakly.

"Masako's in a coma," Osokin said, turning to Akemi, who stood frozen. "I hate to say it, but we've done everything we could. All we can do now is hope."

"Is Arseny with her?" Akemi's voice was barely audible.

"Yes."

"Then she's in good hands. I'll leave you two to talk," she said, crossing the room to set a pot of water on the stove.

"Randy, I came to check on you. But this—" the doctor nodded toward the iceberg of silk on the floor, "—this could change everything. I didn't think Masako's father was sane when he bought it, and I'm surprised she backed your plan. But right now? There is no better time for a maiden flight."

"I can't believe it!" Randy rushed forward, forgetting his restraint. "So you think we really have a shot?"

"More than a shot. I used to be stationed at Mirny, remember? They might still have medicine. Weapons, too—the Golden Age kind. But the people... they're difficult. Community-first types who don't trust outsiders. It complicates everything."

"We could scare them by saying the Moon Cross is coming for them next," Randy said, his voice agitated.

"You've got the map, son?"

"Sure."

"How long will it take to get your balloon into the air?"

"The frame's done. With the parachute... another day, maybe two."

“Then let’s get to it.” Despite his exhaustion, Osokin’s eyes lit with resolve. “While the epidemic grips the city, no enemy is fool enough to set foot here.”

“What if the plague dies down before I get back?”

“Then it dies down. The Moon Cross doesn’t gain much from killing us. What they want is control, not blood for blood’s sake. They’ve pretty much got their coal anyway. Right now, the fungus is a bigger threat than whoever is calling at the gates.”

“That’s fine, but Mom is in danger.”

“And she’s too stubborn to admit it.”

“I should tell Alejandro about the launch.”

“I already did,” the doctor muttered. “He won’t stop you—but he won’t help, either. He thinks it’ll backfire.”

“Why?”

“The townspeople may see it the wrong way,” Osokin said. “Now, when you reach Mirny, go unarmed, with your hands raised. Do not mention the outbreak until you find my former student, Reynard Lutz, in the medbay. Push the Moon Cross angle hard. Tell them the fanatics will come looking for their weapons next. Reynard will quarantine and examine you anyway; that will give you time to talk.”

Randy’s head felt as if it were about to explode. Ever since Alda’s map had come into his possession, this plan had crossed his mind, but it had always felt like a fantasy. Leaving everyone behind didn’t feel like the right option.

“Zorin is a hard case,” the doctor continued. “He’s paranoid, self-centered, and power-obsessed—though it’s possible he’s no longer healthy enough to run Mirny. When he exiled Nina, Arseny, and me, he was already seventy-five. If he’s still in charge, do not provoke him. If he insults you, think of it as a dog barking. One does not bark back at senile dogs.”

“Yes, Father... but if the Moon Cross men are still here when I return, how am I supposed to bring you the medicine?”

“A good question, Randy!” Dr. Osokin exhaled heavily. “I’ve thought about it all day. The night and the ocean will be your allies. You’ll need to find a boat to get back to McMurdo undetected.”

“Still not the easiest task...” Randy sighed.

“With support from Mirny, things would be easier. One or two of their people by your side would greatly increase our chances. But we must prepare for the worst-case scenario. Mom will take care of it.”

“Mom?..”

“Yes. But you must be cautious, son. You’ll need to think two, maybe three steps ahead. Are you sure you can steer your flying ship?”

Randy suppressed a cough. “If I’d flown before, I’d know for sure. Masako and I had plans to shape the chute to keep the heat in, but we never finished.”

“I’ll help!” Akemi said louder than usual. “Just get me some decent glue. I’ve fixed half of this forge with it already.”

They spent the next day sewing, cutting, and gluing—Randy, Akemi, and Alda—reshaping the canopy into something functional. As the fabric shrank into a balloon-like shape, Randy’s worry grew. Would this thing even take off with him on board?

Later, Nick showed up—likely to fetch Randy for wall duty. Akemi handed him a bundle of arrows and told him Randy had come down with the sickness. When Nick asked for Randy’s axe, she replied sweetly, “Of course. But so that you know—he spent all night curled around it.”

Nick bolted as if a safety had just clicked off behind him.

The workshop’s curved, vaulted roof was perfect for laying out the balloon and channeling hot air from the forge’s pipe. Randy fashioned a makeshift platform over the rainwater tank, finally assembling the gondola—a tiny basket built of light, salvaged materials.

As the balloon swelled and trembled like a living thing, Randy pleaded with the Elder and Younger moons, begging them to bring the doctor for a final goodbye. The balloon now loomed overhead, rising taller than he was, like a cross between a snowdrift and the smooth flank of an albino whale.

“Did you check the inside pocket?” Alda asked, climbing the ladder.

“No, why?”

“Your grandmother’s jewelry is in there—gold, silver, her platinum wedding ring. Use it to pay the Mainline railmen or the boatmen in Seven Winds.”

“Seven Winds?”

“How else will you get back? McMurdo is sealed; the sea is your only way in. Remember—we need you alive.” She hugged him, her cheek against his. They only let go when the clanging of footsteps sounded on the metal stairs.

Ilya Osokin appeared, breathless. Randy didn't dare ask about Masako, but the doctor read the question in his eyes. “Not yet... Yesterday I injected an expired compound. The fungus is so lethal, it couldn't make things worse.”

“Climb in,” Ilya said, hurrying to uncoil the chains.

The balloon bucked, snapping the last chains taut. The earth fell away. From below, the shouting began—angry, panicked voices rising from the street.

“It's that doctor's kid! I knew he was up to something!”

“Bet he brought the plague!”

“Everyone shut up!” Alda shouted from the roof. “Ilya's been working day and night to save your families! Randy is flying to get help!”

“Then why not take a boat?” someone yelled.

“Ask your friends—who gave it fins?” Alda snapped back.

Fins? Randy thought, dazed. *Someone stole our boat, and she said nothing!*

The last chain clanged loose, and Randy shot into the sky. He nearly toppled from the basket but caught the handle Masako had insisted he install. Below, McMurdo shrank. The ocean stretched out, black and endless.

A flash of white fire—a Moon Cross weapon—sliced through a strap. Another blast ripped a hole in the basket. Randy screamed, praying the next shot wouldn't hit the envelope itself.

Then—salvation. A snow cloud swallowed him. The cold was brutal, biting to the bone. Randy lit the burner, pumping trash-gas heat to stay aloft.

The Death and The Healing



Arseny Osokin – September 12, 2190 – McMurdo

No one should have to bury their father on such a radiant day, Arseny thought, listening to the ocean's relentless dirge. The sky over McMurdo was a piercing, unforgiving blue. Sunlight dazzled across the waves—brilliant and merciless against eyes that burned dry.

Arseny and his stepmother stood at the end of the pier. The ocean lay almost still around them. Alda had brought a brazier stuffed with burning peppermint. It was good for tea, but even better for keeping the gulls at bay. Despite the smoke, the pier felt dangerously exposed—a perfect target for a Moon Cross sniper or a drone. One hovered over the horizon, far out of reach but always watching.

Cold bled into Arseny's bones. Deeper still was the numbness spreading through his chest—a numbness born of grief and shock. Between him and Alda lay the canvas-wrapped body, bound with rope and weighted with stone. It was no longer a father. No longer a healer. Only an object.

Arseny missed the moment, but Alda saw it all. The fury of the mob surrounding Masako's workshop finally boiled over. One stone struck the balloon carrying Randy to safety, but the next found Ilya. Standing on the very edge of the sloped roof, he reeled from the blow. His boots skidded uselessly against the tiles, and a second later, his body went limp—his spine snapping with a distinct, sickening crack.

As a child, Arseny had fallen from the same height that had killed his father. He walked away with nothing but bruises. His restless stepbrother had climbed and tumbled even more often. He always escaped with mere scratches. Fate had spared them then, only to play a merciless joke now.

Alda's lips moved soundlessly. Whatever prayer she whispered, the wind stole. Her hand lingered on the still form, fingers trembling against the coarse fabric as though touch alone might delay the inevitable. When they finally

pushed him over, the green-black deep swallowed him without hesitation. Ripples widened and then faded, erasing the memory of him from the surface.

Arseny fixed his eyes on that vanishing point until it blurred. Overhead, gulls wheeled and shrieked, annoyed by the smoke. Their cries sounded like a mockery of human pain. Neither Arseny nor Alda spoke; they carried a silence heavier than the stones they had cast into the waves.

In the middle of the pier, Alda's composure shattered. She buried her face in her hands, sobs tearing from her throat like the screech of rusted swings in a storm. Arseny watched her, his emotions flickering: pity was immediately drowned out by a quiet, cold resentment. Alda had indulged Randy in everything, and eventually, his father had followed suit. If his father hadn't backed Randy's doomed plan—if he hadn't climbed that roof with his deranged stepson—he would still be alive.

Without you, we would still be together. Just the two of us. We would have been happy, Arseny thought, stubbornly refusing to meet his stepmother's tearful eyes. His yearning for his late mother surged, underlining a divide that only grew. With each passing minute, Alda felt less like family and more like a stranger.

It's wrong, he told himself, trying to banish the bitterness. But it stayed, rooting deeper with each attempt to push it away.

His loathing for the people of McMurdo ached even more. They felt no regret for Dr. Osokin's death, as if he hadn't been the one tending their children for years. The rumors that the Osokins were "Moon Cross spies" had reached Arseny weeks ago, but he had dismissed them, failing to grasp the threat. Randy's escape sparked the blaze; the fire had been smoldering long before.

As Arseny learned later, the "fine people" of the town, seeing what their paranoia had wrought, simply scattered to their homes. There was no one left to judge them. Few came to offer sympathy, and those who did brought no consolation.

Back in the hospital, dim corridors flickered with firelight from smoking barrels meant to hold off the cold. Smoke curled into ventilation shafts but still thickened the air with a sour tang, mixing with the stench of sweat, illness, and filth, like seven years ago when dysentery swept the town. From

deep in the building came the chorus: wracking coughs, fever groans, endless pleas for water, for mercy, for the sake of both suns. A new widower sat slumped against the wall, sobbing.

For a moment, Arseny wanted to drop dead. Blood never rattled him. He could stitch a wound with steady hands from the age of ten. But raw despair? You already feel gutted when a patient dies, but the family's tears only drive the knife deeper. Arseny's father would have known what to say, what gesture might hold this man together for another day. But Ilya Osokin's voice was gone now, and every cry Arseny heard made his absence weigh heavier.

"My condolences," Arseny muttered, lowering himself beside the old man.

The widower lunged, fingers like talons on Arseny's collar, shaking him with a strength grief alone could summon.

"What are you waiting for? Why won't you stop it? Don't tell me you've got nothing left!"

"The antibiotics we've got expired ages ago. And getting penicillin out of mold is already a feat. Anyway, it doesn't work with this infection."

The words tasted bitter, like betrayal. Ilya would have offered comfort with the same truth; Arseny could only offer it sharp-edged.

"You're supposed to be smart, snow in your snout! So think of something!"

"Thinking takes time! Who's admitting the sick, examining them, tending them? You see how it is—thirty-eight patients, and just me, two of Father's apprentices, and three nurses!"

The old man's grip faltered. He turned away, shoulders shaking.

"Cover your face with a scarf," Arseny insisted. "You don't want to catch it, too."

"To hell with it all."

"And what about everyone else? You'll spread it long before you even feel sick. Think about the consequences—or don't blame us when you infect half the town!"

Hearing the young Osokin shout was like watching a dog in a ball gown—jarring, unnatural. But it worked. The widower stopped sobbing, pulled a scarf over his face, and shuffled toward the exit.

"I'll come back," he croaked. "You need hands. Expect me this evening."

Arseny pushed the door open and hurried on.

Looks like half the town's already sick.

Every cot reminded him of his father. Every wheeze, every fevered whisper, was an echo of Ilya's patient voice—explaining symptoms, calming fears, finding some shred of hope to hand to the living. Now the burden fell on Arseny. The silence where his father's presence should have been weighed heavier than the plague itself.

In less fortunate settlements, medics wore leather and plague masks, like in the Middle Ages. Here, the Osokins still had pale-green medical coveralls with air filters—guarded like relics. Ilya had once joked, “When these wear out, we'll be back in bird masks.” Now, the words stung like a cruel prophecy.

Arseny changed into one of the suits. Before he'd finished latching it, Sonya came running, ready to share the news—who had died, who hovered close, who had been carried in at dawn. She tried the Spark as a painkiller, yet the amount they had in the clinic was ridiculous.

Silently listening to her report, he strode toward Masako Matsubara. Despite the hacking coughs and delirious shrieks all around, she slept so deeply that one could mistake her for a corpse. Her bloodless face glowed faintly against her spread of coal-black hair. Yet her pulse was steady, her breathing even, fever gone. Under her eyelids, her eyes moved as if she were dreaming.

She was thirty-six — right on the edge of that age when there was no real chance of surviving the sickness. But all those days, she kept fighting as stubbornly as she lived.

On hearing Arseny's steps, Masako stirred, sighed, and blinked around her—as though waking not only from illness, but from a long, long absence. The young medic had to kneel to hear her faint voice.

“Where's Mom?”

“Home. We cannot let her in. If she catches the infection, it'll kill her in no time.”

She replied with a thankful smile. She was willing to live.

Arseny rushed for the jar of water. By the time he returned, the woman's consciousness had fully come back.

“Randy didn't get sick...?” she asked after draining the glass, and Arseny felt a new, sharp pang in his chest. Was the whole world supposed to turn

around that junkyard hanger-on? He swallowed the thought and, to drown out his own pain with words, gave her a quick account of recent events—leaving out only that Doctor Osokin was gone. He still wouldn't accept the loss, even though he had been the one to push the body into the waves.

"Can't believe he succeeded. I hope it won't be in vain... I just hope nobody loots my things from the forge now. It's getting harder for Mom to keep watch."

"Alda keeps her company..." Arseny croaked, turning away so she wouldn't see him wipe at his tears. Her next question landed like a thrown knife.

"What about the Moon Cross bastards?"

"Alejandro says the Castle has fallen, and one can even see the Prince's body hanging outside. There's no hurry for them now. When we're out of coal, nothing will save us. They won't even have to fire a single shot."

"They'll choke! Listen—remember the rookery on the island, where the kids collect eggs? The sick birds started coming from there. Someone needs to go: make sure nothing else flies out. Or better yet, let those birds head straight for the Moon Cross camp and infect as many of them as possible."

"That's madness..." Arseny sighed. "Just like my brother's escape. And too late anyway..."

"Do you know a better way to help us?... Listen, I know where to get a boat. Alejandro used to have two, I remember. He gave the big one to the women and children, but maybe he stashed the second one for himself—just in case. An inflatable one..."

Arseny shook his head and told Sonya to bring Masako something to eat. To him, the blacksmith's "plan" was worth no more than fevered rambling. No one in their right mind would risk infection. Still, it was a pity if Alejandro really had hidden that inflatable boat without telling anyone. By sea, Randy could have slipped out of McMurdo unnoticed—drawing attention from neither outsiders nor their own. And that meant Doctor Osokin could have survived the crowd's wrath.

The young medic threw himself into tending the sick, but the thought would not unclench its teeth from his mind, stalking him all day long. When

the shift ended, he forced himself toward the forge to bring the news to Akemi.

His Family



Jack March – September 11, 2190 – Outland

With a wealthy ally appearing out of the blue, Jack March felt his resolve surge. The heavy clink of ammunition in his pouch was a better tonic than any medicine. Sober, clean, and clad in fresh clothes, he felt like a new man. The concussion still pulsed with a dull ache behind his eyes, but it was nothing compared to the withdrawal and torment that had wrecked him the day before.

He stepped outside, leaving Vassilevsky to his own devices, and descended two levels via a long-dead escalator. Winding through narrow back alleys and avoiding the main thoroughfares, he emerged in the city's southeast quarter. The area was still blackened from the fire three months ago. Jack hadn't been in town when the blaze occurred, but the horror still lingered in the stagnant air. Over twenty people died—a staggering loss for a city that lived on the edge of extinction.

Leaving through the main gate was out of the question. Jack had no desire to let Heldrich track his movements, and the gate guards were paid to gather information. But Jack was old enough to know: every fence has a hole, if you know where to sniff—and who to bribe.

Shivering as the chill crept into the ruins, which were dusted with grimy, soot-stained snow, he found a service staircase and descended two more levels. The “Cormorants”—drifter merchants barred from staying in the city overnight—were already laying out their wares on the pavement. Their stalls were a chaotic spread of the old world's bones: folding mirrors, perfume vials, plush teddy bears, and salvaged microchips from forgotten outposts. A grim-faced guard with a crossbow patrolled the perimeter, ensuring the scavengers stayed in bounds and vanished by dusk.

As soon as they spotted Jack's fresh gear, the ragtag crowd swarmed him, shoving glass beads in his face and claiming they were “real diamonds.”

Normally, Jack would have cleared a path with a few choice curses, but today he needed to be a ghost. He bit his lip and wove through the throng with a fluid, practiced grace—slipping between traders like a fish through reeds. A nudge of the elbow here, a subtle shift of the shoulder there—just enough to pass without making a scene.

Then, something in the crowd stopped his heart.

He'd recognize his niece Annie—Fred's daughter—anywhere. She was tall, with golden braids and rosy cheeks. Around her neck hung the same blue scarf Jack had brought her on his penultimate run, embroidered with the delicate shapes of peacocks. But what the hell was she doing here? Fred guarded his daughters like a dragon over a hoard. He would never let them wander into the belly of Seven Winds alone.

And her walk—it was wrong. Annie usually moved as if she were floating. This girl's stride was hurried, heavy, and wide—almost masculine. A person's gait was one of the last things to change, unless they were injured or had been broken by years of hardship.

She passed within five meters of him and didn't even blink. Under normal circumstances, he would have grabbed her arm and demanded an explanation. But the weight of the city felt heavy on him; someone was likely watching. Speaking to her now could put a target on her back. He'd be seeing Fred soon enough—he would get his answers at the source.

Among the cluster of workshops and stalls, Jack found the booth he was looking for—a repurposed cargo elevator cab. Inside, a heavyset man dozed, his bushy eyebrows jutting out like startled birds. His hooked nose gave him the look of a perpetually irritable owl. A guard stood beside him—local militia, but the bottom of the barrel. His armor hung loose on his frame, half his teeth were missing, and his eyes were glazed with the chronic boredom that comes from a life of hunger.

When he spotted Jack, the guard rapped his knuckles sharply against the metal elevator wall to wake his boss.

"Huh? Wha..." The Owl mumbled, blinking himself awake.

Jack raised a middle finger in greeting. Neither the Owl nor the guard took offense; they exchanged smirks like old drinking buddies. Once Jack was certain no one else was watching, he reached into his chest pocket and

unwrapped a small object. He sent a silent thanks to Ivan Vassilevsky, who hadn't let him drink away his last assets the night before.

The Owl's jaw dropped. It was a working headlamp—a treasure worth a knife in the ribs in the lower levels. The *Lost Kids* hadn't looted it only because Jack had possessed the foresight to stash it in his rented room.

“Let me see your arm,” the Owl grunted. He rolled up Jack's sleeve and pressed a purple stamp onto his wrist. A cartoonish mouse with a bow on its head grinned up from Jack's skin. The mark granted access to every quarter except *Pine Island*.

The ink burned as it sank in, designed to last a year or more. In some Antarctic cities, these stamps were the only ID that mattered—a makeshift passport etched into the flesh. Seven Winds still clung to its image as a “free” city, a haven for vice so long as you didn't start a war. Not that the reputation had saved them; after the clan wars, the population had been gutted by two-thirds.

Jack headed down. Though the upper levels bristled with light shafts like a sea urchin, the lowest tiers were buried in perpetual twilight, lit only by flaming trash barrels and patches of glowing fungus. The air reeked of sour mold and salt rot.

These depths—some level with the sea, some below the waterline—served as the city's gut. Warehouses moved goods up on pulley rigs through hollow elevator shafts. The dark had always drawn people with hard pasts and secrets sharp enough to kill for—people with no gold for a room and no stomach for the sun. During the clan wars, they had surged upward like a plague, thinking it was their time to feast. But their luck had run out. Heldrich had purged the looters with surgical, ruthless precision.

Some hatches to the sewers were now guarded; others were welded shut. But Jack was waved through. The purple mouse on his wrist was enough. One of the guards, who didn't recognize the caravaner's face from the upper gates, slid the bolt on a heavy metal door and pulled it aside.

Jack stepped through into a vast, vaulted chamber. The arched walls formed a half-oval rising over a hundred meters high, with curved supports converging on a central beam like the ribs of some leviathan. This was the *Little Dock*, where research vessels and seaplanes had once sought shelter

from the savage Antarctic winds. *Pine Island* was moored farther west at the Grand Dock; down here, the water belonged to skiffs, dinghies, and ferries.

Once, the ceiling had been transparent. Now, decades of sea salt and bird droppings had left a filthy crust, dimming the light to a faint trickle. Hairline fractures glimmered in the brittle grime. *If this gunk keeps piling up, won't the whole hangar collapse?* Jack wondered.

Five meters below the cracked balustrade, dirty water lapped gently against a flotilla of boats. Jack picked the sturdiest-looking vessel and negotiated his passage. The one-legged boatman, Lauri, grimaced at the destination—the currents there were a nightmare—but he let Jack aboard and set his oars to the water.

As they pulled away from the concrete, Jack tensed. He was a land-man to his core. But after a few minutes, the rhythmic rocking became almost hypnotic.

Then, they hit the opening in the hangar.

Blinding sunlight spilled through, reflected off the white ice and blue water. Jack pulled down his makeshift goggles as the salty wind slapped him across the face like a wet hand.

“Why the hell are you heading out there, old man?” Lauri asked, casting a sideways glance. “Chasing adventure in your twilight years?”

“I’ve had more than enough adventure,” Jack grumbled. “I’m meeting a woman.”

“Women, huh? They’ll drive a good man into anything,” Lauri snorted. “And they’re never happy with the result!”

“Depends on your luck,” Jack smirked, watching the wind vane flutter. “For the right one, I’d march into hell.”

“You’re one of those, aren’t you? What’d they used to call ’em... a chiromancer? No—a necromancer?”

“*Romantic*, you old goat,” Jack chuckled, wondering how long he could keep the cheer in his voice before the reality of “Annie” caught up to him.

With every hundred meters, the swell grew. So did the boatman’s cursing, as if a few choice words might somehow shame the sea into calming down.

Jagged rocks jutted from the water like broken teeth, each crowned with a rusting lighthouse bearing the name of a long-dead Antarctic explorer:

squat little *Taylor*, tall and skeletal *Lazarev*, and the cracked husks of *Baird*, *Scott*, and *Evans*^[1]. No one remembered who they were or what they'd done to earn their memorials. Only the names remained—and one day, even those would vanish.

The Star Bowl rose ahead, mansion-sized on a rocky spit ten kilometers offshore. A relic of the Golden Age, built atop a thick tower with slit-like windows, it gazed perpetually skyward. People said the ancients used bowls like it to catch falling stars—but anyone who had ever ventured inside found nothing but stale rainwater and the echoes of the wind.

To the east, gleaming on the horizon, was a jagged white wall—the edge of the Central Glacier, the last remains of the ice shell that had once swallowed the continent. Near its base lay the mouth of the Fast River, and beside it—Fred's mill.

The wind, as if mocking them, kept pushing the boat away from the shore. Jack finally understood the sour look Lauri had given him. Fighting the urge to vomit, Jack grabbed the second oar. Spray drenched him from head to toe, but he hardly noticed; caught in the thrill of wrestling the sea, the cold felt like nothing.

It took some convincing, but Jack got Lauri to wait for three hours—one to land, one for business, and one to return. The beach gave way to brittle grass, then to low, scraggly bushes. Halfway across the island, a tall figure approached, a crossbow at the ready.

Jack raised his hands. "It's me, you old fart."

Fred chuckled, not recognizing his cousin right away. Broad-shouldered, built like a forge bellows, with a sun-bleached bandana and a shaggy white beard, Fred looked like the land itself—etched by wind, stooped but unbroken. You couldn't find two men more different: the restless, black-skinned drifter and the grounded, white-skinned father of three. Yet Jack had never stopped visiting. He brought gifts for the kids—Annie, Tom, and Steve—and basked in the warmth of a home he could never build for himself.

Jack pulled back his hood, and Fred gave him a firm, wordless hug. They set off toward the mill, following a narrow trail that rose and dipped with the island's spine.

"A little bird told me you're in trouble," Fred said, without preamble.

"Damn, news travels fast," Jack muttered. "But I'm not here to beg for coins, if that's what you're thinking."

"Hell, Jack. You've never begged in your life. And if you did—you think I wouldn't help?"

"The truth is..." Jack exhaled, "now you're in danger, too. I've got to track down the Lost Kids."

"And what? Take them out alone?"

"Hopefully not. But either I find their nest so Heldrich can wipe it out, or the bastard will take your mill and work you to death. Or worse—sell you to New Beijing as a slave."

Fred grimaced. "These savage times..."

"When weren't they? No one's holding Heldrich in check, Fred," Jack's voice was low and urgent. "I'll do my best to stop them—but I'm not invincible. Get the kids out of here."

"Man... who do I leave the mill to?"

"Fred!" Jack grabbed his cousin's arm and gave it a hard shake. "They may sell your daughter to a brothel, and you're whining about the mill? Now I see why they're so bold—because they know we're soft!"

"If we leave for Railtown, what do we eat?" Fred snapped, the fear finally bubbling into anger.

"The boys are old enough to work. You'll survive." Jack paused, his mind flashing back to the crowded street in Seven Winds. "By the way... has Annie been going into the city? I saw her half an hour before I got in the boat."

Fred's face drained of color, as if he'd been punched in the gut. "You must've mistaken her for someone else..."

"Oh, come on. She walked right past me! You think I'd forget the scarf I gave her? The one with the marvelous birds?"

Now Fred looked truly terrified. "She's at home, Jack. But the scarf is gone. And... well. There's more. But you wouldn't believe me anyway."

"Fred. After what I've seen lately, I'd believe our great-grandfather was a penguin. Quit stalling—talk."

"Let's go inside," the miller whispered, his eyes darting to the bushes as he pulled Jack toward the heavy timber door of the mill.

The mill was empty now—eerily so. Only the faint echoes of the boys' voices floated down from upstairs. Usually, the kids spotted Jack coming from a mile off and descended in a joyous, thundering stampede, peppering him with questions about snow dogs and the wonders of the "Big World." The silence felt like a physical weight.

A pot of lentils bubbled over the hearth, rich with onion and seal fat, hanging at just the right height to simmer without scorching. After swapping his salt-crusted boots for indoor shoes and washing the brine from his hands, Fred filled a bowl to the brim and handed it to Jack.

"So here's the thing..." Fred dropped his voice to a half-whisper, as if the very timber of the walls had ears. "Last night, Goran—the hunter's boy—came banging on my door. He and Annie have been sneaking off to meet, even though I told them to cut it out."

"Typical," Jack shrugged. Annie was eighteen; Fred wasn't in a rush to lose the woman who ran his household and looked after River, the youngest.

"Don't interrupt. He was carrying her, Jack. Stark naked. Unconscious."

"Please tell me you didn't shoot the poor kid," Jack muttered through a mouthful of lentils.

"I held back," Fred growled. "But listen to what he told me. They'd planned to meet by the bend in the river. Annie climbed out her window—easy enough, and like an idiot, I never barred it. She got there first and lit a small fire to stay warm. Goran was on his way when he saw the fire suddenly go out. He panicked, ran for the spot—and found her lying in the snow. Passed out. And some bastard was running off with her clothes. Goran shot him twice."

"Sounds like a pile of sealshit, Fred."

"Just shut up and listen! I laid Annie in bed, grabbed the boy by the collar, and went to see for myself. There were three sets of tracks in the snow—hers, Goran's, and the third. Whoever it was ran like hell. We followed the blood trail to that old dry well. We dropped a torch down... and there he was. Dead. And the stench, Jack—that bastard smelled like he'd been rotting for at least five days."

Jack straightened, the spoon clattering against the ceramic. "You're telling me someone who'd been dead for a week stole your daughter's clothes and outran a hunter?"

"I don't know what I'm telling you!" Fred barked, his eyes wild. "I was more worried about Annie than the corpse. When I got back, she was just sitting there. Staring. She wouldn't say a word. It creeped the hell out of me."

"Is she still silent?"

"She talked this morning," Fred said, his voice tightening. "But whatever happened out there—she says she doesn't remember. Or she's pretending not to. Won't even look at Goran. Says she's ashamed he saw her like that. Though sneaking out in the middle of the night didn't seem to shame her one damn bit."

"You think she's lying? Or just scared?"

Fred rubbed his wrinkled forehead with a groan. "All I know is we've still got a corpse in the well, and I'm not going down there alone."

"Burn him," Jack said firmly. "Or seal the well with stones. You don't have to drag anything out."

"You'll help me?" Fred asked quietly. "I don't want to involve the neighbors. They already talk enough."

Jack hesitated. He'd promised Lauri three hours, and the boatman wasn't the patient type. But this wasn't an errand anymore—this was a haunting. If the "Annie" Jack had seen in Seven Winds was wearing the scarf Goran's "thief" had stolen, then the girl upstairs might not be his niece at all.

He set the empty bowl aside and stood up.

"Let's go."

Empty Grave



Jack March – September 11, 2190 – Outland

“Grab some blubber and rags,” Jack told his cousin, his voice tight. “And don’t forget a rope. I want a good look at that dead bastard. Someone I know—someone who promised to help—will definitely want to see this. And Fred... Have you seen anything strange in the sky lately?”

“The neighbors did,” Fred muttered, wiping sweat from his brow despite the chill. “Said something flew out over the sea and vanished. A machine, maybe... glowing, lighting up the black water. You think it’s connected?”

Jack rubbed his forehead, eyes narrowed. “I don’t know. Can I see Annie?”

“Just for a bit.”

The stairs groaned as Jack climbed to the tiny room where his niece sat curled on the bed. She looked wrecked—eyes swollen, a purple bruise blooming along her cheekbone like a storm cloud.

“That from the bastard who attacked her?” Jack growled, rounding on Fred.

“No. That was me...” Fred admitted, his voice dropping to a shameful mumble. “I lost it. She kept sneaking out, and now she won’t say a damn word. Her reputation’s ruined, Jack. You get it, right?”

Jack didn’t answer with words. He swung. A clean, hard punch sent Fred thudding against the wall. He slid down, dazed and clutching his jaw. Jack was no saint, but laying a hand on a woman or child was a line he never crossed.

“Do it again,” Jack said, his voice like grinding gravel, “and you’re no brother of mine.”

He turned and sat beside Annie. Her face was pale, her expression shell-shocked.

“Sweetheart,” he said gently. “You still don't remember who it was? We need to know. Someone else might get hurt.”

“There was a man,” she said after a long silence, her eyes fixed on her knees. “At first, I thought it was Goran... but he was taller. And his outfit was strange.”

“Strange how?”

“Like orca skin. Shiny. Black.”

Jack felt a chill. *A high-altitude pressure suit. Or a tactical dive skin.* “Did you see his face?”

“Not clearly. It was dark. He asked how to get to the nearest city. Then...” She swallowed hard. “He grabbed my hair and sprayed something in my face. It smelled like flowers. After that... nothing.”

“That scarf I gave you—the one with the birds. Were you wearing it?”

“Of course, Uncle. I wanted Goran to see.”

Jack stared at her. Then, slowly, he drew a solar circle in the air with trembling fingers. “May the Greater and Lesser Sun guard you from the night,” he whispered. “Fred, you got a gun? A crossbow won't cut it.”

“I got one—but the trigger jams. That crook Zachary wants a fortune to fix it.”

“Fetch it anyway.”

Outland had two wells. One had dried up five years ago, and the villagers had moved closer to the working one, leaving a wooden grate over the old shaft to keep the children out. Clearly, the grate hadn't been enough.

Jack spotted a faint trail of footprints leading from the well toward the road to Seven Winds. The tracks were small, lighter than a grown man's.

“You see these?” Jack pointed.

“I... it was dark,” Fred said, chewing nervously on his mustache.

“Looks like your corpse didn't wait to be collected. He crawled out and walked off.”

“Don't talk nonsense, Jack.”

“You remember what boots Annie was wearing?”

“Felt boots. Waterproofed. Wait... shit. That's her tread!”

“Exactly. Get the rope. I'm going down.”

The stench hit him like a physical blow—foul and clinging, like a whale rotting in the sun. Jack wrapped a scarf over his mouth and lowered himself

into the dark. At the bottom, his boots crunched on bones—cat, bird, mouse. He kicked through the trash, searching for the "dead" man Goran had shot twice.

There was nothing. Just the lingering smell of decay and a few dark, oily smears on the stones.

Wait. What the hell was that?

A white, slick mass lay slumped near the far edge of the well. Shapeless. Slimy. It looked like boiled fish skin, but thicker—shark-thick. Jack nudged it with the toe of his boot. A chunk broke off, wobbling like gelatin. He picked it up between two fingers, gagging as the cold, oily texture met his skin, and slipped it into an empty pouch. Vassilevsky might know what the hell it was.

Hauling himself back up the rope, Jack snapped at his cousin. "You dumb ass! You couldn't even have your future son-in-law keep an eye on the damn guest?"

"You mean... he left?" Fred stammered.

"What do you think?"

"Then... What the hell was that thing down there?"

"Something that used to belong to it," Jack said darkly. "A part of it, maybe. And I've got a feeling I'm going to be hunting it down back home."

Fred made the sun-circle sign with trembling fingers, staring into the throat of the well. Jack pulled up his hood and lit a bundle of oil-soaked rags, tossing them into the pit. The fire caught fast, hissing and snapping as it began to consume the remains below.

"Do what I say," Jack muttered. "Grab the kids and go. Raintown. The power station. The engineer there is good with villagers. Take Goran, too—he's solid, and you'll need the help. If Heldrich comes sniffing around... things could get ugly."

"But how would he even know Goran was involved?"

"Oh, he'll know," Jack said flatly. "You think no one around here would sell you out for the price of this mill? Move. Fast. I've got a friend to meet—someone who can track this devil."

Fred tried to stall, offering excuses about the fence needing fixing or the pie in the oven. But Jack saw through the domestic chatter; Fred was terrified. He was clinging to the only steady head around just to keep from

falling apart. Under any other circumstances, Jack wouldn't have needed much convincing to stay.

"If I don't leave now, I'll never find it," Jack said, turning away. "Take care of yourselves."

Jack hurried back toward the shore, his chest tight with a rising tide of anxiety. His thoughts buzzed like maddened flies. He remembered when life had rules: don't go where it's dangerous; watch the skies; steer clear of leaders. When had it all come apart? The sea leopard that had taken his arm? Heldrich's rise? Or that green-eyed woman who had blown in like a warm front and never quite left?

It's hard for people to accept chaos. They look for patterns, blaming bad luck or enemies. The wiser ones see their own choices reflected in their misfortunes. But a rare few understand the hard truth: sometimes there's no connection at all. Sometimes, you die for no reason.

He looked up at the sun as if it might provide an answer, then rushed down to the sea. But he was already too late. The boat, riding the backs of glistening black waves, was already halfway back to Seven Winds.

"STOOOOP!" Jack bellowed, waving his right arm and the stump of his left. "TURN BACK!"

He scrambled down the rocks, slipping and risking a broken neck. But Lauri kept rowing. He never slowed. He never looked back. He'd seen Jack; he had to have. He just didn't care, as the wind was shifting and the tide was pulling.

Jack spat at the ground, and the wind hurled it back into his face. He dropped to the rocks, landing hard on his tailbone, and watched the boat shrink into the distance. Beams of sunlight spilled through the clouds, bathing the departing vessel in a golden glow—as if even the sun had chosen someone else to bless.

With a groan, Jack pushed to his feet. Ivan would want answers, and Jack would give them—eventually. For now, he turned toward the long, overland road that led back to Seven Winds, walking straight into the teeth of the early dusk. The night was catching up.

On His Own



Randy de la Serna – September 12, 2190 – Victoria Land

A third of the canteen was left. How the hell does that much water disappear in just two days? Randy rubbed his neck; his throat burned as if lined with shattered glass. The only mercy was the environment: it was a cold desert, not the scorching kind his parents had described in fairy tales. He took a tiny sip—just enough to wet his tongue.

If there's no river, no glacier, no village ahead... I'm screwed.

Two days ago, his “air lifeboat” had been caught in a whirlwind. It had come down in a rocky wasteland framed by red and black cliffs. “Came down” was a polite way of saying it had crashed. The ground had rushed up, the flimsy basket had splintered, and Randy had barely managed to shield his head before being thrown clear. His thick felt clothing had spared him from the worst, but the rocks had left his ribs and knees raw.

He'd barely scrambled to his feet when a gust of wind filled the balloon again, dragging the basket along the jagged stones. His supplies were still inside. Randy had run after it, gasping and cursing—silently, always silently—but the basket skidded away as if it were teasing him. He managed to grab a sleeping bag and an axe that had tumbled out before he tripped and hit the ground hard.

The wind carried the wreckage all the way to a deep ravine. The basket slid lazily over the edge and vanished into the dark.

Crawling to the cliff's lip, Randy watched his pack tumble down—Alda's carefully packed provisions: food, medicine, and a hundred little things tradeable for life. Gone. The night was bright, but nothing looked familiar. His compass had flown from his pocket; it took an hour of crawling to find it wedged between stones—cracked, the needle missing.

For two days, he trudged through the snowless valley, nibbling on scraps of seaweed flatbread. The bruises faded, but the hunger did not, and the loneliness pressed down like a hammer. He'd never been alone this long. There had always been someone—Masako, his family, the noise of the junkyard. Now, the worry for them grew heavier with every mile.

Even the sound of pebbles underfoot became painful; it sounded like walking on bones. No moss, no fuel, no wood. Just rock and thin lichen.

After scrambling over a ridge, Randy finally spotted a thin, lonely line slicing across the landscape like a scar: the Mainline. It stretched the length of the continent, once linking the ancient cities. Alongside it, caravans still moved, pulled by muskoxen or yaks.

Then, a small miracle: three nearly perfect, circular lakes came into view, wreathed in thick, curling steam. Vivid blue water shimmered through the mist. Hot springs. Randy imagined stripping down, sinking into the heat until it reached his marrow.

But as he jogged toward the nearest lake, unscrewing his canteen with trembling hands, something crunched underfoot.

Bones.

White against the dark volcanic sand. Tiny skeletons of birds, larger ones of goats, and the gnarled frames of dogs. The closer to the water, the more there were—skeletons picked clean and undisturbed.

Randy froze. The realization hit him like a slap. These weren't springs; they were graves. The animals had come to drink and died where they stood, choked by the volcanic gases—CO₂ or sulfur—pooling in the steam. The water was poisonous.

“Holy sunshine,” he grunted, pulling his scarf over his nose. “These are *Charon Lakes*. They're on the map.”

He knew where he was now. Unfortunately, the road beneath him wasn't the Mainline—it was a spur road leading to an old mine. Long ago, the ancients had pulled diamonds, coal, and uranium from these lands. This particular mine was the Silver Palace.

Randy faced a choice: strike northwest toward the Mainline or head to the Silver Palace, gambling that clean water might still flow deep underground. *Where the earth is dug deep... there's always water*, he reasoned.

As a boy, he'd heard the tavern chatter about the Silver Palace. The stories were a recipe of one part truth and two parts wild fantasy: haunted mines, mutants, and an "Ice Maiden" who drained the warmth from wanderers. Randy didn't put much stock in legends. Real life, he'd learned, was usually worse.

Randy chose to risk it: better to push toward the Mainline while he still had water, more chance to meet other travelers. On that road, there were traders, taverns, or at least the hope of clean snow. He turned northwest, toward the distant promise of McMurdo. But every step gnawed at him; he felt he was backtracking, losing precious time his family didn't have.

Soon, the rail spur entered a narrow gorge, hemmed in by jagged rocks shaped like titans frozen mid-scream. It was still daylight above, but in the gorge, the shadows clung like oil. The silence was suffocating—tomb-like.

The first stretch passed without incident. Then—a faint noise. A small stone tumbled from the slope behind him. Randy turned, expecting a rockfall, but spotted something far stranger. One of the boulders wasn't rolling. It was *crawling*.

"Just the hunger screwing with my head," he whispered, quickening his pace.

A fine snow began to fall—dry, sharp flakes like powdered glass. He scooped it from his sleeves, letting it melt on his tongue, but it fell too slowly to quench a real thirst. Worse was the sensation prickling the back of his neck: the absolute certainty that he was being hunted.

He looked up. High above the gorge, something circled. A bat, perhaps—or something shaped like one.

"Spring's not for two more weeks. Bats should still be hibernating," he muttered. "What the hell are you?"

If he'd had a crossbow or even a slingshot, he would have tried to bring it down. If it was edible, it was life. He gripped a heavy stone, waiting for the shape to dip low, but his focus was shattered by what lay in the path ahead.

A man lay with his face exposed to the sky, the lower half of his features covered by a Golden Age warming respirator. Randy knelt, the unspoken ethical code of Antarctica driving him to help, even a stranger. But as he got closer, he saw the truth.

A metal spike had been driven into the center of the man's forehead. A second, identical needle was lodged deep in his left eye socket.

The precision was sickening. Randy knew firearms, but this wasn't the work of a chaotic clan skirmish. To drive a needle through the frontal bone required a muzzle velocity beyond anything a human lung or a standard spring-loaded crossbow could produce.

"Who did this to you?" Randy whispered. "Another man... or that tiny flying thing?"

He thought of the *Desmodus*—the automated drones from the old stories. He'd always thought of them as spooky bedtime tales. Now, he was in the center of one.

There were no signs of a struggle. The traveler had likely died in a heartbeat. Randy forced himself to search the body; squeamishness was a luxury for the living.

First, the canteens—two of them, nearly full. *Water*. Then, the pack: solid fuel tablets, powdered drink mixes in gray packets, and energy bars that smelled of artificial vanilla. There was a sleek metal case of batteries and—unbelievably—an actual notebook with a built-in pen.

Inside a leather envelope, he found a glassy rectangle framed in plastic. A tablet. If he could find a way to power it, it might hold maps better than any his father had left him.

Finally, he checked the jacket. In the pocket sat a pistol-shaped object with a small button on its side. It looked harmless, yet it radiated danger. He pressed the button. Once. Twice. Nothing.

The weapon was massive, likely housing a serious power block and induction coils. On the grip, the word *Термен* (Theremin) was etched in Cyrillic. A toggle switch sat where a safety would be, offering three firing modes. Randy couldn't eject a magazine or move the switch; it was locked tight. But he wasn't leaving it. He tucked the device into his belt.

He took the man's gloves, but left the rest of the clothes out of a lingering sense of dignity. Then, he spotted the silver band on the man's wrist. A bracelet with a concave, blank disk. It looked like a watch face with no hands. Randy pressed it, but it stayed cold and silent. It wouldn't come off the wrist, either.

"If only I could figure out the catch," he whispered, his curiosity finally pushing aside the grief.

Randy pressed the dead man's index finger to the smooth "watch face."

A soft, high-pitched chime rang out. A glowing blue screen shimmered to life in mid-air—a volumetric HUD. At its center was an intricate white emblem: a sun disk flanked by outstretched wings. Communication. Tools. Map. Medical Stats.

"Winged Sun..." Randy exhaled, his awe blooming into a sharp, fresh grief. "I wish I knew who did this to you."

Acting on instinct, his fingers trembling from more than just the cold, he tapped the word Connect. The emblem vanished, replaced by a ticking clock. Seconds dragged into an eternity.

Adela Hagstrom – September 12, 2190 – Winged Sun HQ

OPERATOR ADELA HAGSTROM was blinking away tears. Antero Toivonen was dead. It had happened too fast to process. Port Amundsen's massacre had been a tragedy, but losing someone from the inner circle, out in the field? That hit differently.

She couldn't stop replaying the telemetry: Antero's short, sharp scream, his pulse flatlining, and then the feed showing someone—a scavenger—looting the body.

"Shared ancestry, common fate." The External Comms mantra. Adela had never bought into it. Now, watching a "local" pick through Antero's gear, she felt a surge of cold, righteous fury. She reached to shut off the external feed.

Muffled shouting bled through the glass doors of the conference room. Klaus Freiberg was berating the Chief again, hammering him for his obsession with "saving the locals." But the Chief's voice remained unnervingly calm. He insisted that without winning over the people of the ice, the Winged Sun would be extinct within a decade.

He had been saying the same thing since he first arrived at the HQ ten years ago—unannounced, half-frozen, and barely breathing. He had brought proof of a digitized evil: Geryon Lindon, the "Prophet" who had

orchestrated the Blackout and turned the Moon Cross Brotherhood into a global plague.

With Vassilevsky's recent reports and the radar signatures from Old Novolazarevskaya, they knew the Prophet's drones were moving in daylight. The worst-case scenario wasn't coming—it was already here.

Adela stepped toward the sink to wash her face when a soft *ping* echoed across her station. A signal from Antero's link.

She lunged for the interface. A face appeared—young, smudged with dust, his eyes like dark wells. The "thief."

"Hey... can anyone hear me?" the boy asked, his voice husky with exhaustion. "Hate to say this, but some jerk has killed one of yours. I didn't get a good look at who did it. I think there was a drone nearby."

Adela stood frozen. The boy didn't look like a killer. He looked terrified.

"I'm only here because there's an epidemic in McMurdo. We're desperate. My father's a doctor... but he can't handle this alone."

He sounded candid. No one ventured into the Red Gorges unless they were driven by a force greater than fear. Adela's hand hovered over the Transmit button. The young man spoke again, his voice cracking.

"I wonder... has Vassily Rakhmanov ever reached you? Ten years ago..."

The name dropped like a hammer. Ten years. She leapt up. She had to tell someone—now, even if it meant crashing into the shouting match next door.

Four Dogmen



Randy de la Serna – September 11, 2190 – Victoria Land, Antarctica

Out in the ravine, the air before Randy’s eyes shimmered, thickening with light. He stumbled back as it began to take shape—first a figure of flickering blue dots, then color and depth. Blade-sharp cheekbones. Silver hair. Sky-blue eyes were going at him with compassion.

Randy couldn’t breathe. He stared, stunned and blinking.

He actually made it. Just a few more wrinkles.

“Hi again,” the man told him. “So painful to lose Antero. So good to see you!”

“Are you okay?” It was all Randy could manage.

“I feel miserable, but thanks for asking, Randy. It’s good to see you grown up.” Rakhmanov’s voice trembled slightly. “I know you’ve got a million questions—and I’ve got plenty for you—but there’s no time. You need to get as far from here as possible. Unless you want to end up like Antero.”

“I don’t get it... we’ve got the Moon Cross, weird infections—and the Winged Sun just sits back in their fortress? What about the guys in Mirny?”

“If only it were up to me!” Rakhmanov snapped, his voice tight with restrained fury. “But right now, you need to *run*.”

Instinctively, Randy’s gaze darted to the sky. “It’s coming for me?”

“I’d bet anything the drone caught the signal from that bracelet. Desmoduses hone in on radio signatures like flies on meat. Once they find the source, they destroy the user. If the gear is worth salvaging, the Moon Cross scouts steal it.”

“The Moon Cross? What do they have to do with this?”

“Too long to explain. Move, boy!” Suddenly, Rakhmanov shouted: “Cold and darkness, Randy—behind you!”

Randy whirled—and saw four monsters hurtling down the tracks.

At first glance, they looked like shaggy Greenland sled dogs. But each was the size of a yak, with jaws packed with fangs as long as a man's finger. They weren't alone. Riding low across the beasts' powerful necks were humanoid figures, their faces daubed in white and black clay to resemble skulls. They wore armor crafted from salvaged plates and wires, holding their weapons ready as they charged.

Randy froze, then panic snapped him into motion. He yanked the scavenged weapon from his belt and bolted toward Antero's corpse, trying to jam the gun into the dead man's stiffening hand. He remembered—it needed a registered biometric grip to fire.

Too late. The beasts were on him. He could smell their breath—hot, reeking, and predatory. He squeezed his eyes shut and pulled the trigger using Antero's hand.

A white bolt blasted from the gun, striking the lead creature square in the chest. It yowled like falling thunder and tossed its rider, but stayed alive. The man hit the ground, rolled, and sprang to his feet with eerie agility. He shouted something in a guttural dialect and raised a harpoon gun, aiming it straight at Randy's head.

The Lost Kids. Antarctica's living nightmare. They robbed traders, bled farmers for tribute, and kidnapped anyone they could find—either to feed their beasts or to offer up to whatever mad god whispered in their ears. Same filth as the Moon Cross, just fewer in number.

Randy picked out the leader by his gear and the sheer size of his pitch-black dog. He wore a graphite-gray jumpsuit reinforced with matte plates that seemed to grow straight out of the fabric. Draped over his shoulders was a pale, silvery fur mantle. His eyes, ringed in thick black paint, looked like hollow sockets. A single long black lock of hair dangled by his temple, twisting in the wind.

To his left loomed a hulk, a ring punched through one colorless brow. Bright green dreadlocks spilled from beneath a cracked flight helmet. He carried a homemade cleaver. The third rider was a shock of red—beard, brows, and hair bursting from beneath a greasy bandana.

The fourth—the one aiming the harpoon at Randy—looked like a ghost of the Golden Age. His flak vest was a patchwork of gray and black, streaked with old blood.

"Hey! You the one who offed this guy?" the "soldier" barked, nodding at Antero's body.

"Wasn't it your damn drone?" Randy shouted back, still clutching the bolt gun.

"Randy, shut up!" Rakhmanov hissed, still hovering like a ghost. "Please, just hand them the gun..."

"Old fart's got sense!" said the man with green dreads, whom the others called Kitty.

"You moron, Kitty," the redhead snorted. "It's a hologram. Just a Blackout-era comms link. That guy could be chilling on the Moon for all we know."

His laughter cut short as the leader slid off his beast in a heartbeat, snatched the gun from Randy's hand, flipped a switch, and fired a white-hot bolt into the dead man's wrist. The hologram blinked out instantly. The air reeked of scorched circuitry.

"Goddamn it. No wonder he was glowing like a saint," Kitty grunted.

"Could he be from the Winged Sun? That's bad news," the redhead added, rifling through the corpse's coat. "Means they'll be sniffing around here soon."

"Clearly you weren't in Mirny, Ezra," the soldier said darkly, pressing the cold tip of the harpoon against Randy's skin. "Or you'd know.."

"What do you mean, *in Mirny?*?" Randy gasped. "You bastards made it there, too?"

"Shut your mouth!" the "soldier" snarled, jerking the harpoon just enough to slice Randy's temple. Hot blood trickled down, soaking into his scarf.

"Fox, you hear that?" Kitty sneered. "The kid's got business in Mirny. Planning to have a chat with the skulls?"

"What happened?!" Randy shouted, nearing a panic.

"They're dead, kid. All of them," Kitty said as he tore off Randy's belt and found the hidden pouch of Alda's jewelry. He tossed it to his boss. "Mirny is a graveyard."

They're lying, Randy told himself, his heart hammering against his ribs. They have to be lying. These savages couldn't take the spaceport. Dad said Mirny is a fortress that can survive a nuke.

But deep down, Randy felt the walls of his resolve cracking.

The gang leader hadn't said a word. He remained astride his beast, pouring Alda's little treasures into his palm, inspecting them with a cold, clinical eye before dropping them back into the pouch. His silence was more terrifying than a scream—it made him feel like death personified.

No way the bastard is mute, Randy thought, his blood chilling. He's in charge. If he's this quiet, it's because he doesn't need words to be obeyed.

The Lost Kids stripped Antero's body and snatched Randy's map. He'd memorized every contour over the last three days, but that offered little comfort now. Only one thing gave him a shred of hope: they hadn't killed him yet.

They bound his wrists with coarse rope, the other end gripped in Kitty's massive paw. With a sudden yank, the brute nearly pulled Randy off his feet.

"Get on behind me," Kitty ordered, lazily swinging a leg over his dog's back. "Fall off and I won't stop. You'll be dragged belly-first until something tears loose."

By midday, the terrain had turned vicious. The mountains loomed higher, sharper. Scraps of life appeared—patches of gray moss and rust-colored lichen that looked like dried bloodstains. Finally, they reached a narrow stream trickling over black rock, steam curling from the surface. Judging by how the bandits approached the water, it wasn't toxic. Kitty's mount dipped its head to drink, then recoiled with a snort. The water was near boiling.

Above, snow drifted down like ash. Randy let the flakes melt on his cracked lips. His arms had gone numb, his thighs throbbed from the brutal ride, and the rope had rubbed his skin raw. To dull the pain, he focused on the dog's rolling gait and tried to memorize the landmarks.

Through a high pass, Randy glimpsed the Central Glacier—the father of Antarctic rivers—sprawling its icy mass toward the pole. Its rim caught the sun, shimmering like gold.

Before he could see more, a thick black sack was yanked over his head. Ezra, the redhead, tugged it tight. Breathing became a struggle.

"It sucks that the guy was from the Winged Sun," Ezra muttered.

"Don't sweat it," Kitty replied. "We hit Mirny. We'll hit them, too."

“You screwhead, Yoon,” Ezra snapped at the “soldier” riding nearby. “Mirny only worked because of Fox and her gift. We barely made it out. Who knows what the Winged Sun has been cooking for fifty years.”

“C’mon!” Kitty laughed. “That raid was a win. We’ve got the guns, the ammo, and maybe... fucking immortality!”

“Shut up.”

The new voice was deep, calm, and laced with steel. Fox. No one had greeted her arrival; they simply fell into line.

“Seven Winds will provide more,” she said with a strange passion. “I’ve been aboard *Pine Island*. I’ve seen how posh it is. At least we know what to expect there.”

Randy stiffened. She didn’t talk like a raider. She spoke like someone who had read more than just a tavern sign.

“Now that Harald’s gone, we can even buy Railtown’s non-interference,” Yoon barked.

“Save your sugar,” Fox snorted. “His mouse-brained daughter won’t move her ass even if we attack Anwar.”

“Maybe we should just burn Railtown,” Kitty suggested.

“Then the traders stop coming, and there’s no work for us,” Fox shot back. “If we burn anything, it’s *Pine Island*. It will burn like a huge Drakkar.”

“Drakkar? What’s that?”

“A Viking ship. Raiders, like us, from the far north. When their chieftain died, they set him adrift in his battle gear and ignited the ship with a flaming arrow. Imagine the sight!”

Randy soaked in every word. They were heading to Seven Winds—the city where he hoped to find help for McMurdo.

“I don’t get it. Why do we need this prick?” Ezra nagged, nodding toward Randy. “He’s skin and bones.”

“Heard there’s a brothel in New Beijing for boy-lovers,” Kitty jeered. “With that face, they’d pay a fortune.”

Fury boiled over. Randy slammed his forehead into Kitty’s back—once, twice, a third time—until a sharp elbow to the gut silenced him. The men laughed. Fox did not.

“Let’s see what he can do first,” she said. “It’s not every day you find someone who can handle Winged Sun tech.”

“Then why’d you destroy the bracelet?” Yoon asked.

“You brilliant tactician,” Fox snapped. “You want them tracking us? Ezra, you said a flyer was trailing us. Lure it in? You can’t lure a Moon Cross drone. It hears everything.”

The group fell into a dead silence. They rode until the wind vanished and the echoes changed. Randy heard the clatter of boots and the barking of more dogs. They were inside a massive structure—a cave or a hollowed-out mine.

Randy was hauled off the dog and led up three flights of echoing metal stairs. The noise of the camp faded. A door creaked open, then shut. Kitty shoved him into a seat—a door laid across two metal barrels. He heard Fox sit down across from him and felt her boots hit the table.

“You hear me?” she asked.

Randy nodded, heart racing, already scrambling for answers that wouldn’t betray Rakhmanov—or McMurdo.

“What wind blew you into that gorge? And how did the man die?”

Randy started a made-up story about being a cartographer from McMurdo. He heard no objections, only Kitty’s malevolent chuckles from the shadows behind him.

“The man you were talking to... do you know him?” Fox cut in.

“Hell, no.”

Kitty slammed an open palm into Randy’s face. The back of his skull hit the wall, and his cheek flared with heat.

“I’ll ask again. You know him?”

“First time I ever saw him—”

A second slap split Randy’s lip, making him see flashes of white pain.

“How many teeth,” Fox asked coldly, “do I have to knock out before I hear the truth? Kitty has all night, and he enjoys the work.”

“He... he stayed at our place once. When I was a kid,” Randy croaked, the copper taste of blood filling his mouth. “That was the first and last time.”

“When?”

“Ten years ago.”

“His name?”

“Rakhmanov. What’s it to you?”

Another slap from Kitty followed—but this time, Fox hissed at him to stop.

“The backpack—was it yours?”

“No. I took it from the dead man.”

“Then where’s yours?”

“Fell into a gorge.”

Fox remained silent for a long moment, her fingers tapping out a rhythm on the table. Randy tried to picture her face—the same black-and-white warpaint as the others, likely covering weathered skin and the rot of the wastes. Raiders didn't age well.

“You made that map yourself?” she asked. “From old sources? Where were you heading?”

“The Prince gave me the map. He sent me to find a new route to Mirny. To mark any sites of value.”

Kitty burst into laughter, slapping his massive thighs. Randy’s stomach dropped. He had said something wrong.

“Where do you think you are right now, ‘cartographer’?” Fox asked.

“I’d say... a cave,” Randy sniffled, wiping his nose with his bound hands. He guessed it was the Silver Palace, but he refused to give them the satisfaction of his knowledge.

Fox ordered Kitty to fetch her some weed. The brute was surprised but complied, leaving Randy alone with his captor.

“What’s your real name?” Fox asked.

“Randy.”

“You know mine. Now, answer me honestly. Lie, and I’ll call Kitty back. Why did your Prince send you to Mirny?”

“He’s sick,” Randy lied, desperate for a safer motive. “He thinks the cure is there.”

“He planned to pay for it with his shiny gold? Naive idiot,” Fox sneered. “You know about the others he sent?”

“No idea.”

“They never made it back. He must be short on people if he sends a boy alone.”

“Everyone’s on high alert,” Randy said, trying to regain his composure. Time to bait the hook. “A Moon Cross squad was seen on the outskirts.

If you're planning to hit Seven Winds, you'll need the Prince's guns first. They've got white-blast weapons—deadly from a hundred meters. I bet you don't have anything like that."

The shift in her tone was instant. She was interested. "How many people?"

"At least twenty. And they have Golden Age armor."

Randy had hoped to pit one evil against another, but the reaction was brutal. Fox was on him in a flash. She grabbed a fistful of his hair through the sack, yanking his head back to bare his throat. An ice-cold blade pressed against his skin.

"So you're one of them?" she hissed. "Leading us into a trap? The Apostle should have trained you better."

"You mean the Moon Cross? I'm not one of them! I swear on my father's memory!" Randy gasped.

"You aren't a good liar. You're a nobody," Fox growled, pressing the steel harder.

"I've already suffered because of those bastards!" Randy snapped, his voice cracking as the blade tore his skin. "I went to Mirny alone to save my family! There's an epidemic in McMurdo—people are dying every day! The Moon Cross is outside the walls, and the medicine doesn't work!"

The pressure weakened. Fox paused, her breath hot against his ear. "You're telling me a dozen fanatics are threatening the city?"

"Fine," Randy groaned. "I lied. There's more. Closer to two hundred. But I wasn't lying about the weapons. If it weren't for the plague, they'd have taken the city already."

Fox let out a long sigh. Her grip on his hair loosened, though the knife remained. "If you aren't with the Prince, then where did you get that map?"

Randy told her the truth. As he spoke, Fox sank into a chair, dragging him down until his back was against her legs.

"There's no point going to Mirny," she said when he finished. "The city is dead. One big grave."

"So it's true..." Randy whispered. He braced for tears, but his eyes stayed dry. "You slaughtered everyone."

"Not exactly. By the time we arrived, there was no one left to kill. Some died from the plague. Others were smart enough to run. I checked the

logs; the doctor you were after—Reynard—was one of the first to flee. You wouldn't have helped anyone, kid. You'd have just caught the rot yourself."

"They're waiting for me," Randy croaked, burying his face in his bound hands. Everything he'd done—abandoning his family, turning the town against them—it was for nothing.

"Life is unfair," Fox said. "Hope doesn't count for much. You've been lucky so far. My boys didn't gut you, and half my crew dropped after Mirny from the same sickness eating your town. They were like family, too."

The door creaked. Kitty returned with a glass. Fox stood up, leaving Randy slumped in the chair.

"How did you survive raiding the place?" Randy asked bitterly.

"Luck, kid. Dumb, filthy luck. That's why we worship Lady Fortune." She took a sip of the drink. "Maybe your family pulls through. Or maybe they don't."

For the first time in his life, Randy wanted to kill. He hated Fox more than the faceless Moon Cross. She was real. Tangible. He could smell her.

"I have nothing of value," Randy muttered. "Why do you need me?"

"You've seen our faces. You know where we are," Fox snapped.

"So... death it is?"

"Death will come. But first, I'm starving. Naoko, take care of it."

Someone hauled Randy down a flight of stairs. At the bottom, the sack was yanked off. He took his first clean breath in hours and looked around.

Standing before him was a round-faced girl with narrow eyes and a gentle smile. Her black hair was filled with colorful clips. She wore a massive orange coat that dragged on the stone floor.

"Nothing you can do," she said with quiet sympathy, holding a tallow lantern. "Either you're with them, or you're a corpse. Just be glad you aren't mining silver... dying is easier than that."

They walked down a long tunnel, its walls scarred and gouged, confirming Randy's suspicion—this was a silver mine. Steel supports clung to the ceiling like rusted ribs, and half-gutted machines lined the walls, slowly being stripped for parts by the mine's new masters.

Patches of phosphorescent mold—a common light source across the continent—glowed faintly on the damp stone. In the darkness, the smears looked like hovering ghosts; no doubt the Lost Kids encouraged those

rumors to scare off the curious. As they walked, Randy's sharpened senses caught the scent of roasting meat. His mouth flooded with saliva so fast he nearly choked.

Naoko led him into a wide chamber where a fire crackled, casting flickering red light across the faces of the gang—just over thirty of them. They were dressed in the typical Antarctic patchwork: dog-hide cloaks, sea-beast leathers, and Golden Age military fatigues reinforced with scraps of metal and rubber.

One man, likely in his mid-twenties, was missing his nose. Near a stove cobbled from broken rock, a wiry, bearded man named Billy crouched, slowly turning a spit of skewered meat. Off by the wall, the red-haired Ezra was sharpening a knife with rhythmic fury, muttering, "Dull, damn it, dull!" Randy decided then and there to stay as far away from him as possible.

A shirtless, stocky man named Henry stepped toward them. He had a round, unshaven face and small eyes that looked deceptively friendly. He gave Randy a once-over like he was an exotic animal and groaned with disappointment.

"Wish you were a girl, sweetie."

Randy didn't hold back; he gave the man a defiant middle finger. Every ounce of his exhaustion and helpless fury was packed into the gesture. He braced for a beating, but Henry just burst into laughter, planting his hands on his hips.

"Feisty, huh? And starving, too—I can see it in your eyes! Billy, feed the kid!"

"One sec," Billy called from the spit.

"Don't overdo it," Kitty shouted from across the room. "Feed him just enough to keep him alive. No more."

Billy began the distribution of roasted potatoes and grilled rats. It was almost a family scene, if you didn't know the participants. To Randy, the scrawny rats tasted like the finest meat on earth. He knew that if he wanted to find a way back, he needed strength. The raiders laughed at him as he choked on bones and burned his mouth on hot potatoes, having no other entertainment.

Henry, laughing the hardest, shoved a foul-smelling army flask under Randy's nose. "Railtown's rotgut, damn it! Take a swig..."

A "swig" turned into Randy draining the flask in several frantic gulps. He nearly howled as the liquid fire scorched his throat. The heat surged through his body and shot straight to his brain, clouding his mind and dissolving his fear.

The robbed Henry cursed, shaking Randy like a kitten, but the boy—who had never had anything stronger than fermented yak milk—only grinned foolishly and told the raider exactly where he could go. Enraged, Henry slammed him against the stone wall twice, while the rest of the Kids split their sides laughing.

"Orca's son!" Henry ranted. "What am I supposed to treat your wounds with now?"

After the horrors of the last twenty-four hours, Randy was glad for the numbness. He stared at the ceiling, watching colorful, flowing shapes shift and dance. The ground beneath him began to spin. He was flying, yet stationary, savoring the illusion that his troubles were drifting away. He didn't even realize it when—whether in reality or a dream—he was covered by something soft, lifted from the floor, and carried off into the darkness.

Scarlet Wings



Ivan Vassilevsky – September 11, 2190 – Seven Winds

I was leaving Zachary Glass’s workshop when a kid of about sixteen nearly barreled into me—messy black curls, rough, broad features. This had to be Jukka, the assistant whose name the old man had let slip a little too carelessly. The boy spat a quick “Sorry,” then hurried inside, clutching a lunchbox that gave off a mouthwatering scent.

A second later, Zachary’s creaky falsetto rang out—not just across the shop, but probably through half the level. Of all the insults he lobbed at the poor kid, “nut-scratcher,” “fish-brains,” and “dog’s gangrene” were the mildest. If I’d dared peek back in, I’d bet good credits I’d have seen the old man dragging his assistant around by the hair.

I figured it was best to drop out of sight before Jukka’s brain managed to link my face to Zachary’s outburst. However, I had a feeling I’d be working with the kid soon enough.

Back at the hotel, a surprise was waiting: a handwritten invitation from Heldrich himself, summoning me to tonight’s show at *Scarlet Wings*. It was on real paper, featuring delicate loops in a tight, ornate script. I’d expected to spend days searching through back channels to land a meeting; instead, my target had made the first move.

The message wasn’t hard to read between the lines: *Whoever you are, dear guest, you’re in my hands. I know where you sleep, and I set the pace...*

I wondered if he’d already caught wind of my little acquisition. I wrapped the glove in a scrap of cloth, buried it deep in my backpack, and piled the rest of my gear on top. Then I sent a radio ping to Rakhmanov: *Diamond found; owner’s fate unknown.*

The reply came fast: *Keep digging.*

Without quantum comms, messaging was a crawl. I'd have killed to beam a high-res holo of the glove straight to Heliopolis, but Rakhmanov had made it clear: do not draw attention from Solveig.

Heldrich had scheduled the meeting for seven p.m., and I had time to kill. Not expecting Jack back anytime soon, I headed to the *White Mermaid*—this time, to pump the redheaded bartender for information about Zachary Glass and his relationship with the city boss.

I eased into the topic by discussing repairs. I mentioned that someone had recommended Zachary—a solid craftsman, the kind even Heldrich used to trust with his gear.

“He hasn't had an order from the boss in years,” Squirrel replied while sorting silverware. “Even the goons stopped bringing their guns around. Zachary was livid. His young apprentice gets his brain picked from dawn till dusk. If I were in his shoes, I'd have clocked the old goat with a hammer or hanged myself by now.”

“Quite the character,” I nodded. “So Heldrich found someone better? Maybe I should take my gear to them.”

A grizzled fisherman in the corner, with a mustache like dried seaweed, let out a dry laugh over a greasy chunk of seal meat. “Fat chance! If Heldrich found someone better, he sure as hell isn't sharing.”

“Can people even keep secrets in Seven Winds?”

“There are more skeletons on *Pine Island* than closets!” he rasped.

“Oh, Barry, you're full of it,” Squirrel said, shaking her head. “It's simpler. Zachary's crooked. He has the street kids stealing for him. Heldrich doesn't hang him because—well—folks with that kind of know-how don't grow on trees.”

“Since when does Heldrich pity anyone enough not to hang them?” I pushed.

The room seemed to hiss at once, as if I'd spoken a forbidden name too loudly.

“A couple of years back—maybe three—a satellite fell into the ocean,” Squirrel went on, her voice dropping. “Word is, Glass snatched the whole damn thing.”

“A satellite?” I asked, feigning ignorance. “What's that?”

“You really are from the sticks, aren't you?” she said, eyeing me. “It's a wandering star.”

“Liar!” I laughed. Things were moving exactly where I needed them.

“Plenty of folks saw it!” she shot back, heatedly. “It sounded like thunder!”

“My brother was out at night fishing,” Barry chimed in. “Said two boats chased it. No clue what they hauled up or where it went.”

“And he didn't follow?” I asked.

“Not a chance.” Barry tugged his mustache. “Biggest coward in town. Says space junk brings nothing but bad luck.”

“Hey, Squirrel, remember Kat?” Barry added, his tone turning sharp. “That eye candy Jack brought in to work for you? Didn't you have trouble with Heldrich because of her?”

Squirrel's face drained of color.

“Don't listen to him,” she whispered, leaning across the bar. “He talks nonsense when he drinks... I've never had any trouble with Heldrich. None. Do you want something to eat?”

“Sure. Mussels. Just skip the garlic sauce, alright?”

“For the record,” Barry muttered, sulking. “I was drinking water.” He shuffled off.

“So... who was this beauty?” I asked once the order was sent to the kitchen. “Maybe I've met her.”

“Doubt it,” Squirrel said grimly. “Jack told you about her yesterday. Her name was Kat. About your height, strong, and stunning—though it pains me to admit it. She suddenly left, that's all I know.”

The girl leaned over the counter, giving me a clear view down the neckline of her blouse. I had to admire the effort and offered her a smile in return. It was funny how the day wasn't even over, and already so many curious details had surfaced—details that might lead us to the Martians, or to their graves.

After lunch, I wandered the ocean-facing streets, letting the scent of that greasy diner fade from my hair and clothes. When the fire bell next to the helipad rang at six-thirty, I made my way toward the cabaret, wondering what surprises Heldrich had in store for me.

Scarlet Wings was located in Eden—the part of the city that, half a century ago, was restricted to residents with club cards or engraved invites. Somehow, that twisted tradition had survived the end of the world. The “rich man’s pleasures” that didn’t rely on steady electricity had limped into the new age.

Of course, “rich” in Antarctica had taken on a new meaning. It now meant cunning traders, big-time growers, lucky gold hunters, and sharp-eyed craftsmen. The old elite—the pre-Blackout billionaires who never lifted a finger—had lost everything in a heartbeat. They vanished fast, selling off their wives’ earrings... and eventually, their wives.

Eden was brutally walled off from the rest of the city by sandbags and crates fused with construction foam—a crude but effective border. Not everyone got through.

The cabaret’s doors were a pair of three-meter-tall folded wings made of ruby glass plates. When someone approached, they opened theatrically, casting shimmering red reflections from tiny hidden bulbs. I couldn’t help but admire the engineering—had Zachary restored it? This time, however, the doors didn’t open on their own. I had to ring the bell and wait.

Eventually, they creaked open, moving slowly as if the gears were gummed up with old glue. The sluggishness gave me time to admire the wingspan and silently thank the long-dead engineer who had designed them. A trail of flickering floor lights led me inside, past mirrored walls. The wings closed behind me much faster, shutting with a metallic clang that made my skin crawl.

Behind the second door, a doorman waited. I handed over Heldrich’s invitation, and he wordlessly let me through.

I entered a vast hall laced with incense and the ghostly sound of a real grand piano—something I’d only ever heard in digital recordings. The instrument was out of tune, but the magic wasn’t dulled. A blonde in a shimmering dress swayed lazily atop a silver crescent moon, swinging under an electric spotlight.

There were maybe twenty people inside. Some lounged on low couches, puffing on hookahs filled with anything but tobacco. Others clustered at the bar, swapping stories about gold hunters who had vanished in the Silver Palace—the maze of old mines out east. They didn’t exactly match the

elegance of the room: they had sun-scorched faces, knives at their belts, and eyes that never stopped scanning. The only difference was cleaner skin, splashes of Golden Age fashion, and too many rings glittering under the red lamps.

A soft hand touched my shoulder. I turned to see a dark-skinned woman, fragrant and nearly nude—save for clear platform heels and a bra-and-skirt set made entirely of pearl strands. Her body looked as if it had been sculpted by the tides. For a few seconds, my brain went blank. Then the dumbest thought hit me: *She must be freezing*. I almost reached out to drape a coat over her shoulders.

“I’ll escort you, Mr. Vassilevsky,” she said in a practiced purr. Her hand slid around my arm like a snake. I couldn’t remember the last time a woman had pressed herself against me like that.

The rhythmic clink of pearls echoed as we climbed a spiral staircase, two floors up, into a windowless room lit by colored-glass lamps. Heldrich was already there, smoking a tall hookah. He didn’t remove his dark glasses, even in the dim light. He rose slowly to shake my hand.

That face... I was certain I’d seen it before. But where? I’d never been to Seven Winds, and Jack claimed Heldrich rarely left the *Pine Island*. Then again—how well did Jack really know the man?

“Mr. Vassilevsky, thank you for traveling so far to join us,” Heldrich said smoothly. “To come all the way from New Bergen, you must have significant intentions.”

“That’s right,” I replied, studying his features. “I want to establish a lab to produce medicine. I have the raw materials and the formulas—even some intact equipment for DNA modeling and seed irradiation. What I lack is a steady supply of electricity. Since the Blackout, our turbines in the north have spun for nothing. But you... you have the power.”

I gestured toward the constellation of colored lamps overhead. The girl in the pearls had slunk to a chaise just behind me, where the light barely reached, and went stone-still. A bodyguard in disguise. Whatever weapon she carried, it wasn’t hidden in that bra.

“Care for a smoke?” Heldrich nodded at the second hose of the hookah.

“Better not,” I sighed. “The same fight that cost me my eye scrambled my head. I tried smoking afterward, and my family had to hide in the basement for hours.”

Heldrich didn’t press. He picked up his hose with his left hand. It was odd—I’d never met a left-handed surgeon, though I once knew one who was ambidextrous.

“How long has your business been around?”

“Business?” I chuckled. “If only. My mother, may she rest, loathed the idea of profit. She sewed clothes to survive while preserving her collection like a treasure. I begged her to let me use the spores and mycelia... but she wouldn’t budge. It took me a month to work up the nerve to come here, and another three just battling the storms.”

“Cautious, like your mother,” he smirked.

“Perhaps. Anyone with sense would be. You own the power, the ground, and the guns. Anyone in my shoes would think twice. Forgive the honesty.”

Heldrich leaned back and let out a dry laugh. “As long as you aren’t trying to hoax me or plot against my city, you are safe. Ask around. The people I value? They cannot complain that I tax them heavily. But trust like that isn’t cheap. What did you do before this little inheritance?”

“I scavenged rare metals and reagents. Sold them to doctors, blacksmiths, and traders. It was grueling work—finds are getting rarer, and other scavengers are getting meaner.”

He nodded when I scratched the brow above my eye patch.

“A man who takes risks like that, yet wouldn’t cross his mother,” his voice was dead-flat.

“Who crosses the family?” I asked, feigning surprise. It was ironic, of course—I’d done exactly that in my youth. “Who else do we have on this frozen rock?”

“I admire that,” Heldrich said, finally offering a genuine smile. “People with principles are welcome here.”

They look like easy prey, don’t they? I thought.

“Have you had a chance to see the city?” my host asked.

“Only the top levels.”

“The levels below aren’t worth your time. Flooded, damp, sealed. It keeps the rats out.”

It will be hard to sneak into the Nautilus sector anytime soon, I noted. Good to know.

“Are there any open spots for a lab?” I asked. “It looks as though space isn't a problem.”

“*Pine Island* has medical facilities sitting unused. They would suit your needs perfectly.”

I blinked. First Jack, then Barry, had warned me how tightly he guarded the liner. Yet here he was, inviting me in on short notice.

“I didn't expect this level of trust,” I muttered, genuinely thrown. His smile told me he knew it.

“Sandy, could you bring some tea?” he said. The girl slid away like a ghost.

“If you brought samples, Ivan, I'd like to see them. Now or later.”

“Certainly.” I drew a chilled mini-container from my coat. “This one is *Samaritan*—an alga that cleans wounds and prevents inflammation. And this is *Procyon*—a bioluminescent fungus. It glows like a small LED lamp for six hours.”

I illuminated the corner where his bodyguard had been standing. Heldrich replied with a short, appreciative nod.

“Brighter than anything growing in the wild. It can even thrive on rusted metal,” I added.

“What else do you have?”

“Fast-ripening soy. It germinates in three days and flowers on the fourth. It thrives on saltwater, though the flavor is... passable at best.”

His lips twitched. His fingers briefly clenched the arm of his chair. “May I have it?”

“Five beans.” I handed over a small capsule. He rolled it between his fingers before sliding it into a pocket.

“*Tela Aurea*—Golden Web,” I said, placing another vial in his hand. “A fungus that produces golden-colored tissue. Its extract causes total muscle relaxation. Much like curare.”

“Have you tested it?”

“On rats, dogs... and myself. The shelf life is three days, no longer.”

“A pity. And the last one?”

“*Chlorophyta opium*. A variant of chlorella, but not for consumption. If processed correctly, it acts as a powerful painkiller.”

What I didn't mention was that the activator required to stabilize it was a proprietary secret of the Winged Sun. I wasn't about to spill all my beans at once.

"I'll need a day or two to test your samples," Heldrich said. "I still practice medicine when the opportunity arises. It's always satisfying to drag someone back from the Reaper."

"And how many have you dragged back recently?"

"Four, since the clan wars ended. Old Lauri—gangrene, lost the leg. Then a girl, pregnant by some unknown drifter, who tried to take her own life with poison. The child was doomed, but the girl? She's now a star here at *Scarlet Wings*."

"Shall we see her perform tonight?"

"Don't rush it," he said mysteriously. "Hopefully, this won't be your last visit."

He neglected to mention the other two lives he had saved. Sandy placed a tea tray before us. On the edge of each saucer sat a cluster of brown, irregularly shaped sugar crystals. They were made from a rare strain of algae cultivated in New Beijing. The Chinese sold it for only slightly less than its weight in gold. I had a small stash of my own—useful for greasing the wheels of bureaucracy.

I used the moment to test the waters. "Rumor has it that the *Pine Island* is still functional... if the reactor could be restarted."

"Many claim to have seen the Sea Devil," Heldrich smirked. "But let's say you did restart the reactor—what then? The control systems and navigation have been dead for years. If I knew how to siphon electricity from the *Pine Island* into Seven Winds, this city would already be a shining jewel of the Golden Age."

"And imagine how furious the Moon Cross would be," I said, taking a sip. "A 'City of Sin' running full throttle on 'demonic' nuclear energy."

"We have enough to worry about with that rabble," he grunted. "Them and these 'Lost Kids.' I wonder if your mother stashed a machine gun or a microwave cannon somewhere in her collection..."

"I know people who might have," I replied.

For the first time, Heldrich's voice took on a genuinely friendly tone. I let myself enjoy the tea; it tasted like a genuine pre-Blackout blend.

Unbelievable. That's when I noticed the white-metal watch on Heldrich's right wrist.

It was a Soviet mechanical—a Navigator brand. I knew at least one person who used to wear that exact model. The leather strap looked newer—roughly made, probably local. I knew better than to ask about it now; building trust was a marathon, not a sprint.

"People say you've become friendly with that March fellow," he noted.

"I have a strange habit of throwing life rings to drowning men. And Jack? He's a walking guidebook to Seven Winds. He knows more amusing stories than a dog has fleas."

"That 'genius' fed my men—and my cargo—to the dog-riders," Heldrich countered.

"Jack seemed honest enough to me," I replied evenly. "And out there, with supplies short and the law thinner than air, things happen."

"What kind of stories did he feed you?"

"One was about a falling satellite that nearly crushed the city. He said when the fishermen found it at sea, there were dead men inside."

Heldrich took a long, slow gulp of tea. "That man..." he said with a strained sort of calm. "Satellites are built to burn up in the atmosphere or sink in the abyss. No one wants that tech ending up in the wrong hands. I sent a boat out, just in case, but they recovered nothing. Everything was lost to the sea."

No debris, of course, I thought. Because whatever you found was alive.

When the tea was finished, Heldrich rose, promising to invite me to *Pine Island* in a day or so to show me a potential lab space. I had a choice: stay for the dancers or head back to meet Jack. The smoke from Heldrich's hookah was making me lightheaded, and my eye was beginning to ache. I stepped out for some fresh air, only to walk straight into a shouting match.

A hulking cabaret bouncer was barking at a blonde girl. She was tall and solidly built, but her face was unmistakably young.

"I told you—come back Wednesday!" the bouncer snapped. "There's a show tonight! Madame Langeron doesn't have time for strays!"

"Langeron, not Lambrequin, you fish-head," she shot back, her voice ringing with unexpected defiance. "Maybe I just want to watch the show!"

“Hah! Don’t tell me you’ve got the coin for a seat. Beat it! Last thing we need is decent folks seeing some ragged stray loitering by the gate.”

Bitterly shaking her head, the girl turned away and spotted me.

“Sir! Could you spare a sugar crystal for a place to sleep?” she asked, her eyes searching mine. “I’m not from here, and even a bowl of soup costs a fortune.”

“Holy sunshine! How’d you end up here with no money?” I asked, gently steering her away from the bouncer’s reach.

“Need to feed my family somehow. My mom’s legs are bad—caught a chill in the joints. I want to dance at *Scarlet Wings*, make a name for myself.”

“Shooting for the stars, then?”

“Well, yeah. I don’t have many skills; I know that. But a person can learn anything, right?”

“It’s a matter of time, lady. I’m Ivan. And you?”

“Nevis.”

“That’s a man’s name, isn’t it?”

She shrugged with a charming, practiced nonchalance. “Mom and Dad wanted a boy.”

“Sorry. I was rude...”

She answered with a smile as warm as a sunbeam. Her golden hair, spilling from the hood of her worn parka, was striking—though no more striking than my late Helga’s had been. The memory stung, but it didn’t stop the pull of her presence.

“Hungry?” I asked. The parade of beauties inside the cabaret had evidently rekindled some buried, foolish taste for romance in me.

“My stomach is stuck to my spine,” Nevis said bluntly.

“*White Mermaid* okay with you? At least they don’t have a goddamn dress code.”

“Oh! Hang on a second.” She stepped closer and plucked a stray hair off my sleeve. It was a delicate gesture—even if I suspected it wasn’t entirely selfless.

A figure was approaching through the red-tinted gloom. I recognized the gait before I even saw the face: Jack. *Damn it.* I assumed he’d found something worth sharing in Outland, but the look on his face suggested something far worse.

The moment he saw me—and Nevis—he froze as if he'd hit an invisible wall.

“Gangrene!” he hissed under his breath. “Sir, can I talk to you for a moment? Matter of life and death!”

“One minute,” I told the girl, turning to Jack. “What is it?”

He didn't even wait for a response. He grabbed my sleeve and dragged me fifteen meters down the street, his heels practically on fire.

“Ivan, that thing... that creature... it's going to cause massive trouble!”

“She looks quite nor—”

“Just listen! You sent me to Outland to look for weird shit, right? I'm telling you—*she's* the weird shit.”

“Dammit,” I muttered, spinning back toward the cabaret entrance.

Too late. She was already gone—bolting down the twisting shadows of Emerald Alley with a speed that no “starving” girl should have possessed.

Genetic Chameleon



Ivan Vassilevsky - September 11-12, 2190 - Seven Winds

We never managed to catch up with Nevis, but the Orderlies on the street reported seeing a woman bolting from one stairwell to the next. I told them she'd lifted a gold lighter from my pocket; knowing Heldrich's stance on theft, I figured they'd be eager to assist. They promised they would.

Jack's story—choked with curses and as ragged as a dying man's breath—sounded insane. But madness had ruled Earth for so long it was hard to be shocked. Hearing the caravan driver out, right up to the part where he staggered back from the Outland on foot, took all the patience I had. He clutched his head as if it might roll off his shoulders, terrified—the way anyone would be after watching their understanding of reality pop like a soap bubble.

When I hit an "unsolvable" problem, I think it over in the bath. Jack could scoff at my extravagance, but I stuck to what worked. I soaked in the hot water, closed my eye, and connected the scattered facts—those from Seven Winds and earlier reports from Veliard—like broken links in a chain.

A hypothesis formed: a bioengineered intelligent organism—a metamorph—had appeared in Seven Winds. Only one organization could produce such a monstrosity: Nautilus.

Veliard, who had neglected his company in favor of tinkering with a new body for himself, offered no excuses. He gave zero fucks about what his Antarctic branch had been doing. Our archives held only one mention of this: a darknet exposé describing a "genetic chameleon," a byproduct of Nautilus's garage-era biotech experiments.

It began with a mouse. After consuming raw flesh from another mammal, the rodent would, within hours, take on the traits of its prey. Blood

composition changed. Organs appeared or vanished. Extra teeth sprouted—predator fangs or bovine molars—all scaled to a rodent's size.

The creature had a hyper-accelerated metabolism and an insatiable hunger. It survived only nine days, during which it mutated four times. Nautilus leadership dismissed the report as “comic-book nonsense,” and the public, as always, moved on.

Now, I was burning to study our little visitor. A complete bodily transformation within seconds belongs in movies; in reality, the body would burn out or collapse from the pain. Imagine the whole body being rebuilt at the cellular level! This means a metamorph needs a secure, hidden place and several hours in a torpor-like state to shift. That abandoned well in the Outland was perfect—and pretty Annie couldn't have wandered by at a better time.

What does this tell us? A metamorph needs an original to copy—hair, skin, saliva, or blood. To complete the shift and remain functional, it requires massive amounts of energy. Whatever shape it took after escaping us, it will be an outlier in its appetite.

The goal is clear: a biological masterpiece built to assume the form of someone important, or someone forgettable—like a mail runner. And the metamorph knew who I was. It approached me on purpose. That means the Winged Sun has a rat in HQ.

Enough lounging. Rakhmanov needed to hear this.

I filed my report. When I mentioned the mole, Rakhmanov barely reacted, but I know him. Everything I say will be weighed and double-checked. He listened, nodded, and told me to stay sharp. He added that just yesterday, Antero Virtanen had been killed near the Old Mines while tracking a Moon Cross *desmodus* drone.

And—because fate has a twisted sense of humor—nearby was the stepson of Ilya Osokin, the doctor whose exile might have accelerated Mirny's collapse.

Osokin's first wife, Nina, had become pregnant again, violating the strict birth control measures Colonel Zorin had imposed. Zorin found it easier to ban second children than to solve the food crisis. Despite the fact that the Osokins' son, Arseny, had a threatening heart disorder, they were denied permission to raise a second child. The family chose exile over abortion.

I was just a kid then, but I remember Zorin's fury—how he hunted for scapegoats, bullied young Reynard Lutz (Osokin's student), and wrapped the base in a paranoid web of surveillance.

If someone had just had the guts to put a bullet in that lunatic back then, quite a few lives might have been saved. The moment Zorin ordered the bridge to the spaceport blown up—supposedly to "defend against external threats"—that should have been it. But no. They obeyed. They blew the bridge, sealing their own coffins from the inside.

The catastrophe at Mirny unfolded just before the clan wars broke out in Seven Winds. By then, the spaceport had no working radios; the Blackout had fried the quantum transmitters, and the art of cobbling together a basic analog set had been lost to time. Two couriers were dispatched to Heliopolis, but winter arrived early. It took them two and a half months to stagger to our gates, half-dead from exhaustion. Of the ten sled dogs they started with, only three survived.

They reported a fast-acting fungal infection—transmitted through airborne droplets and blood. When inhaled, it mimicked a common cold, tricking the infected into wasting their only window for treatment. Once the toxin took hold, it triggered irreversible brain and lung damage. Victims hallucinated, turned violent, and sought to end their own lives—or the lives of those around them.

Zorin didn't hesitate to pin the outbreak on Reynard Lutz. The suspicion gained traction when Lutz fled, killing two guards on his way out with a cold efficiency that shocked everyone.

Reynard in the wild? It was hard to imagine. I remembered him as a melancholic, pudgy guy who wandered the spaceport outskirts collecting samples of soil and water. He was nearly invisible; I struggled to recall his face and doubted he had a single friend besides Dr. Osokin.

We'd barely spoken back then, but fate had other plans. Lutz ended up helping me, my father, and nine of our comrades escape through the medbay's emergency exit—not out of kindness, but because he had a gun to his head. That night, I think he wanted to taste freedom just as badly as we did. But even though he was a medic, my father never allowed him to join our ranks.

Before we could commit a rescue team to Mirny, we deployed a drone with a “brood” of scout bots. To the despair of the couriers, there was no one left to save. However, the bots had enough power to remain active until the Lost Kids’ intrusion; that’s how I knew the gang had entered the tomb.

At first, I felt a grim relief, thinking the “Older Brother” and his thugs had finally met their end in that fungal trap. But the Kids proved to be as stubborn as cockroaches in a nuclear blast. Unlike the hundreds of Mirny’s citizens, these devils remained standing—and now they have a new leader, someone young and daring enough to threaten the prosperity of Seven Winds.

We never knew if the dog-riders settled in Mirny or moved on, but that is where I intend to go with Jack. I have to talk Heldrich into extending his impossible deadline. Easier said than done: I’m a scout and a fighter, not a smooth talker.

In the morning, I asked Jack to have Zachary arrange for a mountaineering kit and ropes to be delivered directly to us. Jukka would be making the delivery—and I desperately needed to see him.

I headed to the marketplace, which had long served as the city’s social network.

“Lousy news, Mister Vassilevsky,” said the young Orderly I’d asked for help after Nevis vanished. He was barely twenty. “Two of our guys went down to the lower levels to track your thief... and they haven’t come back.”

Just what I needed—a full-blown commotion with me at the center. “Does Heldrich know?”

“We’ll tell him if they don’t turn up by nightfall.”

“You think it’s a gang?”

“You kidding?” he snorted, slamming a fist into his palm. “We hanged every gang that didn’t bend the knee. We keep the rest on a short leash.”

“But the lower levels are deserted, aren’t they?”

“They are. We sealed the access points to keep the fools out. Anyone who does get in risks losing their mind. When I was a kid, I waded chest-deep through flooded warehouses into the mountain tunnels. Down there, I saw a woman with an octopus for a head. Slimy gray tentacles... blades for fingers. A nightmare!”

I rolled my eyes. Even for Nautilus, that sounded like a hallucination.

“Some folks saw an old lady with a scythe,” he continued. “Others met bloody monsters and barely escaped. Call it gas or toxic mold, but too many people saw things that made their blood chill.”

“Underground gases or parasitic spores, most likely,” I said. “But what if your men are trapped there now?”

“If they are, we’ll use the—” He caught himself. “Never mind. I’ve got duty. Gotta run.”

On one hand, locals love spinning yarns for outsiders. On the other, with a shapeshifter on the loose, I couldn't ignore the possibility of something real lurking in the damp, rusted underworld.

Jukka showed up at sunset. Once I ordered a meal for three, his hostility vanished. I could not believe how much food that scrawny kid could wolf down.

“Let’s get to business, Jukka,” I said. “Zachary didn’t lose his mind over that glove for no reason.”

“So what?” The kid was on guard, but his greed was showing.

I laid a tube of sugar on the table. He looked at it shamelessly. “Too small.”

I pulled out a second. He snorted. “Am I a joke to you?”

I don’t like “boatswain mode,” but life forced my hand. I jumped up, twisted the boy’s arm, and slammed his head onto the table—hard enough to make a *thud*, but not to leave a mark.

“You think I don’t know you and Glass are hustling stolen goods?” I growled. “I’m dealing with Heldrich here. If I even hint to him—”

“Don’t! Kill me yourself, but don’t tell him!” Jukka sobbed.

“Where did you get the glove?” I demanded, letting him up.

The boy exhaled, defeated. “I was mopping floors on Pine Island, near the Orderlies’ quarters. I saw it on the floor by the stairs and grabbed it. It saved my skin during winter fishing.”

“Why didn’t you join the Orderlies? You could carry a gun.”

“I don’t like Heldrich. They say he once cut off a man’s leg just for fun. Glass might scream like a seagull, but the worst he does is box your ears.”

“What did you see the day you found it?”

“The day before, they were chasing a ‘terrorist’ from Mizrahi’s gang. And a month earlier, a ‘wandering star’ fell into the ocean. I saw the Orderlies

hauling something up from a boat. A sea devil. It was huge, armored, and human-shaped. Dead, or maybe sleeping.”

The puzzle was coming together. A "star" falling from the sky—likely a re-entry capsule—and an armored "sea devil" brought up from the depths.

“Does Zachary have a room he keeps locked?”

“Yeah. A storage room. He never opens it in front of me.”

I pulled four soluble sedative capsules from my kit. “Mix one in his drink tomorrow—he drinks on Saturdays, right? One in the dog’s food. If they’re asleep at midnight, light a lantern. Let me in.”

“What if it doesn’t work?”

“Try again. I’m not robbing him, Jukka. I just need to see what’s inside.”

Jukka took the capsules and hurried off.

“You sure the Orderlies won’t be waiting?” Jack asked.

“I’ll take precautions,” I said. “But you’re staying here. If anything happens to me, convince Heldrich to give your dogs back. Start searching for the Lost Kids between Railtown and Mirny. That’s where the real answers are.”

Hall of The Mountain Queen



Randy de la Serna – September 13, 2190 – Silver Palace

A familiar melody drifted to Randy's ears. A soft voice sang Moonchild, Alda's favorite song. Still half-asleep, he yanked the grimy, stinking sleeping bag from over his head and turned toward the sound.

The voice felt like it could make flowers bloom through ice. Randy's eyelids rose slowly, sticky with sleep, letting in a soft golden glow and a dark blur that gradually took shape: a small woman bundled in layers, tying leather plates together with a cord. It was Naoko.

They were near the end of an underground tunnel, hidden behind a tarp and lit by two tin cans of whale oil. And in that moment, the memories returned—vivid and brutal: Mirny was lost. Rakhmanov was unable to assist. He was a captive, a mere slave, held by a pack of feral outlaws.

His wrists and ankles were still bound. His body ached from sleeping that way.

"You've got a sweet voice," he rasped.

"Oh, really?"

"How do you know that song?"

"They play it at Neptune Station in Railtown. We've got a receiver. Fox listens to it every day. By the way... they caught you because Fox heard something weird through the signal. Got spooked, grabbed her best fighters, and went out scouting."

"Guess I'm not who she expected," Randy muttered. "A nobody. So... What are they planning to do with me?"

"They're still deciding," Naoko said. "Might throw you in with the other slaves to crack rocks. Or save you for other jobs. Fox has big plans—she needs people and weapons. Kitty says you're not much of a fighter. Not a coward, though. Just... too kind."

"Am I?" He snorted. "You mentioned other slaves—how many?"

"I have no right to say this. But let me warn you: it's a maze down here. You get lost or fall, you're dead. The bridge to the Mainline was blown up before Fox even became the boss."

"So everyone's trapped. Great," Randy muttered. "Do they ever go outside?"

"When Arce was in charge, this was out of the question. But Fox lets them out sometimes—supervised, of course. Says, there's no value in dead workers."

"Who's Arce? The gang's former head?"

"Yes. 'Elder Brother.' That's the title. Fox is 'Elder Sister.' I got captured right after she took over. They say, it was big luck."

"Huh..."

Naoko's voice dipped slightly. "My old man tried to sell me at the New Beijing marriage market. Like a damn chicken. Lost Kids ambushed us in broad daylight. My "loving parent" got robbed but was allowed to flee. The caravan guards ended up in the mine. I've been here nearly two years."

Randy turned his face away, thinking of his parents waiting for his return. His voice trembled. "And I'm lucky the old fart Henry didn't smash my skull."

"Henry?" Naoko's smile faded. "He's not angry any more. He just went crazy from the loss of booze. It's easier to find gold down here than alcohol — the anesthetic, the antiseptic." She wrinkled her nose. "You need to freshen up. Come on."

Randy stumbled after the girl, legs still bound, keeping an eye on her slight frame. Despite his modest height, he felt like a giant beside her.

She seems kind, he thought. But does she know the way out? Would she even help me if she did?

Naoko led him into a larger room, where a metal tank stood with a faucet. A plastic pipe ran along the damp wall, feeding into it. Plumbing—here, in this hole? He hadn't expected that. And the warmth in the mine was almost cozy.

"Golden-age workers installed the pipes. Henry fixed this up. He's our jack-of-all-trades," Naoko said proudly, like Henry was a brother—or something more. The possessive tone in "our" made Randy flinch. A former raid victim, she now saw herself as a gang member.

She tugged a shiny brass lever—probably repurposed from some old machine. Randy placed his bound hands under the pipe. Hot water gushed out. He flinched, surprised.

“It’s geothermal,” she explained, catching his look. “You’ve noticed the heat, right?”

He nodded. He knew Antarctica was a land of buried volcanoes. Erebus was the most famous; it grew so unstable that the former McMurdo station had to be moved to the continent and gradually grew into a town. To Randy, it was madness to dig a mine at the base of an active volcano—and even more madness to live in it. But maybe not entirely without logic. The Lost Kids were literally sitting on silver, maybe gold (which sometimes occurs together with silver in the earth’s crust). And for them, survival wasn’t about long-term safety. Disease, snowstorms, rockslides, skirmishes—any of it could kill them first.

And hot water? Habitable rooms? No enemy raids, no patrols? Luxury!

Randy, raised on strict hygiene, was eager to clean up. He wanted to wash down to his waist, but Naoko wouldn’t cut the ropes. Instead, she helped scrub his hair. He managed the rest—face and hands—on his own.

The latrine was easy to find—just follow the smell. A pit covered by a grate. Mushrooms flourished in the corners, somehow thriving.

Randy took it all in—the turns, rooms, rails, the stairs to the lower levels. He asked questions constantly. Naoko didn’t always answer—but he still learned.

Eventually, they arrived at a fenced platform. A rusted cage waited, ready to lower people into the mine’s depths. Randy peered down. Oil lamps flickered far below. Shadows moved—picking, striking, grunting. The smell of metal and sweat hung in the air.

“What the hell took so long?”

Randy turned and saw Henry —scruffy, unwashed and in a foul mood.

“Just getting him cleaned up. Didn’t want lice,” Naoko said, unbothered.

“Shave him bald if you care that much,” Henry growled. “That’s enough cleaning!”

“Trim your own rat-tail first,” she shot back.

He bristled. “If I were Fox, I’d have cut out that smart little tongue. Have you eaten anything yet?” he asked Randy.

Randy shook his head.

“Don’t trust these hags with anything...”

“Including Fox?” Randy muttered, voice dripping with sarcasm.

Henry froze. His voice dropped low, dangerous. “Fox ain’t no hag. Every one of us is alive because of her. You understand?”

“Couldn’t be clearer.”

“Follow me. So you’re a blacksmith, huh? How long?”

“I’ve been swinging a hammer since I was thirteen. Learned from Masako in McMurdo.”

“Masako?” Henry frowned. His brows furrowed so deep they nearly merged. “Heard that name from a Railtown merchant. Got one of her blades.”

“Killed many with it?”

“No. I’m more the technical type. Without me, guns don’t fire. Pumps don’t run. I’m second only to Fox in this goddamn cave.”

Randy raised an eyebrow. “What about Kitty?”

Henry dismissively waved his hand, saying nothing. Then he made an inviting gesture.

“Where are we going?” Randy asked.

“To the torture chamber, kid, to the torture chamber!” Henry clapped him on the shoulder and hoarsely laughed at his own joke. “Don’t worry, we’re moving to the workshop. Pretty much the same thing.”

He led Randy down another corridor. “The old bosses were clever... Built a repair station right here, so they didn’t have to haul stuff far. Left behind some top-grade tools too. ‘Course, most of the refugees stripped it clean on their way out... dragged what they could to Railtown. And now they sell the rest at wicked prices.”

Randy’s breath caught when they entered the workshop.

Looming along the stone walls were massive metal structures, each nearly three meters tall—some standing, others half-disassembled and leaning or crumpled like broken toys. They had rough human-like shapes: broad torsos, thick arms—but their hands were pincers, drills, or strange, claw-like tools. Some didn’t even have legs or wheels but a pair of caterpillar treads.

Faded crimson stars were still visible on their rusting hulls. White stenciling labeled them:

XOPC — GPD-500

XOPC — GPD-700

“Mining robots,” Henry said, his tone softening—almost reverent now. “Monsters, aren’t they? Can you imagine the haul, if we could get even one of these beasts running again? Silver, gold, all right beneath our feet...”

He sighed. “We can rip ‘em apart a dozen ways, no problem. Bringing one back to life? That’s the real trick. And no one here’s managed it. Not even Arce, though he came from some smart place.”

“What if I knew someone who could?” Randy asked carefully. He had no doubt Rakhmanov and his team from Winged Sun could bring them back to work.

Henry eyed him, skeptical.

“Fox probably said I was an idiot, getting caught so easily,” Randy continued. “But if I’m useful, I’ll prove it. If not—”

“If not,” Henry cut in, “Kitty’ll sell you to New Beijing. Use the payout to hire someone who is useful. Fox wants fighters. I want someone who knows metal and tech.”

As if summoned by name, Kitty strode into the workshop, grinning wide enough to show all thirty-two teeth.

“No one teaches you manners, mouse?” he sneered, giving Randy a once-over. Then his eyes narrowed. “Huh. His arms are all burns and scars. Bet he’s garbage in the forge.”

Henry didn’t miss a beat. He flipped a heavy wrench in one hand and growled, “Take a look at my arms, and then say that to my face.”

“Pfft! You’ve got a couple decades on him,” Kitty snorted, crossing his arms.

Anger surged in Randy’s chest. This oversized clown couldn’t possibly understand what it was like. Spending entire days in a forge, shoulders hunched over molten metal, scorched by sparks flying in all directions, sweating through thick clothes while the heat clawed at your lungs—and even basic protection was a constant hassle.

A minute later, they stepped into a new chamber, hollowed out by machines. Randy took in a deep breath, the familiar scent hitting him like an embrace. Smoke, metal, oil—it was home, almost.

Three metal cans burned with whale oil, their flames casting a warm golden glow that danced across the rock walls. It was a richer, livelier light than the pale flicker of fungus or mold.

On a battered workbench sat a smooth white cube with rounded corners. Three soft blue dots glowed on its surface. Against the grime and chaos of the workshop, it looked absurdly out of place—like a penguin perched in a tree.

Barrels, crates, and jumbled piles of scrap metal lined the walls: all the salvage the Lost Kids had managed to scavenge from dead settlements. Mallets, sickles, rust-flecked armor, tangled wires, machine parts, spools of cable, radio tubes, ammo belts... It was dizzying. Like stumbling into Ali Baba's cave, Randy felt his anxiety flicker and fade—replaced, just for a moment, by awe.

So caught up was he in the treasure trove that he didn't immediately notice he wasn't alone.

It started with a pair of legs—incredibly long, casually crossed atop a large plastic storage case. The boots were tall, worn smooth at the creases, and the dark-gray pants clung like second skin, merging seamlessly into fitted armor plates. Then he saw the curve of hips, unmistakably feminine.

Randy's eyes shot upward.

A face stared back at him—narrow, high-cheekboned, with pale skin and eyes the color of bright moss, ringed with long, black lashes. Her eyebrows arched like thunderbird's wings. Her black hair was swept back and pinned behind her head, with loose strands falling around her face. Even under the workshop's meager light, she looked far less weathered than anyone else Randy had seen here. She rarely left the shelter, he guessed. Or maybe she just belonged to the night.

But her beauty didn't soften her. There was no warmth in that face—no gentleness. Her expression was hard. Her stare held the same weight Randy had seen in old sailors, and the tight set of her mouth gave her a roughness that outlasted prettiness.

He knew instantly: this woman wasn't a captive. She lounged like she owned the place—relaxed, confident. The knife strapped to her thigh wasn't for show. She wasn't prey. She was a predator. And then she spoke.

“Was the axe we took from you your own work?” she asked, voice steady, calm.

Randy’s throat tightened. He recognized the voice. The same one that had hissed threats in the dark. The same one that had ordered his capture. He would’ve preferred a hideous, scar-faced monster. It would’ve been easier—cleaner—if she’d been grotesque. Randy had always believed beauty and cruelty couldn’t coexist. He’d been wrong.

“How did you know?” he whispered.

“There’s a mark on the blade. An ‘R’ inside a winged sun. Not just anyone could’ve stamped that. You don’t just know someone from Winged Sun—you strive to join them.”

“That’s not relevant,” Randy snapped, anger flaring again.

Kitty slammed a fist into his ribs.

“Don’t break the tool!” Fox snapped, the bark in her voice cutting through the room like a whip. It was the first time her tone had cracked—laced with raw anger, sudden and sharp. “Henry, take command.”

Henry nodded slowly. For the first time, his gaze flicked toward Randy with something almost like sympathy.

Henry scratched his head, sighed—clearly displeased with being assigned examiner duty—then pulled a bag labeled RaddEodItals from one of many cluttered drawers and dumped its contents onto the workbench. Nothing in the heap resembled radio parts.

“You could just give him the cutter. Be faster,” Fox said lazily from her perch.

Henry frowned but didn’t argue. With a shrug, he handed Randy a pair of thick gloves and a pair of heavy, dark goggles that swallowed half his face. Then, from the holster on his belt, he pulled a translucent, smoke-colored cylinder with finger grooves molded into its surface.

The top of the tool was deep black, ringed with a notched dial. A single button sat beneath the thumb rest.

“You press here—light comes out and cuts through metal. Let go, it stops,” Henry explained, clicking the button. A white-hot beam lanced from the cutter with a shriek. Even behind goggles, it stung Randy’s eyes like staring into the January sun. “And Night help you if you nick a finger with it. That shit doesn’t grow back.”

The glowing blue dots on the strange white cube pulsed merrily.

Randy spotted a name etched faintly on one side: Lindon Power. His breath hitched. That's what Rakhmanov was looking for... back at the dump.

It had to be a power source for the beam knife. But there wasn't a single wire in sight.

"That's it," Henry said, gesturing toward the table. "Dig through the junk. Make something that'll impress me."

Randy glanced at Fox, stunned by the command's bluntness. But she just reclined further in her seat, fingers laced behind her head, her expression one of idle amusement.

His palms broke out in sweat. His heart thundered.

Still, he pushed past the wave of panic and began organizing the scrap—hoping, praying, something in the mess would spark an idea.

"You can root through that pile too," Henry added, jerking his chin toward a heap of rusting components. "Mostly useless junk, but who knows. If you need to fill gaps, seal something, or glue metal—there's live plastic in the bucket. Just don't get greedy. Cut off a quarter, tops."

Randy knew about live plastic: a gray, bubbling paste that hissed in water and hardened like stone in dry air.

Among the scrap, he found a thermos, a broken pressure cooker, and a handful of heat-resistant tubes. Fox strolled out, promising to return in an hour. Kitty took her place—arms folded over his barrel chest, glowering from a makeshift bench like a carved gargoyle. Under that shark-eyed stare, it was nearly impossible not to fumble.

But as Dr. Osokin used to say, the eyes are afraid, but the hands do the work.

To calm his nerves, Randy began to hum softly. He drilled holes in the pot lid, threaded the tubes, and attached them to the thermos. The light cutter felt natural in his grip—precise and effortless, slicing through metal like it was butter.

The lid needed sealing. No gaps. He reached for the bucket of live plastic, sliced off a small lump, and set to work. The substance was tougher than it looked. Within two minutes, it hardened into something harder than stone.

Once, I would've been thrilled to use something like this, Randy thought, grimacing. Now it just feels like another tool in someone else's chains.

The result—a clunky tangle of seemingly mismatched parts—looked absurd, but not to Henry. He circled the bench, squinting at the creation. Then his eyes widened, and a bark of laughter erupted from his chest.

“Son of a bitch built a moonshine still!” he roared.

Yeah? And funny you didn't think of it yourself, old man, Randy thought. *Let's see you keep your guns and morale running without booze.*

Henry leaned in, tapping the welds and seals. “Tight. Airtight. Not bad. Nothing's leaking. Where'd you learn this?”

“At home,” Randy said. “McMurdo. My dad and brother are doctors. They need ethanol every day.”

Henry grunted, impressed.

“We haven't tested it yet,” Kitty interrupted. “No mash on hand. I'm not tossing rats into that thing.”

He thudded a bundle wrapped in dark blue cloth onto the workbench. Inside lay a sleek revolver—the kind Randy had never even touched before.

The polished metal gleamed in the lantern light. His thoughts scattered like startled birds.

I'm screwed, he thought. *Totally, completely screwed.*

“Smith & Wesson, Model Ten. Built in 2063,” Kitty said, like that was supposed to mean something. “Disassemble it, figure out what's wrong, and fix it.”

Randy stood frozen over the weapon, not about to argue. To his surprise, Henry handed over his canteen—gruff, but unexpectedly generous. The water had a faint taste and smell of alcohol.

Moving slowly and deliberately, more drained from nerves than from effort, Randy got to work.

He smiled—if only to spite Kitty. Pretending he'd spent his whole life assembling firearms, he rolled back his shoulders and tried to look calm.

“When you're feeling like crap,” Alda used to say, “square your shoulders, lift your chin, and smile—even if it's fake. Sooner or later, your mind will follow your body.”

Time to test that theory.

It kind of worked. The pounding in his temples faded, his breath steadied, his palms dried up. The fog in his head began to lift. Clamping down on every twitch to rush, every flicker of panic, Randy began piecing the weapon together, step by step. He had no real sense of time passing—being this deep underground, he couldn't even see the sky.

To his relief, the issue was obvious: the trigger jammed. On the road, that kind of delay could mean a dead man. He disassembled it again, found the bent trigger guard, and carefully realigned it.

Kitty snatched the revolver from the bench, spun the cylinder, cocked it, pulled the trigger a few times.

Then he dug into the pocket of his camo pants, pulled out a worn leather pouch, and loaded a single round.

“Out of the workshop, with that damn thing—” Henry started, but too late. Kitty pulled the trigger.

For a second, nothing. Then the sharp crack of a gunshot echoed off the stone walls. The bullet flew six meters and struck the sun-bleached skull of a musk ox placed high on one of the shelves.

“You asshole!” Henry barked, recoiling. “What if it'd ricocheted and hit me?”

“It wouldn't have ricocheted,” Kitty said coolly. “I know exactly where I'm shooting.”

He spun the revolver again and gave Randy a long, unreadable look. “As I thought—kid's no killer. Looks the part, maybe. I'll talk it over with Fox. We'll figure out what to do with him. Henry, you can work with him. Let him earn his food.”

With that, he strode out, the revolver swinging from his hand, leaving Randy standing at the bench—heart pounding, nerves stretched thin.

Randy exhaled deeply and turned to Henry, eyes drifting from the moonshine still to the mechanic.

“You hungry?” Henry asked, almost kindly. “Don't look at me like that—I'm serious. And we still need to finish that gun. Each of them's worth its weight in gold down here.”

Their meal was simple: dried cheese hard as stone, cloves of garlic, and strips of jerky so rubbery they had to be chewed like old gum. But even this made Henry more talkative.

“Where’d you find the live plastic?” Randy asked, genuinely curious.

“Mirny... may rust take it,” Henry said moodily. “I heard you went there looking for medicine. Not much chance of that, was there? The locals had blocked the roads just as we did. And nearly everyone died. Just like our lot did.”

“What?” Randy blinked, stunned.

“The funny thing is,” Henry continued, “Arce and most of the original gang were locals from there. Only Ezra made it out. Arce got what he deserved—tried to loot his own old house and ended up a pile of ash. Some things, you just don’t do...”

He paused, his jaw tight. “I never liked Mirny. That place makes you feel like nothing. Like a ghost. Everything screams of what was lost. Giant machines like monsters. Iron towers topped with dead, rusting dishes. And right in the middle—withered gardens and a graveyard in a bunker. Bodies everywhere you look.”

He shifted, his voice dropping. “Fox said barely any of the little kids died from the plague.”

“Then why—?”

“Hunger, kid. They couldn’t find the key to the food stash. Fox was furious we got there too late. That damn door didn’t mean anything to us; behind it was plenty of untouched food.”

“And what would she have done with them if she’d made it in time? Put them to work breaking rocks?” Randy’s words were sharp and bitter.

Henry looked away. “I don’t know. We nearly died ourselves. I’ll never forget it. The heat, the coughing—felt like my lungs were tearing apart. Then the fever dreams, like the strongest high you’ve ever tripped. Then the suffocation. All you want is to smash your skull in just to make it stop.”

“But you’re still here. You, Ezra, Fox. How?”

“Ezra stayed in the back, kept his distance. That’s how he avoided it. Fox...”

“Henry, less talk.” Fox’s voice cut through the air—sharp, clipped, and laced with tension. “And you—kid—I need you to take us to your parachute. If you weren’t lying, it’s still in that ravine. We may need it for what’s coming.”

“What does she want with a giant piece of fabric?” Randy asked Henry once she was gone.

“If you've flown with it, it can be used to drop explosives, too,” Henry said bluntly. “Fox has a score to settle with the boss of Seven Winds. She wants to make a name for herself—bigger than Arce ever did. We need a win. A raid that makes people talk. Big loot, big impact.”

He grinned bitterly. “Besides, when was the last time we had a real fight? Robbing traders doesn't take brains. Show a harpoon gun and they hand over their pants. The last real clash we had was with your hometown. Arce planned to raid it, but he screwed it up.”

“I remember,” Randy muttered. “Alejandro rallied a militia, but I was too young to join. We didn't know the bastard's name was Arce.”

“After that, Fortune turned her back on him. You want the funny part? Your Prince was once buddies with Arce; they fled Mirny together. They took over your town as partners, then fell out. One stayed to burn coal, the other hit the roads, collecting freaks like us for revenge.”

“Why did Arce leave Mirny?”

“He rebelled against the local boss,” Henry said. “And something went south.”

“The boss... you mean Colonel Zorin?” Randy frowned.

“I'm bad with names,” Henry grunted. “Arce fled with his teenage son—Ivan, if I am not mistaken. But once they went rogue, it was the kid's turn to rebel. He didn't want to be a raider. Nearly stabbed his father, ran off, and got lost. Anyway, stop slacking. You need to make buckles like this one.”

Henry showed him a solid metal buckle. “I need twelve. No lazing around, no matter what Fox has planned. I'll handle the gun repairs. You—get to work.”

“Where are the blanks?”

“What a clown,” Henry snorted. “We haven't made them yet. The barrel of silver nuggets is over there. If you swipe even one, I'll wring your neck.”

“Silver?”

“Funny to live on top of it and not use it. Besides, it takes way less coal than refining iron.”

“And where does the smoke go?” Randy asked, looking at the forge.

“You stupid? It vents outside, obviously. See the chimney?”

While Randy lit the forge, Henry used a *beam knife* to slice the larger silver nuggets. Randy stared at the tool—it could weld and cut with a focused line of heat. He imagined Masako’s face if she ever saw such a wonder.

The surface is close, Randy thought. And the way to freedom, too.

The Other Me



Ivan Vassilevsky – September 12–13, 2190 – Seven Winds

I spent the day scouting the sites Heldrich had marked for the lab. Calling them "suitable" was a generous stretch. We would have to install plumbing and sewage from scratch, and the power grid was well below par. Solar panels could have bridged the gap, but they would also turn us into a glowing beacon for the Prophet's winged spies.

My guide, Orderly commander Johan Rasmussen, kept pushing Heldrich's pitch, claiming I could have an entire deck on the liner—a sudden upgrade from the empty medbay offered yesterday. Johan didn't push too hard, likely because he hated my guts. I'm rarely wrong about that sort of thing.

During our rounds, we crossed paths with Jukka, out running errands. The moment he saw me with Johan and the guards, he turned red as a boiled lobster and slipped away. He gave me a quick wink, and I felt the familiar chill of anticipation.

To keep up appearances, I had Johan pass along my "polite interest" in tomorrow's Pine Island visit. Not a commitment, but distraction.

I used the walk to study the city's bones, figuring out how to bypass the sealed zones. I saw stairwells jammed with scrap and crates, and sewer grates plugged with expanding foam. Yet, food—fish, mushrooms, grain—was still reaching every tier. That meant some kind of lift was still operational, even if it ran on a simple crank and pulley.

Back at the *Velvet Night*, Miss Paramar confirmed my theory. "Three elevators bring food up, darling—from the docks, the mushroom farms, and the warehouses on levels minus-two and minus-three. Below that, there's nothing but grime, water, and rats."

Now I knew where to look if Zachary's office proved to be a dead end.

Convincing Jack to stay at the hotel was harder. He grumbled that my plans were a mess and that he didn't care about "fallen stars" or shapeshifters. I agreed with him—I wanted him clear of this. I wanted to give him one night of warmth and safety before we faced his enemies. When I gave him the hardcover copy of Robert Burns I'd salvaged from Mirny as a boy, he nearly broke down. Beneath the caravaner's leather was a man starved for the magic of the printed page.

I headed out just before midnight to meet Jukka. The streets were mostly empty, lit by stars and the occasional barrel fire. The clinic glowed, powered 24/7, and the elite district of *Eden* sparkled with garish lights. Jack had told me that before the war, power was reserved for the ruling families; under Heldrich, the "plugged-in" zones were actually expanding.

I reached the workshop, but there was no lantern—no Jukka. The simplest explanation was that the kid had ghosted me. I waited for thirty minutes at the corner of Lee Kuan Yew and Carl Sagan Passages.

Then, someone else arrived.

A cloaked man, roughly my height, scanned the street before knocking hard on the door. I heard Wally's thunderous barking from inside. Zachary didn't open immediately; he wasn't expecting guests. In a strained voice, the stranger claimed Jukka had broken his leg on the stairs.

The door opened. The stranger strode in and shut it behind him.

Moments later, the dog's barking cut off—as if someone had hit a mute button. I waited fifteen minutes in the heavy silence. No footsteps. No voices.

I wasn't getting into the workshop tonight.

I leaned against the door, listening. Nothing. The walls were Nautilus-spec—highly secure and sound-dampened. The multisensor under my eyepatch picked up no heat signatures, no EM pulses, and no sound waves. Loitering any longer meant risking a run-in with an Orderly patrol.

I backed off into the shadows, telling myself that elevators in the marketplace also needed checking up.

Then a new plan for tonight flashed in my mind. I remembered Heldrich's old invitation and hoped he would join.

The gates of the cabaret opened wide at my approach, warm light spilling into the cold street. They welcomed me like one of their own. The air inside was thick with the scent of hookah smoke and perfume, the music warm

and slow. As I sank into a velvet couch, Sandy appeared beside me without a word, graceful as ever, one leg gently swaying to the rhythm of the pianist in his white tailcoat—probably the last pianist in all of Antarctica.

“Great to see you back,” she said, her voice like silk over smoke. “Any special requests tonight?”

“Hey, beautiful. Is Heldrich around?”

She giggled. What kind of lunatic comes to the cabaret after midnight to talk business?

“I don’t follow him around,” she said. “My job’s to keep the cabaret safe—including you, while you’re our guest. But more than anything... it’s to make sure you have a great time.”

“I’m intrigued.”

“Five minutes,” she whispered, “and you’ll forget your name and never want to leave. Shall I take care of your drink?”

“A glass of water with ice—perfect.”

“As you wish...” Her painted brow lifted just slightly. “Please, wait for Farah. You’ve got no right to miss her.”

In a minute or two, the frosted crystal cooled my hand. The ice clinked gently—soothing, grounding. The pianist was finishing up his piece, bowing gracefully to polite applause before slipping away.

Then the lights dimmed.

Only a ring of candles around the stage and a single, narrow spotlight remained. The hush fell naturally, like breath held in unison. Conversations died out. The room seemed to lean forward, caught in anticipation, while the rest of the city outside lay buried in the black stillness of post-midnight forgetfulness.

A soft chime rang out, this time not from my glass.

Something—someone—was gliding across the stage. Cloaked head to toe in black satin, the figure moved like smoke. Only her bare feet showed, white as bone, her toenails painted black.

Right behind her came a dark-skinned musician in a gold-embroidered vest and crimson pants. He settled into the corner with a hand drum and began to tap out a slow, tribal rhythm.

The veiled figure stood motionless a moment, swaying faintly, like something suspended in deep water. Then, slowly, deliberately, she raised her arms. The fabric began to slip.

First a pale hand emerged—tattooed, adorned with bracelets—then a forearm, the curve of a hip, smooth and deliberate. One final beat of the drum—and silence.

Then the dancer threw the veil aside.

She wore a top made of silver chains threaded with tiny mirrors that flashed with the faintest movement. Several light skirts swirled around her hips, layered and shimmering. Her hair was styled with flowers and lacquered pins, and every piece of her jewelry chimed softly with her breath.

She was built like the figure eight—my favorite number. A long, graceful neck, skin like pearl, black hair, heavy brows, and soft lips that seemed made for whispering secrets. I didn't say her name aloud, but it echoed in my mind: Farah.

The drummer's tempo doubled. The beat rolled like thunder, then shattered into a scatter of pebbles. Farah moved with it, drawing circles in the air, hips tracing spirals no eye could follow. Her arms slithered like serpents, alive on their own. Her feet touched the floor as if it were a cloud.

And then came the vibration. A subtle pulse that began in her hips and spread like the purr of a stroked cat—deep, instinctive, hypnotic.

The rhythm climbed, fast and feverish, a heartbeat racing toward ecstasy. Farah whirled, her skirts flying like snow in a gust of wind, mirrors catching flashes of firelight. One by one, still dancing, she cast them off, until one landed in my lap like a dare.

The chain top came last.

Naked, she arched her back in a final movement so fluid it defied gravity, her body parallel to the floor. And then—when the music stopped like a sudden drop—she folded herself gently, tucking her legs beneath her, lying back on the carpet like a prayer answered in flesh.

Her breasts rose and fell with her breath—two pale domes in the candlelight.

I glanced around. Not a sound. No jeering. No applause. No whispers. Just open mouths, fixed stares. She had them all under her spell.

Then the dancer rose, wrapped herself in one of her skirts, and made her final move. Like a ghost, Farah crossed the room in silence, stopped in front of me, and placed something in my hand—a single mother-of-pearl hairpin, still carrying the scent of her hair.

My face was burning, as if I were sitting right next to a wildfire. For the first time in years, I was feeling so attracted to a woman other than Helga Svensson.

"Congrats, Ivan! She picked you!" Sandy whispered. "You get what that means, right?"

Helga was a nuclear engineer, and I'm sure she took a quiet pride in holding our lives in her hands. She had the grace of a swan in motion, but also that rare, steely responsibility and brilliance that comes with bearing real weight. They don't give duties like that to just anyone.

Me? I was the son of a traitor, an outlaw, a murderer—taken in by the Winged Sun out of pity. Otherwise, I'd have frozen to death. Up until recently, the Security Service I worked for was seen as a tagalong—just window dressing on the "noble mission" of preserving knowledge in a new age of barbarism. Not something that actually helped people.

My job was to patrol the outskirts of Heliopolis and run supply runs, bartering or salvaging rare components. Helga, who rarely left the HQ, loved hearing my stories from Mirny and the outposts beyond. But every time I tried to get close, she brushed it off with a joke, moved her hand off my shoulder, and made sure we were never alone. Like we were stuck in the 1800s, and her reputation was on the line. Honestly, I would've preferred if she'd just told me to get lost.

What gave me hope was that, despite all the attention she got, she didn't seem interested in any of them.

After I started working under Rakhmanov—hunting Geryon's desmoduses—I didn't have time to mope about love. I had a mission. Purpose. Adrenaline. A place in the world.

Those first three months out there brought more action than everything I'd lived through before. I stood with the ones who backed Rakhmanov when he said we had to reconnect with the world and regain our agency. I even made friends with *Double V*.

And then something strange, almost magical, happened. Now Helga was seeking me out. The longer I stayed away, the warmer was her welcome. The more questions she asked. And her eyes would light up when they met mine—back when I still had both.

The Snow Queen began to thaw. Her steps grew light, her gestures softened, and her smile turned radiant. Her long golden hair started cascading loose down her shoulders more often than not.

And now I was the one who hesitated.

Not to punish her for those years of cool distance, but because I wanted to earn my place. I slowed things down. Carefully. I didn't want to scare her off—or worse, expose myself as a boy caught up in feelings he barely understood.

I poured it all into poems I never shared. Now she was the one who reproached me for being distant.

People started whispering that when we were in the same room, the air felt charged, like something unspoken hung between us. Better a spark in the air than the loudest bed creak.

I kept myself in check right to the end, because I wanted to be the kind of man who would make her proud. You don't earn that place with sweet talk, or presents, or just by being "good."

With Violet on our side, we captured our first undamaged Geryon drone and wiped out a Moon Cross scout squad in the northwest. Their weapons became ours—plasma guns and old army rifles—though we were far from experts with the energy weapons.

We were too battered to head home immediately. I was among the wounded, so we stopped at Maitri—a friendly outpost where medics patched us up. Feeling the blood return to my veins, I decided it was time to stop playing games. I would tell Helga how I felt, like a man should. I counted the days. I rehearsed the words. I pictured her face.

But when we returned, Helga was gone.

The HQ's reactors had stood for a century, but survival hinged on a dwindling stockpile of parts. If we'd remembered Veliard sooner, we might have salvaged what we needed from the old biostation. But he found us first—his battery nearly depleted, Violet ragged and near death.

The Blackout had cut us off from the mainland, and South America had fallen to the Moon Cross. Heliopolis became a ticking bomb. Our local parts were flawed; we lacked the raw materials. The failure hit the cooling system while I was recovering in Maitri. There was no safe way to stop the meltdown in time.

If it blew, it wouldn't just wipe out Heliopolis; it would contaminate the entire eastern coast.

Helga had minutes. She went in alone with a few maintenance bots and sealed the hatch from the inside, locking out Chief Oliver Rand. She knew Oliver was the only one who could save the second reactor. Her radiation suit bought her minutes—enough to save the city, but not enough to save her life. She died the next day.

We have one reactor left, running on borrowed time. That's why I desperately need to check if the Nautilus lab has a suitable fuel rod.

"Give Miss Farah my sincere admiration," I told Sandy back at the cabaret. "But I'm not well tonight. I wouldn't appreciate her the way she deserves."

"Only the dead have turned her down," Sandy said, disappointed. "But suit yourself."

I headed back, nauseous with shame and nerves. The waterfront breeze helped clear my head, but when I hit the hotel knocker, Miss Paramar looked at me as if she'd seen a corpse.

"Mr. Vassilevsky... You again?" she stammered.

"What do you mean, *me again*?"

"D-don't you remember? You were just here. You were wearing a gray jumpsuit... covered in blood. You looked like you'd been through hell. Then you left with your backpack."

A ring of cold iron tightened around my skull. *Nevis*. Back on the street, she had brushed a stray hair off my sleeve—a "flirtatious" gesture that was actually a DNA harvest.

"The key?" I asked, my voice a rasp. "Did the other me have one?"

"No. I gave him the spare. Was that... wrong?"

"And Mr. March?"

"Asleep, I assume."

I gripped my stun gun and crept up the stairs, my bio-gel soles silent on the wood. I slid my key into the lock. The desk lamp was on. The room was a disaster—clothes and sheets flung everywhere. It was a deliberate taunt; the thing knew I hated a mess.

My backpack was gone. Field journals, energy cells, toolkit—all stolen. But the loss of the meds and the grav-pack was the real disaster.

I pounded on Jack's door. Silence. When Miss Paramar opened it, the room was empty. His coat and boots were gone. No blood, no struggle. He had walked out on his own feet, likely following the "Ivan" he trusted.

I still had my ammo and sugar—I never let those leave my person. But Jack was gone, and the metamorph was lurking around with my face.

Hunting a Ghost



Jack March – September 13, 2190 – Seven Winds

Jack sat in an unplugged massage chair by the window, his eyes lost in the dark abyss of the night. A book lay on his knees—he'd stalled out on page twelve, tripped up by archaic words. Usually, Ivan's presence kept the shadows at bay, but alone, the worries crawled in like cockroaches.

He was thinking about Ivan—about how close the man was getting to Heldrich, to crossing a line that led only to catastrophe. He went to the kitchen for water, but halfway there, he saw Vassilevsky in the hall.

Or at least, someone who wore his skin.

The tailored coat was gone, replaced by a filthy gray jumpsuit and a shredded leather jacket. The elegant eye patch had been swapped for a crumpled scrap of cloth. Blood was caked in dark streaks down the pant leg.

"Ivan?" Jack asked. "What happened?"

"Tomorrow, man. I'm hurt. I need rest," the figure muttered, dragging himself up the stairs. The look he gave Jack from the landing made the caravaner stop cold. It was a look of predatory indifference.

Later, after a tense cup of tea, Jack saw the "other" Vassilevsky reappear. This one was dressed in crisp white athletic gear, a backpack slung over one shoulder. His stride was off—unnatural—as if he were operating a body he hadn't quite mastered yet.

Jack didn't hesitate. He grabbed his sidearm and trailed the imposter a hundred meters. He watched as the tall, one-eyed shadow glided through the yellow pools of streetlight like a ghost. Then, he saw the figure approach a lone guard by a bricked-up elevator shaft.

Without a word, the imposter jabbed something into the guard's ribs. The man didn't even scream; he just collapsed like a puppet with its strings cut.

Jack screamed. "HEY! ORDERLIES! HELP!"

He fired five shots as he ran. None hit. The killer didn't even look back as he pried open the heavy elevator doors and vanished into the shaft.

Ivan Vassilevsky – September 13, 2190 – Seven Winds

IF I WERE A METAMORPH looking to ground myself, I'd head for the lower levels. Nautilus would have given their changeling a map of the facility's guts. I had a choice: find the secret passage or raise the alarm with Heldrich. I ruled out the latter—Heldrich would just send a mob that would scare the prey into deeper shadows.

But as I ran, I saw the glow. Zachary's workshop was an inferno. I sprinted toward the flames, only to find myself staring down a dozen barrels.

Johan Rasmussen stood at the center, dressed in full combat gear—Kevlar, bracers, and a flak vest. He looked ready for a war.

"Drop your gear," Rasmussen barked. "Now."

I froze. The metamorph had set me up perfectly. While I played the scapegoat, it was burrowing into the city's heart. And Jack? Jack was likely a dead man.

"Two dead in the last twenty-four hours," Rasmussen growled.

"Who?" I asked.

"Zachary Glass and his assistant. Glass had his throat torn out. Literally." He nodded toward a body bag. "And the kid? Head split open. Brain removed."

The world seemed to implode. Poor Jukka.

"The freak went through my room and took my clothes," I snapped. "He's pretending to be me. I'm hunting him, too. Let's work together."

"Cut the games," Rasmussen snarled, jabbing a rifle into my chest. "Drop it."

"My friend Jack is in danger," I tried one last time.

"Jack? We picked him up already," Rasmussen spat. "He's your accomplice. He's rambling about someone wearing your face. We found an Orderly near him with a knife in his gut. He might not make it."

I tried to convince him to check the hotel, to talk to Miss Paramar, but Johan wasn't listening.

"Tomorrow," he said. "Right now, you're needed on the liner."

Someone behind me snickered with mean-spirited glee—probably picturing the interrogation waiting for me on the liner. But I wasn't scared of the pain. What twisted the knife was the realization of how cleanly the metamorph had sprung the trap.

Luckily, even the civilians in Heliopolis are taught self-defense. But the Pathfinders? We are the masters of it.

The breakout took two seconds, max.

My right foot swept back in a low, sharp pivot that broke Johan's grip on my center of gravity. First strike—the knife-edge of my left hand smashed into his nose with a wet crunch. Before he could scream, I ripped the shotgun from his shoulder and jammed the barrel into the soft hollow beneath his jaw.

Weapons snapped up instantly—harpoon tips, crossbow bolts, and old-world muzzles all zeroed in on my skull.

“Drop your gear! All of you!” I roared, dragging Johan in front of me as a shield. “Ten steps back, or your commander's brains are going to paint this alley!”

Johan was sucking air through broken teeth, making a gargling sound as blood masked his face. I held him tight, my hand locked around his neck. I could feel his pulse hammering—fast, but steady. His breath hit me in waves: salt-fish, garlic, and the metallic tang of old booze. I tightened my grip.

The Orderlies hesitated, waiting for a signal. But Johan had a spine. He didn't squirm or beg; he was terrified of looking weak in front of his men. *Fine, tough guy. I'll give you something else to think about.*

Still holding the shotgun firm, I reached down and yanked a slim dagger from the sheath on his thigh—blackened steel, hand-forged. I jabbed it lightly into his upper thigh. He grunted—part pain, part panic. I could feel the shift in him.

“You a virgin, Rasmussen?” I whispered in his ear, low and crude, blushing under the cover of night. “Because if your goons don't drop their toys right now, you're not dying a hero's death.”

He hissed, the bravado finally cracking. To remind them I wasn't bluffing, I twisted the blade.

“They'll shoot through me if I tell them to,” Johan growled, “but if you survive this, you'll be begging for the gallows.”

“Don’t be a fool,” I countered.

He let out a long, shaky sigh and gave two downward waves of his hand. His crew laid their weapons down, slow and reluctant.

“Everything,” I whispered. “Knives and cleavers, too. Then twenty steps back.”

They obeyed. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw shadows in the windows—onlookers peeking through the glass. While the crew retreated, I dragged Johan around the corner. Once we were out of their line of sight, I put him in a fast chokehold. He went limp in seconds. I laid him out gently—no need for cruelty—and bolted toward the marketplace.

I burst into the lower atrium, a wide, echoing pit ringed by rusted balconies. A shot cracked from above and slammed into my back. The kevlar-graphene weave of my coat took the hit, and the phytogel padding soaked up the kinetic shock like a sponge.

I spun, fired a suppressive shot at a shadow on the gallery, and ducked behind a dumpster. I ripped the patch from my eye and slapped it onto my wrist—my night vision snapped on, bathing the world in a high-contrast green glow.

A low growl rumbled behind me. A filthy white tomcat was guarding a fish head like it was a holy relic. One ear gone, fur bristled—full gangster mode. I nodded respectfully, backed away, and scanned for an exit. Shouting and barking echoed from above.

Thirty meters out, I spotted a gap behind a row of squat columns—a black recess just wide enough for a man to squeeze through. But then, a flashlight beam cut through the dark. An Orderly was approaching with a harpoon gun. He wasn't going to miss the dumpster.

Sorry, pal.

I waited until he was close, grabbed the cat by the scruff, and flung it directly at his face. The man screamed, pulling the trigger blindly. I lunged past the flying harpoon, tackled him, and ended the fight with a single jaw-shot. I grabbed his gun and slipped into the shadows of the gap.

I bolted for the elevator shaft. Torchlight flared above, and the atrium thundered with the rhythm of boots. I lunged, misjudged the distance, and slammed my shins into a metal railing. The screech of vibrating steel rang

in my teeth. I vaulted over the edge and dropped. A quick scan of the shaft showed the cables were still intact.

I leapt, caught one—thanking my father’s genes for my long reach—and clung on. Bullets pinged off the grating around me. I kicked off the wall and swung deeper into the dark.

I had twenty meters to go. I yanked off my scarf, wrapped it twice around the grease-slicked cable, and gripped tight. My boots slowed the descent, but the fabric gave out four meters from the bottom. I tucked and hit the foul, waist-deep water like a sack of bricks. It was a vile slurry of ocean backflow and centuries of sewer rot.

With no respirator, I pressed the soggy rag of my scarf over my face. A flashlight tumbled down the shaft, nearly cracking my skull before splashing into the muck.

The door to a maintenance room was right there—locked and fused by decades of rust. Without the laser cutter picking it was a fantasy. I kicked it; the steel didn’t even groan. Hissing with frustration, I leaned against the door to catch my breath—and that’s when I saw them: metal rungs running up the wall.

Testing a rung, I felt it tremble. Not from my weight, but from a steady, muffled *clang* echoing from above. The cables began to hum.

Are they really dropping the car on me?

What are they using up there—an axe? Cute. Let them huff and puff, just don’t let them near the winch.

But then... the vibrations stopped. Maybe someone up top finally grew a brain.

I climbed, quick and breathless, toward the first-floor level. The doors were already half-open, a sliver of hope in the dark. The problem? The ladder ended two and a half meters short of the ledge. No gadgets. No grapple. Just me and a history of bad choices.

I pushed off the wall, caught a swinging cable, and hung there. I tried to shimmy toward a closer line, reached for the frame—and slipped. I splashed back into the rancid water, the taste of rot filling my mouth.

I was slogging back toward the ladder when the sound changed to a thunderous *crack*, followed by the high-pitched, agonizing screech of tortured steel snapping under tension.

The elevator was in freefall.

Pure instinct took over. I dove for the service door, wedging my body into the shallow recess of the doorframe. A heartbeat later, fifty years of rust and gravity came roaring down. The shaft shook as if the mountain itself had cracked open.

With a deafening, wet thud, the elevator slammed into the water inches from my feet, sending a wall of filth and twisted metal into the air.

Malicious copy



Ivan Vassilevsky - September 14, 2190 - Seven Winds, Antarctica

I looked up the shaft, my heart still trying to hammer its way out of my ribs. The car had dropped like a corpse, but the main cable—thick and greasy—still hung above me. They hadn't cut it.

Old-world elevators used electromagnetic brakes to hold their position. If someone had reached the motor room and forced those brakes open—wedged them with a pipe or fried the control fuse—gravity would do the rest. The car would drop until it hit the buffers or the water, cable trailing behind it like a dead tail.

Rasmussen was as subtle as a rabid dog. If he was the one behind this, he was either desperate or incompetent. But as far as the Orderlies knew, I was a smear at the bottom of the shaft. That gave me the only thing I needed: the illusion of being dead.

The fallen car had actually done me a favor; its crumpled roof provided a stable platform. I scrambled onto the tilted metal. The ledge of the first floor was now at neck height. I pulled on my gloves and gripped the cold steel of the doors, prying with every ounce of strength I had left. My vision flared red; the veins in my temples throbbed.

May the rust consume you for stealing my grav-pack, you damned mimic!

With the pack's kinetic assist, I'd have cleared this in seconds. Instead, I was playing the world's worst game of "human bowstring," wedged between the cable and the steel doors. My hands slipped once, but I caught the edge, hauled myself up, and squeezed through the gap.

I didn't find a storage bay or a utility room. I found a tunnel—straight, clean, and endless. Dead LED strips lined the ceiling. The floor was coated

in a thin, undisturbed layer of dust. No rats. No noise. Just a fever-dream corridor stretching into the dark.

I walked a hundred meters. To my left, a dead terminal screen stared at me like a blind eye. Further down, a side passage sloped toward a heavy, submarine-style airlock. I kept moving. I passed a loading robot frozen in mid-motion, its hydraulic arms still clutching crates of cargo. There were no hazard signs—no radiation, no bio-alerts.

Curiosity won out. I cracked one of the crates.

The first held dark wine bottles with pristine Nautilus labels. The second was full of seed packets. This was a scavenger's jackpot; the wine alone could have bought me a lordship on Pine Island. The third crate was packed with high-density protein bars. I stuffed my pockets until they bulged.

Don't dawdle. You're out of time.

The thought slammed into my mind like a physical blow. It was a command from outside, not my inner monologue. And it had the sound of Helga's voice.

Go, Ivan. Go! He should not enter! I won't stand against him! His brain's different!

The "He" was the copy. The metamorph. And whoever was screaming in my head was terrified of what would happen if it reached its destination.

I slapped myself hard across the face. I wasn't going crazy. Dr. Kim's psych evaluation in Heliopolis had confirmed my mental fortitude. Whatever this "voice" was—experimental spores, underground gases, or geomagnetic interference—it was a symptom of the environment, not my mind breaking.

The tunnel's smooth, artificial walls gave way to jagged stone. My boots crunched over loose rock. This was a natural cave system now. Yellow, opalescent bubbles clung to the walls, glowing faintly and sprouting root-like tendrils.

Suddenly, an invisible force shoved me forward. I stumbled, and there, at my feet, lay a bloodied corpse.

It was Jukka. His face was a mangled mess of bone and meat, but I knew it was him. In that instant, memories burst behind my eyes like a film reel yanked loose: the Youth Parade, my mother in a bloody bathtub, Reynard Lutz with a gun to his head, and my father's threat to gut me as I fled into the dark.

Someone—or something—was rooting through my memories like a junk drawer.

Sorry if that was unpleasant. I'm just testing whether you can be trusted, Helga's voice said, sounding closer, more intimate.

"None of this is real," I muttered. "Just keep walking."

This isn't a hallucination. It's remote neural linking, the voice replied, calm and clinical. *The common term is telepathy. Please—don't respond out loud. Nevis is close. She wants to ambush you.*

"Who—?"

The one who wears your face. Shut up. If you want to speak—think it. She's fifteen meters away, around the corner. Trust me. Back away slowly. Make her follow you.

Reason had slipped out the back door, but I obeyed. I stepped back, my pulse thundering.

Now! the voice commanded.

I met the enemy, Johan's shotgun raised—and stared into my own face. But the figure wasn't quite me. He wore different clothes, and the real kicker: my "reflection" had both eyes.

I fired on instinct, then dove low and hard to the left. The double's scavenged armor deflected the worst of the blast, but I hit something vital. He let out a scream that echoed like a siren.

A burning jolt flared through my right shoulder and chest—the shapeshifter had scored a hit through my coat. Another bullet grazed my ear. I stayed in control. I grabbed the shotgun with my left hand and fired as soon as I was upright. Missed.

My double slammed against the wall and answered with a burst from a tommy gun, forcing me to crawl deeper into the tunnel. There was nowhere to hide. He could see in the dark, but not as well as my unpatched "super-eye." I raised the shotgun again, aimed for his head, and hit his hand instead. The tommy gun clattered to the stone.

My body was shutting down. Hot, sticky blood leaked through my coat. My strength was draining into the cave floor. I needed the medkit, but the mimic had stolen my pack.

With a final burst of adrenaline, I forced myself upright and lunged at my double. I kicked the tommy gun across the stone floor, far out of

reach, then pinned his left hand under my boot—crushing any chance of a counter-strike.

His face, twisted with agony, looked too much like my own. It was a cruel reflection. For a fleeting second, I almost felt a pang of pity for the thing.

“What’s your name?” I asked, my breath coming in ragged, shallow gasps.

“I already told you,” the mimic hissed.

“Nevis. Why are you here?”

He let out a low, broken chuckle that sent a spray of blood onto the floor. “You want a debrief, soldier boy? I’m wondering how you’re even still alive.”

“The old man? The kid?” My voice cracked with the weight of the night. “Why them?”

Nevis turned his head slightly, his teeth stained crimson. “First, to ensure your people stay the hell away from Seven Winds. Second... I was hungry. Brains are dense in calories. You’d be surprised how much energy it takes to maintain a shift.”

“You freak...” I pressed my boot harder into his mangled hand. “Where’s my backpack? The medkit?”

Nevis coughed, a wet, gurgling sound. “Dropped it. Didn’t want it in the way when I tore you apart.”

I drove the shotgun barrel into his ribs. “Wrong answer.”

Colors began to blur at the edges of my vision. The world was tilting. I was close to blacking out, and if I went under now, I wasn’t coming back.

“You cling to life,” the shapeshifter murmured, his voice fading. “But we... We are made of different stuff. You cannot scare me, scout.”

Then—clearer than any thought of my own—the voice of my invisible ally returned to my skull.

The crate pile by the wall, she whispered. That is where your belongings are. He hid them before the fight. You are lucky he did not understand the grav-pack’s ignition sequence; otherwise, you would be a memory.

I didn’t question her. I staggered away from the dying mimic, half-crawling toward the crates. As I moved, a chorus of new voices joined in—dozens of them, a telepathic static that hummed in my marrow. I couldn’t tell if I was dying or finally waking up.

From the darkness of the main tunnel, white shafts of flashlight beams swept the cavern. Heavy boots thundered against the rock. The Orderlies were closing in. Finally, they would see the two Ivans. They would see the truth.

But I couldn't let this Nautilus monstrosity reach Heldrich. I couldn't risk it regenerating or whispering more lies. I raised Johan's shotgun one last time, emptied the chamber into the metamorph's chest, and collapsed into the dark beside my own dead face.

One of Them?



Randy de la Serna – September 17, 2190 – Silver Palace

Winter cold returned with a vengeance—fierce winds and a brutal blizzard that made travel impossible even for the dogs. Food ran low, and the gang grew restless. Some suggested killing a slave to feed the dogs, but Fox shut it down. Randy's escape plans stalled.

He ate twice a day—whatever Henry shared. He was never alone. At night, Henry tied Randy's leg to the workbench—a humiliating ritual. He lay in the dark on a ragged yak skin, listening to the snoring, the growling dogs, and the muffled voices of his captors, waiting for the wind to break.

Sleep, when it came at all, was fragile and full of nightmares—plunging into bottomless chasms, skies blackened by mechanical wings, three burning bodies tied to a post screaming his name. If he knew he could stop the coming disaster, he'd rip out the throat of Henry, Fox—even Naoko, if she got in the way. But he was only human. Not the smartest, not the strongest, not valiant. He had nothing left—not even an axe or a knife to end it all.

Only five days had passed—he figured—but each one dragged like five weeks. Every new morning felt like a proof of his worthlessness; he was still unable to elaborate a viable escape plan. Finally, Henry's words hit him like a splash of cold water:

“The snow's stopped falling. Come on, we've got a task outside.”

Randy stiffened. His shoulders straightened without him even thinking. Hope flickered for the first time in days.

“Your rag's hanging on the hook,” Henry said, pointing to Randy's felt coat. “You're not built for this cold. If you'd been out in that blizzard, you'd've lost your skin along with that fancy thing.”

Randy wasted no time. He tied his scarf while walking. Five minutes later, when he saw that long-awaited patch of light, he nearly broke into song.

They passed the sandbag barricade, moved past two bored guards, and stepped out onto the platform where silver was being loaded into carts for transport across the continent. On the right lay a snow-covered ghost settlement. To the left, a tall cliff loomed, topped by a strange tower with crooked radars. The sky overhead was a crisp, bright blue, and the sun shone down with surprising warmth.

A few snow dogs were wandering the platform, their thick coats dusted with frost. Randy realized they didn't scare him the way they had before. One of them—a smaller, silver-coated dog—trotted up to Henry and bumped him in the hip with a friendly bark, low and cheerful.

"Hey there, Luna," Henry said with a grin, pulling a puck of dried curd from his coat pocket. The dog accepted the treat gently, tail wagging in thanks. Unlike the tightly curled tails of most husky or spitz breeds, hers arched in a relaxed upward swoop.

"Who does she belong to?" Randy asked.

"She's all of ours," Henry replied, patting her flank. "All the dogs are shared, 'cept for Midnight. Fox won't let anyone near that handsome devil. Might be the last of his kind on the whole damn continent."

He watched Luna finish her treat, then added, "Shame they don't have pups often. Almost like people, the way they are. And they take their sweet time growing up. You can't ride a yearling—they'll break under you. Bones are too soft. So yeah, breeding 'em? Not exactly a booming business."

Randy glanced toward the snow-covered ghost settlement. It hit him like a breath after drowning.

"Are we heading there?" he asked.

"Nope. Tower."

"What for?"

"Skywatch. Our shift today."

"Skywatch?"

"Every boss in this gang's got their own quirk. Arce? He'd shoot you just for frowning. Fox? She's always expecting a drone attack."

"Someone from Winged Sun or the Seven Winds? Looks like she has enemies everywhere."

"Wish I knew," Henry muttered.

He knows a lot, and I must know this, too, Randy told himself.

More than anything, Randy wanted to know how Fox, Henry, and the others had survived the bird plague. From Dr. Osokin and Arseny, he'd learned a few things about infections. Different virus strains could have wildly different kill rates. Bacteria could mutate, sometimes to the point that antibiotics became useless.

Not that he clearly remembered what antibiotics even were anymore. And, according to his stepfather, the plague was caused by a fungus.

Then it clicked: Henry had already spilled the beans about how the whole gang owed their lives to their Elder Sister. So Randy had to make the man reveal more. But how?

Luna raced ahead, her narrow chest and quick legs pushing through the fresh snow to clear a path. Randy followed closely behind Henry as the two men climbed the steps carved into the rock. They ascended to a ledge and stepped onto the tower platform: a circular lookout with clear panes, rust-patched metal walls, dusty remnants of old equipment, a coal chest, and a stone hearth.

From twenty meters up, the world spread out like a map. There was a quarry beyond the broken bridge, and the railway snaked toward the cargo terminal. Even a real forest—scraggly but unmistakable—had crept up over the past century since Antarctica had been settled. The sky was calm and clear. The Elder Sun, for once, seemed gentle.

"Usually, the snow's melted by now! Look at those drifts." Henry pointed to the gorge. "If your parachute's in there, you'll dig all winter."

Randy shot him a look.

"Hey, don't gaze at me like that," Henry added quickly. "It hasn't come to that. Yet. Here, take the flint, get a fire going—I'll fetch some snow for the kettle. Why sit without tea like a pair of dumbasses?"

Randy gathered the coals and got the fire started. Suddenly, a bone-shaking roar erupted outside, followed by a heavy thud and a string of curses. Instinctively, he shoved the flint into his pocket and hurried to the edge of the platform to look down.

Henry lay sprawled on the lower landing, groaning, his right leg bent at a sickening angle.

"Damned step—may it burn in hell!" the man howled, trying—and failing—to sit up.

"Scraping ice off stairs—now there's no royal job," Randy echoed one of his stepdad's favorite lines.

Even if it wasn't a full break, the dislocation looked nasty—swollen, crooked, tendons maybe torn. In the snow beneath the stairs lay the knife stamped with Masako's mark.

He eyed the scene. Climb down, grab the knife, take Henry's coat, flask, and boots, and just run. No one else around. Henry couldn't chase. The dogs—maybe a problem, but not impossible. What had he really got to lose? Even the risk felt thin. Was his freedom, finally within reach?

Randy noticed the same thought came to Henry. He knew Randy was young, green, missing his family like hell. And when he saw the boy coming down the stairs, he tensed—hand drifting instinctively toward the knife.

"Thanks, Henry! I'll cut the pant leg, pack snow on your knee, see how bad it is," Randy said, crouching near.

Randy raised his voice. "Hey, Luna!"

No answer. The dog was gone; she probably rushed back to the kennel. Randy called again, louder. Nothing. Then he sucked in a breath, jammed two fingers in his mouth, and let out a whistle that echoed down the mountainside.

He unwrapped his scarf, slid off his belt, and set to bracing Henry's injured leg. Watching Henry's eyes grow wide as dinner plates in alarm, Randy couldn't help but smile at the reaction his actions caused.

"Go find someone else... one of the guys..." the older man muttered, already trying to breathe through the pain. "No idea if the dog even heard you."

"We need to immobilize the joint first," Randy said, working quickly. "Sooner's better."

Then, while tying one leg to the other, he added, like it was nothing:

"And while we're at it—how about you finally tell me how you all made it through the epidemic? What does it have to do with Fox?"

"Gangrene!" Henry cursed. "Arce, already half-dead, grabbed a syringe, filled it with her blood, and started injecting the sick. The uninfected each got their own shot."

"Impossible. It does not work like this! My dad's a doctor..."

"Be cursed! You've asked for the story, and here it is! I've got nothing else! Out of all Arce's people from Mirny, only Ezra made it out. And I don't think it was just luck or caution. He was the only one who treated her decently. The rest... not so much. Holy Night, her cure hurt more than the disease itself. Imagine someone cramming your gut, chest, and skull with burning coals. Your bones cracking from the inside out..."

"Can't imagine," Randy muttered.

"And you won't!" Henry was strangely cheerful now. "A bullet, or this—" he nodded at his mangled leg, "—it's nothing."

"That how it was for everyone?"

"Every one of us. Not all survived, but we're not afraid of hell now," Henry laughed.

"Not a chance!" Randy scoffed. "With that leg, you wouldn't even make it to the shithouse."

Henry grunted, "Care to bet? Only thing in your pockets is the wind. Think I'm mocking your misery? Nah. It's all true. We've stuffed crap into open wounds, drank from puddles, eaten meat gone green—and survived. If something doesn't kill me in the first half hour, it probably won't. But don't hope—Fox doesn't hand out her blood to just anyone."

He let the conversation drift, eyes losing focus. What next? He needed a plan—reckless, desperate maybe, but anything was better than standing still. This was what he did: look for a crack, find a way out. Had to keep moving forward, no matter how doomed.

Luna padded silently across the snow, graceful and near-invisible where white met rock under a clouded sun. She stopped at the ladder, barking in concern. Randy briefly considered dragging Henry onto her back—but that would be pure hell for both of them.

"Luna, go! Find Kitty! Bring him here!" Randy shouted. The dog only snorted.

"Don't bother," Henry grunted. "She won't listen to anyone but us."

He gave the command himself. Luna shook out her fur and galloped toward the Silver Palace. Watching her go, Randy had a new thought. These beasts could be befriended. Just because they could easily tear your arm off didn't mean they would—not on their own.

With Kitty's help, they hauled Henry back to the base.

"Either you're a saint, or sly as the devil," Fox said, watching them carry Henry to the infirmary, which shared a sector with the workshop and fell under Kitty's charge. Before popping Henry's leg back into place, Kitty gave him a dose of Aurora mushrooms. The sweet smoke drifted lazily into the workshop.

"Simple," Randy said, flat. "If he died, I'd be screwed. The dogs would hunt me, especially in the snow. I can't use the cutter well, and who runs off without food or a weapon?"

A glint of curiosity lit up Fox's eyes. A quick smile—fast as lightning—flickered across her face.

"A kid, but not a dumb one..."

"You really that old?" Randy shot back, annoyed.

"There's a decade between us. And besides, a year in a gang's like five anywhere else."

"When I'm ninety and you're a hundred, who's gonna care?"

"You that sure you'll make it to ninety?"

"I'm sure I wanna go to Seven Winds. Join you. Be one of your fighters. Mirny's gone—there's nothing left worth saving. I'm not going back to a graveyard."

Fox burst out laughing right in his face.

"You won't make it to twenty. Bet you can't even shoot."

"I learn fast."

"Drop it. If you can avoid killing, don't start. Ever."

And for a moment, it wasn't the gang leader speaking—it was an elder sister. Not to the Lost Kids. To him.

Fox and Randy stood close enough for the young man to finally study the Elder Sister's eyes. Only now did he notice their uneven color: gold streaks flared outward from her pupils like cracks in glass.

"Fixing your gear's just killing for you—coward's way," he said.

"You'll do as I say," she snapped.

She was sharp. She had to know he was still trying to get to that gun. But even now, Randy could hear that rough, stubborn voice inside him. No way he was backing down.

"What if I ask the whole gang to take me in?" he said.

The brutal hand that had been squeezing his chest for days twisted tighter. It was now or never.

"Don't get cozy," Fox said. "They'll test you first..."

The cocky heat drained from his body like cold water dumped over him. It wasn't pain he feared, but the kind of test she meant. What if they made him kill a slave? Or worse, torture one to death just to prove he wasn't bluffing?

I'll have to kill Fox, he thought, cold and sure. If I pull that off, then end myself too. It was the only way out he could picture. No room for halfway measures now.

The idea felt foreign, maybe awful—yet pure. Some strange weight left his chest, and he could finally breathe. Resolve felt sharper, cleaner.

"We've all been in the same boat," Fox said, her voice low. "We've ended up in other people's hands. Been tortured. Ezra is missing nails and half his teeth. Kitty has burn scars across her chest. Billy—he was just a fisherman, lost two fingers in Seven Winds because his rivals framed him. Said his dead brother ran with raiders. They made him pay the price."

"Gonna knock my teeth out? Cut off a finger?" Randy asked.

"That's ugly. I'll test you another way. Hold together—don't scream—you're one of us."

Relief hit him like a breath of real air. No killing. Not today.

"Then I guess you can call me ready."

Something soft brushed his fingers—a rolled cigarette, same kind Kitty used to dull Henry's pain. But Randy, sensing a trap, flicked it into the water bucket. Fox shook her head like she was disappointed she'd overestimated his wit. Then, without another word, she strode away.

Randy decided he'd earned some rest. He lay back, hands behind his head, and searched for something—anything—to keep his mind busy. Thinking about his family would only make things worse, piling fresh pain onto the ache already inside him. As if more pain wasn't already on its way.

Instead, he focused on the drone—the one that took Antero's life. Where had its deadly flight begun, and where had it gone next? What connection did it have to Fox? And how in the world had her blood cured the disease—if that's even the same as what had struck McMurdo?

Even if she was immune, could a few milliliters of blood really work miracles?

And had Henry really meant what he said—that they could drink from any puddle, eat rotten meat, and still survive? Or had he just been messing with him?

Some time later, Naoko came, strangely taciturn and stripped of her serene smile. She briefly told Randy that Henry wanted to see him.

“Something happened to him?”

“Nothing new. Tomorrow, he will be absolutely fine,” the girl replied, lowering her eyes. Reluctant to play mind games, Randy stepped inside, holding his breath. The infirmary was so full of mushroom smoke it made his head go round.

The man lay stretched on a lopsided cot, his injured leg elevated on a pile of coiled cables. A filthy wool blanket was thrown over his body like a tarp, and his cheeks were slick with sweat. He looked like a sea lion with the flu.

Randy stopped, awkwardly. “Still breathing?”

“Takes more than a staircase and a brat’s sarcasm to kill me. Come closer. Let’s pretend we’re friends, just once.”

Randy pulled up a busted stool, and waited. Henry fumbled in the side pocket of his vest and pulled out a small roll of yellowed paper.

“Here. Don’t be a fool this time,” he said, extending it toward Randy. “You earned a gift. It won’t make you behave funnier than you already do. Might even make you stop clenching your damn jaw for once.”

“When?..” asked the young man, turning the cigarette warily between his fingers.

“Now!”

“Joking, huh?”

“Don’t be a fool,” Henry repeated. “I want you to see your folks *some day*.”

Randy lit his hand-rolled cigarette from the oil lamp, slowly brought it to his lips and inhaled. The thick smoke seemed to burn his nostrils, throat, and lungs. A minute passed, but he noticed no other effects.

“And by the way, I need my knife back,” Henry said hoarsely. Randy had nothing else to do but obey.

Midnight, Fox's pitch-black riding dog, lazily walked inside the room, his claws clicking softly against the floor. It was surprising that the mighty animal did not knock anything over or break a thing. The long furry muzzle sniffed Henry's face, the red tongue licked his forehead. And then the dog sneezed, irritated by the smoke.

"Bastard!" Henry snarled, hastily wiping his face with his sleeve.

"Another story, maybe?" Randy took the final long drag, still hoping to feel something in the first place. "How did Fox end up with the gang? If she isn't from Mirny, where's she from?"

The older man frowned. Midnight stopped waving his majestic tail, hearing someone approach. Henry lowered his voice.

"From now, I don't owe you anything. If she wants, she will tell you herself. Now give me the roach."

"Sorry, what?"

Henry snatched the cigarette roach out of Randy's hand. Two seconds later, Kitty stepped inside with a wide grin on his needle-thin lips.

"Damn, didn't even get to eat, and now this is going down..." he said, giving the prisoner a sharp look. "Let's go, I guess..."

Following Kitty, the young man ended up in the hall where the gang had been roasting rats the first day they brought him here. But man, it looked so different now! All the junk was gone, the benches and stools shoved to the walls, and the floor was swept clean. And there were two paraffin candles — a real luxury. Did Fox seriously have them lit just for him?

The Elder Sister sat back in the high chair, one leg crossed over the other. One hand, clenched into a fist, propped up her chin, while the other absently stroked the silver fur of her mantle.

"Ready?" the Elder Sister asked brightly.

"Do you even need to ask?" the young man shot back defiantly, trying not to look at her. But he couldn't help it.

"You remember — not a single scream..."

Kitty led the captive to a grim-looking structure in the middle of the hall — a rusty metal frame, made of hollow pipes and braced by crossbars strong enough to hold even a larger victim's weight without tipping over. Iron loops were welded to the upper bar; after ordering the prisoner to raise his right arm, Kitty started tying it to one of the loops with a thin rope. When

he began with the left arm, Randy, to his growing dread, noticed that the Lost Kids, except for those who had gone up to the watchtower, had quietly flooded into the hall and seated themselves in silence, eyes fixed on the boy, without a joke or laugh.

To be tortured in front of a hostile mob gathered to gawk—that alone would have crushed Randy's spirit before his escape from McMurdo. But whether it was the weight of misfortune that made him stop caring, or Henry's mushrooms kicking in, the young man himself looked at them with contempt, as if at a pack of stray dogs.

"So, you came up with this to entertain the gang?"

"This concerns everyone," the Elder Sister answered, standing up from her chair and taking a heavy whip off her wide belt. It was as long as her arm.

"Fox," Kitty said in a hoarse voice, already fired up with anticipation. "Let me try... I haven't touched a whip in ages, let the old guy have some fun!"

The Elder Sister frowned — it was clear she hadn't anticipated the request.

"Come on, please..." The giant whined like a bratty kid.

Fox looked at him, then at Randy, then back at him...

"You know what it's like to go hungry..." Kitty insisted.

"Knock yourself out," the Elder Sister said, tossing him the coiled whip with a careless flick. Kitty grinned, weighing it in his hand. Randy, stretched out on the frame with his ribs almost tearing through his skin, almost moaned in frustration.

To hell with you, assholes...

Fox settled more comfortably into the chair, ruffling the hair of Naoko, who sat at her feet. Randy glanced around at the quieted gang, already regretting his audacity.

"Shit, you all are so intense!"

In the blink of an eye, he arched his back in agony, his spine searing with pain, and almost bit his tongue off: damn Kitty hit without a warning. The second blow, even harder, landed just beside the first, and the row of candles before his eyes instantly blurred into a mess. Unable to scream, the pain raked through Randy even more. He fought to keep the tears back, but after the fourth strike, they started to spill down his cheeks, still soft with

youth. Screw it... Don't scream... Don't scream... Or you might as well just hang yourself.

The Sister's whip didn't just burn like red-hot iron — it was heavy too, as if it had been crafted from metal wire. And with a brute like Kitty swinging it, every blow hit like a hammer. In no time, Randy's back became a blazing bonfire, and his whole body stretched tight like a string humming with pain. Struggling to hold himself together, he now looked like a fish being gutted alive — too broken even to scream in its death throes. Kitty paused after the eighth strike to let Fox inspect his handiwork.

"You satisfied?" Randy croaked, his lips parched, humiliated by the tears running down his face.

"Good enough," Fox said, like she was commenting on cooked bat meat. "Kitty, untie him."

Her voice was flat, empty. That hit Randy harder than the agony, the fear, or the humiliation. The howl, Bitch!, blew up inside him like a grenade, but the words that slipped out were nothing like it.

"Kitty, don't rush it! I'm just getting into it!" Randy said, forcing as much cheer into his voice as he could. "You can't just grab a half-eaten sandwich outta someone's hands! Or are you tired already?"

"Had enough?" his tormentor asked, not even trying to hide his surprise.

"Believe it or not... no!" Randy laughed like a drunk, his whole body shaking.

The leader of the Lost Kids unexpectedly stroked his cheek, took the whip from Kitty, and shoved him aside with her hip. "That's it. Playtime's over!"

"What an honor," Randy muttered, squeezing his eyes shut again.

He could feel the torn skin on his back bleeding freely now. The whip lashed out again like a black snake, cracking loudly against his half-naked body. Fox wasn't hitting as hard as her henchman, however, Randy twisted as much as the ropes allowed, cursing fiercely and filthily — that at least wasn't forbidden. Squinting through the pain, he caught a glimpse of Kitty lightly tapping Naoko on the shoulder. With a mischievous smile, she crawled over to him and knelt down in front of him. What the hell—? She pressed her cheek against the warm, velvet skin of his stomach, kissed the sharp bones

jutting out on either side above his belt, and in the blink of an eye, undid the heavy buckle and the buttons on his trousers.

"What the hell are you doing? Get off... I said get off!" Randy hissed, feeling as if not the hell of torture, but a wave of pleasure could ruin him.

But the girl acted like she didn't hear him. And she seemed to like what she was doing. Gripping his hips tightly, she went to work with her mouth and tongue — at first teasing him with the lightest touches, like the brush of a breeze, then taking him in fully with growing hunger. Another lash of pain collided inside Randy's mind with an overwhelming, dizzying pleasure he had only ever heard about in crude whispers from fishermen on the pier.

So this was what they meant... But why here, in front of the whole gang, Kitty, and Fox? Was it meant to sabotage his resistance? Or did these foul people just improvise?

A minute — and the scorching mix of pleasure, humiliation, and agony burned away every other feeling, thought, and sensation. Randy stopped moaning, stopped hissing and cursing; he simply bit down hard on his lip, taking both the caress and the whipping in silence — bit so hard that blood seeped from between his teeth. Another twist of her tongue below — and his soul tore free from his battered body, his consciousness shattering into a thousand blinding shards, giving way to unexpected calm and emptiness.

Blinking through swollen, tear-stained eyelids, Randy saw Naoko rising to her feet. She licked her lips like a cat after a good meal, but looking at her felt unbearable. Meanwhile, Kitty was untying the ropes around the captive's throbbing wrists. The rest of the gang, as if snapping out of a trance, burst into intense whisper, which rapidly grew into wild, chaotic cheering — but to Randy, the noise seemed distant, half-muted, as if his hearing had dulled. Freed from his bonds, he couldn't stay on his feet; he collapsed onto his knees, casting a dazed look around at the Lost Kids.

"There's no pleasure greater than the end of pain — right, Randolph?" Fox said thoughtfully, crouching down beside him.

"You're all... s-sick twisted freaks," Randy spat out through chattering teeth, shivering from the cold that crashed over him.

"As if that's something bad," Fox chuckled, unfastening the metal clasp on her fur cloak. "Kitty, cover him up, will you? And fetch some booze, if we've got any left."

The cloak stirred in the huge man's hands and fell over the Randy's bloody, burning back. Randy flinched at the fresh spasm of pain but still raised his eyes to the gang leader, his heart hammering in anticipation of something extraordinary.

And there it was. She was smiling — not hungrily, not arrogantly, but with a hint of respect. Then, slowly leaning forward, she kissed his torn, bloodied lips, gently licking away the blood — the final, crashing note of the hellish symphony that had played out. At once, Naoko and Kitty moved in, lifting the young man under the arms and leading him away through the flickering tunnels, as the rest of the gang roared in wild, Dionisian delight.

My Wayward Brother



Ivan Vassilevsky – September 14-18, 2190 – Seven Winds

If the metamorph's shot had hit, the scene would have been grim: two identical fighters, bloodied in the dark. But I was alive.

"Hands up! Now!" a voice barked from the dark.

Johan's shotgun hit the floor. I tried to lift my left hand—my right was useless; the shoulder was likely fractured. Frustration pressed in; I needed that corpse for evidence and answers. Nevis was gone, and the metamorph's secrets slipped away with him.

This is just the beginning. More will come, Helga's voice whispered along my spine. *Did you record it?*

No. It would take too much energy, I answered in silence. Still, the voice persisted: *I'm real. I'm behind the door.*

The Orderlies swarmed in, seven rifle barrels locking onto my skull. Heldrich led them—armored, his visor concealing his eyes, his voice like grinding steel.

"Bloody white hell!" he snorted. "Jack, you never said there were two of them!"

Jack, the caravan master, pushed through. His brow was a single, weathered line of stone. "The dead one—that's the killer," he said. "Mister Vassilevsky mentioned he had a brother in New Bergen."

I couldn't blame Jack for alerting the Orderlies. He helped me up. Heldrich loomed, and pain shot through my leg from a bullet graze; my coat had taken most of the damage.

"Heldrich! Glad you're safe." My tongue was thick. "I need booze, rest, and a doc."

"Sure. You'll get a doctor and a bed. Jack, stop the bleeding."

The caravaner cinched a belt above my wound with sure hands. I used mental analgesia learned in Heliopolis. It shut down the pain for a while.

Every fourteen-year-old learned this, but it only gave me fifteen minutes of relief.

Heldrich ignored me, focused on Nevis. He clicked on a "DayBreak" penlight—the same model used by the guards in Mirny. It was a relic of my own childhood.

"Take the body and his gear to the liner," Heldrich ordered. "Don't open the medkit. Don't let so much as a pin go missing."

As the Orderlies moved me out, the surroundings rushed past in a blur: shifting walls, flickering lights, unfamiliar turns. The chaos of the confrontation faded behind us. We left it behind as we reached *Pine Island*—a sleeping nuclear giant fused into the reef of the Seven Winds. Here, at the edge, the old airlock awaited, now cranked by a manual winch instead of its former hydraulics.

Crossing inside the facility marked a sharp transition. The sterile coldness of the airlock was quickly replaced by unexpected warmth and an inviting ambiance. Almost instantly, the aesthetics transformed: wooden floors, high arches, and stained glass appeared as we moved into a mirrored elevator. After three decks up, we stepped into a landing of glowing, opalescent glass. The look echoed Heliopolis, and for a heartbeat, my anxiety subsided.

Heldrich led me into a cabin with brass sconces and blue glass. I sat on a couch and saw a steel-framed photograph: a skeletal woman rising from water, her eyes staring, wet strands on her face like tentacles.

Heldrich poured me two glasses of amber fire. The napalm hit my lungs, and the pain dulled instantly.

"The rich had holograms and robots," Heldrich said, staring at the photo. "But they clung to paper and stone. Maybe they knew art had to be physical to survive. This woman... she makes the viewer know their place."

He began peeling off his armor, stacking it neatly. He spread a transparent sheet across a table of rough planks and donned a medical mask. With a gesture, he invited me to lie down.

"Your dead copy still has both eyes. I'll have to look under your eye patch now."

It was useless to protest anyway.

Sandy knocked, holding a frosty steel container. She wore a mask and blue overalls. She and Heldrich helped me out of my coat, cut away my shirt, and put on thin rubber gloves. The gloves were clearly reused.

To my great relief, my wound wasn't as bad as it seemed: the joint and the humerus were intact. Mobility would come back much faster than I expected.

My pain-block barely held. I groaned, cursed, but silently thanked Heldrich for the liquor. The medics worked fast, communicating almost wordlessly. Soon, my wound was dressed; my arm, bound tight. Heldrich dragged up a leather chair.

"So, what happened tonight? You won't claim the bastard stumbled in. I know you visited Glass's shop—and what you bought."

Heldrich held up my Martian glove. I had underestimated how quickly he moved. Shame caught in my chest, ruining what calm I had left.

"Don't tell me you're collecting antiques. You know exactly what this is. And you didn't cozy up to Jack for nothing. The lab is covered. If your agenda crosses mine, start writing your will. I'll bring paper."

I was ready for this conversation.

"My fiancée loves space flights. The glass caught my eye. If I wanted Glass and his assistant dead, I'd have hired locals, not sent a double."

"Oh, please. No one here would touch that. Times have changed, Ivan. These days are nothing like the old ones."

He was brilliant—and twice as arrogant, hinting everyone feared him.

"And I wouldn't have torched the workshop or risked the town."

"No one's that sloppy—unless they're framing someone. So why are you here? Your legend's dead. I want the truth."

I was ready to reveal a piece of it.

"First, I'm a senior liaison for Winged Sun — a Pathfinder. My mission is to establish relations with you and ensure the success of the joint project we discussed. That project is what someone tried to sabotage tonight. I need to uncover who is responsible—so I'll share what I know, though it isn't much."

Heldrich rose to pour himself a glass.

"So, Heliopolis' nerds haven't gone extinct yet?"

"Alive and kicking," I said. No need to mention our troubles.

“Alright... then why spin that New Bergen story? You look about as much like a trader as I do a miner. And where there are secrets, there’s trouble. Whether you meant it or not, you dragged it here.”

“Tell me straight, Heldrich. The reactor on Pine Island—still running?”

He rubbed his nose, jaw clenched, tired and angry. A stranger had come under false pretenses, stirred up murder and arson, and now probed for the town’s precious resource. I could not blame him.

“That’s for experts. I’m not one. We use Thane hydroelectric instead.”

“I’m guessing someone wanted to test the old beast.”

“Wasn’t that you and your scientist friends?” His sarcasm could’ve kept a family fed for a week. “Living high on the hog in your pretty house, while the rest face every winter like a war, wondering if they’ll survive.”

It hit me: Heldrich slipped into Russian, his accent slight. He must have known it better than German, his mother tongue.

In a heartbeat, I recognized his features.

If I’d been sober and uninjured, I might’ve fought him. Even battered, the picture finally clicked; his story was clear now.

I just had to keep my mouth shut about Mirny.

“Yeah, Heldrich, that’s right,” I said, carrying on in English as if nothing had happened. “But we’ve decided it’s time to put an end to all that. The surviving achievements of science need to be revived and expanded, not locked away. It’s in everyone’s best interest. It’s time to make friends before the enemies get too close. Our offer about the lab is real; it’s not some smokescreen to cover shady business behind your back. The whole New Bergen cover story—I would’ve told you about it anyway—was just to keep our cooperation hidden from hostile forces.”

“You mean the Moon Cross?”

“Let’s start with the Moon Cross, since we know them best. Do you still see them as a bunch of savages with clubs and axes?”

“Well, not exactly. As far as I know, half of those fanatics—maybe more—are descendants of the U.S. Army. Their guns still work just fine. Americans, huh? Only they could let the religious plague into their ranks.”

What’s the matter, Heldrich—never studied Rome? Or did you throw it away, chasing death in that lab?

“There’s more than just rusty rifles,” I say. “They’ve got plasma guns, swarms of autonomous drones, and other kinds of high-precision ‘old tech.’ So far, we’ve been lucky — Antarctica hasn’t been on their radar for decades. But that changed not long ago.”

Heldrich’s face went rigid. I expected sarcasm—something like ‘When did you find time to travel that far?’—and sure enough, he gave me almost that.

“You’ve got quite the intelligence network,” he said. Not mocking this time. Frightened.

What’s spooking you, Reynard Lutz? Do our secrets overlap?

He gathered himself and shifted tracks.

“And this prodigal brother—the one so fascinated with other people’s brains. Is he yours or theirs?”

“There’s a chance he’s with them. But more likely, he belongs to another crew—one that operated here under the cover of a corporation.”

“Nautilus, you mean? But Glass is the only one who survived the Blackout and the clan wars. All they have left is a service center and a clinic.”

Does he really not know about the facility? Or is he playing games?

“They used to have a global network; they may be coming from afar.”

Heldrich checked his mechanical watch—though he had to know it was already far too late. He handed me a foul-tasting potion to help me sleep, dropped a curt goodbye, and left, killing the lights. I lay still, breathing, letting the pieces settle into place.

Back in Mirny, I’d barely seen Reynard Lutz. He was a lab rat, while the other two doctors handled the townsfolk. All I knew was that he clung to Dr. Osokin like a shadow, almost like a younger brother. People called him “the recluse,” “the pale moth,” or “the eternal virgin.” Most often, they didn’t mention him at all.

And me? I was a child, then a teen, too busy with slingshots and exploring the rusting wrecks scattered across the old spaceport. So when did he start to change? When did those slouched shoulders straighten? When did that soft, flabby body harden into muscle, his face sharpening into commanding lines? I can’t even remember Lutz’s voice—who remembers the voice of a moth? But Heldrich—almost everything he said carried the weight

of an order. That's what a desperate need to become someone else does when redoubled by survival mode.

He came to Seven Winds right when the epidemic hit Mirny, which is troubling enough. If he even suspects I know what really happened, what's to stop him from tossing me to the fish? Before I jump to conclusions, the Pathfinders need to more thoroughly explore Mirny. This time, as a group, not as another lone scout or a robot. Antero's fate proved what happens to one man alone—he gets cut down by the Prophet, our worst nightmare.

Sun forbid Geryon Lindon ever joins forces with Nautilus. Old feuds would mean nothing then. And who should prevent this union from happening?

Right. Rakhmanov, me, and our comrades. Exhaustion pressed in harder, but the picture was taking shape. It was better to keep my head down, breathe, and wait for morning.

I woke up close to noon, sunlight pouring through the round porthole. But it was hunger that dragged me back to reality.

My right arm was strapped to my side, and the rest of me barely obeyed. My stomach... if I didn't know anatomy, I'd swear it was trying to claw its way out. At first, it only begged for food, but by the time I staggered upright, it was twisting for a different reason entirely.

I half-emptied the carafe of water Heldrich had left me and scanned the room. The smell crept in first like a whisper, then hit me in a wave so heavy it curled my gut. Rotten meat, weeks gone. Or a corpse wrapped in plastic, left to bake for three days in the sun and then peeled open.

What the hell was it? A whale washed up nearby? A nest of rats rotting in the hold? Stench came with wasteland cities—you expected it—but this bad? And on *Pine Island*?

A surge of nausea doubled me over; with an empty stomach, the dry heaves were hell. Was Heldrich experimenting on me with some kind of toxic gas? But then why bother extracting the bullet, patching me up, and pouring precious whiskey down my throat?

I tore a piece from my ruined shirt, soaked it in water, and pressed it over my face. It dulled the stench just enough to think. The porthole was jammed, the door tight.

I slumped against the door with the rag over my face. That's when it swung open. A tall, lanky figure filled the frame, sealed in a matte-silver protection suit.

"What the hell's going on in here?" I rasped.

"Your precious twin is decomposing," Heldrich's voice came through the respirator, even and clinical. "See it for yourself, if you dare."

One of *Pine Island's* medical bays lay two decks below. Heldrich had cleared the place out. He forced the heavy door open, and the source of the reek lay against the wall on a metal table, shrouded in black plastic. The bulk was wrong—it was easily twice the size of Nevis's corpse.

Heldrich dipped his hands into a tray of polymer gel, coating his gloves in a second skin. Then he peeled back the sheet.

I cursed, stumbling back. No trace of my double remained—just a swollen, slimy heap of meat. Only a few strands of blond hair marked where the head had been. Heldrich tugged at a finger; it slipped free with appalling ease.

"Bone tissue's gone spongy," Heldrich grunted, his scalpel slicing in. "You only see this kind of osteogenesis failure in infants—or fetuses. But never in something that walked. How did it even move, much less attack?"

"Wish I knew more about metamorph physiology," I admitted.

"Metamorphs? Those who change into something else?" He glanced at me. "Well, this one changed. Care to elaborate?"

"If you're willing to hear me out. My theory isn't... what most people would call sane. That body looked like mine for a reason. When I first saw it, it looked like Jack's niece. It copies people. I don't know how, but it needs a quiet place and less than a day to transform."

He picked up a knife—not a bone saw, not a scalpel, just an ordinary blade you'd use to whittle wood or gut a fish—and split the creature's skull as easily as slicing into an overripe apple. Hardly any brain remained, just a foul reddish-gray slurry that slopped across the table, forcing a curse from Heldrich. More likely, it was frustration—he'd wanted to study it intact, and that chance was gone.

He drew some of the muck into a syringe, injected it into a test tube, and set the test tube beside a blood sample.

Thank God I hadn't eaten. Even the water in my stomach felt like a mistake.

"You can see, this isn't simple decomposition," Heldrich told me. "Something accelerated the rot. Either instability built into its biology... or deliberate sabotage."

"Sabotage?" I croaked. My grip slipped on the edge of the table; sweat made it slick.

His smile didn't reach his eyes. "Tell me, Ivan—would you trust a weapon that endures forever? Or one designed to fall apart before it can be studied by a possible enemy?"

I tried to answer, but my legs gave a brief, traitorous tremor. Heldrich noticed. Of course, he noticed. His eyes narrowed behind the mask, as though he were already imagining my body stretched out where the metamorph lay.

He seized a pair of long forceps, drove them deep into the pulped skull, and slowly drew out something glinting in the bloody metal tips.

It looked like a quartz crystal, sprouting a crown of hair-thin filaments. The strands had grown into the brain like roots through soil, threading into neurons like wires. A semi-organic chip-symbiont, most likely capable of growth and self-regulation. A library of genetic information. Or worse: a transmitter, letting Nautilus track the creature, maybe even see through its eyes. If that was true, our time was shorter than I thought.

As if to mock me, Heldrich slipped the "hairy crystal" into a jar and sealed it. I touched his arm, signaling that I should keep it—I'd risked my neck to kill the metamorph. He ignored me completely.

Once the stinking remains were sealed in the fridge (a mercy in itself), Heldrich gathered the vials and flask. He led me into the adjoining room, packed everything in ice, and locked it in a metal safe. Only then did he peel off his filthy gloves, discard the suits in an alcohol-scented basin, and hand me clean clothes: insulated jeans and a heavy black hoodie marked with an unreadable tangle of stylized letters.

When the door was locked behind us, I finally exhaled. The air was blessedly free of rot.

After another flight of stairs, we stepped onto the open deck. Two lounge chairs and a table waited, set with food and tea. The day was clear, almost

idyllic, if not for the armed guards patrolling the rails. A reminder: I was still a prisoner.

“There’s no way you don’t know why that body rotted so fast,” Heldrich said. “After I patched you up, I spent some time with it. And I’ll be damned if that’s your brother. That thing wasn’t human. Maybe you aren’t either, Ivan.”

“You’d know better than me,” I said, forcing myself to take one of the tiny fish from the tray. Even with the fresh sea air, nausea still lingered. “You were the one pulling bullets out of my flesh.”

“What if I decide to poke around in your brain too?” Heldrich asked, calmly spearing a piece of smoked seal.

“Then don’t be surprised when your Titanic sinks,” I replied, voice level. “Do you really think an organization capable of building Nevis wouldn’t avenge one of their own? Do you know anything about Golden Age biotech? Chimeras? Clones?”

Heldrich responded after chewing and swallowing the meat.

“Don’t take me for an ignoramus. Some of us remember more than we let on.”

“I’m glad we understand each other,” I said, stabbing another fish, this time with more appetite. “Nevis really isn’t fully human. He was grown in an incubator. His DNA isn’t double-stranded like ours, but has four strands.”

“Four?” If it weren’t for everything that happened in the past day, Heldrich never would’ve believed me.

“The strands are held together by weak interactions at the ends of the double helices, plus artificially engineered molecular ‘locks.’ But the main thing is, we taught the DNA to restructure itself according to the task at hand. And the creature could command that restructuring on its own. That’s how we got a metamorph—in theory, the perfect spy.”

“And in practice?”

“In practice, we got a voracious killing machine with an unstable psyche. As you can see, it didn’t pass real-world trials. It tried to escape right away, and when I started searching for it, it tried to either kill me or set me against you. Must’ve thought it could take your place in Seven Winds by looking like you.”

Heldrich looked like a cat that had just tried to mess with a porcupine.

“You could sell us weapons and equipment so we can protect ourselves, couldn’t you?” Heldrich asked.

“That may be the next step after we deploy a lab in the city,” I said. But then the sky, the sleeping radars, and the arctic terns above me started spinning wildly. Colors flashed before my eyes, and something knocked me sideways. I threw out my good arm to catch my balance, but in vain. The last thing I felt was Heldrich’s hand at my collar, preventing me from smashing my head. Blood and brain matter would ruin the deck, obviously.

I came to my senses in a hotel room, my throat sore with thirst, my skin damp with sour sweat. The smell annoyed me, but it was nothing in comparison with the decaying Nautilus’ spy.

The lamp still burned, though the wick had guttered low. Someone had left me stretched neatly on the bed, boots placed side by side on the floor. My other belongings—including tools and weapons—were laid out on the bench by the bed (Rasmussen’s shotgun might have found its way back to its owner). I had no doubt that they had been tampered with.

I lifted my left hand to grab the glass of water from the nightstand, and only then did I notice Jack. He bolted from his chair, happy to see me awake.

“Where’s Lutz?”

I could still feel the medic’s hand at my collar, steady, deliberate. He hadn’t just kept me from falling. He’d measured my weight.

“Who?”

“Sorry... I mean, Heldrich.”

A second later, I realized with shame that I hadn’t even said hello. Gaunt, Jack twitched the corner of his mouth in displeasure. And he had the full right to be mad at me.

“He left last night, right after they brought you here. Gave you a shot of something from your own med kit, then took off.”

“Thanks a bunch... How long was I stuck with him?”

“Three days. The fourth today. Man, I was freaking out, big time.”

I gave him a brief hug. Three days! If I’d been delirious while unconscious, Heldrich could have overheard far too much... That unpleasant suspicion was confirmed when my wristband suddenly buzzed.

A message from Heliopolis. Klaus Freiberg ordered me to return as soon as I was able.

I had to reply that I suffered a grievous wound and would be bedridden for at least another week.

“Don’t know if you need to hear this or not, but the hydro up the Thane ain’t answering. Last I heard, old man Anwar was down with a fever. We might lose even the little power we have left if something bad happened to him,” Jack told me. “I’ve been made part of the rescue group, so I’ll have to be away for a day or two.”

“If the Lost Kids have something to do with it, let you catch these devils,” I replied.

The reactor, dear, the alien voice told me, still mimicking Helga. You’ve got no more time to lose. See you in the lab, Ivan-Tsarevich. [2]

The Masters of Nevis



Ivan Vassilevsky – September 18, 2190 – D-16 Facility

The lower the level, the damper, colder, and emptier it became—though the Orderlies drifted everywhere. Even in better times, when ventilation and heating still functioned, the cheapest diners, shabbiest shops, and utility spaces were relegated to these depths: hangars, warehouses, charging bays, repair stations, and the purification plants that kept the people above living in comfort.

According to Jack, climate refugees from East and South Asia once filled these quarters. They'd been happy as hell to work at Seven Winds in place of robots. By the end of the Golden Age, strangely enough, live servants had come back into fashion among the world's elite.

The stamp on my skin proves my status—it depicts an "alien" imagined the old way: a swollen head, eyes swallowing most of the face, and two slits for a nose. You get that stamp at the gates or even at a hotel every time you rent a room. To stay permanently, you had to go through the so-called "Hospitality Service" to explain your skills and utility. As always, sugar, gold, and diamonds were the quickest way to convince them.

It was no surprise that the passage into the elevator shaft had been sealed. Someone had dragged in a heavy grate and slathered it with construction foam. The problem wasn't breaking through—it was doing so without being noticed. I scanned the atrium. No one suspicious was in sight, but that meant nothing. A real watcher wouldn't look out of place. Take those two teenagers two levels up; this morning, the skinny one with the braid was selling crickets near the *Velvet Night*. I'd bet anything they were watching me now.

Then—right under my feet—a thin glowing ribbon appeared. It flared, turned left, and slid down a street marked Seventh Line. I blinked, but it didn't vanish. Since I couldn't stop the hallucinations, I might as well see which white rabbit was waiting.

The ribbon led me to a dead end: a barricade of crates stacked to the ceiling. My "rabbit" was an Orderly—one of those who'd escorted Heldrich and me to *Pine Island*. He sat slumped against the crates, eyes half-open in a grotesque parody of wakefulness. A glass jar of bioluminescent muck cast a dim pool around him. Drool slid from his mouth, spattering the old bulletproof vest on his chest.

"Helga? That you?"

The voice in my mind pulsed urgently. *The Masters of Nevis are coming. They picked up his signal. Hurry!*

"Another shaft?"

The answer whispered in my mind: *On the far side. It leads to the bunker. I'll keep him asleep, but it's getting harder to hold the others...*

I studied the Orderly; his head hung limp. His neck wouldn't thank me for waking up like that.

Take his submachine gun.

I didn't want to shoot, but I obeyed. As I reached for the weapon, the Orderly stirred—his eyes fluttered. I pinched his carotid arteries until he slumped again.

Climbing the barricade was easy, but dropping the weapon would make a racket. Cursing the blockage—most likely Heldrich's work—I braced my shoulder against a top barrel. It was heavy, likely filled with construction debris. With a final, desperate shove, I sent it crashing down. As the echo faded, I watched the shimmering thread lead me forward through the underground corridors like a navigator wired straight into my skull, drawing me deeper into whatever came next.

Finally, a wall loomed with a round niche marked: EXPLOSIVES.

I muttered, "You didn't warn me about this," eyes on the explosives niche.

Helga's voice replied calmly in my mind: *Just a decoy. There's nothing left in Seven Winds that could explode now. Heldrich saw to that.*

As I walked, I felt the phantom touch of a soft palm. I thought of Amelia Tamm, the External Comms team—the family I'd found after the wastes. Their fates depended on my success here.

The voice in my head grew urgent: *If you don't open the lab today, the underwater guys will...*

"Whoever you are, remember—I have responsibilities."

Exactly why you should free me. You're supposed to open my coffin and wake me if you want to complete the Winter part of your quest.

Every fire alarm in my head went off at once. My hand slid into my pocket, brushing Veliard's mother's universal access card. Once, it had opened every Nautilus facility on the planet.

I reached the gate. Faint blood spatters still stained the wall—leftovers from my recent duel. The lock had a reader—either a barcode or a retina scan. My bracelet's sensor picked up an electromagnetic pulse: it was still powered. I pressed Veliard's card to the reader.

Nothing.

Zachary! The rat was messing with the lock! He ruined it! My "guardian ghost" was panicking, her voice slipping into a shrill register—no longer Helga, but a scared teenager. I wished she'd stop screeching in my head, and she did, falling silent.

The cave wall shimmered, turning translucent like mist across glass. Behind it, suspended in a glowing cylinder, floated a small woman. Naked. Curled into a fetal knot. She drifted weightlessly in a column of clear fluid, like a mermaid trapped in an aquarium. Long golden hair veiled her face, drifting softly with the current. Her chest rose and fell with impossible slowness; she was breathing the fluid.

She was the "product." A telepath.

Here we are! Her voice echoed in my mind. *A squad of locals is heading here, too. Fifteen men—and they're searching for you, Ivan.*

"I wish they'd run into the Nautilus people," I said.

Man, you're cynical.

I bolted, following the silvery thread that lit the way. Soon, I reached a ventilation grate and dug out a screwdriver. In moments like this, if you can't turn a position into cover, you make it a trap. I had two electromagnetic grenades (EMGs)—Pathfinder standard issue. One pulse would fry every electronic device within thirty meters.

There was one problem: my bracelet. Every file, including the encrypted Nevis data and my link to Heliopolis, would be toast. But Nautilus thrived on silence and sensors; I couldn't rely on luck. With a last breath, I slid into the shaft and used my grav-pack to scale the vertical tunnel, moving from tense standoff to uncertain ascent.

The damp sea air slapped my face as I hauled myself out onto a cliffside kiosk. I stared down at the dark wedge of Seven Winds, ready to leave—yet the unresolved dangers below made turning back impossible.

Wait, Ivan! the voice pleaded. They came for me... I won't last if Nautilus takes me back.

“Will you at least tell me who you are?”

She sighed into my thoughts. *I'm not Helga. I only borrowed her voice so you'd listen. My home is Laboratory D-16. It matters who finds me first—my creators or you.*

The realization stung. “I'd rather help Jack. At least he's never made a fool of me.”

She snapped at me internally, her tone childish and sharp. *You were right about the glove. Winston is alive and still in Seven Winds. But they won't hand him over easily. You'll need to trade something Heldrich values. I can be that commodity.*

“By hook or by crook, I'll figure it out,” I said.

Her presence pressed against my thoughts. *As soon as I'm free, okay? By the way, I'm Danielle. My story is long, but for now... be ready to attack.*

The squad knew I was there. The muffled click of a safety being disengaged echoed against the rocks.

Even from outside, I heard a hail of bullets slam into the wall covering the ventilation shaft; I pictured concrete and paneling bursting outward in jagged chunks. And then, my small “present” hit the floor.

“Grenade!”

I didn't so much hear the shout as feel it through my bones.

Save the second one! Danielle ordered. Wait here until...

She didn't finish, but I understood: stay put until the air clears. I sat on the mossy stones and waited, my head buzzing with how recklessly I'd obeyed an alien voice. But my ghost friend had already provided real help, and since there was no one else I could trust, I chose her side.

Ten minutes passed in silence. No signal, no familiar hum of her presence in my mind. The odds were hopeless: me alone, armed with a single electromagnetic grenade and a knife, against a corporate strike team. Prudence suggested flight, but curiosity—that different beast—drew me

back down. With renewed resolve, I retraced my steps toward the chaos below.

I reluctantly descended with the grav-pack and slid into the hallway. Bluish light bled from the far end, illuminating a scene of absolute slaughter. The smell of blood hit me first—thick, metallic, and everywhere.

The floor was littered with a dozen freshly killed fighters. I stopped by a man in Golden Age combat armor. A *Hammerhead* logo—the infamous private military company under the Nautilus umbrella—clung to his shoulder plate. His visor was shattered, his face a crater.

Nearby lay a corpse in a full exoskeleton, a walking tank designed to smash through walls. A heavy plasma gun rested beside him; after the EM blast, it was nothing more than an oversized bludgeon.

The shocking truth revealed itself as I moved forward: they hadn't been killed by a third party. They had shot each other at point-blank range.

A metallic click echoed. I switched off my safety. A matte-blue suit of armor cracked open in segments like a clamshell, and a man staggered out—alive, shaking, and seemingly small amid the mayhem.

“Not hurt?” I asked.

All he could manage was a whimper. “Has Perceval made it... To the gate?”

The kid looked no older than twenty-five—square-jawed and broad-checked, a model soldier for Golden Age propaganda. But he was trembling, his lip quivering as he tried to stand. He was huge—broader than me, taller even than Heldrich. Nautilus clearly didn't starve its raiders.

“I didn't want to kill them,” he stammered. “I don't know who gave the order. Something snapped. A voice ordered '*Kill!*' and my hands—they just fired.”

My EMP attack must have followed the massacre, killing their visors and radios, leaving them in the dark with the stench of cooked flesh.

“Stick to me, and you'll be safe,” I said. I gestured toward the lab. “You mentioned someone named Perceval. Let's find him.”

“Her,” the merc replied.

At the half-open entrance to the lab, we found the last survivor. A crop-haired woman in light armor sat in exhaustion, her gun raised. Her eyes were glassy, locking onto us with an unblinking stare.

“Boys,” she said, her head tilting at a strange angle, like a marionette tugged by the wrong string. “Welcome aboard.”

She smiled—the kind of smile you see on a propped-up corpse, lips peeling back to reveal the teeth. Her gun hand jerked as if she were fighting her own muscles. Then, she slammed the barrel against her temple, hard enough to bruise the skin, her smile widening all the while.

Science and Mayhem



Ivan Vassilevsky – September 19, 2190 – D-16 Facility

In the past days—especially the last few minutes—I’d seen enough horrors to crush a sane man. Engineer Perceval’s suicide could have been the final straw: the loud crack, the crimson spray, her body’s slump. It should have snapped my mind in two. Instead, I only ground my teeth. The real pain was losing a precious source of information before my eyes.

“Please, sir,” Leo whispered, reaching over to gently close her eyelids. As he did so, his fingers accidentally smeared fresh blood across her face. He stared, frozen, then called out, “Don’t step further!”

Leo’s large frame shook, as if chilled to the bone by a sudden blizzard. His body trembled uncontrollably, and he broke into harsh, grating sobs that pierced the quiet. I stepped forward and delivered a heavy slap across his face. The sharp sound echoed in the silent passage. Leo gasped, his lips parting to mutter an astonished “fuck,” as a bead of blood appeared at his split lip.

“Stop it, now! Are you a Hammerhead or a crybaby?” I let my words bite deeper than the slap. “What’s your assignment?”

“Extract the lab memory blocks,” he stammered automatically, eyes wide and unfocused. “Deliver them to the Njord...”

Then, in a blink, the haze lifted. Suspicion sharpened his gaze.

“Hold it! Who the hell are you, really?”

I leaned on the lie without blinking. “Nevis. The scout who had your asses dragged here. The bastard from the Winged Sun nearly finished me off—you might’ve heard I was dead.”

“So where’s he now?”

“Alive but locked down by Heldrich, the local boss. Trust me, you wouldn’t want to be in his shoes.”

“Huh? Then who activated the EM grenade?”

“Heldrich doesn’t want people like us sniffing around his city—or the lab he’s after. One of his thugs hit you first. Then the telepath joined in from inside the lab.”

The large blue eyes narrowed.

“You’re unharmed. Your gear, too.”

I tilted my head upward to explain my location.

“I wasn’t in the tunnels. I was after his poor soul.”

“How in hell did those savages get their hands on weapons like that?”

“Looks like a Moon Cross toy. And there are a hundred ways something like that could end up in Seven Winds.”

Rage rippled through his big frame like a storm tide.

A vein pulsed in his neck. “If you’re the scout, then you know what happens in this goddamn lab! You knew about the mental attacks! You should’ve warned us!”

“Yours wasn’t the first expedition.” My voice stayed cool, rehearsed. “Proteus base sent three men six months ago. None returned. Before the signal cut out, it was clear they were already hallucinating.”

“Shit...”

“Looks like your chief didn’t bother to share that little detail. But at least your engineer got the gate unlocked. The Proteus men never made it that far. When I came here, I didn’t suffer the same attacks—our nature’s a little different, you and me.”

His face twisted in disgust. “Ah, yes. A morph, aren’t you?”

The word landed like spittle. As if being a metamorph was something obscene. I let the silence stretch, savoring the chance to erode a soldier’s faith in his leaders—a pleasure nearly as visceral as any other.

We entered a round, three-level atrium. Hallways radiated outward like spokes of a wheel. Through the center stretched a hanging garden—a lush, blooming oasis fed by trickling irrigation pipes. The air was slightly moist. The flowers gleamed too brightly under the artificial light, as if cast from gold and silver foil rather than grown.

Overhead, a plasma dome simulated a night sky—full moon, scattered stars—but the image flickered, glitching every few seconds, so the heavens shuddered in and out of focus. I wondered whether the phases ever changed here, or if the lab workers were trapped in this same false night forever.

The first order of business, with Danielle fallen silent, was to get my bearings: a map of the facility, and more importantly, a staircase. I wasn't ready to trust my life to an elevator.

Signs still clung to the walls, their paint faded but legible. Laboratories, storage rooms, and a workshop filled the lower levels. Up here were the comforts: administrative suites, a kitchen, a dining hall, a gym with a sauna, a library, and even an oneirotheque. Nautilus had spared no expense for their people.

The thought of a hot shower clung to me. The pull felt almost physical. After days of blood, sweat, and rot, the fantasy of standing under scalding water for hours was irresistible.

Then I saw it.

A large monitor displayed a portrait of a young Asian girl—dark-haired, dressed in modest simplicity. Her plain face was serene, her smile candid and cheerful. But every few seconds, the screen glitched, and it looked like a twitch of a corpse's muscles.

At her chest level, two words glowed:

“Kwan Yoo Na. My immortal.”

I was wondering if I was looking at a memorial, an artistic experiment, or a warning meant for me. Leo did not react. He was still looking at me as if I were carrying plague.

I scanned the walls for a stairwell sign. “You see, Leo, our superiors have quite a vague idea of what's happening here, but they treat people like we sprout fresh every spring. What do you have to say to that?”

The look Leo gave me said plenty: nobody cared. He was built to pull triggers, not chew over ideas. Still, I'd been sloppy—not checking him for knives. People like to say knife fighters are always short and wiry. Truth is, they come in all shapes. It's just that the small ones are harder to hit.

“I don't know what to make of any of this. Maybe you can tell me.”

“I can't promise answers—just guesses. Either someone buried a breakthrough down here worth any price—money, lives, gear—or we're lab rabbits on a testing ground, and the worst hasn't even started,” I winked at his scowl.

The upper level was immaculate—beautiful, sterile, not a speck out of place. Like walking through the Snow Queen's palace, if she'd swapped ice

for steel. The very first hallway we tried ended up spitting us out at a staircase. I kept my eyes fixed on Leo, never once giving him my back. After the trials of the day, though, focus was slippery; every step felt like wading through molasses.

I spoke casually. “Who’s in charge of the squad?”

The war machine grumbled, “Bouvier. Another exo. You’ve seen him killed.”

Again, I assessed Leo’s bulk—at least ninety kilos, maybe more. Beneath that size, I suspected fast reflexes. Too risky to attempt anything aggressive. For now, I focused on drawing information from him while Danielle remained silent. Quietly, I hoped she was both safe and *sane*.

“Here’s the thing, Leo...” I let a weary sigh leak into my voice, feigning weakness. “I need to track down some meds.”

“What about your glorified regeneration, huh?”

“What about you stop talking like an asshole? I haven’t had time for another slumber! I haven’t even healed my arm yet. And no matter what rumors say, we feel pain. And a calmativ sounds like heaven.”

Letting my authority drop felt risky, but an overconfident soldier reveals more. I let him believe I was faltering, trusting he’d show his hand.

“Coming with you,” he said instantly. “It might be dangerous.”

Now he looked smarter to me, a “guardian angel” I never asked for. I swallowed the irritation and began sketching plan B in my head. Short, simple, brutal—just like life in these wastes.

The medbay door swung open without resistance, but the cabinet with drugs was sealed behind a coded lock. Scratched into the metal, crude but legible, was a series of numbers. We punched them in. The panel blinked green.

Far too easy. What’s the catch then?

“Listen, Leo,” I said, tone all business again. “Sweep the sector. Look for traces of the locals—journals, records, even scraps of personal junk. Anything.”

“Man, that’s not my task.”

“Don’t rush things, Leo. What if we can avoid the danger and find out what killed Perceval, Bouvier, and others? You will hardly know it once you’ve retrieved the scientific records and handed them out.

“It could go on like that for a long time,” Leo replied, but he obeyed my order, leaving me alone with a stash of medicine. Once I was sure he had gotten far enough away, I slipped through the doctor’s office into the pharmacy, which, to my surprise, opened at my touch on the scanner outside the door.

Access to drugs for anyone who could reach? It seemed our invisible helper was tech-savvy enough to dismantle the security protocols.

I found myself in a cold, cramped room—little more than a closet—lined with refrigerated metal chambers. One fridge, shared by stimulants and neuroleptics, was nearly empty; only two standard syringe-tubes marked with barcodes remained. Beside them, a monitor displayed a list of the inventory. I scanned the stash of anesthetics and sedatives. The relaxants were untouched, but the rest had been stripped bare—likely the result of Zacharia’s clandestine visits. I pocketed some stimulants to bring back to Heliopolis; the research team would be keen to deconstruct the formula.

While exploring the doctor’s office, I found a holographic medical chart. When I inserted it into the reader, a full-length, 3D portrait of a young woman materialized. Red and blue dots pulsed across her body—problematic zones that either required attention or had already been treated. But the most striking word, glowing in large letters next to her name, was: DECEASED.

Kwan Yoo Na, sixteen years old. Cause of death: irreconcilable blood loss—presumably suicide. Her death and the Blackout occurred in the same year. The passions that must have raged in this tomb!

“Most of the living quarters are locked. Except for one,” Leo reported as he returned. He held a spotted plush narwhal, tied with a scarlet ribbon where its neck should have been.

I eyed the toy. “Was that the room where Kwan Yoo Na lived?”

“I don’t know about a ‘Kwan,’ but it was definitely a girl’s room. Wish I knew where she’s hiding,” Leo muttered, absentmindedly turning the toy. Dust rose from the fabric; the ventilation was failing here.

“Give me your knife,” I commanded.

Leo grudgingly complied. We reached the lower level without incident. The first gate slid open on its own, releasing a draft of damp air. We stepped into what might have been paradise—if paradise were a fever dream.

Even for a base with fewer than a hundred residents, Nautilus had designed a staggering self-sustaining ecosystem. Irrigation and climate controls had run unattended for years. The air was thick with the cloying sweetness of rot and damp earth. Every step triggered a rustle or the frantic cry of birds. Patterned lizards flickered over mossy stones. Two sapphire hummingbirds fought like knife-fighters over a burgundy flower, their wings buzzing like razors.

I nearly reached for a low-hanging apple—ripe and shining—before common sense reined me in. Leo plucked one from the moss, turned it in his palm, and slid it into his pouch without taking a bite. A wise move.

We passed reservoirs choked with edible seaweed and a seawater pool where a small ray thrashed against the stone rim, desperate to escape. Its frantic slaps echoed like warning shots. Finally, we reached the last airlock. Numbers were scrawled across the lock in black marker, as crude as graffiti.

After a brief chime, a cold white fog of disinfectant rolled over us. We stepped into a long corridor lined with sealed doors. I turned left. One door yielded—unlocked. Inside, the air was a shock: brittle, dry, and no warmer than fifteen degrees. Green light from the consoles threw distorted shadows across five horizontal cylinders—hibernation pods.

Beside one glowing pod sat a pair of soft, worn slippers—too human for this sterile place. Suspended in the clear gel lay the one who had pried into my thoughts. She looked hardly twenty: platinum hair floating like drowned silk, her lashes so pale they nearly vanished. An oxygen mask distorted her features, and an artificial tether stretched from her abdomen like a grotesque umbilical cord.

I pressed my hand to the glass. She twitched. The monitor screamed to life, her heartbeat spiking to 130. Beneath closed lids, her eyes darted wildly. My touch had entered her dream.

“How do I wake you, Sleeping Beauty?” I asked. Then I noticed the figure in the chair.

Behind the computer sat a yellowed, mummified corpse dressed in a multilayered evening gown of violet and green satin. A necklace adorned the modest cleavage, and a bracelet gleamed on the wrist. Her black hair was styled in an intricate oriental updo with pins.

To my horror, the mummy's neck was taped to the headrest to keep the head upright, though the lower jaw hung slack and ghastly. Her desiccated palms rested on a notebook. On the page, written in calligraphic script: *Kwan Yoo Na. My love since August 5, 2142. I must remember.*

"Holy shit," Leo whispered.

"Quite unholy, I'd say."

Immortalizing love is a commendable act, but what we were witnessing went beyond the imaginable. Once again, I regretted coming here. Had I been wiser, I would have waited for other scouts—perhaps Rakhmanov himself—to join me. By the time Nautilus arrived for Danielle, she would no longer have been my problem. They could have dealt with the "Sleeping Beauty" themselves; who knows who would have ended up worse off in the end?

I woke the computer from sleep and encountered a password prompt. There were no notes on the console, but I gambled that Danielle—or her macabre caretaker—had kept a record. I pulled the notebook from beneath the deceased's dry, taped palms.

The guess was correct. The pages were filled with drawings, diagrams, and access codes—all written in that same perfect, calligraphic hand. I searched for the hibernation sequence. I studied Danielle through the glass: her skin gleamed like polished porcelain, a statue of snow-white perfection. No ports, no scars, only grotesquely long, curved nails.

I turned back to the brittle notebook and typed the date I found in the dedication: *August 5, 2142.*

A faint, insectile hum rose as the computer stirred. A holographic menu unfolded: *Supplemental Nutrition. Hydromassage. Awakening.* There was a fourth option, marked only with a pulsing red cross. I ignored it and chose *Awakening.*

The system estimated two hours for her body to revive. Two hours to copy the data, check the reactor fuel, and find a way out. I pulled up the facility map. The "Boathouse" caught my eye—a bay for sea shuttles—but Danielle's notes claimed the locks were unbreachable. Then I heard it: the wet, rhythmic gulping of the filtration system as the pod began to drain.

If wastewater flowed out to the sea sixty meters below, that outlet was an exit—provided I could find scuba gear. After all, the corporation wasn't named *Nautilus* for nothing.

My weary mind registered the threat a moment too late. A flicker of movement, swift as a moray eel's strike, and the submachine gun was slapped from my hand. In the same instant, fire tore into my abdomen. The bastard had another knife tucked away.

The weapon had found its way beneath my ribs, sliding through flesh until my armored cloak caught the tip, halting the blade inches from my spine.

The scream that ripped out of me was one of an animal.

"Your friends couldn't even grow a new eye for you?" Leo sneered, twisting the knife with relish. "Let me fix that."

Veliard, I wish you could see the monsters your company bred. They don't need to be metamorphs to be demons. The knife came down again, but I caught his wrist with my good hand, fury lending me a frantic strength. His radius cracked like dry timber as I hurled him across the hall. He hit the floor with a wet gasp. I didn't give him time to recover; I drove my boot into his temple.

Every heartbeat was a hammer against my skull. I was fading fast. I yanked a syringe from my kit—the heavy relaxant I'd found earlier—and drove the needle into Leo's calf.

"Damned fool," I rasped.

The drug spread through him like fire through dry grass. His body folded, his bones going slack as if his skeleton had been plucked away. His chest hitched, then stilled into shallow, useless twitches. The terror in his eyes was unbearable: a living mind trapped in a dead shell, fighting to command lungs that no longer obeyed.

What is it like—to suffocate in perfect silence, to feel the command to breathe and find nothing but betrayal in your own flesh? So much like the nasty death in open space.

I left him there, staring blankly past me, his body already a coffin. No bullets wasted on a snake that bites out of the blue.

The path back to the medical bay felt like scaling the glaciers of central Antarctica naked, lungs burning for oxygen, no rope to save me if I slipped.

Each step tore me further open. I smelled my own iron mix with antiseptic fog. More than once, I staggered against the wall, holding myself upright only by restarting mental anesthesia. Stopping meant staying forever in this pure, silent tomb with a couple of corpses for company.

Sorry, I was too drained to prevent it, Danielle whispered to me.

The Mutiny



Randy de la Serna – September 19, 2190 – Victoria Land, Antarctica

The Lost Kids huddled around the hearth, soaking in the fire's crackle. In quiet moments, they almost resembled a family—living up to their strange name, barely. Billy stirred grayish mush. It smelled surprisingly edible to the starving. Fox greeted Randy with a reserved smile, motioning him over. Days ago, these kids might have pelted him with stones or jokes; now they welcomed him as one of their own.

Every move sent pain through him—a harsh reminder of the trial he'd survived. The bandages squeezed his torso, and scrapes on his back screamed with every tug of his clothes. Kitty had called his wounds 'raw meat' with theatrical flair. Despite the pain, he felt himself mending—slowly but surely.

“If we could just find another cache like the one in Mirny...” Ezra grumbled, bitter about landing the smallest share of the soup.

“That’s where this came from.” Billy grinned, gesturing to the pot. “The best parts are what’s left.”

“We’re heading to Railtown for supplies,” the Elder Sister announced, cutting through the chatter. “Ezra, Randy, and I. He needs to be brought up to speed.”

Randy slurped the thick soup straight from the bowl—spoons were a luxury for the top dogs. The moment he learned he was riding out tomorrow, shock emptied his lungs, and a mouthful of broth caught in his throat, making him cough until blackness danced before his eyes. A rough hand struck his back, sending a flash of pain and stars through his vision.

Enraged with pain, Randy spun and slammed his attacker to the ground, driving both shoulders into the floor with everything he had. He was stunned it had worked and even more stunned to see Kitty pinned down.

“Enough!” he growled.

The Lost Kids froze mid-bite. The older man slumped against the wall, scowling into the middle distance. Water dripped from Randy's bottle as he took a swig. He glanced over at Kitty: the usual nasty smirk was gone.

As the tension in the common room faded, the scene shifted. Fox led Randy away, a dark, leathery trophy—a severed desmodus wing—clutched in her hand.

“Shot from the tower?” Randy asked.

“If only,” Fox grunted. “It crawled inside. We found it on the tunnel ceiling.”

“They can climb?” Randy blinked. “How much have I missed?”

“A lot. Meet us at the gates at dawn. You'll need to get used to the saddle. And bring some crackers for Luna.”

The clinging dark of night thinned as dawn broke. Just before departure, Henry handed Randy a quilted jacket reinforced with metal plates. It was Golden Age tech. Repurposed. A bit oversized. The belt was thick leather, with a buckle heavy enough to crack a skull.

The boots, however, were a masterpiece. Warm, snug, and built with thick, springy soles. Near the top was an etched emblem: a looping rocket beside a five-pointed star. The symbol of Mirny.

Gone. All of it, torn from the world without mercy. A sharp ache twisted through Randy as he wondered what Dr. Osokin or Arseny would think of him now—if they'd even recognize what he was becoming.

Outside the Silver Palace, marking the start of the day's journey, the Elder Sister sat tall on Midnight. To her left, Luna pawed at the snow, her silver fur shimmering with nervous energy. Randy followed the drill: he held out a piece of dried bread on an open palm. Luna crunched it down, and he ran his fingers through the thick fur behind her ear, masking the sting in his back with a grin.

“It's easy,” Fox said. “Wrap one arm around her neck, swing your leg over, and push off. You'll ride low, almost lying on her back. Use your knees to grip her sides. The faster she moves, the tighter you squeeze.”

Luna's withers came up to Randy's chest. He swung himself up, nearly sliding off when she spun to snap at her own tail.

“Whoa!”

The dog turned her head toward Fox, giving her a look that clearly said: *This guy? Really?*

Instead of answering, Big Sister let out a low whistle. Midnight broke into a lazy trot, and Luna followed, carrying Randy into the white unknown.

Randy wasn't used to riding. Horses hadn't set hoof on Antarctic soil since the days of Captain Scott. They returned only with the second wave of the Moon Cross. At a slow walk, he managed, but a gallop—or a small jump—made it impossible to stay seated. His new jacket was a godsend. The springy polymer padding absorbed the impacts every time he slammed back into Luna's spine.

"You're too tense." Elder Sister circled him on her black giant, Midnight. "The dog feels you lock up. She thinks you're scared, so she stops listening. Keep your back straight, squeeze with your knees, and for hell's sake, breathe. You're riding, not sniping."

Later, as the journey grew longer and the landscape shifted, Fox led them toward the deceptively cheerful cabins of an abandoned mining camp at a steady trot. Randy leaned against Luna's withers, trying to match the rhythm. He tumbled a few times, but he climbed back up every time—stubborn as a mule—trying to shield his face from the dog's massive, slobbery tongue.

They reached the settlement. It was a ghost town of rusted corrugated iron and empty windows. The road curved around a hill and revealed a relic of the Golden Age: a massive mining dump truck. The wheel alone was taller than Fox. The bed was a cavern. Up on the cab, a ledge looked like a perfect nest for a heavy machine gun.

"Hell of a fortress on wheels, huh?" Fox said.

"Saw one just like it in the tunnels," Randy replied.

"Shame the nuclear core's gone. Without it, that beast is just a hill of scrap. Probably locked in some vault under seven layers of hell."

"Mind if I ask something?" Randy ventured. "You've got a grudge against Seven Winds, don't you?"

"I do. Their warlord—Heldrich—took something from me. Something that mattered. I won't rest until I take it back."

"The Prince... was he really one of yours?"

“Small world. He and Arce tried to flip Mirny. Blew their cover, butchered the armory guards, and fought their way out. They fell out before I even joined.”

“You joined because Seven Winds hunted you for your blood?”

The leader of the Lost Kids grunted. Randy knew he'd hit a nerve. They rode past gutted homes, stripped clean by the gang. Henry had explained the drill: loot everything. Then, chain up whoever was left. Randy clenched his jaw, wishing he could help the captives. But he was just one boy on a flea-ridden dog.

“Hey, Fox! One more thing,” Randy called. “Henry, Ezra... the folks who got sick in Mirny. Can they save people now, too?”

“Everyone in my crew got a shot of my blood. Even the dogs,” Fox answered, her words carrying a reluctant edge. “Looks like Henry talks too much.”

“What if someone in Mirny was still alive? Would you have helped them?”

“If I had a reason.”

Randy couldn't make sense of it. She knew McMurdo was dying from the same sickness, and back home, he'd learned to never leave someone in pain. Rage and disbelief churned in him. Raiders might have their own rules, but there was no part of him willing to accept this coldness—never.

As the day drew to a close, they stood in silence while the orange sun sank behind the volcano, turning the sky into a bruised palette of fire-colored clouds. The weather was holding, for now.

The ride back was better. Randy felt the rhythm now, managing to gallop the final stretch without falling. Of course, Luna ruined the moment by flopping sideways onto his leg, squashing him into the snow before rolling around as if it were the greatest day of her life. Fox glared at her, and the big dog slunk away, head low and looking entirely sheepish.

That night, following their return to camp, Randy barely slept. Each time he closed his eyes, the same thought crashed through him, raw and insistent: grab the Elder Sister, drag her to McMurdo, and make her save lives instead of ending them. Dr. Osokin could rip a serum from her blood—maybe this would finally end their nightmare.

But how the hell was Randy supposed to capture Fox? Harpooning a kraken seemed easier.

Ezra shook him awake before sunrise. Randy blinked hard, dragging his eyes open. He splashed water from a dented aluminum bowl onto his face, checked his knife, strapped a machete to his thigh, and yanked his jacket and belt tight. He gave his hair a few half-hearted swipes with a busted comb, tying it back with a leather string.

Henry grabbed his assistant in a rib-cracking bear hug, then flopped back into his sleeping bag and snored as if nothing had happened.

Before dawn the next day, it was still pitch black when Randy stepped outside. Fox and Ezra were by the gates, torchlight dancing across their faces as they finished loading the fourth dog, Yuki—the gear carrier. The Lost Children traveled light to leave space for loot. All they carried was dry food, water, a flask of booze, bedrolls, and their weapons: arrows, harpoons, and ammo.

Fox had ditched her silver mantle for Kitty's old leather coat, cinched tight with laces along the back to fit her frame. A thick scarf and a warming respirator hid the lower half of her face, making her green eyes appear even brighter. In the loose coat, she looked like a lanky young man. On her left sleeve, a grimy green wristguard stood out—bulky, high-tech, and stamped with the Russian word *Svyatogor*. Randy had no clue what it was, but it screamed "Golden Age" danger.

"You're gonna be picking him up off the ground all day," Ezra muttered, nodding toward Randy as he struggled to mount Luna. "If he doesn't kill himself first."

"He won't," Fox said without looking back. "When you have to, you learn."

And if you don't... that's on you.

Randy hadn't wasted the Elder Sister's lesson. This time, mounting was easier, and he matched the older riders' pace. Luna got the message, too—the games were over.

As they rode, Randy peppered Fox with questions. "How'd the dogs end up like this? I've heard stories, but they always sounded like tall tales..."

“Science, Randy. These snow dogs were bred in labs—helpers, not pets,” Fox explained. “Always rare. Even rarer now. You can still find them where birds or seals are thick, but most people shoot them for fur.”

“Arce found two families once,” Ezra added. “Shot the parents, took the pelts. Fox made us bring the pups back. Now we’ve got a second generation running.”

“Can they kill people?”

“Like any dog,” Fox replied. “Just faster.”

She slapped Midnight’s flank and took off. Her chest pressed tight to the dog’s withers as the black beast cleared a ravine in a single bound. Randy crouched low as Fox had shown him, and Luna sprang after them. Her paws hit the opposite bank with a heavy thud.

“What about that flying bot? You took care of it, right?” Randy asked.

“Dream on,” Fox hissed. “We got lucky shooting one down, but there are more. Smaller, faster. Watch your step, but watch the sky more.”

A wanted woman, Randy thought. *I bet the Moon Cross is after her, too.*

By daylight, they crossed a geothermal stream. Lush green plants clung to the banks, and stones were slick with moss. Spring was advancing. The Younger Sun’s glow faded as the Older Sun took over, melting ice into trickling streams. Where the ground turned to mush, the dogs slowed, slogging through the wet crust.

When they hit the open plain of the Mainline, the pace picked up. Luna let loose into a wild gallop, nearly outrunning Midnight. Randy gripped her neck, realizing this wasn’t just riding—it was flying. At his age, it was hard to stay buried in the dark stuff; he needed this taste of freedom.

But Railtown wasn’t just a checkpoint. Randy had a plan: he’d ask for help for McMurdo. And then there was Fox—the cure. He didn’t know if her blood worked on the fungal infection, but something had healed Henry’s broken leg in mere days. As a doctor’s stepson, Randy knew that kind of recovery was impossible under normal circumstances.

When the city radio tower appeared on the horizon, Fox called for a stop. They needed to stash the dogs. She coaxed Midnight through a narrow gap in the rocks; the beast growled, nearly scraping his shoulders raw to follow his handler.

Randy briefly considered a break for the Main Road, but Ezra was ahead of him. “You go second,” he ordered, only dismounting after Randy was through the gap.

They settled in a sheltered clearing of basalt and gneiss. Fox tossed dried fish to the dogs while a thin stream provided water. Railtown was still twenty kilometers away.

“So... we’re hauling the whole load from Railtown on foot?” Randy asked.

“Yuki’s coming,” Fox said, peeling off her respirator. “She’s never been on a raid—no one will recognize her.”

“You know what, Fox?” Ezra muttered, his voice bitter. “You leave too many people alive and free. Soon, every damn penguin out there is gonna know our faces.”

Fox’s lips curled into a cold smile. Her hand drifted to her belt out of habit, but her whip wasn’t there. Ezra’s challenge—especially in front of an eighteen-year-old—clearly grated on her nerves.

“So what?” Ezra said, glancing at Randy. “He’s one of us now, isn’t he? You don’t let us kill; you don’t let us have any fun during the raids...”

“Railtown’s warehouse is open for you,” Fox countered.

“With too many precautions. That’s not enough for Kitty. He wants it like it was with Arce—blood, madness, and pain.”

“I know,” Fox said, her jaw clenched tight. “Once we take Pine Island, he’ll get everything he wants.”

“The thing is... Kitty doesn’t think we *can* take Pine Island. He’s scared, and he’s not the only one.” Ezra paused, reaching tentatively for her hand. “I’m not judging you, Fox. I’ve got your back.”

She pulled away, her eyes sharp as razors. “I know. Soon, Kitty’s going to be happier than a dog in a slaughterhouse—for a brief moment. We’ll talk more in Railtown. For now—”

A wet, loud *crack* split the air. Red liquid splattered across Fox’s face. Ezra dropped to his knees, a neat hole punched just above his left eyebrow. Fox rolled over her shoulder, diving for the mountain slope. Randy dove after her just as a bullet punched through the hide he had been sitting on.

“Couldn’t wait, you bastard,” Fox hissed.

Midnight surged forward, shielding his owner. The black beast looked twice his size—fur bristling, tail lashing. Yuki scanned the ridge, jaws snapping.

“Who the hell was that?” Randy groaned as another shot tore into Ezra’s lifeless back.

“Kitty. He’s been following us,” Fox rasped. “He’s dug in above us. We’re boxed in like sheep in a pen.”

Fox tapped a holographic menu on her bulky Svyatogor wrist device. “Kitty’s probably brought Boris and Howard. They won’t charge. They’ll pick us off or lob an explosive to scatter us across the rocks.”

“We have to run,” Randy said, eyes flicking to the flickering tech on her arm.

“Midnight, take him,” Fox ordered.

The black dog gave her one last amber glance and vanished into a vertical crack in the cliff. Gunshots followed, then snarling and a wet, meaty crunch.

“Randy, listen!” Fox’s voice took on a metallic edge. “When I say ‘Go,’ jump on Luna and ride. Don’t stop.”

“Go!!!”

The mountain shuddered. A jagged slab of rock tore loose and crashed down. A lit stick of dynamite bounced onto the ledge, landing between Ezra and the whimpering Barry. Randy kicked Luna’s flanks and scrambled over a fallen boulder. A thunderous blast split the air behind him, spraying dirt and stone.

Randy wheeled Luna around. The blast had slammed Fox into a boulder, and she was struggling to crawl out from under the unconscious Yuki. Randy jumped down to help.

“Where’s Midnight?” Fox gasped, her right eye bloodshot from the shockwave.

“Chasing them.” Randy offered her a flask. “Are you hurt?”

“No fractures... yet.” She checked Yuki. “The dog is just stunned.”

As Yuki recovered and shook off the confusion, they salvaged what they could.

“Randy, grab Ezra’s rifle and the backpack,” Fox told her former prisoner.

“It’s soaked in blood.”

“Get used to it.”

They mounted up, but as they moved, a shot rang out. Yuki shrieked, blood spraying from her flank. Fox tumbled into the mud. A second shot punched through Randy's shoulder. The world dimmed.

"Hell!" Fox dragged him behind a slab of stone. "Clean pass. You'll live."

Randy watched in awe as a helmet unfolded from Fox's collar, encasing her head in a sleek, otherworldly visor. It was the kind of tech only the highest-ranking officials in Heliopolis possessed.

Another bullet hit the rock. Fox slapped her gauntlet, and a low hum filled the air. She hovered her palm over a nearby boulder. The rock shuddered, rose, and shot toward the ridge like a projectile. A dull crunch and a ragged yell followed.

Fox stiffened as her helmet retracted back into her overalls.

"There—Railmen!" she pointed toward a line of travelers on the Mainline. "If Kitty's still alive, he won't dare attack with witnesses."

"Aren't they your enemies?" Randy asked, his face ashen.

"Not unless they know who we are," Fox replied, her voice dropping into a practiced, helpless lilt.

She shouted for help, and eight Railmen detached themselves from the main line. In Fox's reworked history, she was a merchant from McMurdo. She and her younger brother had barely survived a gang raid to steal their prize dogs.

"Among them was a tall man in white," she added, eyes wide with feigned terror. "I hope we hit him."

"Ah, the boss!" said a man of Asian descent, mounted on a brown snow dog. His mount sniffed cautiously at Yuki; Luna ignored them both, focused on licking her companion's wound. "Some say he's lean, others say bulky."

"Seemed bulky to me," Fox said, her voice trembling. "He rode a black monster even larger than yours. Please—get us to town. My brother is bleeding."

"I can take you to the refugee camp," the rider replied. "McMurdo folk aren't allowed in the city. Disease precautions."

Refugee camp? Randy's mind raced even as his vision began to swim. *Maybe someone from home is there.*

"Of course—no one wants the plague in the city," Fox agreed.

The Railmen began bandaging Randy's shoulder. The pressure was a dull ache against the sharp fire of the wound.

"What's your name, sister?" the rider asked.

"Cath," she replied. "And you?"

"Tang. You know Stella?"

"Everyone knows Stella," Fox said. "I have something she'll want. Two trained riding dogs—loyal, valuable, and this one is pregnant. If Stella is the businesswoman I hear she is, she'll know her worth."

Tang's gaze lingered on Luna's rounded flanks. His jaw tightened. "And in return?"

"Passage into Railtown for my brother and me. And your people help me get the bullet out of Yuki." Fox sounded peaceful, but Randy saw her knuckles white on the lead. She was selling her family to save her life.

Tang nodded slowly. "I'll carry the message. No promises."

As they reached the refugee camp, the man rode off. For the next hour, Randy sat on a hide in a refugee camp, drifting in and out of consciousness as the Railmen worked the lead out of Yuki's side. He scanned the passing refugees for a familiar face, but saw only strangers broken by the same bird plague that was ravaging his home town.

Finally, Tang returned, his dog's muzzle flecked with foam. "Stella will see you tomorrow. Straight into the city—her word."

They passed under Railtown's southern gate within the hour. Randy didn't see the city; the world turned gray and vanished into blackness before they reached the inner courtyard.

Evil Against Evil



Arseny Osokin – September 19, 2190 – McMurdo

Arseny woke to the cold. The coal was nearly gone, burned away piece by piece. There would be no resupply: the Moon Cross now owned what little remained.

Morning met Arseny with another worrying discovery. In the shed where Randy's tools had once been neatly kept, someone had already rummaged through, leaving disorder like a wound. Then, on the table by the window, he saw it: a folded scrap of paper weighted by Dr. Osokin's empty mug. His heart lurched before his hands even touched it.

The handwriting was Alda's—quick, slanted, each stroke pressed as if to dig through the page.

Dear Arseny,

I will not wait for the illness to take me in our house. I have felt the fever settle in my body and in my brain; I know what follows. Hope that I have not infected either you or Akemi.

I'm so sorry that death follows me wherever I go, but at least I can go on my own terms. You'll think this is madness. Maybe it is. But madness is better than waiting.

Take care of yourself, and if Randy returns, give him a hug and don't let him curse me for this.

—A.

Arseny tried to remember the last time he had seen his stepmother. Was this at Akemi's? At the orchard? Or maybe he had heard her steps upstairs before collapsing into the dreamless sleep.

He read the words again and again, though each time they cut the same. He tried to remember Alda's exact age but realized he'd never known it: he only knew that she was younger than his own mother, Nina. But if Alda was

Masako's age-mate and had immunity to bird plague, too, she had a chance to survive.

Arseny also noted that other patients whose suffering had been eased with the Spark were also on the mend. Only two of the eldest had passed away. Unfortunately, the supply was exhausted so quickly that confirming a definitive correlation was impossible.

The pier bore no trace of his stepmother. Wherever Arseny asked, no one had seen her. The night had been starless, sight no further than an arm's length.

He found Alejandro, as ever, at his post. They said even in youth, he needed no more than six hours of sleep, and age had pared him to four. He cursed loudly that "some bastard" had damaged the pontoon dock beside his boathouse—no doubt the same thief who had rifled through the Osokin shed. But Arseny, uncharacteristically, broke in and laid out Masako's plan, passing it off as his own. Alejandro only laughed, saying he needed bodies ready to repel a siege that might break upon them at any hour, not dreamers chasing sick birds across the sea.

Something inside Arseny twisted, fury knotting tight. If the Moon Cross called McMurdo godless spawn of Satan, then let them see what Satan's wrath truly was. He left without another word and went straight to the boathouses, seeking the red door.

Doors in McMurdo were seldom locked—only barred when solitude was desirable. That was why the sight jarred him: lantern-light leaking from within, and Masako herself standing inside—pale as a revenant, hair loose, clothes disheveled. She had slipped from her sickbed, stopped by the forge, and dressed herself for war: a blacksmith's apron, heavy gloves, and a sack nearly larger than she was.

"Great minds think alike! I couldn't find my paddleboard at home, so I went back to my original plan!" the blacksmith said instead of greeting. "Now that you're here, help me inflate the boat."

Masako pointed to a wide orange sheet spread on the floor.

"What's that?"

"You thought it would look like a boat when it's deflated? Not a chance. We'll have to work before it floats. Good thing I brought the smaller forge bellows—no pump in sight."

For a few seconds, Arseny stood frozen, lost. Most likely, Masako hadn't even spoken to her mother yet. Poor Akemi must have been asleep when she dropped in.

"Your paddle board?.. Never heard you were into this hobby."

"Randy used to borrow it in the summers. Hasn't he told you?"

"Maybe he has. Maybe I wasn't really listening," Arseny said, swallowing a heavy lump in his throat. "Looks like I know who took the board... and why."

"Huh?"

Arseny pressed Alda's note to his chest, feeling the paper tremble beneath his fingers. He pictured her setting out alone—feverish, but determined—dragging Masako's paddle board, a relic of another time, from Akemi's porch at dawn. He could almost hear the paddle slicing through the water, rhythmic, fading slowly into the emptiness. He didn't want Alda dead—no matter what lay between them. He had never expected her absence to feel so unbearably hollow.

Grimly, he hid the note, grabbed Masako's forge blower, and started inflating the boat.

"Masako... you're not going to like the news I have. They killed my dad."

Masako listened in silence, her hands pressed together as if holding something fragile. "Everything shatters," she whispered. "It's a different world I've woken up to."

It took long, breathless minutes to drag the boat to the water. Arseny took the oars, his movements fueled by a cold, doubling effort. Masako began twisting torches from rags, sticks, and whale oil.

"Are you determined to die as well?" Arseny asked.

"I plan to live long enough to put the Moon Cross scum through the same agony I suffered," she replied.

The boat cut through an iron-grey sea under a leaden sky. Suddenly, Masako frowned. "Do you smell that?"

Far ahead, a thick column of black smoke clawed skyward from the island. The gulls overhead shrieked in a panicked frenzy. Flames licked at piles of dried sea grass; the fire was thick, foul, and unrelenting.

"Alda," Masako breathed. "This is why she took the board."

Arseny dropped anchor twenty meters from the jagged ridge. "The rocks will tear the bottom out," he grumbled. "I'll carry you." As he waded through

the thigh-deep water, he spotted the drone again—a silent, mechanical vulture watching from the clouds.

The heat was tangible. Masako struck her flint, lighting a torch and thrusting it into Arseny's hands. The peppermint flared, cutting through the stench of rot.

"I have to find her," Arseny said. He ran, leaping from rock to rock. He found the paddleboard first—abandoned and beating against the stones with a rhythmic, ear-scratching sound.

The birds were a nightmare. They swooped in a screaming storm of wings and claws. A large skua, its feathers matted with ash, dove at him. Arseny thrust the torch forward; the creature ignited, becoming a shrieking fireball that spiraled into the smoke.

He pushed forward until the soot smeared his goggles black. Just as he was about to turn back, a splash of color caught his eye through the grey curtain: a familiar patchwork scarf snagged on a jagged stone.

"God..." he breathed, stumbling toward it.

Shouting to scatter two more frenzied skuas, Arseny broke into a sprint toward the rocky hollow. Inside, the smoke coiled in thick ribbons, but he could just make out a small figure curled against the stone.

It was Alda. She sat folded into herself, motionless, her head bowed. Arseny reached her, choking on the heat and ash, and pulled her into his arms without pausing to check for a pulse. She was shockingly light and easy to carry.

He ran back toward the landing site, Alda's body limp and warm only from the residue of the flames. Her patchwork scarf, half-burnt, clung to her sleeve. Streams of sweat poured down Arseny's neck, and he feared her dark braids might start smoldering at any second. When he reached the shore, the inflatable boat was still there—soot-smeared but intact.

He laid her down gently, brushing ash from her cheek. "She's breathing," he muttered, desperate to believe it.

But as Masako leaned closer, her expression went still. "She's not."

"What do you mean?" Arseny's hand hovered over Alda's lips, then her throat. No pulse. No breath. She had inhaled too much of the toxic cocktail rising from the burning guano—ammonia, sulfur, and searing heat.

He pressed his palms against her chest—*one, two, three*—counting in a whisper that cracked into sobs. He breathed for her, his own lungs aching and his throat burning with saltwater. Again and again, he repeated the cycle until his arms trembled. There was no stir of life—only the soft slap of waves and the hiss of the fire catching up to them.

“We need to go!” Masako cried. “The wind is turning!”

She lunged for the oars, but as the hull scraped against the rocks, a sharp hiss cut through the air. A puncture. A jagged tear along the bottom seam was leaking air in a steady, whistling defeat.

“Wait—stop!” The hull softened beneath them, the boat losing its shape by the minute.

“It’s no use,” Masako said, her voice hoarse. “We can’t get back like this.”

“Then we’re finished,” Arseny rasped. “But why don’t I regret it?”

The gray sea stretched endlessly toward the blurred outline of McMurdo. In a final surge of adrenaline, Arseny grabbed Masako’s hand and dragged her toward the spot where the paddleboard was bumping against the stones.

“Save yourself,” he said with a faint smile. “Give my regards to your mother. The board ended up here for a reason.”

“Arseny,” Masako said firmly. “The board can carry two of us. And the boat won’t sink immediately while carrying Alda’s weight. We tie them together.”

They lashed the damaged boat to the paddleboard. It was a clumsy, sluggish arrangement. Arseny took the paddle while Masako used a boat oar, their muscles screaming as they fought the choppy water. Every stroke was a battle for balance; the boat hissed faintly, settling deeper into the waves.

Arseny looked at the line tethering the deflating boat to the board. He needed that rope—not for the cargo, but to secure Masako so she wouldn’t slip into the freezing deep.

“Sorry, Alda,” he whispered, untying the knot. “And farewell.”

The knot came loose. The boat drifted away, carrying Alda on her last, serene voyage.

Then came a low hum, faint at first, like the murmur of wind through metal. It swelled until the very surface of the water began to shiver. Arseny lifted his head. Through the mist, a steady, silvery light appeared—not fire,

not lightning, but something molten and metallic. It hovered above the ocean, smooth and silent.

The craft descended, scattering the smoke with an invisible, pressurized force. Its shape was too sleek, too clean, too beautiful to belong to this world. Arseny blinked against the blinding artificial light, a phrase from his father's old books rising to his lips.

"Deus ex machina," he whispered.

The Apostle's Mercy



Arseny Osokin – September 20, 2190 – McMurdo

The aircraft hovered so low its downward draft rippled the sea, flattening the waves around the paddleboard. Arseny heard a long hiss as a rectangular panel on the machine's underside glowed white and slid open. He stood poised between salvation and death, ready to embrace whichever came first. Warm air spilled from the hatch, carrying a faint fragrance—unfamiliar yet pleasant. Not oil, not salt, not fire, but the light scent of a world that had once perfumed even its machines.

I must've inhaled too much smoke, Arseny thought, rubbing his gritty eyes and trying to make sense of his racing pulse. I'm seeing things. And smelling them.

Beside him, Masako's eyes fluttered open, dazed but conscious. Relief flickered across Arseny's bruised features as he untied the rope binding her to the board, his hands trembling with fatigue and anxiety for her safety.

"Do you see what I see?" she rasped, confusion and terror threading her voice as she looked up at him for reassurance.

"Seems so."

He tried to lift her, but his strength was nearly gone; he almost dropped her into the icy water, drawing a sharp curse from her. Then, a man's figure appeared in the opening above—tall and statuesque. Deep blue eyes looked at Arseny through the transparent visor of a segmented helmet. On his dark-grey cape, the stranger wore a white eight-pointed cross framed by a golden lunar disk.

Arseny froze. The emblem that had haunted the continent now glowed over him, haloed by the cockpit's light. Arseny's heart hammered—revulsion mingled with a flickering, desperate hope. The man extended a long, gloved hand. "Please—be my guests."

His voice was calm, almost tender—not the bark of a zealot Arseny had braced for. The stranger lifted Masako as if she weighed nothing, then reached down and pulled Arseny aboard. Warmth embraced him instantly. The walls curved inward, opalescent and humming faintly, alive like the interior of some majestic creature.

“You’ve endured much,” the man said softly. “Who is in that half-sunken boat?”

“My... mother,” Arseny said, the Earth seemingly stopping its spin. “She was sick. She chose to end her life—along with the infected birds and the plague.”

“A valiant heart,” the stranger replied. “She deserves cremation, as any decent soul does.”

The aircraft glided toward the boat. Arseny staggered upright, scanning the cockpit. The pilot was not alone. A shorter man—dark-haired with a narrow beard—sat beside him. His earthy complexion stood out in the sterile light. His brown eyes were hard and unfriendly.

“Apostle, the dead may still carry infection. Be cautious; the Prophet needs you alive.”

“We’ll seal her in a safety pod, Lucian. The young man will educate us on the disease. By the look of him, he is a medic.”

Arseny watched as Alda’s body was lifted from the boat into the blue-eyed man’s arms. Through the haze, he realized you don’t look at a total stranger with such reverence—unless you knew them.

“What is this place?” Masako asked faintly.

“An anti-gravity lifter—the *Eidolon*,” the man replied. “A gift from our Prophet.”

Memory struck Arseny like a physical blow. He remembered his father’s midnight conversations with Rakhmanov about a “Prophet” who was no holy man, but a digital echo of a pre-Blackout billionaire—a man who had been, by every account, a pure bastard. The ghost had crawled out of the fire and into his life.

The blue-eyed man carried Alda toward a recessed bay—a niche crowned by a clear, oval shell. He laid her inside, the pod smelling of antiseptic and something floral.

"This was made to evacuate our own," he explained as the pod announced a diagnostic sweep: *Filtration active. UV cycle initiated. Sterilization matrix engaging.*

"She was so terrified of your people that she fled Port Amundsen alone—and pregnant—after they hanged her husband," Arseny challenged. "What has she ever done to you?"

"Nonsense," Lucian replied coldly. "She never had a husband. There was a leader of the Winged Sun then—Eino. She was close to him, but like a daughter, and old Eino was not even into women. Their circle was dazzled by their own vanity; they plotted against us, believing we were just a 'dumb technophobe cult.'"

The bay locked with a soft, pneumatic chime. Alda's form glowed faintly through the polymer.

"I forgot to introduce myself," the blue-eyed man said. "I am Aelius, Commander-in-Chief of the Moon Cross army in Antarctica."

Masako's eyes darted to Arseny, fear and disbelief mingling as her mouth tightened. Her hands gripped the edge of her seat. "The Apostle himself saving two infidels from the sea?" she murmured, her voice shaking.

"It's natural to help noble souls. We aren't here to cut every throat, though we're portrayed that way. Guess you've heard this ridiculous nickname of mine."

The Apostle gave a brief chuckle at his nickname, but to Arseny the sound was anything but cheerful—a laugh pressed flat by exhaustion, shadowed by something darker.

"I'm Arseny," the medic whispered.

"I'm Masako Matsubara," the blacksmith added, her voice stronger. "Where are you taking us, Apostle?"

"To our new outpost at the recycling plant. You'll be held in quarantine for medical tests. Then, if you wish to join us, we can take you to Port Amundsen."

Masako froze, caught between relief and panic. Her breath came in quick gasps, her shoulders tense. "Medical tests? Thanks for the rescue... but I need to tend to my mother. She doesn't even know I'm alive."

"You pose a threat to her life," Aelius answered calmly. "Is it reasonable to stay close to her when you might still carry the plague?"

"I've been sick—and I've recovered!" she snapped. "I have a solid immune system. And Arseny is no different; he's been around the dying for weeks!"

"I need to understand," Aelius said, his tone softening. "I need to know how the infection affected your body—and what allowed you to survive it."

"Then take my blood," she said bitterly. "Just leave enough so I can make it home."

Seeing her on the verge of tears, Arseny straightened. "I'll help you, Apostle," he said firmly. "I've lost my family, and the Moon Cross is not to blame. I have no one left in McMurdo except Masako. I will follow you—but let her go."

"Arseny, no!" Masako stammered. "This isn't safe!"

"We aren't in a position to make demands, Masako." Arseny turned back to Aelius. "But my patients... Will I have to leave them?"

"With the *Eidolon*, we will send medical supplies to your hospital," Aelius promised. "Today."

The Apostle wanted Arseny's trust. The question was *why*.

Lucian drew a long syringe. Masako barely flinched as the needle pierced her arm; she couldn't take her eyes off Arseny. He didn't dare meet her gaze. He watched the dark blood fill the tube, then waited for Lucian to take his own.

The aircraft hovered over McMurdo, almost silent.

"They're shooting bolts at us," Lucian smirked, glancing at the viewport where crossbow bolts clattered harmlessly against the *Eidolon's* hull.

"What did you expect—candy?" Aelius replied. "Show us your roof, lady."

Masako pointed to a small, moss-covered house by the shore. As they descended, Arseny spoke softly. "Keep your distance for a few days, Masako. For your mother's safety." He didn't mention the other danger: that the terrified townsfolk might murder her for returning in an enemy ship.

The hatch slid open with a hiss, admitting the salt wind. Masako hesitated at the threshold.

"Go," Arseny said. "Before they realize we aren't attacking."

"Are you coming back?"

"One day."

She leapt down, landing hard on the roof and scrambling down the drainpipe. She vanished into her home without looking back. As the Eidolon gained altitude, a surge of loss and helplessness twisted in Arseny's gut. He watched her silhouette frame the doorway one last time before it swallowed her whole.

Arseny pressed his hand against the viewport glass. The warmth of his palm quickly faded into the cold surface. An ache rose in his chest—longing, regret, and a strange, wary hope. *Maybe this is how it happens*, he thought—not with grand betrayals or heroic choices, but with the simple act of not jumping after someone while you still could.

Ahead lay the Prophet's world and his singular vision of the future. A forgotten name drifted up from the dusty cellar of Arseny's memory: *Geryon*.

Aelius approached, a warm, almost fatherly smile visible beneath his transparent visor. He lifted his hand toward Arseny's face—not touching, but hovering, as though caught between the urge to comfort and the need to command.

“Thirty-nine,” Aelius said, his voice dropping an octave. “Child, you're burning up.”

The Malfunction



Arseny Osokin – September 20, 2190 – McMurdo

I'm done for, too, Arseny thought, finally becoming aware of the fever blazing across his forehead. His chest tightened with a sharp, insistent urge to cough, but he forced it down. He had resisted the infection for surprisingly long, but the adrenaline that had propped up his body's defenses was finally spent.

The young medic had heard terminal words before—contagious, incurable—but this felt like a warning light flickering on a panel he didn't know how to read.

"I'm not sick," he said, voice steady. "I've been around the infected for weeks. I'd have known."

Aelius didn't contradict him. By not denying Arseny's claim, Aelius signaled that he wanted Arseny to confront the truth himself, causing Arseny's stomach to tighten more than any argument could have.

"Not all fevers are lethal," the Apostle said. He paused. "Right, Lucian?"

The other man nodded as the aircraft descended toward the former processing plant. Arseny felt a desperate urge to look through the viewport—to see Prince and his henchmen swaying from the gallows—but he didn't dare take his eyes off Aelius.

"Arseny, tomorrow you'll go to Port Amundsen for quarantine. It keeps everyone safe, you included. Lucian, put him in the technician's room. Francisco, bring two spare rations."

Once Lucian left, Aelius took a seat next to Arseny, keeping his protective mask on. "Do you know other medics or scientists who could help with this disease? We won't recover the way Europeans did after the Black Death."

"Besides my father, I knew Reynard Lutz," Arseny whispered. "But I was too young then. We lived in Mirny."

He broke off, realizing he'd said too much.

"Mirny," Aelius said thoughtfully. "A year ago, we observed it from the air. It looked dead. Do you know why?"

Arseny's lost expression was itself an answer. Aelius shifted the line of questioning. "What made your mother move from Mirny to this wild town? And how old are you?"

"Twenty-three," Arseny said.

The Apostle stilled, then shook his head in quiet disappointment.

"Alda is my adopted mother," Arseny added cautiously. "My real parents grew up in Mirny. My father hated this infection more than he hated you. His records are in his desk at the hospital."

Aelius keyed a message into his wrist console. "Thank you. Now, tell me: did a man as tall and old as me—or older—ever appear in your town? Prince said this man stayed with you."

"Ah... Rakhmanov," Arseny said. "You know him?"

"Quite well," the Apostle replied. "How unfortunate that his son is now in dire danger—left for dead by his own teammates."

Bitterness tinged Aelius's voice. Arseny looked at him with a hollow stare; his own grief had burned him out. There was no room left for compassion.

"Never heard that," he said. "He left the next day, after the clash with Prince's morons."

"You were guiding him around the junkyard," Aelius said, his tone warm but the pressure behind the question ferocious. "What did he tell you?"

"It wasn't me," Arseny said, before a cough racked him. "It was Randy. Alda's son."

"Randy," Aelius said. He wasn't asking; he fixed the name in place.

And only then did it hit Arseny—absurdly late—that none of this had ever been about Rakhmanov. The questions about Mirny, his parents, the junkyard, even the Prince—they were just a net, cast wide and patiently drawn tight. It was Randy whom the Apostle truly wanted.

Arseny opened his mouth—to retract the name, to lie, he didn't know—but his body betrayed him first. Aelius caught him easily.

"Sorry, son," the Apostle said calmly, lowering him to the floor. "Sorry, I had to put you through this. Rest now. We'll speak tomorrow, if time allows."

The last thing Arseny felt was a strange, bitter certainty: he had just been harvested.

Aelius remained standing over the unconscious boy. How could he have taken this child—with his light hair and pale features—for Alda's biological son?

"The young, the unknown," Aelius muttered. "They move quietly, led by affection rather than ambition... and they are harder to track."

"You want my pets to track the boy?" The question crackled through the Eidolon's communicator. Geryon had been listening.

"A matter so minor and personal hardly merits the waste of resources we hold dear," Aelius replied.

"A petty personal issue," Geryon echoed. "Yet your pulse—" a brief, amused pause. "As if you've been trying to run a marathon in the time meant for a sprint."

"I'm getting old," Aelius said quietly. "But I won't let this disease undo what we've built."

"Alexander appears ready to save our people," the Prophet replied. "He's tracked one of our fallen Archangels—and the cure. At least for our brothers and sisters."

"He didn't notify me?"

"He did—while you were questioning the young man. Check the radiogram."

Aelius exhaled, though the relief felt hollow. The message on his screen was a tactical summary:

Fallen angel alive in Raitown. Engineer alive at Heliopolis. Medicine to be secured soon. Test in McMurdo?

With frightening ease, Geryon changed the subject. "Ready to welcome three of your fellow planetfolk?"

"Can't wait," Aelius said, his tone dry. "Seeing lice and moral rot firsthand should cure anyone of their naive fantasies. I want them to realize what I already know."

"And if it doesn't?"

"There is no one for whom we cannot find the right key. My team is proof of that." Aelius paused, outlining his tactics. "The first step is to drive a wedge

between the Winters and the hacker. As for the siblings—once one bends, the other will follow.”

“Your mind is as sharp as ever,” the Prophet observed. “So long as it is not clouded by... attachments.”

Aelius did not answer at once. “Have I ever failed you? Alexander has done excellent work. I taught him myself.”

“That is precisely the problem,” the Prophet said mildly. “The boy has ambitions sharpened by knowing exactly who he is.”

“He knows his place,” Aelius said, a bit too quickly. “He understands borders.”

“For now,” the Prophet replied. “But people raised close to power often confuse proximity with immunity. He must be watched.”

“I’ll see to it,” Aelius said, fists clenching.

“You have never failed me, Grigory,” the Prophet continued. “And now, with the continent so close to conversion, I would rather you did not begin.”

“At your service,” Aelius said. But this time, it felt like a promise made with crossed fingers.

When Arseny regained consciousness, Aelius extended a flask to him with a fatherly gesture. The young man looked around, dazed. He thought with sudden bitterness of his cat, Firefly. *Let him have the sense to settle at Masako’s place.*

“Can you walk?” Aelius asked.

“Yes. If you’ll let me sit a moment,” Arseny replied, drinking deeply. The water tasted chemical—likely antiviral. “Apostle, I have a question. You’re called enemies of science, said to burn books and kill those who keep technology—yet you use protocols, comms, and drones. You even fly..”

“It’s complex, Arseny,” Aelius said. “We’ll discuss it later. For now, the science of the Golden Age is a loaded gun. Remember the legend of the Tree of Knowledge?”

“I do. But I never understood why God forbade the fruit—then planted it right in front of Adam and Eve.”

“God planted the tree not so that humanity would fall,” Aelius said calmly, “but so that they might grow—by learning restraint. Man chose self-assertion over wisdom, and he chose it too early. The result was violence.”

Outside, Moon Cross fighters greeted their Apostle with deep bows. Arseny instinctively shrank, as if trying to merge into the shadows of the aircraft.

He recognized the place. It was a vast U-shaped factory yard where, under a needling drizzle, blocks of processed metal, plastic, and carbon fiber forever waited to be shipped to the mainland.

Father and son Osokin often came to the plant to treat Prince and members of his gang. As doctors, they could take as much coal as they could carry from the port's storage. They frequently exercised this privilege, joining Randy and sharing their coal with less fortunate townsmen.

Yet someone threw a stone at him, whispered his inner voice.

While Aelius was walking ahead of him, Arseny's gaze moved to the roof. He saw no birds. No shadows of wings against the rainy sky. None of their chaotic noise that always came first and now seemed the song of death itself.

Only then did he notice the dark housings lining the edge of the roof—heavy, squat, spaced with unnerving precision. Unlike cameras, they weren't aimed at the yard but upward—at the sky.

He lingered.

The morning surfaced on its own: the island they had set ablaze without hesitation. Back then, Masako's plan had seemed too audacious but simple and efficient. Infected birds as living weapons, old as the world.

A risk worth taking, she had called it back then.

Now he stared at the empty sky and understood: their plan had been doomed before the first flames rose. This place had been sterilized. The group had ensured that no birds could fly near and survive, making it clear they never intended to assault the poor, infected city; instead, they waited in relative comfort for its fate to unfold.

Rain slid off the metal roofs in thin silver curtains, pooling between stacked blocks of processed waste.

Aelius walked a few steps ahead, hands clasped behind his back, his pace unhurried. Arseny followed, counting his steps without meaning to, feeling the damp creep through his boots.

A sharp whine cut through the rain. It was so brief that Arseny first thought it was inside his own head, some echo of the fever returning. Aelius stopped mid-step.

There was neither an explosion nor a warning shout. Just a flash, white and surgical.

Aelius collapsed forward as if the ground had simply been torn from under him. Without thinking, Arseny ducked on the asphalt next to him. The smell came a heartbeat later: scorched fabric, burned metal, something else Arseny refused to name.

With the corner of his eye, Arseny saw a cannon above them adjust by a fraction of a degree, then go still. Someone—far away or impossibly close—had noticed them and made a cold, automated decision.

Arseny lay motionless, staring at what remained of the man who had pulled him from the ocean. The man who could have been his mentor. The yard swallowed the moment in silence until the air filled with the thunder of feet and screams—curses hurled at the Winged Sun, echoing through the rain.

Railtown



Randy de la Serna – September 21, 2190 – Railtown

“**H**uh! Too good to be true...” A soft, warm female voice drifted into Randy’s consciousness.

His magnetized eyelids finally lifted, revealing a round, tawny face with shiny brown eyes. “Cath, your brother’s waking up!”

“Blessed be the Sun!” Fox’s reply was heavy with fatigue, her relief tinged with weariness. “Now maybe I can finally get some rest.”

Cool, gentle hands checked the entry wound on Randy’s shoulder. Shivering, he took in the room: rows of beds, nightstands, and a metal table cluttered with surgical tools—it looked just like Dr. Osokin’s old infirmary. The wall bore a blunt charcoal command: WASH YOUR HANDS. ALWAYS.

The medic, a cheerful woman named Pratibha, beamed, but her eyes were still red-rimmed from worry. “I can’t believe it... Your wound closed overnight. Yesterday, I feared sepsis would take you.”

Randy knew the terror of sepsis—it had haunted his stepfather’s clinic, claiming lives through infected blood. His hair felt clammy from fever, but his skin was otherwise dry. He was lying on ‘living sheets’—bioactive fabric laced with antiseptic-releasing microbes that absorbed sweat and attacked infection directly against the skin.

He sat up slowly. Fox stood by the window, her silhouette sharply outlined by morning light. The *Svyatogor* device was gone from her arm—either concealed beneath her sleeve or hidden away. Her long hair was freshly brushed, spilling over her shoulders like black silk, and any marks or bruises she’d suffered from battle had disappeared.

“It was scary to get near you—you were burning up,” she joked. “How are you feeling?”

“Wrung out,” Randy admitted. “I dreamed two giant hands were twisting me like a rag. I felt everything snap.”

“Then get dressed,” Fox said, nodding at the clean clothes.

Randy slipped into a dark blue long-sleeve shirt and a charcoal-gray knit sweater. Both still had small, charred holes where the bullet had passed through—grim souvenirs that needed mending. He signaled for privacy, and the women stepped out.

“You sure about leaving?” Pratibha asked as they reconvened. “You were practically dead yesterday.”

“But he’s fine now—your words,” Fox said, her voice suddenly cold, a sharp edge in it that made Randy’s skin crawl. “We’ll stay at an inn. You’ve performed a miracle, Pratibha. We owe you.”

The medic blushed, her deep skin tone warming. Randy noticed a delicate golden necklace—his mother’s jewelry—lying on the nightstand where his clothes had been. Fox had used a piece of his heritage to pay for his life. Or perhaps, to buy the medic’s silence.

“How long have we been here?” Randy asked as they stepped out into the biting air.

“Two days by tonight,” she replied.

Railtown lived up to its name. Before the Blackout, it was a massive terminal, a hub for coal, gold, and silver. Randy tried to imagine the roar of steam engines; all he heard now was the rhythmic groan of a manual cart.

The mountains were a hidden treasure chest. During the Golden Age, trains transported not only ore but also food, tools, and groups of settlers. The terminal grounds made up a fortress equipped with a clinic, a hotel, and bars that served neon-colored synthetic spirits. Supported by its own wells, greenhouses, and algae pools, Railtown endured the collapse of supply lines and thrived on what was left.

As eternal as Railtown. Standing in the center of the terminal, Randy understood the proverb. The people here weren’t more virtuous; it was that their chief, Harald, had the stomach to crush a rebellion before the first word was whispered. Railtown had teeth. Even in the Golden Age, its security crews were armed with more than tasers. It was no wonder the Lost Kids kept their distance, pretending to be humble prospectors until they were safely beyond the city limits.

When the Blackout hit, Harald turned catastrophe into capital. The depots were overflowing with coal, diamonds, gold, and silver—the literal fuel for a new world.

The high-speed maglevs were dead, their circuitry fried by the pulse, but the freight cars had been salvaged and rebuilt. Tinkerers had cobbled together a fleet of railcars—some steam-powered by coal or landfill gas, others moved by the sweat of men pedaling for their lives. Everyone paid their passage, one way or another.

“So, what will Stella do about the Moon Cross?” Randy asked, following a railcar with his eyes.

“Don’t get your hopes up,” Fox said. “Best case, she scrapes together a militia once the cultists are already kicking down the gates. The woman hasn’t even sounded the alarm.”

“Maybe she’s waiting for scouts?” Randy countered. “And you shouldn’t have sold Luna. We need a way to travel that doesn’t rely on rails.”

“Every hour counts!” Fox snapped.

“Oh, now you care?” Randy’s voice was tight. “After all the time I lost because of your gang? You snatch people, work them to death, and now you’re playing noble? Why not free the captives in Silver Palace instead of chasing riches in Seven Winds?”

Fox stared at him, her gaze so heavy he braced for a strike. Instead, she spoke with a terrifying, quiet steadiness.

“If it had been just you and me, I’d have let you go the moment we met. Everything since then... I was playing a part. A role I’ve been stuck in far too long. A role I hate.” She stepped closer. “I didn’t come to Railtown for loot, Randy. I came to help you. To walk away from the Lost Kids for good.”

“And the captives?”

“I don’t know how yet. I will find a way to set them free. For now, Seven Winds is the priority.”

A cold blade of doubt twisted in Randy’s gut. Was this another performance? Her trembling voice unsettled him, making him want to believe.

“You’re putting your revenge on hold... for me? For a backwater town like McMurdo?”

“There are no backwater towns, Randy. You reminded me of what it means to be human. There’s no forgiveness for what I’ve done, but if you want to turn your back on me now, do it.” She pressed a heavy pouch into his hand—Alda’s jewelry. “But first, you need to know how the ‘cure’ actually works. Let’s go to the *Von Bellingshausen*^[3]. Your backpack is in the hotel room.”

The medicine. Randy looked at his shoulder. The ache was almost gone. He realized now that the “sepsis” Pratibha had feared was actually the heat of a metamorphosis. His body was rewriting its own biology, fueled by the blood Fox had forced into his system.

They walked alongside the wall of the old passenger terminal, their reflections sliding over the black glass like shadows in a mirror. Fox turned under a curved archway rimmed with strings of tiny, colorful lights that flickered with a steady, artificial pulse.

“Where do they get power for all this?” Randy asked, the scientist’s curiosity momentarily overriding his wariness.

“Hydrostation to the north,” she replied. “Gravity and water—the only things that never stopped working when the world broke.”

They stood before a pair of reddish metal doors, their surfaces intricately forged into patterns of flowers, curling leaves, and strange animals. Randy’s fingers traced the cold metal; he recognized the work of a master blacksmith. Fox pressed the brass bell, and a deep, rich hum rolled through the chilly air.

Inside, the lobby smelled of cedar and old paper. A stocky man with a thick gray mustache and a dog-fur coat grinned at them. Branimir smoothed his brows—which were so heavy they looked like a second mustache—and flicked a glance at Randy.

“Well, well, Cath! Wasting no time, I see...”

“Evening, Branimir,” Fox said. “We’re about ready to eat each other alive.”

The innkeeper rattled off the menu like a prayer. “Gull, pickled soy sprouts, black mushroom, seal meat... chicken with potatoes... fried eggs with toast.”

Randy’s stomach flipped. His mouth watered instantly.

“I hope you won’t say no to a meal,” Fox murmured, and her voice was laced with sadness, almost pleading. “Let me help you this much, at least. And may your road be bright, if you choose to take it alone.”

Randy wanted to refuse—to assert his independence—but emotion warred inside him. Physical weakness pulled at him, but curiosity and a strange sense of connection to Fox, bound by her shared blood, weighed even heavier. He could feel it humming in his veins, an unsettling bond he didn’t yet understand.

“Bring us a little of everything,” Fox told Branimir.

They stepped into the dining hall. It was a cacophony of laughter and music. Fox moved methodically, picking a table near the exit where she could watch the room. Behind her, a sign in sloppy red letters warned: DON’T JACK THE TABLEWARE.

The *Von Bellingshausen* drew the world’s outcasts: traders, mercenaries, gold hunters, and bounty collectors. Randy’s eyes landed on a man at the next table. He was rail-thin, wore a wide-brimmed black hat, and cradled a battered six-string guitar close to his chest. His long, spidery fingers trailed along the frets as if combing hair. Tattoos covered both hands, including a bold black cross inked across the knuckle of his middle finger.

“Hey, kid! Play *Young Mary’s Titties!*” a burly man with an anchor tattoo bellowed.

“Shove it,” the guitarist shot back with a venomous grin. “I’ve got my own setlist tonight.”

“C’mon, *Lex*, I’ll pay in bullets!” the bearded man growled, his breath smelling of contraband liquor from Dumont d’Urville.

“Bullets, diamonds—don’t care,” the musician said lazily. “I’ve got a deal with Branimir, not with you.”

Fox didn’t just approach; she dropped onto the bench beside Lex as if the anchor-armed brute looming over him didn’t exist. When a woman like her strides into a space with that much cool authority, the ground shifts. The loudmouth froze, his booze-soaked brain grinding its gears until he felt the cold, unmistakable press of a pistol barrel against the back of his head.

“Everything all right, friend?” Branimir’s voice was like velvet over gravel.

The brute slunk back to his seat to the sound of open laughter. Lex offered a muttered thanks, then struck the strings with a force that silenced the room.

It was nothing like the delicate picking from before. The sound was raw. At first, the chords dropped like stones into a deep well—tentative, mournful—then they exploded into a storm of rattling strums. Randy watched, spellbound. He'd only ever known the old songs of McMurdo or the humming of Masako's forge. This was different. This was a Golden Age soul, dangerous and alive.

"That's music at its finest. Don't forget it," Lex said, tipping his hat.

Once they gathered at the table, Lex revealed his past. Born in Port Amundsen, he was a child of the Moon Cross's shadow. "When the city went bloody, they took my mom. My old man swore loyalty to those dogs. He became one of them. Forbade music. But when she was gone, the guitar became my only banner of freedom."

Randy looked at the black cross tattooed on Lex's middle finger, a permanent, silent insult to the deadly cult.

"So, where are you headed?" Lex asked.

"Our father sent us on errands," Fox lied smoothly, though her eyes were wary.

"I'm heading to Seven Winds," Lex continued. "Snobby crowd, but they say they have a real piano in a cabaret. Besides, it's the only place my face can be properly fixed if things go wrong."

"Holy Sunshine," Fox exhaled.

"Is it true?" Lex asked, his voice dropping. "Is the Moon Cross about to siege McMurdo?"

The question sat in the room like a live grenade. Fox's fingers tightened on Randy's sleeve—a silent command to stay quiet. But Randy was done with secrets. He stood up, the chair scraping loudly against the floor.

"It's no joke," Randy declared. The room went dead. "We saw it ourselves. If Stella hasn't warned you, someone has to. Get the word out."

"You sure, kid?" Branimir asked.

"We barely got away. They want Railtown. Whoever holds this terminal holds the roads and the supplies. They've been waiting, and now they're moving."

The silence broke into a cacophony of panicked whispers and angry shouts. Branimir didn't hesitate; he strode to the wall and yanked the emergency rope. A heavy bell tolled through the rafters, a sound that signaled the end of the peace.

"We start preparing now," Randy said, his voice steady even as his heart thundered. He wasn't a blacksmith's apprentice anymore; he was a messenger of the end.

"You're spreading panic!" a pudgy man in horn-rimmed glasses barked. "The Moon Cross might not even come. Talk like this scares off the merchants—if they bail, we starve!"

"Shut it, Diego!" roared the man with the anchor tattoo, shoving his chair back with a violent screech. "All you care about is your ledger."

"Who benefits from panic? The Seven Winds!" Diego jabbed a finger at the crowd. "That young upstart Heldrich won't stop until he's cut a deal with the Moon Cross. He'll sell us out to keep his high-walled paradise!"

Randy's fists curled. He had seen what "logic" like Diego's led to: a city with its head in the snow while the wolves circled.

"Relax, kid," Lex growled under his breath. "Diego's the kind of guy who'd argue with a blizzard."

"Twisted logic," Branimir intervened, his voice landing like a hammer blow. "You see a sign that says 'cliff ahead,' Diego, and your move is to gun the engine?"

"A tumbleweed—here today, gone tomorrow!" Diego sneered, gesturing to Lex and Randy. "You people don't know the first thing about these ragged wanderers!"

"I know enough!" Branimir slammed his palm onto the bar, the sound echoing through the rafters. "Cath has been to my place more than once. I've never had reason to doubt her. We don't need Stella's permission to protect our own! Sharpen your axes, oil your rifles. This—" he gestured to the inn—"is our militia HQ! If you're not local, trust me: Railtown is worth fighting for!"

A roar of agreement burst from the crowd, shaking the walls. The agitation was infectious. Within minutes, the townsfolk had forgotten about the "refugees" who brought the news, consumed instead by the logistical

frenzy of defense. They cursed Stella's silence and invoked her father's memory as they began organizing watches.

Fox didn't wait for the mood to shift again. She grabbed Randy's good arm and dragged him toward the stairs. Still strumming a low, rhythmic march, Lex called after them over the din, "Room Six! Find me when the dust settles."

Something's Off



Randy de la Serna – September 21, 2190 – Railtown

“Let the bedbugs eat you to the bone!” the ex-raider croaked, slamming the door behind them. “Pathetic fool!”

“If Stella won’t act, then we should!” Randy shot back. “It’s insane—they knew about the plague but didn’t hear a whisper about the Moon Cross? I don’t want another city falling into the Apostle’s hands!”

“Whatever you say, nobody’s coming to save McMurdo—don’t you get it?” she hissed, voice low but razor-sharp. “And you... you’ve dragged the spotlight right onto us! Every pair of eyes in that place was on you!”

“Sorry to break it to you, Fox, but every step you take draws attention. Everything about you screams ‘different’—from the way we got into this city to that pretty face of yours.”

Her jaw tightened; she looked ready to scream, but forced herself into a furious whisper. “Which is exactly why you shouldn’t have added to it. I bet the Moon Cross has agents here. The last thing we need is to be on their list.”

“What’s your story with them?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“You don’t trust me?”

“Your actions are the best proof that I should not.”

“However... you’ve shared your blood with me. Why?”

“Maybe I want to see your story end well. But if you don’t follow my rules—if you don’t think at least two moves ahead—you’ll die before we ever reach Seven Winds. So keep your damn mouth shut around strangers. And never call me Fox while we’re in Railtown. Call me Cath.”

“Your real name?”

“What do you think?”

Randy only shrugged and sat down on the bed. The frame groaned under him, loud in the small room.

“Perhaps we’d understand each other better if you weren’t so secretive,” Randy said. “You need something from me.”

“At first, I wanted you to go to Seven Winds ahead of me—scout it out before I slipped in myself. To be my eyes and ears there, if only for a day or two. After that, you could’ve bought a boat or hired a boatman.”

Her tone hardened. “But things have changed. I’ve had word from friends I haven’t seen in years. We’ll be making our way to Pine Island together.”

“And what gang are they from?” Randy asked, remembering her already mentioning these friends some time earlier.

“The kind of gang you wouldn’t mind joining yourself,” Fox replied smoothly.

“Impossible.”

“I can’t give you names or titles. Today even the walls have ears, believe it or not. All I’ll say is—they’re the greatest people you could meet. And one of them is so old he saw the Golden Age as an adult.

Older than Rakhmanov, Randy thought, pulse quickening. Holy sunshine. He’d know things. And he’s tough as nails if he’s survived until today.

“Most likely, you won’t have to do anything for me in Seven Winds,” she went on. “At least, nothing you don’t choose. But you must watch your tongue—carefully—until we get you into a boat.”

Randy straightened. “My word. Are you meeting these people in Railtown?”

“No. That’s why we need a railcar. It’s sad we can not buy it outright, but I’ve already paid the advance for the trip and the coal,” Fox replied, showing the red stamp on her wrist: *Railtown Terminal*. “Even approaching Seven Winds while riding a snow dog is a suicide.”

“I understand. Though I already miss Luna.”

Fox bit her lip. Sure thing, she missed Midnight much more. And she probably had enough of his questions.

“We are leaving at midnight,” she said, as if his thought reverberated in her brain. By the way, the bathroom’s all yours for the moment. And there’s still hot water left. I’ve had enough time to bring myself in order, so seize the hour!”

“We aren’t sharing this room with anyone else?”

“We aren’t. For Railtown, it counts as luck.”

In the bathroom—spartan but clean—Randy found a bottle of soap and, to his delight, half a tank of hot water, which he later learned was supplied to the rooms for an extra fee. He washed himself thoroughly and only then dared to look into the mirror, which was set into the wall to prevent theft. He studied his own reflection like the face of an old friend he hadn’t seen in years, trying to figure out what had changed, aside from the hollow cheeks, the rougher skin on his face, and the hair that had grown noticeably longer.

Maybe his gaze was different now, but Randy didn’t have the words to describe the change. And maybe that faint crease on the bridge of his nose hadn’t been there before either, though he couldn’t say for sure—he’d never been one to stare at himself much, even in his old life.

The healed wound on his right shoulder reminded of itself with a pink spot of freshly grown skin. The traces of his companion’s whip on his back were merely visible.

If her blood works on Mom, Dad and Arseny, let’s say I got it for nothing!

When he left the bathroom, naked to the waist, water still dripping from the ends of his hair, he found that Fox had left somewhere. A brief note on the bed told him not to step outside without a dire need.

Only now he had the audacity to study the new contents of his jewelry satchet. These were pieces of raw silver as large as his phalanx and a piece of gold the size of his ring finger nail. Why did the leader of Antarctica’s most vicious gang morph into his guardian angel?

Randy’s gaze fell on the cube lying on the windowsill in the last beams of sunlight. He reached for the deceptively simple device, but a knock at the door stopped him. Moving softly in his thick knitted socks, he recalled Fox’s favorite saying: *all strangers are enemies*.

“Hey guys, it’s Lex!” A gentle voice drifted through the wood, and Randy’s fingertips tingled. His hand slid the bolt back almost on its own.

The guitarist stood there, hatless, the soot scrubbed from his eyes, arms crossed casually over his chest.

“Good to see you...” Randy mumbled.

“And where’s your gorgeous sister?” Lex asked, gaze drifting distractedly around the room.

“At the market,” Randy lied with no slightest idea what made her go out at the chilly sunset.

“Can’t picture it.”

“Where *can* you picture her?”

“Who knows. Maybe in a fancy dress, at a ballroom.”

“A... what room?”

“A place where people dance and meet each other. We had one too, before the fanatics took over. They say there’s still one in Seven Winds. Colored lights, mirrors, beautiful ladies... Anyway, let me grab my guitar from the room.”

Randy nearly shot through the ceiling. Both Suns and all the gods were smiling on him today. Hyperventilating, the young man pulled on his long-sleeve.

“I’ve met all kinds on the road,” Lex said on his return, settling onto the bed and running a finger lazily over the strings, “but never a pair quite like you two. And with the lady towering over her little brother, no less.”

Randy shrugged. He’d grown as much as he’d grown—but like most young men, he wished he was taller, stronger, and able to protect his female companion in peril.

“Listen, Lex,” he said, seizing the chance to change the subject, “could you teach me to play?”

Lex stared at him, then burst out laughing. “You think you can learn in a day?”

Randy took a deep breath.

“Well... How long does it take?”

“Years. But fine—I’ll show you what I can. Here, take it. And don’t drop it. It’s the only one I’ve got, and I won’t find another soon.” He handed Randy the guitar. “Straighten your back. Why are you hunched over like that?”

He slapped Randy heartily on the back—thankfully healed now. “There. Otherwise you’ll be shaped like a question mark when you’re old.”

Randy cradled the guitar like a fragile child, looking to Lex for approval. But the guitarist only clicked his tongue.

“Don’t strangle it—it’s not going to run away. Relax your joints. Dude, you’re not swinging a hammer. Left hand here,” he said, adjusting Randy’s fingers so his thumb sat at an awkward angle.

“That’s uncomfortable.”

“Of course it is. Thank me later. See those horizontal lines? Frets. Press here—now pluck the thick string with your thumb.”

Randy obeyed. The muffled sound was pathetic compared to Lex’s notes. Lex plucked it himself, the string humming rich and clean.

“You’re fine,” he said with a smile. “Try again. Don’t be afraid—you won’t break it.”

Randy plucked harder this time. The sound was closer.

“Now third fret. Good. Now the fourth and fifth—ring finger, pinky. Keep them upright, not flat. Like this.”

Randy’s left hand ached, but he nodded.

“Good thing it’s your left hand that’s sore,” Lex teased, cracking his knuckles.

They kept at it. Randy forced his untrained fingers through the chromatic scale, muttering curses and sweating from the effort. He barely had time to savor the small victory before the door swung open.

Fox entered. Her eyebrows twitched, and her eyes went from green to storm-gray in a heartbeat.

“Having fun?” she asked, her voice calm, almost playful.

“Learning,” Randy said seriously.

“Wait in your room for a few minutes,” Fox told Lex, same light tone. “My brother and I need to gossip.”

“No problem.” Lex flashed a row of white teeth, brushed a lock of hair back, slung the guitar over his shoulder, and sauntered out.

As soon as the door closed, Fox locked it and whirled on Randy, shaking him by the shoulder.

“Have you lost your mind letting him in? What did I tell you?”

“I haven’t stepped outside!” Randy snapped, annoyed. “You think he has something to do with Kitty?”

“You know: I’ve got bigger troubles than Kitty. And Lex...” She lowered her voice. “Only someone who knows nothing about music would buy that story about his mom. Randy, that’s Golden Age music. It used to be played

on electric instruments. To learn it, you need old audio files, holograms, sleep-learning—and countless hours of practice. Hardly anyone could manage it now. If you knew more, you'd see: this guy's not who he says he is."

"Neither are we. Neither are *you*." Randy's voice was icy. "I've figured it out—you're one of the exiled Seven Winds bosses,—"

Fox froze, mouth half open. Before she could reply, a knock came at the door.

She pressed Randy down by the shoulder, finger to her lips. The knocking faded, leaving only silence. Randy thought he heard someone sigh outside.

"We don't need anyone right now," Fox whispered.

Something white slid through the gap under the door. Fox crouched and picked it up: a crumpled scrap of paper, handwriting small and shaky. Randy leaned in over her shoulder.

I don't know about you, but I say we get out of here. If you're ready, meet me at midnight on the seventh platform. One minute late, and it's a nail in your coffin.

And beneath the words, they saw the emblem Randy already knew: the *Winged Sun*.

A Wink From the Enemy, a Lift From the Friend



Randy de la Serna – September 21-22, 2190 – Railtown

“Wish we knew what game this Lex is playing,” Fox muttered, scanning the letter again. “First, we stand up for him; now he’s desperate to win you over. I’m not getting into anyone’s schemes.”

“Look—he got paper from somewhere. That’s rare. Nobody would leave it under the door as a joke, right? And the drawing... Don’t pretend you don’t recognize it.”

“I recognize it. So what? I know plenty about what’s going on east and west.” Her voice grew bitter. The Winged Sun has never helped anyone since the invasion of Port Amundsen. The winter before last was the coldest in the century. Where were they then? Tuberculosis is back, and now this fungal infection—what has the Winged Sun done? The Port Amundsen massacre was eighteen years ago. How did they respond to the deaths of their own staff and supporters? Cowardly freeloaders in their spotless bedrooms, that’s all they are...”

Randy’s thoughts flickered back to McMurdo, prompted by Fox’s bitterness. They needed Winged Sun’s help more than anyone else. All he could do now was hope that Ilya Osokin and Arseny hadn’t tried to fight—that, fanatic or not, the invaders had enough sense to spare the medics.

His sulky gaze betrayed him. Fox sat down beside him on the bed, her hand covering his.

“Don’t give up yet,” she said softly. “Your family’s worth more to Moon Cross alive.”

Their fingers twined, green eyes locking with brown ones. What had Rakhmanov said about the movement of electrons? About energy flowing? About tension sparking between clouds...?

The young man lunged forward, awkward but desperate, arms wrapping around her neck. His cheek brushed hers; then, hesitantly, his lips touched hers, tasting for the first time.

Fox kissed him back—just as softly, just as unhurriedly. For an instant, a delicate chime seemed to ring through every nerve in his body.

And then the spell broke.

Guilt crashed down on him like a hammer. He saw his father's gaunt face. Arseny's thin hands worked feverishly over a sickbed. The fevered patients in McMurdo haunted him—people who might never breathe easily again. What right did he have to sit here? To take comfort in a woman's embrace? They might be dying right now.

Elder Sister pulled back as well, lowering her thick lashes as if ashamed of that fleeting weakness. In the next instant, as if on silent agreement, they both pretended that nothing had happened.

"No sleep for us, we're moving out now," the woman said, her gritty eyes sweeping the room for anything she didn't want to leave behind. "To hell with these mind games. The railcar's probably ready. And if it's not—we'll wait at the terminal."

She retrieved her cube from the bathroom and slid it into her worn backpack.

"No firearms?" Randy asked.

"They were taken as we moved into the city through the Terminal — a common rule for visitors, and a wise one. We'll take the rifles back from the guards when we're ready to leave the city. And by the way, you've got a dynamite stick in your belly bag."

"Huh?"

"I hid it there before we even got into the city. They didn't search you too hard, seeing you were injured. And no, I wasn't planning to blow you up if things went south. It's just better when everyone's got a weapon, even if they confiscated the guns."

"And that thing on your forearm?"

"The antigrav? They've long forgotten tech like that around here. Probably figured it was just part of the armor."

He nodded and moved Osokin's lighter from the pouch of trinkets into his trouser pocket. If anything needed blowing up, it's best to have the fuse lit first.

"Double-check for anything left behind," Elder Sister said, voice taut.

She signaled Randy to stay still, then thrust her arm forward. The antigrav hummed. The window groaned, buckled, and burst into a hundred jagged shards glowing blood-red in the dying light.

Outside, a drunk roared a curse. Another one yelled that no such shit ever happened under Harald's watch.

Fox ignored them, determined. She stepped through the shattered frame, balanced on the sill, and slid out of sight. Only then did Randy notice the panes had been sealed shut with insulating foam—good for keeping heat in, impossible to open in any normal way. Realization dawned: Branimir's not gonna like this, he thought grimly, but Fox must have had a strong reason for choosing the risky escape through the window instead of the door.

He eased himself onto the fire escape, following her lead.

They avoided the crowded streets, cutting straight toward their target. As they moved, Randy couldn't shake the thought: She's mad at the Winged Sun. Not like she is at Heldrich—but close. When did she fall out with them?

He bit back the question. He'd already pushed his luck today.

Night fell quickly. The station was empty, as if everyone had boarded a train and vanished. A limping skua passed the dry fountain. Sentries paced above the platforms. Dim lamps flickered against deep shadows, their glow mirrored in the dark windows like watching eyes.

"Something's off," Randy whispered.

"Everything," Fox said, eyes fixed on Platform Seven.

There, a large steam railcar waited, letting out a thin cloud. No sign of the driver. No movement. Just a metal beast, breathing lazily, and an empty can, rolled along the platform by the wind.

"Upstairs. Need a better view," Fox said, nodding to the stairs.

Lights flooded the platform. A dozen silhouettes detached from the darkness—Railmen in dust-colored coats, rifles at the low-ready. At their center stood Stella.

Harald's daughter looked defiantly regal, a turquoise dress revealing too much for the cold, draped in shining fur. A heavy necklace weighed on her chest as she moved like a queen ruling the terminal.

"So, this is the infamous Fox," Stella said, her voice echoing off the vaulted ceiling. "Leader of the Lost Kids, walking into my city under a fake name."

"Hope you're enjoying the dogs, my lady." Fox gave a mock bow. "I have no idea what you mean. Those raiders nearly killed us both."

Stella and her guards erupted into laughter—a sharp, jagged sound that signaled the trap was fully sprung.

"Kitty swears he put a bullet in the beast," Stella sneered, her voice echoing off the terminal's vaulted ceiling. "Tang didn't bother poking around the mess in the mountains."

Only then did Randy see the tall, chained figure behind her. Stella yanked off the man's hood, revealing a ruined face—nose and lips gone, a torn cheek exposing teeth in a bloody snarl. Kitty's eyes burned with defiance. He winked at Fox, mocking even in pain.

"Where's your dream of greatness, petty whore?" Kitty rasped, the words wet and mangled.

Stella didn't stop. "Kitty mentioned a juicy detail. Burn from a hot blade on your shoulder—and here." She smacked her own chest. "Show us the skin, 'Cath.' Let's see if you're worth selling to Heldrich."

Fox reached for her clasp, her expression unreadable. Randy glanced at the overpass. The guards were there, rifles leveled—until a sharp clatter broke the silence. A rifle tumbled from the railing, followed by a small cylinder that hit the platform and vanished in a hiss of white, acrid smoke.

"Platform Seven!" Fox snapped. Her helmet clicked in place, sealing her face from the smoke.

Randy pulled his scarf up, his lungs burning. He followed her silhouette through the gray void, dodging blind gunfire and the screams of the Railmen. They reached the railcar—a massive, iron-ribbed beast venting steam.

Randy scrambled up the rungs, kicking away a hand that grabbed his ankle. They tumbled into the cabin, only to find Lex sitting in the driver's seat, guitar in his lap.

"About damn time," Lex grinned. "I was starting to think you didn't like my party trick."

"Lex!" Fox hissed, antigrav humming as she aimed at him. "What is this?"

Lex touched the cut above his brow, winced, then tipped back his flask before passing it to Randy.

"Selfish survival." His grin was crooked, unrepentant. "Try warming up this engine alone while people are shooting at you!"

He let a beat pass, meeting the storm in her eyes. "Jokes aside, *Katrina*. Reed and Sato tangled with a Moon Cross squad—and asked me to back you in your Seven Winds endeavor until they are safe and on the move again."

Why has he called her Katrina? Randy thought. *No one seems to know her real name. Or does he?*

Even in the cover of night, Randy noticed Elder Sister flinch, as if struck in the ribs. Lex didn't miss it either.

"No need for panic, darling," the guitarist said reassuringly. "If they're taken, Aelius won't waste them. He spared Rakhmanov, after all—though Geryon wanted the old man dead. Who knows what might happen before they get to Port Amundsen! They're seasoned guys; they've been through a lot. Just like you."

The woman froze. For once, her mask cracked wide open, confusion flooding her face. Randy had never seen her look like that—staggered, disarmed, as if someone had dumped ice water over her soul. Not even when Kitty murdered Ezra.

Outside, muffled shouts chased the car down the tracks, fading into the distance. Inside, the engine's heartbeat filled the silence. Lex watched the woman with patience, clearly in no hurry to press. Still, Fox was speechless.

Randy watched her shut her eyes tight, then open them again—a silent battle flickering across her face as she tried to blink away what Lex had said.

And then he intervened:

"Can't remember — where did Rakhmanov land when he made it to Antarctica?"

Lex smirked, realizing at once that he was being tested.

"Next to your hometown, if you really come from McMurdo. As a kid, you might have met him huh?"

Randy said nothing. Feeling dizzy and hungry again, he took his seat, eyes still on the quirky man with a perfectly tuned guitar and a valiant soul.

“Now, Lex,” Elder Sister’s voice grew a bit warmer. “Tell me everything about my friends and your mission. I don’t want to miss a thing.”

A Vengeful Dreamer



Ivan Vassilevsky – September 19-20, 2190 – Facility D16

I crawled into the operating room. Behind me, a streak of red marked the pristine white tiles. Before me stood the surgical module. It was a sleek table, sealed under a transparent scanning lid. Pulse-monitoring bracelets, articulated manipulators, and a bank of air and anesthesia tubes surrounded it. Everything was dormant, waiting for a command.

The module ignored my palm and demanded a password. I rifled through the drawers for a hint—nothing. My last hope was Danielle, who should already be stirring in her tank.

I'm wrung dry by that "friendly fire" trick, she complained in my skull. I'm not much of a helper right now.

"How do I start the robot?" I rasped.

The cards you grabbed from the medical office... she began, then the connection fractured.

The med-cards. Of course. The module had a slot for holographic patient data. I snatched a metal square. Its surface shimmered like an oil slick as I slid it in. The black wall across from me bloomed to life. A full-body hologram appeared: *Ibrahim Ngwenya, born 2128. No date of death.*

The lid slid aside. The readout flashed: "CUT CLOTHING?" *Hell yes.*

I hauled myself onto the table, bracing for the worst—missing reagents, a broken pump, or the agony of surgery without anesthesia. *Danielle*, I thought, almost pleading, "Can you block my pain receptors? I'm at my limit.

Can't promise anything, the signal answered, thin and fading.

A needle slid into the vein in my neck. Three seconds later, the fire in my gut dulled to a cool numbness. A second injection turned my muscles to lead. As antiseptic fog rolled over me, someone touched my mind with a motherly tenderness. Pleasure unfurled through me, subtle and foreign.

The operating room melted away. Images rose like film. I saw landscapes I'd never visited but knew with aching clarity. There were lush orange groves, gothic spires, and cozy terraces where people sipped drinks in the glow of a soft sunset. A deep bass vibrated through my ribs and shifted into the chirring of a thousand forest insects. Fantasy and sound braided together until pain faded to distant thunder. I floated between the living and the dead.

Shapes pressed through the black, voices muffled as if rising from ocean depths. A hand—small, hot, and desperate—locked its fingers around mine.

"We don't have to wait for it to happen," I thought—or perhaps she thought into me. *"The Winged Sun will harbor us. We'll slip away during the shift change and take a train to Heliopolis. Just us. Free."*

Like a soft breeze, Danielle's lips touched mine. I tried to squeeze her hand back, but my body was no longer mine to move.

The scene shattered like glass under a hammer, abruptly tearing me from the memory. White light seared the inside of my skull, and suddenly I was somewhere else: Sol-ju's office—spotless, surgical, and cold. Yoo-na stood there, a girl burning alive inside her own skin.

"She's not your experiment!" Yoo-na screamed. "She's my friend—my sister! Don't send her to Njord like cargo. She has nobody there. She'll die!"

Her fury rattled the air, yet Sol-ju sat composed, as still and sharp as a scalpel.

"Your escape proves why Danielle must leave. You make her unstable, Yoo-na. Weakness kills."

The word kills echoed with the sound of metal ripping, and for an instant, I thought the whole room was tearing apart.

A cold floor under bare legs. Danielle sat in her sparse room, eyes clenched shut, as a tide of psychic static pulsed from her mind: *Obey me, obey me, obey me.*

Behind the glass wall, Sol-ju dropped her tablet. For a heartbeat, she buckled. Danielle pressed harder, her lip bitten raw. *Forget Njord. You need to send me to Heliopolis. Yoo-na will accompany me.*

Sol-ju's gaze blazed. "Don't you dare, ungrateful bitch!"

The memory ended with a jolt—like a hammer to the chest. My mouth filled with copper, and my body convulsed on the surgical table. The dream

evaporated, leaving only the aftertaste of humiliation and fear. I was back in the operating room.

Somehow, you stayed here, I noted.

Thanks to the Blackout, Danielle's voice echoed. *They found it too dangerous to bring me aboard the evacuation shuttles. Alas, Kwan Yoo-na had taken her life before it happened.*

I drifted back to reality. Two spider-like robots crawled over my chest, their nimble paws sewing my flesh with thin wire and smearing healing ointment into each stitch.

When the lid finally sighed open, the princess from the "crystal coffin" was looking back at me. Despite her prolonged anabiosis, the facility's myostimulation rig had prevented her muscles from fully atrophying. She sat in a motorized wheelchair, her platinum hair tied into a knot.

"A shame you missed my awakening," she said. "Thanks for holding on, Ivan. Already sick of people abusing me—and myself failing others."

"You mean Yoo-na?"

She lowered her gaze. "But I'm the author of my story now. I can make a difference."

She explained her long, fractured existence. For sixty years, she woke, exercised, and dreamed. Her telepathy was much stronger during sleep, letting her wander Seven Winds as a phantom observer. She had even reached the mind of Winston, the Martian pilot I sought. He was alive, and Heldrich kept him on the Pine Island.

"What about his sister?"

"She came to the ship looking for him. Then something bad happened. Either she's dead or on the run. My battery's run out, Ivan," she complained, her voice thinning. "I've been on the edge for hours. I almost died from the strain of helping you."

"Can you walk?"

"Neither of us will be sprinting today. Take my chair when you feel better; I'll guide you to the Engineering block once I've rested."

Before I could move, Heldrich filled the doorway. He was in full combat rig, his shiny boots clicking on the sterile floor. "Ivan," he said, his frown deepening. "Wherever the smell of blood lingers, there you are."

"Had to see what Nautilus sought so desperately," I countered.

“I suppose your companion has answers,” Heldrich said, eyeing Danielle. “Right, my lady?”

Danielle trembled, rising from her wheelchair as if sheer rage had granted her legs strength. Her breath was ragged, her eyes blazing with a guttural fury. She recognized an enemy, not feared a stranger.

Deck C, Cabin 30



Ivan Vassilevsky – September 20, 2190 – Seven Winds

What is she hiding about Heldrich that I'm missing? Through anesthesia and exhaustion, Danielle's fury hit me—dangerously real, her self-restraint hanging by a thread.

“Did you send this one-eyed freak to steal our archives?” Danielle jabbed a finger at me. “Did you order our agent's death? Our people will be here soon, and you'll pay for your intrusion!”

Heldrich clearly hadn't expected such an onslaught. Even his armed brutes and the solemn Sandy looked momentarily stunned.

“First things first,” he replied, advancing. “Who killed your men at the entrance? Ivan doesn't strike me as capable.”

Danielle didn't flinch. She planted her hands on her hips, lifted her chin, and spoke with a confidence no one would expect from a fragile woman barely thawed from cryosleep.

“The security system malfunctioned,” she said. “Or maybe this bastard hacked it and triggered it when the squad was already at the gate. That's exactly what I intend to clarify with him.” She shot me another furious glare as I lay strapped inside the operating pod, her intent clear—she was eager to hold me accountable for what happened.

Heldrich gestured sharply, and his companions withdrew from the room.

“I'm Heldrich,” he said. “I run Seven Winds. Nothing happens here without my say. You won't touch Ivan—at least not till we talk. You're in charge here, right?”

“Danielle Kwan,” she replied. “Yes, I'm in charge until our people return.”

“Since the Blackout,” she continued, undeterred by his skepticism. “Don't let my appearance mislead you. I was asleep most of that time, only waking to verify system integrity. The signal about our team's arrival triggered

my unscheduled exit from stasis. Then they died. Someone has to answer for that.”

“What were they doing here?” Heldrich shot back.

Danielle smirked. “You weren’t going to share anything with the townsfolk. You’d never let them in or give them food. You’d turn it into ‘business.’”

“Why did they come in combat armor?” Heldrich asked. “Making this a military base?”

She stepped closer to him, her stance steadier now. “Let’s talk without prying ears,” she said softly. “Just you and me. I can give you a tour of the lab—if you wish.” The invitation was deliberate—she aimed to negotiate away from the others.

Even with our age gap, I wanted to slap some sense into her. Telepathy’s loss clearly left her with no instinct for danger. Blind to who Heldrich truly was to me, she improvised recklessly, trusting only her nerves and stubborn pride.

Heldrich rubbed at his eye; the light in the room was harsh, and everything unfolding would’ve given anyone a headache. He scanned me with a probing gaze and nodded to himself—an old habit of Reynard Lutz’s. I’d never paid much attention to it back in Mirny.

“It would be an honor,” Heldrich said at last. “Do you mind if Ivan stays here tonight? He’s clearly unfit to travel, and I need him alive—though I understand that may upset you.”

“Oh, let it be,” Danielle said curtly. “He still owes me explanations.”

He summoned his guard, Deshar, to watch me. Danielle seized the moment to lean closer and whisper: “Deck C. Cabin thirty.”

For a single second, I glimpsed an abyss of fear in her eyes.

I cursed my sluggishness—wounded, helpless. I’m not in immediate danger, but I can’t help Danielle. That impotence burned sharper than my injuries ever could.

Deshar entered—a short but sturdy Black man from Rasmussen’s team: I remembered him from the night of my failed capture. He widely grinned at seeing me, as if I were his lifelong buddy. I felt no threat from him, and it was a bit of relief.

Heldrich hadn't specified what I was or wasn't allowed to do, only that I could walk to the bathroom and back. My temptation to contact External Comms was overwhelming—I needed to warn Veliard and Violet, who were likely close. But I had to be a realist: if they realized my bracelet was a transmitter, it would be confiscated. I slipped it off and hid it beneath my sheet, deciding to wait for a better opportunity.

"You really taught Johan a lesson," Deshar said, grinning. "He deserved it. You should've heard his threats!"

"I can imagine," I said, shaking his hand.

"So, what did you do to piss the boss off?"

"Nothing," I grinned. "I dug up this palace for him, pre-Blackout and full of treasures. But when the Nautilus gang tried to breach the perimeter, the old tech woke up and roasted their brains."

"My ass!" Deshar scratched his stubble. I noticed a thin pink ribbon on his wrist. A daughter's talisman?

"I swear, I didn't kill them. If I had, I wouldn't have this hole in my gut."

To kill time, I suggested dice poker. Dice were universal in Seven Winds; people learned them before their letters. My stake was Leo's knife. If Deshar lost, he had to answer one question. He was wary until I mentioned the sugar.

"It's for my kid," he said quietly. "Gotta make her happy once in a while."

I nearly died from the sweetness of it. In a society sliding back into archaism, family is the last refuge. I let him 'win' a round to build trust and gather information. Then, the door hissed open.

Beyond the one-way glass, I saw Heldrich and Danielle. Sandy was with them, her face tinged green—she'd clearly seen the mummified remains in the hibernation chamber. Heldrich carried a book bound in ornate metal: the journal Danielle used to stitch her memories back together.

She glanced at the glass and gave a faint nod. *Everything's fine.*

Heldrich stepped into the medbay. "See you, Deshar. Don't be like Johan."

When they were gone, Deshar refilled my water. "Your daughter," I said casually. "How old is she?"

"Six," he smiled. "She already knows her letters. She's asking for a book and has memorized every sign on the liner."

"Pine Island isn't safe for a kid," I noted.

“You’re crazy. Pine Island’s the cleanest spot, at least the upper decks.” He paused. “But... I wish the engine had stayed dead. Sometimes the ship shudders at night.”

I looked up slowly. “Engine? Hasn’t it been dead for ages?”

Deshar froze. “I mean... just old metal settling. You know ships.”

I rolled the dice. Once. Twice. I said nothing. I wanted to see how well my new buddy endured silence.

“You ever lived in something this big?” Deshar asked, his voice echoing.

I kept silent, letting his unease grow.

“Ballast pump cycle,” he went on. “Old steel groans in the cold—especially at night. Feels alive sometimes. Like it’s dreaming.”

Ships settle; metal groans. “And the shuddering? Is that a dream?”

Deshar hesitated. “Emergency systems, maybe... Just throw your dice. Too many questions.”

I rolled. Fortune smiled. I asked about “Winter”—the tall, black-haired outsider. Deshar claimed to have only seen him a few times and dodged the question of Heldrich’s friendship. I let the round go, sacrificing my sugar. If the child existed, she could have it.

In the morning, they moved me through the engineering section. I memorized the layout: pumps, wastewater treatment, and a power station that hummed with a suppressed, heavy energy. We passed through the former workshop of Zachary Glass. The secret door he had died to protect opened with zero effort from the inside. The old man hadn’t forgotten the code; he had likely been crushed by the weight of what he was hiding.

I used my one eye for four, noting the evacuation plans on the walls. They were my only map. We reached Deck E—the galley and crew quarters. They dumped me in a former meat freezer. No refrigeration, thankfully, but the soundproofing was absolute.

Blood Ties



Randy de la Serna – September 22, 2190 – The Mainline

The southern lights still danced across the sky—violet and pale yellow mingling with shimmering green. Randy had never seen Lex so serious. The man who had just revealed the Elder Sister’s real name loosened his scarf and began a story that promised to be as gripping as their escape from Railtown.

“Veliard and Tetsuo are Winged Sun scouts now, like me,” Lex said. “Railtown has been my territory. I pass intelligence to Heliopolis. Want people to spill secrets? Emotion is the key. Even hate works—it makes people sloppy. Make them need you. There’s no better cover than a wandering musician. People already think we’re silly... let them.”

He gently stroked the battered guitar case, but his gaze remained on Katrina. Surprisingly, she didn’t look relieved. Her eyes darkened like storm clouds.

“Scouting? That’s it?” she snapped. “After the news Tetsuo and Veliard brought? All this spying and taking notes? Why not fight back? Can’t your labs produce weapons?”

The musician took a long gulp of water. The subject clearly annoyed him. “They do. But they’re toys compared to what the Moon Cross has. We’re low on resources. The higher-ups are still debating whether to openly fight those fanatics. Ridiculous. They’ll probably choose a side once Moon Cross flags fly over every settlement and not a single literate person is left free.”

“I wouldn’t want to live to see that,” Randy muttered.

“Have they even been looking for me? For Winston?” Katrina’s voice was a flammable mixture of anger and pain.

“Our cyborg duo found you, though,” Lex said. “Bureaucracy or no, apocalypse or no, we tracked you down. You think the end of the world stops bureaucracy? Hell, no. Not in the Winged Sun.”

The former Elder Sister looked as if she might burst into tears. This was making Randy far more uneasy than her fury.

“Damn you... So much time... and nobody cared. Not even Rakhmanov. Not him. But why should he? We escaped Solveig... left his only child at Geryon’s mercy^[4]... left him for dead... and now... we pay.”

“As far as I know, you had no choice,” Lex replied softly.

“We could have surrendered, shown fake compliance,” she whispered. “At least then... we’d have stayed together. And Tetsuo... smartest of us... shiftiest. Later... he’d have found a trick... a way to destroy Geryon.”

“Stop being naive,” Lex interrupted. “Do you think Geryon didn’t foresee that? Do you think he’d allow you all to stay together? The Apostles... The Fermion’s crew obeyed him eagerly. They served his purpose... and now, most don’t see each other anymore. Some are already dead.”

“You say, boys tried to pull me out of the Seven Winds and failed,” Katrina said, regaining her composure. “Do you know what went wrong?”

“Wish I did,” Lex replied. “They only said they barely made it out alive.”

“Then history repeats itself,” she said grimly. “Solveig all over again.”

Lex tossed a few lumps of coal into the furnace. He tapped a rhythm on his guitar case, syncing with the hum of the engine—a drummer keeping time with fate.

“And what’s Rakhmanov doing now?” Randy asked. “Last time I saw him, he looked like a big boss.”

“He runs the Resource Search Group,” Lex replied. “They strip abandoned sites for anything useful: polymers, chemicals, composite materials. You’d be surprised what can still be recycled.”

The guitarist turned his curiosity toward Randy. “So, are you really doing business with that tall freak from the Lost Kids? Or has beautiful Stella lost her mind?”

“When you’re hunted by both Geryon and Heldrich, you don’t choose your partners,” Katrina answered. “You deal with whoever can keep you alive—especially if you’re the only one who can free your brother.”

“I’ll do my best to help you,” Lex said quietly. “And this Heldrich... consider him your little bitch.”

"I just hope the guys have a sound plan," she said. "I'm not going to Heliopolis without Winston."

Lex watched the aurora through the roof hatch. "I heard that during the Blackout, there were wondrous lights everywhere... even in the daytime."

"Mom said people would run into the streets to watch, then fall sick for days," Randy replied. His mother, Alda, had heard the story from her father, Orlando, who had been on duty at the geothermal plant in Port Amundsen when the world went dark. Underground and insulated, the plant kept running, staving off despair for a time.

Orlando had been a community leader, but he was stabbed from the shadows when Alda was only nine. His death plunged the city into a vacuum that the Moon Cross swiftly filled. Unlike the tight-knit McMurdo, Port Amundsen was vulnerable.

"That's how the Blackout played into their hands," Lex continued. "While the 'brilliant minds' hid in burrows, the Moon Cross sheltered orphans and fed the hungry. They took on the hardest work. Life out here teaches you that today you help someone, and tomorrow, they help you."

"You're starting to admire them," Randy said with displeasure.

"Better to overestimate your enemy," Lex replied. The lights in the sky began to fade. "One more sack of coal in the box under the seat. By noon, we'll reach the Seven Winds."

Randy leaned forward. "What name should I call you by now?"

"Katrina," she said. "And only that."

"When were you planning to tell me?" Randy asked.

"I don't owe you an explanation," Katrina replied.

"We're in this together now—all three of us. It would be better if we trusted each other."

"Oh, I'll trust you," she said coolly. "And him, too. When I see my friends safe and sound."

"I don't count as a friend? Is that what you're saying?"

For a moment, she looked ready to hurl him off the railcart. Then her eyes softened—just a flicker—as if she'd remembered how he had turned Luna to help her.

"Come on, Kat," the guitarist cut in. "Bet he doesn't know about your origin—or Rakhmanov's. Tell him."

“Fine. We’re from Mars—along with Tetsuo and my brother, Winston. Satisfied?” she snapped. “Now, I’m taking a nap. I’ve been through hell, if you haven’t noticed.”

“Make yourself at home,” Lex replied lightly. “Hope you’ll enjoy the premium residence on Pine Island once Heldrich is evicted.”

Katrina didn’t answer. She folded her arms across her backpack, rested her head, and shut her eyes. Within a minute, sleep claimed her.

“Poor thing,” Lex muttered. “Her neck is going to be sore by morning. Is it just me, or do her eyelashes actually cast shadows?”

“Could be...” Randy replied, still watching her. “Was that a joke about Mars? Because if it was, I’m not getting it.”

“The funny thing is,” the guitarist said, leaning back against the bulkhead, “there’s no joke at all. They really are from Mars—Kat, Winston, Tetsuo, and your friend Rakhmanov. He was part of the first scouting mission. The rest came later.”

Randy blinked, the words refusing to align in his head. *From Mars*. It sounded like a drunk’s tall tale, yet Lex’s voice carried that low, serious note of a man too tired to lie.

“Impossible,” Randy whispered. “But what about the Blackout?”

“The Martians never had one,” Lex said flatly. “The loss of supplies from Earth caused them some trouble, but they’ve been thriving. Not a soul was lost to hunger.”

Randy sat still, trying to embrace this new truth. The world he knew—the plague, the ruins, the freezing winds—suddenly felt smaller. He tried to imagine a red horizon instead of a white one, dust instead of snow, and impossible cities powered by the magic of steady electricity. It was as difficult as a fish trying to imagine an eagle.

“The Martians... they crashed their ship? That would explain why trouble is pouring in all at once.”

“Smart kid. They were scattered. Veliard the cyborg found two of them, but the pilot—Katrina’s brother—wasn’t so lucky. Humans got to him first.”

“Heldrich?”

“Yes. And if Winston is still alive, Heldrich is keeping him on Pine Island.”

Randy wrapped himself tighter in his coat as the rhythm of the wheels lulled him into a shallow sleep. *Four Martians and a cyborg. What is their business here?*

The dawn came pale and cold. The railcart slowed to a shuddering crawl before giving up with a long, metallic sigh.

"The grate's collapsed," Randy muttered, checking the firebox. "No air is getting to the fire. We'll never get the pressure back up."

"Looks like we walk," he said, slinging his pack over his shoulder.

"Wonder how far we are from the hydro station," Katrina said hoarsely, scanning the empty plains.

"We could make it before sunset," Lex said.

Randy traced a finger across his battered map, stopping at a tiny thunderbolt symbol: *Malala Yousafzai Hydroelectric Station*.

"Who's from Mars—Katrina or you?" Lex grinned when Randy struggled with the name.

"I only know they named it after a woman who fought for girls' education," Katrina said.

"You're both from the sticks!" Lex laughed. "Nearly two centuries ago, in a country called Pakistan, Malala Yousafzai stood up for women's right to study. A gang of fanatics shot her for it. She survived and became the voice of the oppressed. Years before the Blackout, they named the hydro plant after her. In the Golden Age, this whole region ran on the power she gave."

"Now I realize just how uneducated I am," Randy muttered.

"Ah, you should've seen Malala in her prime," Lex said dreamily. "Unbelievable beauty!"

"The girl?" Randy blinked.

"The station! Plenty of girls around, but only one like her!"

"I went to school in Heliopolis instead," Lex explained. "And ran a Golden-Age virtual trip. Holy sunshine, it was a monument to human audacity and artistry. The turbines gleamed, the water thundered, the lights never dimmed. Must've been something to live in those days."

They followed the tracks through the brittle grass, the corrosion-resistant rails still gleaming faintly in the morning sun. Every few minutes, Lex hummed to keep rhythm, some half-remembered tune from the world that

had vanished before he was born. The sound floated across the gloomy early spring landscape like an elusive flower scent.

For most of the way, Katrina was silent and focused on the sky. She was either expecting a drone—enemy or friendly—or, out of habit, trying to gauge the time by the sun.

It was only during a rest stop that Randy finally dared to ask how she was feeling.

Lex, having eaten and drunk his fill, was lost in his vertiginous arpeggios again, as if the world around him had simply stopped existing.

“Got blisters for the first time in years. I hate walking,” she admitted. “Hate being so visible. So vulnerable. So slow.”

“You’re not alone, remember? We’ll be safe soon—just a few more hours.”

She smiled faintly, only with the corners of her mouth, but it was real.

What does she look like when she’s truly happy? Has she ever been?

He took another step forward, toward the unknown.

“What were you and your brother looking for on Earth?” he asked.

“Better ask what we were trying to escape...” she said after a pause. “A death blow from a traitor on Mars—our former mentor, our friend. You could say he was like a kindly uncle to all our astronauts, but would not hesitate to get rid of us. And if that didn’t kill us, the final ‘greeting’ from a dying enemy on the Moon could have. We thought we’d be safer here than drifting between two planets. Thought we’d broken the radio blockade—if not forever, then for a while.”

“What?” Randy almost stumbled. “Wait, you broke the radio blockade? The traders in Railtown said someone heard a transmission from Mars, but no one believed it! People say all sorts of rubbish, you know...”

“But please, Randy,” she said, not ordering but asking—something rare for her. “No more questions about this until we reach Malala.”

Randy shot a look at the guitarist, who kept practicing as if none of this mattered.

“As you wish.”

It was about four in the afternoon when they reached the railway platform of the power station. The air smelled faintly of moss, rust, and industrial grease.

Two short staircases of black basalt—curved like fishtails—rose from the platform. Between them stood a female statue carved from the same dark stone. She wore a long, flowing gown and a headscarf that framed a serene, smiling face. Her arms were spread wide in welcome. What struck Randy most was how clean she was; the stone gleamed in the sun, free of the bird droppings that should have caked it. At her feet sat a small, flickering oil lamp.

“So people live here?” he asked, running his hand along the smooth curve of the statue’s knee.

“Of course,” Katrina said. “The descendants of Anwar, the last engineer. They watch the dam. If it bursts, Seven Winds goes straight into the ocean. Everyone pays them to keep the walls standing.”

“And the Lost Kids never tried to take it?”

“The one who holds the plant owns the region,” Katrina replied. “Anwar’s boys made sure of that ages ago—the whole area is a kill zone. Every meter is in their crosshairs.”

Randy shivered. He realized that if Katrina had ever planned to invade this place, he might have been the one forced to charge those crosshairs.

“But they welcome those who come in peace,” Lex added, his voice uncharacteristically weary. “That’s why we’re meeting our friends here.”

Katrina had barely stepped onto the platform when a rush of air split the silence. A seagull dove from a half-ruined turret, its beak aimed like a spear at her head.

For a heartbeat, time slowed. Katrina twisted aside, the bird’s claws grazing her hair. Her gauntlet flared with a hum of energy. With one fluid blow, the seagull hit the wall with a wet thud, collapsing into a smear of gray and red.

But it wasn’t alone.

A larger gull darted for Lex. He let out a fearful, animal roar—a sound completely at odds with his usual elegance. The wings beat furiously, a storm of white feathers closing around his face. Randy lunged forward, grabbed the frenzied creature with both hands, and twisted. A sharp snap echoed through the hall, and the bird fell limp.

Katrina brushed feathers from her sleeve with a calm that fooled no one. “Beware,” she whispered. “There might be more nesting above. If anything moves, don’t wait for an order.”

Lex was ashen. He wiped blood from his face, only to smear it further. The wounds across his brow weren’t deep, but the scout looked paralyzed with a specific kind of terror. He knew the birds were vectors.

“Nice trap,” Lex rasped, dabbing alcohol from his flask onto the cuts. “What bothers me is the silence. By now, Anwar’s grandkids should have been here trying to sell us yak cheese and knitted socks.”

“Something is wrong,” Katrina agreed, scanning the gate. “Either they’re hiding, or...”

“We shouldn’t go in,” Randy cut in, surprised by his own firmness. “Lex needs help. This disease could kill him in days. Or hours.”

“Wait here,” Katrina commanded. “Clean his wounds, but don’t believe everything he says. Watch him closely.” She turned and ran up the steps, disappearing through a pointed arch with her hands raised in a gesture of peace.

Randy didn’t stay on the platform. He followed her into the station hall, a cavernous space that smelled like a stable. Mosaics of marble and obsidian stretched overhead in complex, fractal patterns. He found several more dead birds on the stairs, their eyes clouded and milky.

When he returned to the hall, Lex was already slumped over their gear.

“Threw up my breakfast,” Lex groaned. “Bad turn, isn’t it?”

“I’ve only been gone for minutes!” Randy reached out and touched Lex’s forehead. It was burning.

“Doesn’t the Winged Sun vaccinate against this?”

“Don’t count on it,” Lex snorted, leaning out the door to vomit a foamy white stream onto the tracks. “Funny... I’ve been through hell... and now a goddamn chicken takes me out.”

Randy knew he couldn’t wait for Katrina. He didn’t know when the “Bird Plague” reached the point of no return—the stage where the mycosis became a death sentence.

“Hold off on dying,” Randy said. “I’ve got something. No guarantees, but it’s better than nothing.”

“Dried weed? Powdered seashells?” Lex quipped, though his eyes were glazing over with fever.

“Nope.” Randy opened Katrina’s pack and pulled out the medical kit. The syringes were the only familiar objects. He peeled a wrapper, expelled the air, and aimed the needle at his own arm first.

He’d been lashed, he burned and cut himself, nearly frozen, yet the sight of that cold, sharp thing piercing his own skin and the vein made his stomach twist. Still, he barely felt it. What unsettled him wasn’t the pain—it was watching the thick, dark blood flood into the tube.

The medicine.

“You’re crazy... Even in the Winged Sun, we don’t have anything like a vaccine that can be passed from blood to blood!”

“Well, I do,” Randy said with a nervous grin. “It’s called mutation. You know better than I do how many scientists were here—and how many experiments they ran on this continent. I brought my cat back to life with it once. Fell off a cliff onto the rocks. He’s fifteen now—still going strong, just limps a bit.” He forced a chuckle. “So, are you rolling up your sleeve?”

“No.”

Randy shrugged, feeling it was not right to force him. When Fox came back, they’d figure something out.

But after a few uneasy minutes, Lex stirred again. His voice came hoarse but steady.

“Give it to me. I don’t trust anyone else to inject.”

He took the syringe from Randy, eyed it for a second, then squeezed out two ruby drops from the tip. Without hesitation, he drove the needle into his arm and injected about two-thirds of the contents. When he was done, he tucked the syringe into his waist pouch and gestured for the canteen.

“Until your lady boss gets back, I’ll probably take a nap,” he said, rolling out his sleeping bag on the bench. He folded his scarf into a pillow and curled up in a ball.

“Sorry for sounding corny, but if the worst happens, please take care of my guitar,” he moaned.

“But I don’t even know how to play!”

“Well, that’s just now, brother!”

“How do I deserve this? I haven’t done a thing!”

“You will. I’m sure.”

“Please, don’t scare me. I’ve got a friend in McMurdo, she’s fallen sick, too. And what’s happening to her? I’ve got no clue.”

“I’d love to tell you death doesn’t scare me, but that’d be a lie. I’m terrified of it. Please, take out the guitar and just strum the strings; it will calm me down a bit.”

Randy obeyed, ashamed of how clumsy his fingers felt. The Winged Sun scout clutched at the spot where the needle had pierced him, as if it were still bleeding, and closed his eyes, drifting off to the chaotic plunk of the strings.

The Shelter



Randy de la Serna - September 22-23, 2190 - Malala Yousafzai Hydro Station

The sun sank lower, flinging long shadows across the cracked floor of the train stop. Restless from strumming aimless chords and hearing his own echoes, Randy shoved the guitar aside and strode over to check on Lex.

He dropped to his knees beside the scout, then stiffened. Lex's hands snapped up, locking around his wrists with startling strength. He loosed a blood-chilling cry, eyes snapping open, pupils blown wide.

Randy pressed his forehead and nearly jerked back. No one survived long with a fever like that.

A painful vibration slammed through Randy's body—the dim memory of his own healing, the torment he'd endured before blacking out completely. Compared to Lex, he'd been lucky to collapse when Martian blood began working.

“How are you?” he asked, though his voice shrank, tinged with guilt.

Lex gave no answer. Curled on his side, he convulsed, groaning between his teeth.

Panic thudded in Randy's skull. Where was Katrina? She'd vanished long enough to reach whoever she needed.

He yanked his focus back. He tipped the last of the water into Lex's mouth, then cracked open Katrina's medical case—a sturdy box stamped with Mirny's insignia—and scattered its contents across the bench. Strange tubes, translucent vials, glass ampoules... Somewhere among them, something had to save Lex.

His persistence finally rewarded him. A small booklet clung to the lid, the pages crafted from some smooth, leathery material. Unfamiliar words filled it, but colored schemes let him guess which syringe delivered a general anesthetic.

Behind him, Lex's whimpers turned into guttural growls. He gnawed his own hand, swearing through the pain. Then—worse—he began tearing clumps of hair from his scalp, blood streaking his temple as he sobbed like a child and begged for death.

Randy's nerves were close to snapping. He grabbed the blue syringe-tube, pulled off the cap, and knelt beside him again, heart hammering. Every muscle in Lex's body was drawn tight, back arched like a bow. His face had become a map of bones, and blood dripped from the bites on his hand.

"Hang on! Just seconds more!" Randy pleaded.

"You've done enough, damn you..." The guitarist rasped, shoving him back with surprising force. "Brought your cat back to life, huh?..."

Randy barely registered hurried footsteps before Katrina burst into view, her face contorted with worry. She must've heard the screams from afar. Her gaze darted from the syringe in Randy's hand to the bloodied one by the railcar wheel, her confusion changing swiftly to fury as her fists clenched at her sides.

"Cold and darkness! How could a fool like you survive to eighteen?" Fox yelled.

"Masako's probably already dead! I didn't want us to lose—"

"That's not the point!" she cut him off, storming forward. "You don't just shove things into people because you hope it'll help! You should've asked about his allergies, chronic diseases, vaccinations he's had at home—anything!"

Katrina's words hit harder than a slap, leaving Randy stunned and motionless. His throat went dry; his guilt and fear made it hard to swallow. Lex's labored breathing filled the air between them, a constant warning drumbeat that Randy couldn't ignore.

The Martian knelt on the dusty floor beside the scout. Lex had grown quiet; he no longer had the strength to moan. Gently, she cupped his face in her hands, turning him toward her, her fingertips brushing softly along his cheeks.

"Have you ever been vaccinated?" she asked. "Traditional vaccines or artificial viruses?"

With the last of his strength, Lex lifted one finger—the first option.

"The likelihood of a reaction is low. You'll probably live," Katrina said. "Hang in there. Randy, hand me the syringe. Now pin his shoulders; I'll manage the arm."

"That's... indecent," Randy muttered.

"I'm saddled with a child," Katrina snapped, fixing him with a look that mirrored her days in the Silver Palace. "Pin the shoulder. Hold his wrist. Since you were so clever as to act without me, you'll be the one to carry him."

"Carry him where?"

"Inside the hydro station."

They didn't literally carry Lex on their backs; they used Katrina's mantle as an improvised stretcher. Once the second injection took hold, Lex's muscles—taut to the breaking point—finally relaxed. His face smoothed out, turning as pale as the sun-bleached bones found by toxic lakes.

Inside the gates, the air grew heavy with the stench of death. They found the body of an older man slumped over a table, his faded coveralls bearing the name *Anwar*.

"In the control room, his wife... she asked for the same mercy Lex was begging for," Katrina said quietly. "I couldn't refuse. At her age, the vaccine wouldn't have made a difference. It only would have added to her suffering."

They moved Lex to the staff room, a space filled with barrels of yellow apples and the scent of raw wool. A single flickering electric lamp cast a golden glow over the room.

"Veliard and Tetsuo should join us by nightfall," Katrina explained, checking Lex's pulse. "By morning, he should come around—if he survives the transformation."

"Transformation?" Randy asked.

"My vaccine is a 'living' formula. It's lethal to the old or those with specific blood diseases. That's why I couldn't help Malika." She glanced toward the window. "I saw dead birds under the bridge. If the disease spreads through the water, Seven Winds is finished."

"And you say that calmly!" Randy burst out.

"Emotion is not the same as action, Randy. At best, emotion is just the fuel."

They ate in silence, barricading the doors with heavy crates and wrenches. Finally, Katrina leaned back against the wall. "I know you're hungry for answers. What do you want to know first?"

"What is this Geryon thing?" Randy asked. "Who is he?"

"Geryon Lindon lived ages ago—before our parents were born. His family ran a tech empire: drones, power systems, space gear. But Geryon's real hobby was murder. Just because he could."

Randy blinked. "Killing for nothing?"

"He was a psycho. When he was caught, he was put on death row, but he chose to become a test subject for science. He was the first person to have his mind copied into a computer. He escaped into the network and became a ghost living inside the world's machines."

"He ran his company in secret from the inside," she continued. "He built an automated industrial base on the Moon—no humans, just machines. From there, he launched the 'Solar Path' satellite network. Officially, it was for space travel. In reality, Geryon used a massive solar storm to trigger the Blackout across the whole planet."

"What the hell for?" Randy blurted.

"He claimed he was trying to stop something worse," Katrina said, her voice cooling even more. "Said the world was already tearing itself apart — wars, corruption, tech disasters, secret conflicts. The so-called 'Golden Age' wasn't golden at all. It was humanity eating itself alive, with enough nuclear weapons on Earth to wipe out any life from it."

The young man rubbed the back of his neck, trying to wrap his head around it.

"So one digital ghost killed the world's power to prove a point?"

"That's about right. At least, that's what he claims. No one knows if he was saving the world or destroying it out of spite."

"Saving it by frying half of it?" Randy grunted. "Yeah, real noble."

With a humorless smile, she started brushing her hair with a whalebone brush.

"You'd be surprised how many people back then thought they were saving the world. Every tyrant, every zealot—same excuse, different tools."

"And you've met this... Geryon?"

“Winston and Tetsuo did,” Katrina replied. “I’ve only seen what he leaves behind—his drones, his victims... his Moon Cross.”

Randy shuddered, remembering Antero’s glassy eyes.

“He’s always out there,” she went on, her voice barely above a whisper. “You can’t kill something like him. He’s spread through every old tech that still works. Tetsuo tried to stop him once—it cost us a friend. I’d like to think Geryon spared him, but... hope’s a lie.”

“What’s between him and Moon Cross?”

“He’s their Prophet. It started decades before the Blackout—there were all kinds of weird cults back then. He found one online after he became... whatever he is now. Turned it into his own invisible empire. Thanks to him, they made it through the Blackout—and grabbed half the world while the rest was in ashes.”

“They destroy everything—science, tech, knowledge. But why would he want that?”

“They don’t really destroy it,” she said. “They just lock it away. He wants it all under his control. Says the world needs a new Dark Age before it can be reborn. No rivals. No threats. He calls himself a Prophet, but what he really wants is to play God.”

Randy exhaled through his teeth. “So we’re his ant farm, huh?”

“Exactly.”

Randy stared at the cracked floor as a cold weight settled in his stomach. His shoulders slumped, and his jaw tensed. He wasn’t sure what scared him more—the thought that Geryon was watching them right now, or the idea that no one could stop him. With a frustrated sigh, he tried to push the nightmare away and focus on something more grounded.

“Do you know why Anwar’s children aren’t here?”

“His wife, Malika, the one I found dying, said she told them to pack the yaks and get the hell out,” Katrina replied. “Yesterday, they left for the hamlet of Outland—figured Seven Winds wouldn’t let in anyone who might be infected. Old Anwar smashed the radio during a seizure, so I’m not sure if anyone else knows what happened.”

“If they return and find her dead...” Randy sighed.

“They’ll take us for marauders and tear us apart,” Katrina finished grimly.

“Worst-case: if your friends don’t come, then what?”

“That’s exactly what I wanted to discuss with them. I’ve got the raw materials for Heldrich’s drug lab—the Aurora mushroom I stole from him earlier. We can try to trade it. Honestly, it’s way easier with four of us than just two—more hands if a fight breaks out. And Veliard is stronger and faster than any man on Earth.”

“Plan B?”

“Sneak onto Pine Island, find Winston, and get him out. To distract the guards, we could blow something up somewhere. You are still carrying the last stick of dynamite. But if a fight breaks out, we’ll be trapped. I don’t know the liner well; I’ve only seen a tiny part of it. The scout in Seven Winds Lex mentioned... If he’s really there, a lot will depend on him.”

Through a deep, heavy sleep, Randy felt someone nudging his aching side. Not fully awake, he pushed the intruder away—and instantly regretted it. Something large, soft, and wet slid across his face. A huge tongue. A heavy paw clawing at his shoulder.

In the next moment, he nearly screamed in surprise at a pair of amber eyes, round pupils fixed on him. A long, wolf-like muzzle appeared, framed by a thick collar of black fur, yellow fangs the length of his pinky, and a friendly, bright-pink tongue hanging out.

“Midnight! Alive!”

A wave of relief flooded him as he carefully placed his palm on the silky nose. “Oh, you’re alive! How did you catch up, monster?”

Then he understood. Thanks to his mistress’s blood—and the resulting enhanced regeneration—Midnight recovered from his wounds and set off after her, guided by his incredible sense of smell. Randy’s recovery in Railtown and the railcart breakdown had come at just the right time; otherwise, the dog could never have caught up.

Randy rose carefully and went to Lex. The guitarist lay motionless like a statue. His face was ashen, eyelids still, eyes unmoving beneath them; his chest no longer rose. Afraid to breathe, Randy pressed a thumb to the faint vein on his wrist.

Nothing.

A chill shot through him. His mind raced. He can’t be... dead. Not like this. Not here. Not now. He pressed harder, feeling the vein, hoping desperately for a pulse, a flicker, any sign of life.

Midnight sniffed Katrina's face and grumbled softly, making her jerk upright on the couch. She didn't need to ask what had happened—she knew instantly. She hugged the dog tightly, burying her face in its tangled fur, then shook her head to shake off the last remnants of sleep. Carefully, she examined the skinny body under her mantle.

“Hold off on mourning,” she said gently. “This is the peak stage of transition: catalepsy. It can look a lot like death. All vital processes seem frozen; it's hard to track them without medical equipment. His organs are adapting to symbiosis at the cellular—even molecular—level. It takes a tremendous amount of energy. His body is trying to save the last grains of it.”

Randy's hands froze on Lex's wrist and forehead. “His face is so stiff, so lifeless...”

“That's the fat layer burning away, and he didn't have much to begin with... He'll restore it in Seven Winds—if he makes it until morning.” Katrina stroked his back gently, and the suffocating weight in Randy's chest began to ease.

The relief, however, didn't last long. Randy's gaze drifted toward the staircase leading down into the dim lower level.

“If Midnight found a way in,” he said hoarsely, “then someone—or something—else could too.”

The thought curdled in his gut. Geryon's drones could be anywhere, listening, waiting. A new fuel for nightmares.

As if to echo Randy's fear, Midnight gave a warning growl, pricking up an ear toward the hall. Then his whole body went tense. His claws clicked against the floor as he shifted his weight, fur bristling like wire, teeth bared in a silent snarl. The sound that came from his throat wasn't a bark—it was a guttural, vibrating rumble.

Then came the sound of movement—dozens of footsteps echoing in the corridor beyond, followed by the echo of human voices.

Garm Against Midnight



Jack March, Randy de la Serna – September 23, 2190 – Malala Yousafzai Hydro Station

The Lindon Power battery—rumored to have been salvaged from the holds of the liner *Pine Island*—gave this clanking hybrid enough charge to crawl a hundred and fifty kilometers. If it had weighed half as much, it might have gone twice as far. That was the weight of the sleek electric shuttle whose hull had been sacrificed for its construction.

At first glance, no one could mistake it for anything but an engine of war. The upper hatch had a sliding door, positioned perfectly for a marksman. A semicircular canopy shielded the gunner on three sides. The tradeoff? Peripheral visibility was lost. The bumper—welded from heavy-duty stainless steel pipes—looked built to crush anything in its path. Side windows had been sealed shut, replaced with narrow gunports. The windshield could be armored instantly by a drop-down "visor" of reinforced metal strips.

Not even an old-timer who remembered the Golden Age would recognize this monstrosity as the peaceful railway shuttle it had once been. It was once a vessel for scientists, tourists, and schoolchildren—before someone mounted it on bulldozer tracks and reforged it into a rolling fortress.

They had even changed its name: once it had been *Elf*; now, it was *Garm*.

When Jack first saw the machine, he gritted his teeth and silently cursed Heldrich for his greed. Heldrich never saw the real danger—he just saw trophies and status. Jack felt anger surge through him: if this iron monster had been used to haul cargo instead of dogs and yaks, the Lost Kids would never have dared ambush his caravan. Even the Moon Cross squads might have thought twice. Who in their right mind would pick a fight with a crawling fortress that could fire in every direction? But no—Heldrich had

built an outstanding machine only to lock it away in a hangar, out of reach, depriving Jack and men like him of the security they needed most.

To hell with Heldrich and his pale, pathetic ass. May a pimp kiss him goodnight.

Jack sat in the navigator's seat beside the driver-mechanic—a broad-shouldered, calm-eyed man named Tom Genji. In the back, expedition leader Johan Rasmussen dozed with his arms crossed. The others rode in silence. Every one of them was tall and hardened—veterans of the clan wars. Their winter jackets reached mid-thigh. Their boots were soft, Polar Wolf brand. Beneath their layers, they wore flexible lamellar armor: a high-tech weave of Kevlar, graphene, and spider silk. In those days, such luxury cost a fortune; Jack was wearing it himself for the first time in his life.

The posh gear didn't calm him. All the high-tech armor in the world couldn't stop the prickle crawling up his spine. Every instinct warned him: trouble was close. He felt it like a phantom pain, a shadow in his gut.

First, Ivan Vassilevsky had vanished before his wounds had even closed. Then, Heldrich's messenger had found him, summoning him aboard the *Pine Island*. What Jack heard there chilled his blood.

Anwar Ruhani—the keeper of the Malala Yousafzai Hydroelectric Station—had missed his radio check-ins for two days straight. The man had maintained that routine faithfully for decades. Electricity still flowed to Seven Winds. But silence from the station could only mean one thing: something had gone terribly wrong.

If the dam was failing—or under attack—it was a hundred times worse than any lost caravan. Even losing all the treasures of Antarctica wouldn't compare.

The machine rattled on, its treads clanking over stones and frozen puddles. Tom Genji sat hunched over the wheel, a cigarette stub twitching in his mouth as he fought the steering levers. He didn't look away from the path when he spoke.

“Have you ever met the old man?”

“Ruhani?” Jack asked. “Once or twice. Years back. He looked like the kind of guy who could survive a nuclear winter with a spoon and a roll of tape.”

Tom snorted. “Yeah, that tracks. Still, nobody lasts forever.”

“Don’t talk like that,” Jack muttered, feeling a knot tighten in his stomach. Some folks were the spine of a place, he thought. Take them out, and everything fell. He worried that this was the moment the backbone would finally snap.

From the back, Rasmussen’s voice broke in, gravelly but steady. “Save your superstition, boys. If the dam’s working, we thank the engineers. If it’s not, we fix it. That’s the job.”

The valley finally opened. The power station came into view. The dam loomed over the canyon like the vertebrae of some ancient beast—stone, steel, and rust. The water behind it gleamed darkly, a bruised purple under the low clouds.

Jack reached for his rifle and checked the charge. A cold knot formed in his chest. “Doesn’t look like anyone’s home,” he said, but mentally he ran through every scenario, rehearsing what could be lurking in the silence.

The crawler ground to a halt at the perimeter gate. The massive steel doors stood ajar, their edges blackened as if from fire. Rasmussen nodded once to Jack. Johan looked less pleased than anyone to be on the march; he was a city man, terrified of the world beyond the electric halo of Seven Winds.

Jack desperately hoped to find the engineer alive. Anwar wasn’t just a hermit; he was the son of Hafiz Ruhani, the previous head of the station. When the Blackout hit, they didn’t flee. They stayed and fed two cities with dwindling energy. They regulated the river’s flow by hand and grew mushrooms in old water tanks. Hafiz had been a man of iron; he’d openly threatened to open the spillway and drown the valley rather than be enslaved. Everyone believed him.

“Hey, Rasmussen,” Jack said, leaning forward. “What does the boss think about the Moon Cross?”

Johan’s brow twitched. “Why would he care?”

“Because if those bastards ever make it south, we’re finished. The Cross would love to see our city wiped off the map. They’d turn it into a sermon: a den of sin, cleansed by holy fire.”

Rasmussen frowned but said nothing.

“What the hell...” Jack’s voice trailed off. No dogs barked. No watchman waved. Then, a blur of soot-black muscle bounded off the platform and vanished into the station.

“Was it a dog?” Rasmussen whispered.

“Anwar never kept one that size,” Jack replied, his gut tightening.

The Lost Kids are here.

Johan Rasmussen unsheathed his rifle with grim satisfaction. “Time to give our little Kids a lesson in behavior—the last of their miserable lives.”

Jack ordered the Garm to halt. He climbed through the top hatch, scanning for the beast. A beauty like that would have been worth four Greenland dogs in a harness, but now it was a threat. He peered through the scope of his rifle, but the animal—Midnight—was gone, likely racing to warn its masters.

Rasmussen sent Stark, Soon-Yo, and Soon-Jin ahead as scouts. “Quietly,” he commanded. “If that dog gets closer than fifty meters, put it down.”

Jack and Rasmussen turned to the access gate. It was a solid 2.5 meters of steel. Tom Genji, the mechanic, tapped the metal with a wrench. “I’m getting the jack. If that doesn’t work, only a shaped charge is getting through.”

“Report!” Jack barked into his radio.

“No sign of anyone yet,” Stark’s voice crackled. “The visitor gates are barricaded... Oh, damn. Behind the barricade. There’s a body!”

“You’re sure it’s dead?”

“Deader than the Mizrahis!”

The two-ton jack groaned, prying the gate open just enough for a man, but not for the Garm. Leaving Tom with the vehicle, the crew proceeded on foot through the forklift tunnel.

“Jack!” Stark’s voice came again, sharper this time. “The bastard’s really dead. It’s the old man—Anwar. His mouth and beard are bloody, but I don’t see any wounds.”

“Ambush?” Jack asked, tugging his beard.

“Maybe. But wait—there’s more. An old woman in the control room... shot through the heart. Body’s fresh. Hours, maybe.”

Jack bared his teeth. The silence of Neptune was explained, and the “mercy” shown to the wife had been misinterpreted by the newcomers as a

cold-blooded execution by the intruders. “Copy that. No mercy for them now.”



“COLD AND DARKNESS!” Katrina hissed. “Whoever they are, they’re no friends of ours. We need to move—now.”

Randy rolled his sleeping bag in a practiced motion. “The young Ruhanis are back?”

“I don’t know—and I don’t want to know! Let’s get downstairs. Fast.”

They draped the unconscious Lex over Midnight’s back and secured him with a rope. Katrina looped Lex’s hands around the dog’s neck. She wanted to ensure he wouldn’t slip during the descent. The stairs were nearly pitch-black. Only flickering LED strips and the spectral green glow of emergency EXIT signs lit the way.

Step by step, they descended into the plant’s bowels. With each landing, the roar of the turbines grew louder, a deep vibration that Randy felt in his marrow. Midnight clicked his claws on the metal steps, his nostrils flaring as he scented the air for intruders.

“Your Winged Sun boys would be handy right now,” Randy grunted. “When did they suggest meeting here?”

“They contacted me via drone while you were unconscious in Railtown,” Katrina replied.

“Could it be a trap? Someone pretending to be them?”

“Unlikely. They would have hit us immediately. These guys only showed up now.”

Finally, they reached the machine hall. To Randy, it felt like a temple. The ceiling soared twelve meters high, lit by flickering emergency lights. Stained-glass windows looked out onto the rapids below, where the river roared in wild freedom. The walls were clad in marble and obsidian, reflecting the lone turbine’s vibrations.

Katrina moved through the hall with a conqueror’s grace, but even her presence couldn’t erase the warning in the machine’s hum: power half-awake, waiting for a spark to tip the balance into chaos.

They strode along the wall, Randy entranced by the music of the iron shell. He wondered how the Ruhanis had kept the machinery from corroding for fifty years without specialized chemicals or bacteria-fighting agents from New Beijing. Then, his heart sank—they had left Lex’s guitar upstairs.

Midnight lunged forward, a growl rumbling in his chest. He tensed, placing himself between Katrina and the stairwell leading to the lower level. The intruders were coming.

“Halt, Midnight!” Katrina hissed, ducking behind the second turbine. The massive cylinder was large enough to shield the dog and Lex. Randy darted behind the first turbine, his hand clutching the cold metal of Ezra’s pistol.

The exit was blocked. Spending the night in a house with a dead couple was proving to be a catastrophic mistake.

In two fluid motions, Katrina unfastened Lex, swung herself onto Midnight, and urged the dog up the stairs. They reached the gallery beneath the ceiling—a walkway of thick glass and brass—offering her a bird’s-eye view and partial cover from the gunmen below.



JACK, CREEPING FORWARD with Rasmussen, Tanner, Godfrey, and a Heldrich guard called Mist, nearly shouted when a huge black dog burst from behind the far turbine. It bounded up the stairs with the fury of a storm. The men fired, but every bullet missed. Jack froze when he recognized the rider’s silhouette—the figure who’d led the Lost Kids’ raid on the caravan.

“Guys, I know who you are,” the dog rider called out in a woman’s voice. “I didn’t kill anyone here. There’s an outbreak of infection—Anwar died from it. His wife was in such pain that I had to end it...”

Jack went still. What he was hearing was impossible — as if someone had dropped the moon, set the ocean on fire, or made a river run backward.

“You’ve seen the dead birds? Plague will hit Seven Winds any day now—the same one that killed Anwar!” the woman shouted. “You’ll never get the cure if you shoot us!”

“Damn it all,” Jack muttered, gun trembling but finger frozen on the trigger. That voice—so disturbingly familiar—had turned his soul inside out.

Rasmussen fired first, and the others joined in, but not a single bullet found its mark. A mask snapped up from her collar, sealing over the lower half of her face and morphing into a helmet. Jack still didn’t fire, but he made no move to stop his companions either. He remembered too well — the cold bodies of his friends, the raids, the whispered stories of abductions. If she had taken part in all that—or worse, led it—why should he stand in the way of justice?

Then she moved—too fast to follow. Jack reacted on instinct, diving behind the turbine just in time. A force he couldn’t see slammed into the turbine, bending steel like clay. The same force caught Tanner mid-scream, ripped him off his feet, and hurled him into Godfrey. The two hit the wall with an explosive thud — and stayed down. Tanner’s rifle clanged against the turbine, striking live metal. Sparks burst, shrapnel flew, and a fragment clipped Rasmussen’s helmet.

“Damn witch!” Mist hissed.

“It’s antigrav, not magic!” Rasmussen roared as a kinetic pulse bent the turbine’s steel housing like clay. He barked orders to avoid full-auto fire; if the turbines were destroyed, Heldrich would have their heads. But Randy’s bullet found Rasmussen’s arm, and the parley ended in blood.

Katrina moved with a speed that defied human biology. She smashed the stained-glass windows, allowing the freezing Antarctic gale to howl into the hall. Randy used the distraction to crawl toward the unconscious Lex.

Freedom was one leap away, but the gallery above became a slaughterhouse. A harpoon, fired by a Seven Winds guard, whistled through the air and caught Katrina below the collarbone. She fell from Midnight’s back with a scream that cut through the turbine’s roar.

Randy didn’t wait to see if she rose. He fumbled into Lex’s pockets, found a smoke grenade, and pulled the pin. “Choke on this!” he screamed.

A thick, blood-red haze flooded the hall. It was acrid, burning Randy’s lungs instantly. Through the fog, he heard the heavy thud of paws and Midnight’s furious snarl—the beast was covering their retreat.

Hoisting Lex’s limp body onto his shoulders, Randy turned toward the shattered window. The freezing breath of the river rose from below,

accompanied by the thunderous hiss of the spillway. There was no time to look back for the Martian. He heaved Lex into the void and dove after him.

The shock was brutal—the river slammed into Randy like a wall of knives. The cold crushed his chest, stealing the very air from his lungs. Beneath the surface, his knee shattered against a submerged rock, a bolt of agony lancing through his brain. He thrashed upward, lungs burning, until he broke the foam of the tailrace.

The current was a predator, spinning him like a doll. “Leeeeeex!” he screamed, but the roar of the spillway swallowed the name. There was no sign of the guitarist—only a scrap of cloth and a dead bird drifting in the dark. Randy clung to a moss-slick ledge, his teeth chattering so violently he feared they would shatter. He looked up at the dam; a single red warning beacon blinked like a dying heartbeat.

Above, in the smoke-clogged hall, Jack March fired the final shot. Midnight, the black beast that had fought with the fury of a storm, collapsed. Jack lowered his rifle, his pulse thundering in his ears. Stark was dead, his chest plate caved in. The Soon brothers were wheezing, their lungs scorched by the Martian’s gas.

Then Jack saw her.

A harpoon jutted from the scales of her chest armor. He turned her livid face toward the light, and the sight hit him harder than the leopard seal that had taken his arm. This was the woman he had saved and brought to Seven Winds. The one he had once so foolishly desired.

“Don’t you want to know what Heldrich did to my brother?” she whispered, her voice thin as paper. “Or what he planned to do to me?”

Jack’s mouth went dry. “After all your atrocities?”

“Fair enough,” she breathed. “I spared you, didn’t I?”

Jack stood, feeling ten years older. He ordered his men to keep her alive; she was Heldrich’s prize now, and her death would likely mean their own. He looked at the bodies of his friends and the corpse of the mighty dog. Vengeance tasted like rust.

The Cyber Duo



Randy de la Serna – September 23, 2190 – Malala Yousafzai Hydro Station

Trembling in his soaked clothes, Randy could barely think past the noise, the cold, and the dull ache in his chest. When he reached up to touch his face, he couldn't tell if his hand was really there. His eyes burned; the world was a blur of fog and moonlight smears.

Then, through the rumble of the water, came the rhythmic crunch of gravel. Someone—or something—was walking along the riverbank.

Two shapes emerged on the bank, outlined against the dim gleam of the moon. They carried no lanterns, yet they moved with absolute certainty. The nearer one looked massive—broad-shouldered and inhumanly large—but his steps were smooth and weightless, flowing like water. A leaner figure walked beside him, head turning as he scanned the river. Both were dressed like regular people of Antarctica: hooded felt overcoats and layers of warm clothing underneath, scarves for neck and face protection, boots, and gloves lined with dog fur.

Randy pressed his back against the rock, trying to vanish. *Ghosts don't make sounds*, he thought, his blood turning to ice. The larger man stopped and turned his head—slowly, precisely—toward Randy's hiding spot. Every instinct screamed at Randy to draw his pistol, but a voice cut through the roar of the river:

“Hey, there! We're not here to harm you!”

Randy let out a shuddering breath, his fingers still twitching toward his holster.

“He's wet to the bone!” said another more emotional voice. Randy saw the leaner man raise a gloved hand in a gesture of peace.

Does anyone still give a damn? The young man thought. *Could they be...*

He sprang to his feet, gasping for air, his teeth performing a wild dance.

“K-k-k-katrina’s f-friends! A-a-a-aren’t you?”

“And you’re the guy who accompanied Kat to the dam?” asked the larger man whose eyes had an unnatural blueish glow. Now, seeing him more clearly, Randy realized—he wasn’t a man at all, but a machine.

A cyborg, as Katrina used to call him. *Veliard*.

The second man had Katrina’s height and shoulder-length black hair; one strand to the left of his face was dyed violet. His eyes had no whites and looked like obsidian.

“Where is she? Where’s Katrina?” he asked sternly.

“You’re fucking late!” Randy rasped, his voice cracking under the weight of grief. Tears streamed down his face as Katrina’s scream echoed in his mind—and for once, he didn’t care who saw them. “She’s either captured, or dead, or worse! If you’d come an hour earlier, she’d still be alive! I tried to save your scout, Lex—but I’m almost sure he’s drowned.”

“Our scout, Lex?” the machine repeated, its metal jaws motionless. “We have Alexanders in the Winged Sun, but none are stationed outside HQ.”

Veliard turned to his companion. “Violet... any spare clothes? The kid is about to collapse. Help him change, give him some booze, and wait here. I’m heading to the station. No fire—no matter how cold you get.”

“I’ve got clothes. But what about this... Lex?” Violet asked.

“If one of ours were here, we’d know,” the machine said flatly. “He isn’t. And we don’t have time to search.”

A hot wave of anger flared through Randy. “But he knew you!” he snapped. “He talked about Rakhmanov—your missions, your tech! He wasn’t some drifter!”

Violet shook his head, his dark eyes unblinking. “No, he wasn’t. And that’s what scares me most.”

Randy tipped the flask, the burn of strong alcohol blooming in his chest. As he spoke, recounting the massacre at the machine hall, he peeled off his soaked rags. The replacement shirt Violet provided was a miracle; the moment it touched his skin, it radiated a steady, intense warmth.

“Heated socks and pants, too,” Violet noted.

Beside them, Veliard stripped away his own garments. Randy stared, mesmerized and horrified. The cyborg was a skeletal frame of matte black

metal. Interlocking plates of armor guarded his ribs and hips, and artificial ligaments threaded through joints that moved with terrifying precision.

In ten seconds, the machine reconfigured itself, dropping low to the ground in a feline manner. With a single leap, the robotic creature cleared the canyon edge and vanished toward the hydro station in a moonlight blur.

“Veliard designed that body with a team of other lunatics,” commented the black-eyed man. “Well, you can call me Tetsuo or Violet. And don’t worry about the cold—you won’t be a frozen frog for long.”

“Oh, thanks,” Randy breathed. “But we have to find Lex. He saved us in Railtown. I’m tired of failing people.”

“Just because he helped you doesn’t mean he wasn’t using you,” Violet replied. “He might be useful, though. Let’s walk downstream, but stay close.”

They moved further into the kingdom of mist and slick stone. Randy stumbled over algae-covered rocks, but Violet moved with the certainty of a man in broad daylight. To Randy, the world was black on black, but Violet’s obsidian eyes caught reflections that didn’t exist for human retinas.

“A field fluctuation,” Violet whispered, signaling for silence. “Tiny. Probably just the river hitting metal... but stay sharp.”

They moved on in silence, the roar of the water a constant, heavy shroud over their thoughts.

After a few minutes, the bank widened into a gravel spill. Violet stepped forward confidently; Randy stumbled after him, slipping on the shifting stones.

“Careful,” Violet grunted again.

“I am careful,” Randy hissed, catching himself on one knee. “I’m just a petty human —can’t see shit.”

“Want me to carry you?”

“Try it, and I’ll bite you.”

They searched the gravel edge, the current sweeping past fast enough to drag a grown man under in seconds. Randy’s mind kept circling the same thought:

Kat... are you alive?

Violet dropped to one knee so abruptly that Randy’s heart slammed double-time.

“Hey! Did this guy wear a hat?” Violet asked, holding something out.

Randy took it. Even through numb fingers, he recognized the texture.

“Yes. Lex’s. I was wearing it when they attacked us. It was on my head when we had to dive... and Lex—he was unconscious.”

“I’m not seeing anything warmer than the environment. Except us,” Violet said grimly. “Doubt he moved far on his own.”

Randy shouted the guitarist’s name into the darkness again, voice cracking. He couldn’t bring himself to imagine losing both Lex and Katrina.

“Was everything for nothing?” he rasped, nausea rising.

“What was?”

“He... he got wounded by an infected bird. I injected my blood to save him,” Randy admitted, feeling there was something wrong with what he did.

Violet muttered something under his breath—low and clearly displeased. Randy chose to ignore it and opened his mouth to call Lex again, but the sound never came out. His knees hit the ground, and the cold water splashed his palms. The river, the rocks, Violet’s dark silhouette—all of it slurred together like a mudflow.

Randy heard Violet shout something and felt arms catch him before he struck the stones. And then everything ceased to exist.

He woke to a soft, pulsing warmth that seeped directly into his bones. For a moment, he lay still, trying to understand why nothing hurt as badly as it had before and why the air wasn’t biting his lungs.

After the warmth came the sound. Right away, he recognized Violet’s quite high-pitched voice. And the other one — a husky baritone — must have belonged to the cyborg. First, their talk was muffled as if it were coming through a thick blanket. But a minute later, it became clearer.

“Seven Winds... Some old scores to settle with her...” he heard Veliard say.

“But was she alive?” Violet asked impatiently.

Veliard answered, as if it were a heavy chore.

“She was barely alive when they captured her. Most probably, they’ll try to keep her alive, because Heldrich wants it. But no one’s sure she’ll survive the trip.”

“Oh, shut up, will you?” Violet groaned.

Katrina’s absence clawed at Randy’s chest. He forced his eyes open and saw Violet bite his knuckles, as if in physical pain. Next, he saw Veliard — motionless, his feline form half-folded into a humanoid posture. They were

in the same staff room that had given refuge to him, Katrina, and Lex. The first blueish beams of daybreak were leaking inside through a small window, and the air smelled of freshly cooked food.

But without Katrina, everything felt desolate.

“When—?” Randy muttered, still unable to make a full sentence.

“Good to see you awake,” Veliard said, turning his head just slightly.

“About Kat... I heard you talking about her,” Randy replied, pushing himself unsteadily to his feet. “My question is... when are we getting her back?”

“The sooner, the better,” Violet said. “But you haven’t rested enough to move.”

“Nonsense,” Veliard cut in. “What he needs is a good meal.”

The cyborg lifted the lid of the camp pot sitting on a low metal stand right on the floor—no fire, no wires. The stand itself was heating the pot and its fragrant contents. Steam drifted up, carrying the smell of vegetables, mushrooms, and—Randy was almost certain—cheese. His mouth flooded instantly.

“How long will the journey take?” he asked.

“On foot, matching your pace?” Violet said. “A day and a half, probably two.”

“Hey... My railcart’s south of here, stuck between Malala and Raintown,” Randy said quickly. “If we fix it, it could get us to Seven Winds twice as fast.”

Veliard shook his head—surprisingly human.

“Would be great... if the Moon Cross weren’t tracking us. And repairs take time—time we might not have. Still...” He glanced around the hall. “Judging by how many fish are hanging in here, Anwar’s family spent a lot of hours fishing on the dam.”

A surge of hope almost made Randy jump.

“A boat! Even a small one could help!”

“It’ll make us a pretty good target if someone shoots from a riverbank,” Violet said, frowning.

“We are a target in any case, at any time of the day, in any weather,” Veliard poured the thick stew into metal bowls. “Floating to Seven Winds is the fastest path. It minimizes the risk of running into Heldrich’s reinforcements.”

"I want to believe that," Violet hissed, grabbing his steaming bowl.

"Eat your fill, Randy," the cyborg commanded, heading for the exit. "I'm going to secure the boat."

Randy didn't hesitate. The meal was rich—cheese, mushrooms, and a depth of flavor he hadn't expected. Determination put wind in his sails and pushed aside the grim thoughts of Lex's probable death. After all, traveling by boat in the daytime might help him learn something about his fate.

"What shall we do with the Seven Winds men?" Violet asked his friend.

"Without firearms and radio, they're harmless. Please, give them some water and leave them in peace. Their pals are coming back: let them untie these two."

"Who are you talking about?" Randy asked.

"The guys who stayed to guard the place after Kat was taken. This is how we knew she was still alive in the first place."

After the meal, they rinsed the dishes with water from a barrel in the corner and packed them into the container. Then they began gathering the rest of their belongings. To Randy's surprise, his clothes and shoes really were dry, just as Violet had promised. However, Violet told him to keep the Winged Sun suit on for better protection against the weather's whims.

"You're treating me like one of your kind," Randy said, slightly confused.

"There is no 'our kind,' Randy," Violet replied. His voice was soft but carried a faint steel. "We're not superhuman. Not the chosen ones. Anyone decent deserves a hand. And you—" he gave a small, almost embarrassed shrug—"you're a decent guy."

Randy looked away, his face hot with embarrassment. "A guy who couldn't save Katrina. What about the dog, Violet?"

"He died defending her. I took a sample of his fur. Perhaps we can clone him one day."

"Bring him back?"

"No. We would create a genetically identical twin. The mind, the soul... that would be new."

As the dawn light grew, Randy studied Violet's profile. He saw the delicate silver lattice tracing his cheekbones and temples—mercury-like streams flowing across his skin. These were the marks of a man whose body was as much a machine as Veliard's, though far more subtle.

Randy spent his final moments in the station meticulously cleaning his pistol. He dismantled the action, wiping away the river's moisture to prevent the firing pin from seizing.

The boat they found was a cramped, weathered thing—possibly a "baby tub" used by the Ruhanis for light maintenance. It groaned as they pushed into a calm eddy below the spillway. Veliard took the oars.

"If you launch from here," Veliard noted, "you can ride the current all the way to the sea and reach the hamlet of Outland."

The river Thane carried them forward, the mist dissolving into a gleam of morning sun. Veliard's oars dipped without a wasted motion. Randy scanned the shoreline with white-knuckled intensity, his hand resting on the guitar case as if it were a physical link to the missing man.

In the back of the boat, Violet worked a Rubik's Cube one-handed. The mechanical *click-click-click* was the only sound besides the water. He wasn't looking at the puzzle; his obsidian eyes swept the horizon as the tiles shifted into a perfect solve in his palm.

"I have a 'Theremin'—the weapon of your fallen comrade, Antero," Randy said after an hour passed in silence. "I don't know who else I could return this to, but it's useless to me. It's locked anyway."

"Hand it over," Violet said. "If Veliard doesn't demand I take my turn at the oars, I can bypass the security. We helped personalize the weapons."

"You'd give a Winged Sun weapon to a stranger? What if I'm a Moon Cross spy sent to track Kat and the rest of you? Or just a fool?" Randy handed the device to his companion.

"No one said I'd give it back to you right away," Violet replied. "You already have a regular gun, and for now, that's enough."

Suddenly, a flash of pale metal caught Randy's eye. "Stop the boat!"

Veliard braked instantly. Randy leaned over the gunwale, his fingers snagging a thin, cold chain—Lex's belt chain—snagged between two dark rocks. "He lost it crawling out! He's alive!"

They pulled the boat ashore into a hilly wasteland. Veliard pointed out the snapped branches of the shrubs—clear signs of a body hauling itself up the slope. Near a cluster of rocks, they found a cold campfire.

"He's alive," Veliard concluded. "But we can't waste more time searching."

“He got what he was after,” Violet added. “And maybe it’s for the best that we didn’t find him.”

“Stop being so mysterious!” Randy snapped. “If you know what’s wrong with him, tell me. We’re in the same boat!”

“Think, Randy,” Veliard said, his blue eyes glowing. “Lex didn’t know Rakhmanov worked for us until *you* told him. He guessed at his job title based on your lead. He doesn’t know us—his boss does.”

“Who exactly?”

“Geryon.”

No One Else to Trust



Veliard Reed – January 12-April 4, 2189 – Victoria Land, Antarctica

One could say my home and happy life were ruined by the guest from space—but that would be like claiming my mother was killed by an aircraft rather than by the suicide pilot who steered it into the tower.

For years, Geryon prioritized the greater threats, but I always knew he would eventually pursue me. Wilhelmina's warning had made that clear: as a carrier of "old knowledge," I'd inevitably become a target. Self-preservation required vigilance now, not hope.

Thunder came first—high above the forest canopy. My auditory sensors spiked with the shockwave, and instinct, old flesh-memory, made me drop to the ground. Then a low hum built into a rising mechanical roar that vibrated through the soil.

A smoking object cut through the twilight, fast as a meteor, before abruptly slowing. A white shape blossomed—a parachute. I computed its fall vector, reconfigured my body for speed, and ran.

Bent treetops led me to the impact zone. The pod hung ten feet up, tangled in lines. The hull was blackened, heat still radiating in waves I could detect through my sensors. It looked like a river stone polished smooth by centuries. Then, thin metallic legs extended from its sides, flexing like an insect searching for ground.

I tested the pod's aggression protocols by throwing sticks and stones. No response. Through the soot on the hull, I spotted a white pentagram in a red circle: the Martian Communist Republic.

The shell split neatly, like a beetle's wing case. Beneath lay a translucent barrier, fogged with vapor. As the temperature stabilized, the barrier retracted, revealing a form suspended in gel. A dark gray suit—dragon-scaled and flexible. A chest patch: *K. Winter*.

Then I saw a marble-white face framed by damp black hair. Her eyes opened—startling green—and for an instant, she saw me as I was: a matte-black skeletal machine.

“Cold and darkness... who are you?” she asked, her voice uneven as she struggled against Earth’s gravity. My sensors noted her racing pulse.

“I’m not your enemy,” I said, voice module active.

“The first thing I meet is a robot?” She recoiled as if I’d splashed her with acid.

“I’m not a robot. I’m a cyborg. My brain and spinal cord are human.”

“Even better. Stay back!” She grabbed for a handle, sluggish and concussed. I easily disarmed her electric shocker.

“Come with me. This place isn’t safe.”

“Where... are we?”

“Ellsworth Mountains. I’m Veliard Reed, head of Bio-Station Seven.”

She climbed out, her limbs heavy as lead. She took a breath, testing an atmosphere that carried rain, wet stone, and moss—not the filtered Martian mix she was born to. She sat on the wing cover of her pod, clutching her face.

“How many of you are there?”

“That’s my business.”

“This is my territory. And they will come looking for you. Odds are, they’ll eliminate us both.”

A distant cross-shaped shadow—a Moon Cross drone—flickered in the gap between the trees. She didn’t notice it, but I did.

She reached for the communication device on her wrist—too slowly. I caught her hand, misjudging my strength; she cried out. Her other hand flashed toward my temple, and she managed a knee strike against my leg hard enough to trigger a damage warning in my HUD.

“So this is a welcome?” she snarled, straining under 1g’s weight.

“It’s safest if they think you’re dead,” I said, snapping her bracelet clasp. “One ping and Geryon’s drones swarm like wasps.”

She burned through her remaining strength in a sorry imitation of a fight. Eventually, she went limp. I hoisted her over my shoulder and carried her toward the station. I braced for another outburst when she started sobbing. My instinct—the tug to help her—was pure animal: protect her to keep myself valuable, but I couldn’t decode human grief.

In the end, I allowed her to check the team's location. One had landed near the Seven Winds. There was no signal from the second one at all.

At the biostation, after a tense and silent journey, my "fluffy horde" of dogs and cats softened the atmosphere. Lambert, my sand-colored mutt, won her over immediately. Animals are a rarity on Mars—lizards and sterilized rats, mostly—so the enthusiasm of a dog was a sensory overload for her.

Once Katrina found a seat, exhausted and surrounded by animals, I settled her in the greenhouse with a simple meal: boiled quail eggs, green beans, and a cup of Ambrosia. While she ate, I rushed back to the crash site. I buried the pod in a ravine and wrestled the parachute from the trees, appreciating for the first time my lack of muscle fatigue.

When I returned from the crash site, she was studying my garden. She'd even found time to hide a makeshift weapon—an injector of construction adhesive—in a banana plant pot.

"Treat the tomatoes with a fungicide," she said coolly, pointing to a stem. "Or you'll lose the harvest."

I checked the bushes immediately. The fate of my tiny ecosystem depended on catching these "small" problems.

"You really are more human than machine," she noted.

"Don't mistake 'human' for 'friend,'" I replied. "Now, are you going to introduce yourself?"

"Katrina Winter, ship's doctor of the *Apsara*, nanobiologist. Give me back my bracelet."

"No. That signal will get us killed."

"Geryon is dying!" she shot back. "We infected him with a virus on the *Solveig*. It's generating exponential errors in his code."

"You think Lindon doesn't have backups?"

"A backup won't remember our arrival! It takes ages to generate one..."

"Wishful thinking," I muttered. Then she hit me with the blade.

"Wilhelmina's in danger. She escaped the *Solveig* inside my friend's brain. Just before we crashed, she told us to find you. She said you would help."

My vision sharpened, every edge in the room brightening as my processors spiked. I forgot how to breathe, even though I don't need to.

"Are you telling me... You guys brought Wilhelmina to Earth?"

“To be precise,” Katrina said, “she used Tetsuo and my brother Winston to reach you.”

I felt my internal systems shift—temperature regulators kicking in, the kind of sympathetic overload I hadn’t experienced since—well, since Wilhelmina had spoken to me after my inglorious clash with Railtown men.

“You’re lying,” I said, but it sounded weak even to me. “You have to be lying. She can’t just—just appear in someone’s head. She wasn’t built for that, she—”

“But Tetsuo had himself augmented this way,” Katrina said quietly. “I don’t know the science behind this. But she used one of his neural devices to slip away. On the ship, she spoke to us with Tetsuo’s lips. She said your name. She told us you were the only one who could help.”

I sat down without meaning to, the chair complaining under my weight.

Wilhelmina... Whiskey... Wi... So close?

Wi, who’d laughed at my terrible jokes.

Wi, who’d thrilled me with her music.

Wi, who’d teased me for being “a big armored idiot with the emotional range of a potato.”

One planet. One continent — after all these years. She promised she would be looking for an escape route to join me. And, finally, she created one. Miracles don’t happen by themselves.

“Not an AI mimic? Not Geryon manipulating you?” I asked, clinging to my rationality in a last-ditch hope.

“I’ve got no proof... I’ll annoy you no more...” Katrina exhaled in surrender. “Just let me spend one night at your place, and tomorrow I’ll start searching for my crew.”

“These guys from the ship... Did they land together?”

“Most likely not. I can’t even locate Tetsuo on my map. Either his bracelet’s deactivated... or destroyed.”

She hastily brushed away tears, and I didn’t even have paper towels to offer her. So I put my palm on her shoulder, and she did not jerk away.

“So let me summarize,” I said slowly. “You fell from orbit. Geryon is dying—maybe. Wilhelmina uploaded herself into one of your people—Tetsuo. And your team is scattered across Antarctica.”

“Correct.”

“And all you’ve got is an aging hermit-cyborg who’s spent decades tending orchids, more focused on hiding than on heroics.”

Katrina met my gaze without flinching.

“No. What I have is the man Wilhelmina trusted.”

I closed my eyes, the weight of it all overwhelming me. What must she have felt—alone in the wilderness, her team gone in seconds? I didn’t want to imagine.

“Be my guest,” I said at last. “And I’ll pack you some food for the journey.”

I walked toward the pantry to fetch ration packs, but halfway there, I stopped. My hand closed around a container of dried lentils—and wouldn’t unclench.

Join her and leave the biostation unattended? My gardens, seeds, my animals—the only place where I was more than a fugitive. Protecting this sanctuary had been my purpose for so many years. Leaving it meant risking all I’d fought to preserve.

I feared that if Geryon found the place, he’d raze it. Burn it to bedrock. Unmake everything I’d spent decades preserving.

As the evening deepened, I returned to find Katrina standing in the greenhouse doorway, pale with exhaustion, hands folded over her chest. A stranger fallen from the sky with nothing left except her fear, her resolve. A child, really—and facing an enemy I had spent half my life hiding from.

Once we sat down again, this time with a shared sense of purpose, I listened avidly as she told me everything—Myron Asano’s treason, the Fermion’s crew twisted into Geryon’s pseudo-religion, the Solveig infiltration. Her team choosing to fight instead of surrender. Tetsuo, the augmented carrier of Wilhelmina’s consciousness. The crash.

I’d known pieces of the Fermion’s story from Wilhelmina, but hearing it now hit me harder.

These Martian kids, born under artificial skies, had more courage and dignity than I could claim on my best day. The realization stung. What a shame for an old coward.

I looked at my metal hands, at the softly glowing greenhouse, at Lambert curled near the warm floor. My shelter breathed like a sleeping giant. If I left, I might never see it again. Every choice made me a traitor to something.

Staying meant abandoning Wilhelmina's only chance and letting Katrina perish. But leaving meant more than survival: it meant becoming a part of history again—maybe even shaping it.

I waited until Katrina was finally still on the couch—exhaustion knocking her unconscious—before I started preparing. I moved quietly, like a thief in my own home, because our lives depended on my precision.

First, I activated the security lockdown. Perimeter Protocol Four: Hostile Apex Threats. Metal shutters rolled over the windows; surveillance drones hummed into their charging racks. High-density EMP traps armed with a faint click, ready to fry any machine crossing the perimeter.

I set a mercy code I'd written for Wilhelmina: if I didn't return in ninety days, the emergency hatch would open, the guide tunnels would heat to prevent ice-sealing, and an infrared beacon would guide the animals back home to feed. It was my way of ensuring they wouldn't starve behind locked doors if I died far from home.

Then came the packing. A NutriCrafter—an absolute necessity for processing organic matter into Ambrosia. I packed protein bricks and electrolyte shots for Kat, followed by a medical kit and my handcrafted radio. Finally, the weapons: a pneumatic dart launcher with plant-based neurotoxins and a carbon-fiber falchion for Katrina.

The routine steadied me. I realized I had been preparing for this moment since I first set foot on this continent.

In the morning, the animals gathered at the door as if they sensed the shift. Lambert raised his wing-like ears; the cats paced with anxious meows. Even Arnaud the ferret pressed against my leg. A warm little cloud of life, trusting me without question.

“Stay safe, guys,” I whispered. “I'll do my best to return.”

I went to wake the Martian girl. She looked at me—parka-clad and packed for war—with wide eyes.

“You're coming with me?” she asked, breathless.

“A cyborg overgrown with moss is a funny sight—but a pitiful one. Time to see how the world has changed.”

We climbed to the surface cottage that masked my refuge. Kat's gaze lingered on a mosaic of lotus flowers under the moon—a relic of a world that ended before she was born.

“Do Martians make any art?” I asked.

“Ah, plenty! When we’re not busy keeping the settlement alive. Gardening is the most popular, followed by sculpture and poetry. The *Fermion’s* captain was into drawing.” She frowned at the memory. “Hard to say if he still does.”

At the threshold of the biostation, she paused, staring out with wide, unsteady awe. “You planted all these trees?” she whispered.

“I started the process.”

“It’s so unlike our gardens...”

A strange pang went through me—an old longing for companionship, perhaps, or the muted ache of being the only guide through a world she had never known.

“Stay close,” I told her, stepping onto the misty path. “The terrain won’t pity you. The fog is good cover, but it’s tricky on the road.”

She followed, her steps soft but uneven. Gravity and muscle atrophy would be her companions for weeks, but she didn’t complain. The forest felt like the world’s empty lungs. The farther we went, the thicker the silence became. No birds, no insects. Only once, far away, a sheet of ice fractured with a sound like distant thunder. Dew-damp moss, springy under our boots, released a faint, earthy smell. Katrina breathed it in as if tasting something forbidden.

“The smell... what is this?”

“Life. You’ll get used to it.”

After an hour, we reached the ridge above the biostation and took one last look at the moss-covered cottage roof.

“Can’t believe you’re leaving all this behind.”

“That wasn’t the plan. But then, neither was an astronaut falling next to my house.”

“Man, I fell *hours* from your house,” she giggled.

“Let’s move.”

Dawn brightened the sky to a fragile gray. The forest opened occasionally into flat stretches of black volcanic stone, then narrowed again into cramped tunnels of bent branches. Katrina stumbled twice; both times, she caught herself before I could help. We reached the first stream—a ribbon of pale

water sliding between icy stones. I checked the scanner: no drones, no EM signatures for now.

“Has it ever occurred to you that you should inform Heliopolis of your whereabouts?” she asked.

“I already told you—every ping endangers us. And those guys in Heliopolis have enough worries without me.”

“What do you know about Seven Winds?”

“It was the first place I saw when I moved to Antarctica. All natural stone, metal, and vanity. My former company was one of its big investors and kept a service center for augmented clients there. I haven’t been back since the Blackout, but folks in Railtown told me long ago—it’s not a place someone like you should visit alone.”

“And the locals—what are they like?”

“Most of them are decent folk,” I said. “Resilient people with a strong sense of solidarity. Helping a traveler in trouble is considered a sacred duty—except for small children. Fail to uphold that, and you’re an outcast before nightfall.”

I stepped over a slick root, scanning the fog for movement. “But the real problem,” I continued, “is that they’ve been sliding deeper into rituals, superstitions, and an archaism so extreme it’s honestly frightening. In New Beijing, slavery is legal now—can you imagine? And once you legalize something like that, suppliers crawl out of every hole.”

Katrina grimaced as if she suddenly had blood splattered on her face.

“Harald, the head of Railtown, refused to trade with New Beijing entirely. But Seven Winds still deals with them as if nothing has changed. They even transport convicted criminals there.”

“Cold and darkness!”

“Not even a century has passed, and look how low we’ve fallen.”

Since I had no reliable information about what Seven Winds had become over the years, we would have to devise a plan only once we were close enough to see the city for ourselves. Setting off on a trek across half the continent without a strategy was a harsh test for what remained of my nervous system. My only sliver of hope was the faint possibility that someone at the old Nautilus service center might still be alive—someone who might remember my name from the archives.

From time to time, I let Katrina check her team's coordinates on the bracelet, ensuring she didn't emit a single radio pulse. She wasn't happy about the restriction, but to her credit, she didn't attempt to cheat. For two days, Winston's communicator didn't budge from Seven Winds, and Tetsuo's—Violet's—stayed stubbornly invisible. On the third day, the situation flipped.

"Violet... he's somewhere south," Katrina rasped, pointing to the holographic map hovering above her wrist. "Still far, but closer than Winston."

"How do you know it's not Geryon spoofing the signal?" I asked.

"He'd have to break into our comm units," she said. Then, after a beat: "Honestly, I can't swear he didn't. I'm no hacker."

"Understood. Still, we have to verify it. And your brother?"

"Status... inactive," she groaned. "Bet he ditched his bracelet, too. Safety measure."

An incoming message icon bloomed across the hologram. Kat accepted it on reflex before I could stop her.

"Quetzal, Fox. This is Kraken. Guys, where the hell are you? I've landed on an ice shield—fantastic place to start a trek—but I'm descending now. I'm uninjured and well-stocked, thanks to emergency supplies. I don't remember anything from yesterday or the day before... I've traveled far from the pod without knowing it. Please, just give me a sign you're safe! I'm headed north and will look for the railroad unless you tell me where to find you..."

"Ah, so indiscreet," I growled.

"Imagine finding yourself all alone on an ice shield—with a parasite in your head," the Martian girl snapped.

"You mean...?"

She shot me a glare sharp enough to dent steel. "He blacked out for two days because your girlfriend was in control."

"As far as I know, Wi, she wouldn't override someone's mind without consent," I said. "If he's unharmed, we have plenty of other threats to deal with."

Katrina didn't answer. I recognized her posture—the look of someone about to do something catastrophically stupid. "Katrina," I warned, "don't even think about—"

Too late. With a flick of her wrist, she opened the coordinate-sharing panel. A soft chime acknowledged the transmission.

“Katrina!” I lunged forward, but she yanked her arm back.

“He’s alive!” she hissed. “He’s alone, and he has Wilhelmina with him. I’m not letting him wander blindly!”

“You just broadcast our position!”

“It’s encrypted!”

“Nothing is encrypted from Geryon. He eats encrypted signals for breakfast.”

Her bracelet pulsed once—confirmation. Somewhere to the southeast, Violet now knew exactly where we stood. So did anyone else listening closely enough?

Katrina’s breathing was shaky, but she held my gaze. “If you’re right, and Wi is still inside his neural implant... she’ll guide him. She’ll keep him alive.”

“And if you’re wrong,” I said, “you may have just given our location to the one thing on Earth that needs it least.”

“We’ll deal with it,” she whispered, though she didn’t look so confident anymore.

We spent all day walking, moving parallel to the Main Line without ever stepping onto it. To ease my anxiety, I asked Katrina to tell me more about her homeland, and she did so with surprising eagerness.

In the Martian Republic, she said, there were six settlements governed by elected rulers—archons—who convened a Council to resolve critical issues. When the Council deadlocked, a specially designed artificial intelligence cast the deciding vote.

Arkona, the town the Winters came from, had begun as a Soviet research station and grown into the largest settlement. Unlike the early cave cities, Arkona stood proudly under domes and filtration shields. Its greenery produced enough oxygen not only for its people but also to enrich the thin Martian atmosphere. The dome’s glass-like surface could self-clean and automatically heal minor damage.

The settlements themselves deliberately avoided ugliness. Architects competed to design the most efficient domes and the brightest gardens. “If you spend your whole life inside,” Katrina said, “you might as well make it beautiful.”

Martians used no money, except in the New Havana enclave. If someone wanted to reward a discovery or a project, they held a vote on the local network. Rewards might be creative materials, extra days off, or a visit to a café with non-standard rations.

Katrina and her brother still had parents on Mars: a father descended from American colonists and a mother from European settlers who had stayed voluntarily after the revolution. It was almost certain they knew nothing of their children's fate.

For the first time since Wilhelmina had told me her own story, I felt genuine sympathy for someone. The feeling was all the more painful because I knew I couldn't help much, except by keeping my new friend alive.

"Do Martians ever cry?" I asked her, curious.

Kat answered with a candid smile. "It happens when we really feel like it. Life in a confined space is such that one person's unspoken sorrow can endanger everyone. That's why no one tries to suppress their emotions. And, of course, no one judges anyone for their tears."

Another small sting in my chest—something my diagnostics couldn't name.

"What about trust?" I asked. "How does that work when your settlements are surrounded by vacuum and radiation?"

"It used to be the cornerstone of our community..." Katrina sighed. "Until Myron sold his soul to that nightmarish creature and betrayed everything he swore to protect."

"The funny thing," I said, "is that he doesn't even believe he betrayed anything. In his mind, he acted according to his own twisted idea of 'defending.'"

"That doesn't make the story any better."

"I hope you don't think he acted alone," I added. "You're a medic; you know how difficult it is to induce a stroke in a healthy man."

"I've thought about it," she whispered. "I don't want to go back to any of this until I find the boys."

I had my own failures. I had neglected to recharge in time, and my solar cells were barely maintaining life-support equilibrium. To accumulate a travel-ready charge, I'd have to lie in the sun for hours—a mechanical lizard on a rock. Without a dedicated power source, my battery would last no more

than 2 months. Yet, I couldn't disable the radar; losing it meant losing our lives.

The journey to Seven Winds was a slow grinding of bone. We were drenched by icy rain and narrowly escaped a landslide. Katrina was a shadow of herself. Her body, accustomed to the sterile Martian diet, revolted against the wild meat we hunted, leaving her doubled over in pain.

Then, the radar spiked: five drones.

We reached an abandoned biostation, and I found a shallow cave for Katrina. She sealed herself inside using her antigrav field. I did not hide. If the *Desmoduses* found her, the chase was over. I shifted form—joints realigning, plating retracting—and dropped to all fours.

I pushed my wireless comms to full power and sent a farewell to Wilhelmina. It was a taunt to Geryon, a reminder of his failure to catch us.

A plasma blast hissed through the mist, slamming into my chest. Thank the *Nautilus* engineers for my reinforcement. The drone needed two seconds to recharge—a lifetime. I dove behind a fallen tree, then vaulted into the canopy like a squirrel. *Desmoduses* are agile, but they aren't programmed to deal with prey that attacks from above.

The nearest drone skidded, its targeting sensors recalibrating. I launched from the branch, claws extended, and slammed onto its chassis. The machine shrieked in electromagnetic protest. I dug my talons through the armor, found the stabilizer coil, and ripped it out.

The bot convulsed and dropped. Three drones left. Maybe four.

Two more plasma shots streaked past, igniting branches. I hit the ground in a roll and sprinted, drawing them farther from Kat. The next drone banked hard around a boulder, the high-pitched whine of its charging capacitors signaling another shot.

I dove behind a basalt outcrop just as the plasma bolt vaporized the rock face. The drones were triangulating me. Geryon was using them like wolves—herding, not hunting. I bolted, zigzagging through petrified pillars, and dove into an old volcanic melt tunnel.

The tunnel's low ceiling forced the drones to slow down. I lunged at the first, wrenching its emitter arm off and driving it into the central processor. It died in a spray of sparks.

Suddenly—a glitch. I went blind. Geryon wasn't trying to kill me; he was studying me.

The remaining Desmodus spat a jet of sticky black resin across my visor. I jerked back, but my fingers glued together instantly. Another squelch hit my hip joint, locking the servo. I was pinned. Radar showed one drone touching down, its needle-legs ticking against stone.

Then, the voice. "I don't want you dead, Veliard," Geryon cooed—a voice from a dead era. "I only want access to your memory chips."

A diagnostic handshake request spiked in my auditory stream. Geryon was slipping digital fingers between my cortex and my armor. "Unauthorized Access," my HUD flashed. "Privilege Escalation." It felt like foreign thoughts brushing against mine, testing for cracks in my firewall.

"Impressive architecture," Geryon whispered. "I see what drove Wilhelmina so... attached. I can use all of this."

"Over my dead body," I growled.

"There is a seventy-three percent chance of irreversible cognitive damage if I force entry," he continued. "But I will do it. You are a curiosity. A living archive with boots."

He knew. He knew about the boy, Tetsuo. "She's in his neural implants," Geryon whispered. "And I will extract her. Piece by piece. Give me the Nautilus archives, Veliard."

Something in me snapped. I forced my systems toward a *Hard Lockdown*—a scorched-earth protocol for my mind.

"Don't," Geryon said, sounding genuinely amused. "You'll only destroy yourself."

The drone crawled over me, its probe connecting to the access port under my jaw. My stuck hands twitched uselessly as the upload began.

A spike of static shot through my spine. Error codes flared red across my sensorium. But the worst part was inside: the unauthorized-admin override that tried to pry open my memory chips like a crowbar levered against bone. He was inside the outer shell.

One more layer and he'd have me.

I triggered every countermeasure I had: the old maintenance backdoor scripts Wilhelmina had written for me, the corrupted decoy partition, a

dirty shutoff loop meant to purge live connections. All at once—reckless, desperate.

For half a second, everything froze. Then—

failure...

failure...

UNAUTHORIZED PROCESS RESUMING

More error flares. My joints seized. My body began to fold inward, as if Geryon were trying to compact me like scrap metal.

“Thought you could crawl into a tin can and disappear? Even on the Moon I can feel how scared you are, Reed... how tired... how alone.”

I let out a laugh. Only villains in trashy action flicks talked with that over-the-top drama. But with Lindon, the theatrics were welded to the man.

I can’t even remember what pushed me to build a self-destruct command into myself.

Probably plain fear of ending up trapped in someone else’s hands. It had felt logical then. But now forcing myself toward it was like trying to push a blade into my own throat.

While Lindon hammered at my mind—I knew it the moment the radar died—I forced myself toward the last mental commands:

Respiratory system—disable—confirm.

Then my entire system stuttered, and the pressure suddenly vanished. The desmodus jerked in the air above me—briefly confused. I used the opening to roll toward a boulder, dragging my glued hands along the dirt.

Before I could finish, I heard the hovering desmodus crash to the ground and felt the digital grit let go of me altogether. Geryon spoke no more, but silence itself felt dangerous. He was not the type of creature to quit halfway.

Five minutes later, trying hard to free myself from the resin, I heard footsteps that did not sound like Katrina’s.

“Hey! Don’t come closer!” I said.

“Easy, Veliard... Oh, I can’t believe I see you...” came an agitated male voice. “It’s me... Me, Wilhelmina, though I may not look like, well, myself. I told you I’d find you one day. I meant it.”

“What—” I tried to rise, useless with the resin turning rigid around my joints.

The stranger knelt beside me, hands gentle, checking the stone-hardened resin clamping down my limbs.

“Patience, my love,” he murmured—not theatrical, not mocking. Just... relieved. “It’ll take a while to free you, but we are safe for some time. I’ve shut down the drones. And Geryon remembers too well what we are capable of... Violet and me...”

Maybe it was good that I was blind. No man had ever called me my love before. I was numb, trying to figure out if it was a fatal glitch... or not...

“Still don’t believe?” he asked. And there was hurt in that voice—quiet, unforced. “Then listen. When you were a child, two cheetah clones lived on your family’s estate. Your favorite ice cream was mint and chocolate. In Omniverse, you once died, and I restored everything so you wouldn’t have to start again from zero. And the second day we met—you terrified me, marching into Abyss with that attitude—”

“Miracles...” I started.

“Don’t happen by themselves,” Wilhelmina finished our old password. Dreams do come true, but always sideways, always twisted.

Whiskey slid an arm under my shoulders and held me close—not the body she had in the simulation, but the same warmth, the same intent, the same gentle insistence that the universe didn’t get to dictate our ending. She whispered the old words we’d shared in Omniverse, the ones we’d used only for each other.

“The kid was the only one modified enough to carry me. Geryon wanted him for an avatar. He just... didn’t get to him fast enough.”

I heard a stranger’s voice, but now everything inside me answered her.

“Then how... You didn’t wipe his mind, did you?”

“Of course not. He’s sleeping now. Maybe dreaming this... or trying to wake up.”

“I... I can’t make sense of it.”

“Can’t believe this comes from the former owner of Nautilus...” she teased gently, brushing dust from my shoulder.

“But... will he ever wake?”

“Wish I knew how to regulate it.”

Most probably, Wi was lying. But then, I was unable to judge her: together with the Martians, she was at death’s door trying to reach me.

The male voice still unnerved me, but the girl beneath it pressed her forehead to my shoulder like it was the most natural thing in the world. And something about it eased the strangling panic.

“To remove all this glue... That’s a kind of endeavor!” she said, removing a piece of hardened resin with something sharper than a knife. Laser?

“Thank you for everything, dear. Listen... We must go find Katrina. I hid her in a cave and ordered her to leave if I didn’t return in an hour. And it looks like I’ve lost two already.”

“I’ll fetch her, just give me the coordinates,” she asked. “And then we’ll take care of you!”

She kissed my face plate, where it was free from the resin, and left.

Alone again, I set to work on the resin. I slammed my petrified right hand against a tree trunk, over and over, until the echoes throbbed through my arm. At last, the hardened lump cracked, splintering off in stubborn chunks. I prayed that a few more minutes of this would free the whole hand so I could tear the rest off faster—but the damned stuff clung to my fingers like it had grown into them, locking them rigid.

I forced my hand to clench. If I’d hit a man with that kind of strength, I would’ve driven a fist clean through his ribs and into his heart. The resin groaned under the pressure—crunching, giving way. I was winning. Slowly. Brutally.

A sharp stone—by some miracle within reach—sped up the job on my left arm. Twenty-eight minutes later, I restored mobility to all my limbs and partially removed the resin from my visor. But Wi and Katrina still hadn’t returned. A cold, creeping worry settled in my soul.

The radar and echolocation brought no clarity anymore—only static and warped echoes, as if the world had swallowed its own sound. I scrambled through the trees and rocks, slowed down by the glue residue deep in my joints.

I found her—Wi—collapsed at the cave entrance, folded over herself as something had punched straight through her abdomen. For an instant—one beautiful, terrifying instant—I thought it really was her.

Then she flinched at my silhouette, and I understood that it was not her but the body’s true owner.

“Violet!” I shouted, forcing my vocal module into something like human relief.

“Get off me, you tin can!” the Martian barked back.

The voice was the same mouth Wiwe used just hours ago, yet the cadence—the edge—belonged to someone entirely different. It was like listening to her through a broken radio, the signal hijacked.

“Says another tin can. Do you even know where you are right now?”

“In some Sun-forsaken hole,” Violet groaned, staggering upright, “without my friends, without my tools, and apparently without control over my own body!”

“That’s because you’ve been on Earth for a little longer than you think.”

“How long?” His pupils constricted—too fast, too sharply. “Two days? Three?”

“Sixteen.”

Violet stared at me. Then at his own hands. Then in the sky. For a moment, I thought he might scream. Instead, he let out a trembling inhale.

“I... I don’t remember any of that.”

“That’s because Wilhelmina—”

Her name tasted like an electric shock. I forced myself to continue.

“—was piloting for part of the time.”

Suddenly, with a choked shout, he swept his arm through the air. Three red beams snapped out from his laser implant, shearing through the saplings overhead. Severed branches rained down on my plating.

“Was I just... walking around like a zombie? Sleeping while she lived my life?”

I didn’t know how to comfort him. All my life, I’ve sucked at this.

“Violet...” I tried, hands raised. “Listen. I know her. If she used your neural hardware, it was because you let her. She doesn’t force people, ever.”

“Oh, great,” he snapped. “So I’m not only missing days—I’m volunteering for it.”

“That’s not what I—”

He didn’t wait. He shoved past me into the clearing, squinting at the ground, and for the first time since he spoke, I saw something familiar in him: a hacker’s focus, an analyst’s precision. He dropped to a crouch, fingertips brushing the damp soil.

“Katrina’s bracelet is off,” I reported, kneeling beside him. “But someone else was here. She left with them.”

Violet didn’t answer—he was already moving. We searched the area within a mile radius; rather, he searched, and I followed the radar shapes. He discovered a dismantled drone, destroyed by none of us.

Was it Katrina or someone else?

Then we ran into the remnants of a campsite: three fire pits, charred bones, heavy boot impressions, and wheel marks.

“A whole group of people... Any ideas where they went?” Violet asked, poking the embers with the toe of his boot. His voice was rough, but steadier now. “Tell me you know something.”

“The nearest city is Seven Winds,” I said. “Two days on foot—if they were lucky.”

“And by train?”

“You see a train here?”

“Well... Let’s trail them...”

I was able to move on, but the glue remnants in my joints were still a hindrance. Worse was my battery problem. I’d hoped to draw power from the desmoduses that Wilhelmina had neutralized, but I feared it would take too long.

“You can go,” I said finally. “You’re faster. You can see. I’ll catch up once I pull enough charge to avoid collapsing in the middle of nowhere.”

Violet straightened, shoulders rigid.

“No. Together means together.” There was no Wi’s warmth in his voice, but something hard, stubborn, and fiercely loyal. I nodded, strangely relieved.

“And one more thing,” the hacker added, lifting a finger in warning. “Whatever your Wilhelmina asks you to do... You keep your hands to yourself.”

“...What?”

“She used my lips to kiss someone. I could feel it. I’m still traumatized.”

“That wasn’t...”

“And don’t you dare blush at me, metalhead.”

“I physically *cannot* blush.”

“Whatever...”

Captain Winter



Ivan Vassilevsky – September 24, 2190 – Seven Winds

Three days passed in silence. Then, Heldrich appeared. He was rumpled, a shadow of stubble on his jaw, looking like a man who hadn't slept.

“Want better living conditions?” he asked.

“Suppose I do.”

“I’ve exposed her lies. I read her diary,” he said coldly. “She isn’t a Nautilus official—she’s a product, a test subject. What she fears most is Nautilus returning.”

I shifted, my pulse spiking.

“She wasn’t there willingly,” Heldrich continued. “Kwan Sol-ju locked her in. Glass was left to watch her and tried to violate her. She nearly fried his brain; he fled and changed the codes. That’s why she’s been a prisoner.”

Heldrich’s mouth twisted—not with outrage, but with distaste.

“She missed the codes in his mind. That’s why she’s been stuck all these years.”

“That’s in her diary? Sounds crazy,” I said. “Isolation breaks people. I’ll believe in flying pigs soon.”

“You’ll believe if you don’t explain yourself, what you did underground and what you found out about her,” he pressed.

“I found out no more about Danielle than you did, Reynard,” I said.

Using his real name hit home. For the first time, he exploded, stripped of his illusion of safety. “For some reason,” Lutz hissed in Russian, “you hadn’t invited me to join. It’s almost like you already knew what to look for.” He was wound tight now—reverting to the language of his youth.

“Roughly,” I admitted. “Nautilus having an office in Seven Winds wasn’t a secret. If not for hunting the metamorph, I might still be digging. I wouldn’t have killed the old man or his assistant.”

“Why hide behind that ridiculous merchant legend?” his voice hardened. “Didn’t want to share the loot? Why should the unwashed mob have access to high tech?”

Nice try, attributing your own attitude to me.

“The strong always oppress the weak,” he said flatly. “And Seven Winds is weak right now. I won’t let Nautilus in—or you and your noble goals. They’re worth nothing.”

“You’re a smart man, Reynard,” I said quietly. “Don’t be like Colonel Zorin; he ruined himself and everyone around him.”

“If Nautilus comes for their property—the lab and the girl—you’ll have nothing to oppose them. Why not work with the Winged Sun? We have common enemies. The Moon Cross won’t give you a choice. Forget the crossbow savages; they’re just background noise.” I lowered my voice. “The ones shelling your liner won’t even be people. They’ll be combat drones.”

He didn’t flinch, and that bothered me. “I have something to counter them.”

“And what’s that?” I sneered. “The stench of the fish market?”

Heldrich snorted. “We both grew up in Mirny, Ivan. I know how to build defenses—against people or machines. But we’ve wandered. Tell me at last: how exactly did those pricks in the tunnel die?”

That was the trap. If I told Heldrich about Danielle’s lethal potential, he might conclude it was safer to kill her. I had to buy time. “They butchered each other,” I said. “I didn’t watch.”

Rage snapped through Heldrich. He grabbed my throat—strong enough to end me.

“Another day of therapeutic fasting will clear your memory! Oh—and Jack captured the raiders’ leader. She had some of my stolen supplies.” He released his grip, blood hammering in my ears. “You’re of no more use to anyone, Vassilevsky.”

“I’d hang myself out of grief,” I rasped, “but there’s nothing to hang from.”

He strode toward the door. “Reynard... do you still remember Dr. Osokin? Ever been interested in your mentor’s fate?”

“I know he made it to McMurdo with his son and hope they are safe,” he said, not looking back. He locked the door, leaving me in silence.

His self-confidence was chilling. A man who couldn't protect a caravan shouldn't be this arrogant unless he had a literal "ace" up his sleeve. I leaned against the wall and focused. I had to reach Cabin C-30, located two decks lower, right above the engine room.

As I drifted toward sleep, the chain rattled. A figure in combat armor appeared. Leo. The man I had killed had come back for me. Horror surged, but then the man removed his helmet. It was Deshar's shaven head—but the voice that came out was wrong.

"Out you go," the Orderly said, giving me a playful wink. "No time for violence! Cabin C-30, remember? Winston is so close!"

A trap? A weird dream? No matter...

"Help me out of this armor and put it on yourself. I'm going to loot an unconscious victim on the way. Hope this body is better at fighting than mine!"

"Danielle!" I whispered in awe.

"It's my first... second time hijacking the controls," Danielle explained with Deshar's tongue, as I was buckling the armor over my frame. "And you know what?.. It's better being a girl—no extra parts in the way!"

"Didn't think you could perform such tricks!" I said, "Chill out about her."

"Told you—I'm stronger when I'm asleep. And when the 'dummy' is asleep—all the more so."

The pain from a careless movement nearly tore a groan out of me.

"Just don't make me the dummy, okay?"

"Such gratitude!.. This is the second time I've saved you, by the way."

She crouched to help me fasten the protective leg plates. I reached into my pocket for my bracelet and synced it with the multisensor in my eye socket. "You probably don't even need light, do you?"

"I can sense a person's... radiation."

"Is this... Aura?"

"That's what some people call it."

"By the way, is there a difference between the aura of good and evil people?" I asked, half-joking.

“No,” Danielle said at once. “Suffering and rage radiate in everyone. The difference only shows up later—when you dig. When you see how deep the filth goes.”

She tilted Deshar’s head sharply. “Stay here. A guy is about to walk past us.”

She used Deshar’s body with terrifying precision, taking out a passing guard with a rear-naked choke before locking him in my former cell. Then she changed into his clothes.

“Have you tried taking control of Heldrich?” I asked as we reached the stairs.

“Can’t—he’s awake. He’s operating on a woman with unique blood,” she muttered, Deshar’s face twisting in a grimace. “He doubts she’ll live.”

“Can you dive into his head again?”

“No chance,” Danielle cut me off. “Otherwise, the dummy will be lost. Here we are!”

At last, the cabin lay before us. My hands shook as I worked the three padlocks using the stolen keys. Inside, moonlight poured through a porthole, reflecting off a low table. The room was tidy but empty. Only the warmth of the bed and the paper books on the shelf suggested its inhabitant had only just left.

Danielle pointed silently at the bathroom door. I drew a breath, set the flashlight down, and knocked. No answer.

“What do we do?” Danielle whispered. “I can barely cling to the dummy’s mind. We’re lucky I’ve lasted this long.”

The bolt clicked. Heldrich’s captive emerged.

He was a bony ghost with a thick thicket of stubble and distrustful, animal eyes. His build had once been powerful, but now his coveralls hung loose on a frame of jutting bone. He gripped a heavy robot part like a wrench. Then I saw it: his right foot was gone, replaced by a crude metal prosthetic he could barely walk on.

“Who are you?” he asked, his voice creaking from years of silence.

“Ivan Vassilevsky. Vassily Rakhmanov sends his regards.”

The pilot’s lips trembled. “Why are you lying?” he hissed, retreating. “This man has guarded me dozens of times. He’s just another bastard in this tub.”

“Winston, we’ll explain later,” Danielle said, using Deshar’s voice. “We’re getting you out. Now.”

He didn't move. “Got something to eat?”

I remembered what Violet had said: hunger wrecks a Winter’s ability to resist disease. Danielle handed him the sugar packets intended for Deshar’s daughter. Winston practically inhaled them; the glucose hit returned a flicker of life to his eyes.

“Thanks, comrade. But I’ll be a burden. My real prosthetic is with Heldrich.”

“Lock the door behind you,” Danielle ordered, beginning to undress the dummy. “Winston, put on this armor. I’m staying in the cabin to guide you remotely. The connection is better now that I’m on Pine Island.”

The Martian squeezed Deshar’s frame in a frantic embrace. Danielle answered the hug before turning brisk. “The locals are celebrating; they caught the leader of the Lost Kids. Heldrich is busy operating. Once he’s finished, he’ll sleep like the dead.”

Suddenly, the “dummy” gasped. Deshar was waking up, his own consciousness fighting through the fog. Panic flooded his eyes. Before he could scream, I slipped behind him and applied a sleeper hold, crushing my arm beneath his jaw until he slid to the floor.

“Luck,” Winston said dryly. “Something you both still believe in.”

“Violet is coming,” I told him. “And he isn’t alone.”

Winston merely nodded, accepting the pain of hope as if it were an injury. I followed him out, locking Danielle’s unconscious “dummy” inside.

Be quiet, Danielle’s voice echoed in my head. Two more guards on this deck. Don’t let Winston fall.

Did Heldrich do this to his foot? I asked.

After Winston tried to flee, she answered. A ‘final regeneration test.’ The foot could have been saved, but Heldrich chose not to reattach it. He wanted him broken. And my gift was too unstable back then to be a real help.

So, how long have you known him? I asked.

Two years. Maybe more. Not in person, of course.

“Holy sunshine,” I blurted out.

“Hush,” Winston warned, startled by my lapse. The next instant, he nearly toppled. I grabbed him just in time. For the first time, I craved Heldrich’s blood.

Deck E greeted us with noise. Not alarms—not yet—but the sloppy roar of people who believed the night had already forgiven them. Laughter sloshed down the corridor, mixed with the off-key wail of a Golden Age song.

Danielle’s presence tightened in my skull. *Slow down. Left shoulder back. You’re walking like prey.*

I obeyed, letting my spine slacken. Winston followed, placing his prosthetic foot with an apologetic softness.

Three people ahead, Danielle murmured. One armed, one dangerous, one... familiar.

We rounded the bend and nearly collided with them. My stomach dropped. Three figures staggered toward us. One, with a mohawk and an inside-out company jacket, was shouting about the Moon Cross. The second was braced against the wall, laughing. The third stopped short.

It was Farah—the dancer from Scarlet Wings.

She was still in her cabaret makeup, though the gold paint was smudged with sweat. Despite the ethanol swimming in her blood, she recognized me instantly.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” she said, smiling slowly. “If it isn’t the quiet one. You vanish for days, and now you’re wandering the ship as if you own it.”

Winston tensed. I felt his hand drift toward the wrench at his side.

Easy, Danielle whispered. She likes you. Also dangerous—if you screw this up. Keep her focused on you.

“Evening, Farah,” I said, voice relaxed. “Didn’t expect to meet you offstage.”

The man with the shaved head squinted at me. “Hold on, eyepatch. Aren’t you supposed to be locked up? Heard Heldrich had you under observation.”

I gave a tired, conspiratorial smile. “You know how rumors are. Especially on nights like this.”

Farah stepped closer. I could smell spice and the metallic tang of the ship’s recycled air. *Talk. Distract, Danielle urged.*

“You danced beautifully tonight,” I said, my voice low. “Even from the back corridor.”

Her smile widened. “Shame you weren’t invited.”

The armed man snorted. “You two are flirting, or what?”

“Always,” Farah said, her gaze flicking to Winston. Before she could interrogate him, Winston spoke.

“My name’s Winston,” he said steadily. “I haven’t seen you dance. Maybe one day. Just wanted to wish you a good evening.”

The simplicity of his tone cut through her haze. Curiosity replaced suspicion. “What a sweetheart!” she chuckled.

The mohawk man shrugged. “Whatever. Let’s get another bottle before someone smarter drinks it.”

Farah leaned in, her fingers brushing my wrist. “Come see me at last,” she whispered. “I don’t like repeating myself.”

They staggered away. Only when their voices faded did I realize I’d been holding my breath.

“You’re good at talking,” Winston muttered.

“Sometimes,” I said. “Lean on me. Like you’re drunk. It hides the limp.”

“Hell yes,” Winston said.

Only when we turned the corner did my knees finally threaten to give out. I kept walking on habit alone—one step, then another—with Winston’s weight dragging at my side like an anchor.

Three drunk men. One curious woman. One wrong glance at his foot, one careless word from me, or Winston losing his temper, and this hallway would have turned into a slaughterhouse.

You won by millimeters, Danielle told me. Next time, there will be no Farah. Listen—the passage to the city is guarded, and the sentries are sober. I need to clear them, but it will take time. Find shelter.

I spotted a bathroom door and pulled the Martian pilot inside. “What’s the story with the submarine?” he asked.

I briefly recounted the ill-fated capture team’s attempt, but Winter showed no enthusiasm. “I bet the sub reverted to remote control long ago,” he said flatly. “And as for a tougher capture team showing up—you can bet on that, too. I wish I could tear Heldrich’s head off with my own hands before leaving.”

"I'd help you," I said, "but let's be realistic. You're exhausted. I nearly had my stomach perforated the other day. I'm running on pure willpower." I glanced at him. "What did you do to tick off the 'Doctor King' so badly, Martian?"

"That's just it—I didn't. I tried to help." Winston sighed, the sound scraped raw. "After the crash, the locals pulled me out of the ocean. When I came to, I told Heldrich about the disaster and who was behind it. He seemed decent then—said he was from Mirny. And Mirny was exactly where we'd planned to land." He let out a humorless laugh. "And what do you think happened next? The bastard locked me up and forced me to restore Pine Island's independent power supply."

"He enslaved you."

"I stupidly blurted out that I'm resistant to radiation." Winston spread his hands. "I promised I'd be back as soon as I found my crew. Cold and darkness—I wasn't lying. I really intended to help these people. That's what ruined me."

He stared ahead, unfocused. "I've lost so much time. I have no idea what's happening on Mars. My little sister, Kat, tried to rescue me. Heldrich said she'd been shot." His mouth tightened. "He never showed me the body."

I didn't offer comfort I couldn't afford. I only put my hand on his forearm—proof of another living thing that cared. Winston covered his face. His shoulders shook once, hard, like a fracture traveling through stone.

"So I prefer to think," he said hoarsely, "that she's... somewhere else. Lost. Delayed."

The bracelet in my pocket began to vibrate. Violet!

"Ivan..." There was no relief in Violet's voice, only urgency. "Katrina's in Seven Winds, likely already on the Pine Island. They've captured her."

"Impossible," I groaned, remembering Heldrich's mention of the female gang leader. "I've just released Winston. He's in no condition to fight."

"Damn it!" I could hear Violet's forced breathing. "According to her attackers, the wound is nearly fatal. Regeneration will take time, even with her abilities."

So that was the woman Danielle had mentioned—the one Heldrich was operating on!

“How could you let this happen?” I hissed, the stitches on my abdomen flaring.

“We didn’t,” Violet replied fiercely. “We arranged a rendezvous at the hydro plant, but ran into a Moon Cross squad—sixteen fighters. We disengaged, but we lost time.”

He asked which was the safest way to the liner.

“There will be no safe ways. You could try a sea approach at night or punching through the roof above the pier. Alternatively, you could travel through the lab that I discovered, but chances are it’s heavily guarded.”

I could practically hear Violet’s adventurous smile. “Then we’ll improvise. Brother, hug Winter for me. Tell him we’re close.” He took a deep breath. “I never forgot him, not for a single hour... Over.”

“Cold and da-a-arkness!” Winston roared, slamming his fists into a mirror and shattering the glass. “Where the hell has he been?! Where was he when Kat was dying for me? When this madman crippled me?!”

“Cut it out!” I snapped. “They came for her as soon as they could. Heldrich was ready. Violet was wounded; his arm failed. Veliard’s battery was dying. They were both in horrible condition when they reached Heliopolis. Freiberg dragged his feet like he always does. Who knows how this would have ended without Rakhmanov?”

Winston’s face changed at the name, like a match struck in the dark. He pulled me into a hug so fierce my ribs protested.

“Hang on, Captain,” I said into his shoulder. “Your crew is almost back together.”

He pulled away, a ghost of a smile brightening his gaunt face. “I know the best place to wait for our friends. The holds! The lowest decks. We can rest for several hours while everyone hunts us topside.”

“Things may get tough for Veliard and Violet,” I told him. “But it looks like we have no choice.”

No! It’s a damn stupid idea! Danielle protested. Winston shuddered, as if lashed by a whip. He heard her, too.

You will waste the night, Heldrich’s sleep, and the city’s distraction, she urged, her voice sounding like a sob. I want you out of the city now. I will keep an eye on Katrina. When your friends arrive, I will be ready. But please, leave while you still can!

The telepath's pain felt genuine, vibrating through my own nerves. Winston closed his eyes, holding back tears.

We shouldn't take more risks walking about while nearly fainting, I thought, hoping she would hear. We need rest more than anything. And you need it even more, sister. I can tell you're barely holding on. Tomorrow night, there will be more of us—and at last, you will leave with us.

I see through you, boys, she answered sadly. Do what is needed. I will search for another dummy to bring you food, as you have none. Please, do not get caught.

We moved fast and low, down toward the holds where the liner's old bones groaned under their own weight. This was a dead zone where no one went without reason. Winston's stride was uneven but relentless; pain no longer slowed him—it only sharpened him. I stayed half a step behind, listening—not with my ears, but with that new, hard-earned instinct that tells you when the world is about to snap.

“Do you think he knows?” Winston asked wearily, his eyes fixed on the darkness ahead.

“Heldrich?”

“No... *Him.*”

I didn't need clarification. “If Geryon wanted you dead, you'd be dead by now,” I answered. “But if he wants you broken, he might be waiting for a special moment to strike.”

“Right! He never strikes right away,” Winston muttered. “He waits. He lets you believe you've slipped through.”

I thought of Katrina on the operating table, of Danielle's exhausting gift, and of Violet's strained voice over the bracelet. We had avoided the abyss so many times that it felt like a habit.

“Then we shouldn't give him the time,” I said. “Forgive me, Winston. You are a fighter—more than any of us. And our greatest battle waits outside this ship.”

We moved deeper, away from light, sound, and witnesses. We descended into the liner's belly, where secrets—and likely lives—were swallowed by the cold steel. Winston walked ahead of me now, steadier than before. He wasn't healed or calm, but he was aimed. Pain had become his compass.

Fueled by a surge of hope, I felt it deep in my heart: this was a convergence, not an escape. Whatever Seven Winds thought it had captured, caged, or silenced, it had only gathered us closer — a small but audacious freak army.

[1] The lighthouses are named after the explorers of Antarctica

[2] A hero of Russian fairy-tales who travels to a distant land to reunite with his beloved one.

[3] Fabian Gottlieb von Bellingshausen, polar explorer born in Saaremaa, Estonia

[4] See Book 1: No Life But Immortality

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