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## A City in Gray Outlines

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A City in Gray Outlines

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Languages and Literature  
of Bard College

by  
Tamar Mayer-DeAngelis

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2023





For the Skyroom, first and foremost.  
And always for my dad, who told the best stories.



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And thank you to my family, who have encouraged me to do what I love.

I'll see you when it's over.





A City in Gray Outlines



# Table of Contents

Preface.....	1
Cyan Dance.....	2
Oversight.....	8
Gray is the Dawn.....	14
The Museum at Closing.....	23
Sonar (Whalesong).....	33
Black and White (In Ink).....	41
No Replacements.....	54
The Cost of White Flags.....	65
Hazy Orange Sun.....	70
Faded Into Smoke.....	77
Bloodrust.....	84

## Preface

This is neither the beginning nor the end. If anything, it is a series of in-betweens.

*A City in Gray Outlines* is a collection of short stories taking place in a dystopian city somewhere in the future. These stories are set within the same world as a larger story, a novel, on which I am currently working. The characters within are in some cases connected, in others less so. What matters most is that together in their city they survive, and find some light to cling to even in the darkest of places.

There are ways in which all of these stories could be furthered, and ways in which I hope to further them or continue the collection in the future, in addition to working on the larger, more centralized story taking place within this world. It is far from complete, although the stories within this collection function as a cohesive whole and I would not expand upon them as they stand today. I only hope to be able to allow this world to grow in the future. Thank you for reading, now and always.

## Cyan Dance

There are electric signs across the path to victory, and she vaults them with ease.

Maglev skating is not an especially grounded sport, nor is it for the faint of heart, or for anyone too young or too old, or anyone who isn't willing to take some hits.

The Forces don't like it. Businesses don't like it. Citizens don't like it. Maglev skating would be a lose-lose situation for everyone involved if it weren't for the glory of the wind whipping at your coat as you soar over the city, your hair blown back from your face and your eyes streaming in the wind.

Some people say you need goggles, protective equipment, the works. Cat thinks that takes away everything that's important. Sometimes she doesn't even wear a respirator mask – only on the worst days on the lower floors, where all the industry is concentrated. It creates a layer of separation when the skating is all about contact. Grit picked from scraped knees when she falls. Bruises from turns taken too sharply. Worth it for the certainty and the rush.

The world is real. The buzz of holograms means nothing. She breaks through them mid-flight and they warp and shatter around her like glass, rewinding back into place after she passes.

They can do that, rewind. Cat can't because she's human. If she wipes out bad enough, she's just a stain on the pavement. But in the air, when she's flashing like blue-green lightning between buildings and over streets, the danger sets the whole world alight. She leaves a trail of fire behind her.

Things that burn bright leave marks that the city remembers.

So Cat swirls and swerves and spins, and as she picks up speed, she knows that she's only getting brighter.

Most skaters stick close to somewhere they can land. Cat is different. She uses every inch of the city's groaning metal infrastructure to her advantage, bouncing off exposed beams and signposts and windowsills to weave ever upward without needing to take an elevator.

From all the way up there, the world, usually divided into blocks that are split in turn by walls and signs and the towering buildings above, is given unity. Cat watches it turn into glowing squares and lines of light against the dull backdrop, and up above, the city's upper floors turn the clouds into a luminescent fog.

Perched on the balcony of an apartment with darkened windows, Cat swings her legs out over the whole of the city. This must be one of its current tallest points. The apartment behind her might not even have inhabitants yet. She can see the gradation, the way the city shrinks down from this point outward, until out by the city walls the buildings hit maybe seventy, eighty floors at their tallest points where the Forces barracks used to be before the city wall's completion.

The view might be more frightening if it weren't for the web of streets and walkways that weave through the city. There's practically nowhere that's a straight fall hundreds of stories to the ground. You'd have to be the unluckiest person in the world to hit a corner that's just right to do it.

Couldn't happen to her. According to everyone she knows, Cat is the luckiest person out here skating the streets. Even the rest of her crew doesn't want to pull the stunts she tries.

She leans her weight on the heels of her hands. Then more of it, lifting herself to dangle over the balcony's edge, a gust of wind sending the edges of her jacket snapping in the open air. Her skates whirl to life, pulsing in alternations of cyan and pink.

Time to go. She doesn't like sitting in one place for too long.

Cat drops, arcing in a colorful blur downward.

She tucks her knees into her chest, jolting as her skates pick up on the edge of a billboard bearing an image of the helmeted head of a Forces soldier. She uses it for propulsion, changing her trajectory. Flying sideways, the wind whirling at her in the darkness of the night that's slowly steeped in more and more color as she descends. The city narrows as she moves downward, losing that wide-open, still-in-construction sky.

It doesn't bother her. That view's nice once in a while, but she's spent years now bouncing around the city streets down where the sun can barely reach. Cat can skate just as well in a tight space as she can in an open arena, and maybe even better.

The problem that comes with skating where she pleases, though, is that some people are inclined to label it a "disturbance of the peace". Likewise, people aren't always a big fan of colorful spraypaint splattered across the city streets. Her signature colors aren't displeasing to the eye, no matter what people say. Still, it's a crime. Maybe. Just a little one. She would personally choose to call both things forms of art. It wouldn't be as big of a deal if the Forces didn't take everything too seriously.

So, all things accounted for, Cat gets labeled a bit of a criminal. Her and everyone else in the crew. But labels are a societal construct. If she keeps her head down – or if she moves fast enough, which is her preferred option – the Forces don't pay that much mind.

She might have gone a little bit too far the other week. Spraying the frequency to a private Forces radio communications channel on the asphalt wasn't the smartest move. Her colors and all, of course; that's what she carries on her, and she had to get it down before she forgot it. That sort of thing only travels in people's minds and by word of mouth. Keeping it on paper is much too dangerous, but the street, where people can take advantage of it anonymously? Safe enough.

Safe enough if the Forces don't have various other pieces of incriminating evidence on you.

At this point, Cat's pretty sure that they must have people on her tail. That's another good thing about ducking back town into the tighter tunnels between buildings: she knows them all, and she knows how to lose anyone following her.

She ducks down a blue-lit street and kicks her skates off, sitting on the crumbling back doorstep of a convenience store, replacing them with a pair of cheap shoes that have been rubbing her feet raw for several days. She's been flying solo for a bit, even changing up her wardrobe to lay low. The shoes were the cheapest, quickest way to swap out her usual pair, which were given an artistic work-over with a set of fabric markers nearly a year ago.

Skating without the crew's still good, but she misses their chatter all around her. The city's better with people to watch your back while you brighten up a freshly scrubbed wall with some new paint. Cat's not willing to get the rest of them in trouble, though. She might not subscribe to all the stupid labels, but most people do, so she can wander on her own until the buzz dies down.

The smartest thing to do would be to stay home a while. The Forces aren't likely to check every run-down apartment building for a girl with paint and maglev skates, not with bigger fish to fry.

Cat's got street smarts, but no one ever said she was *wise*. Sitting indoors for days on end watching the world move by outside her window sounds miserable. She's willing to take some chances to avoid it.

Weaving in and out of the crowds on the main streets with her bag acting as a shield on her shoulder, she does wonder if she's an idiot. It feels like all the eyes in the world are on her.



Some would say that maglev skating and spray painting alike are “attention-seeking behaviors”. Maybe they are for most people, but Cat’s fine with being an anonymous skater attached to a color rather than a name. She likes the freedom too much to give it up for making a name for herself. A job working behind the register of a drug store or diner is fine if she can take to the skies on her own time. When someone looks up at you from the street as you soar by, you’re more a blur with neon skates than anything else. On the ground without her skates she’s vulnerable.

It would be letting the Forces and their threats get to her if she looked over her shoulder too often, but Cat does look up and down the street as she ducks into some fast-food restaurant advertising the city’s best milkshakes.

There’s nothing out of the ordinary. Cat jams herself and her bag into a tiny booth at the very back of the place, ordering off of a cracked screen and waiting for her meal with her foot bouncing to the tune of the pop music playing loudly from a speaker somewhere.

The food takes a while. Maybe it’s better quality than she thought at first glance. The door swings open and closed a few times, marked by the clanging of a tiny bell and the shuddering of the shop’s floor. After the first couple of times, Cat stops looking up at it – it’s way more suspicious to be eyeing everyone coming in and out than it is to scroll through messages from her friends in her corner and listen to the music.

As a consequence, she isn’t looking up when her visitor enters the shop. She only notices her when the woman with her electro-prosthetic arms is sliding into the other side of the neon-orange booth with shocking grace given its narrow confines.

“Uhh, can I help you?”

“I do believe you can.” The woman and her arms are unnerving. They’re almost skeletal, narrow metal fingers splayed out across the tabletop’s advertising screens, the lines between segments of metal glowing red. When Cat finally tears her eyes away from sharp fingertips, the woman’s gaze is almost as startling, piercing, with one of her original eyes and one that glows red, set in a metal socket.

# Oversight

The Commander's office is a heavy place. Blackout drapes on the windows. Furniture that's meant to fill the space and not for comfort, the chair cushions so hard that sitting there is equivalent to taking up a seat on the floor. Dark paneling on the walls, plasterboard and metal sheets. A pair of framed photos on the edge of her desk: the squadron she served with early in her career, and a professionally taken family portrait of a husband and daughter she hasn't been home to in several nights.

It couldn't be more different from the two central offices deeper into the city. Those buildings are a combination of sleek, modernized aesthetics and opulence, pale floor tiling mingling with dark wood desks and ornately framed titles and posters. A fitting place for the heads of the Forces, so far beyond all of the soldiers on the streets. The most powerful and most acknowledged find a home there, where the present's edge blurs forward into the city's future.

The Commander knows that she could have a place there, that she has already earned it, and yet here she remains at the city's edge.

This is where the city's defenses must hold fast until the wall and all its checkpoints and fortifications are complete. The Forces would crumble beneath the power of a nuclear strike or a heavily armed assault, and the city with them. But no such assault will happen. The world's other states are occupied with each other. It is the ideal time for a city to seal itself away from the outside world.

Until the wall is complete, the Commander will stay here.

What kind of leader would she be to step away from the boundary just when a conflict could tip the balance? She knows that an interruption to the wall, or a significant loss of life, could wreck every prospect of the city's retreat into itself.

It's not only about the city's physical safety. The Forces would handle that with or without her presence. But the mental impact of her presence is of equal importance, if not greater. By remaining here, the Commander demonstrates commitment and loyalty, two things that the city will need if it is to survive its self-isolation. A physical fight isn't her job; winning over the public is.

Image matters, whether people like it or not. The idealists, supposedly all about an image, place too little importance on it. The ones who call themselves realists say it doesn't matter, but they're all about it. The Commander walks a fine line between the two in which image is everything, but it must be backed up with incontrovertible evidence of her capabilities and successes.

To that end, her life has been dedicated to the Forces. She was the one to propose plans that led troops to victory when the conflict was at its worst, some years ago. That's what made it possible for the city to be left to itself now, to enclose itself into safety. The Commander's reputation speaks for itself. When the city has shut itself away, there will be a place for her on a pedestal. She will not allow for a mishap that could ruin that place.

She lays her hand upon the edge of her desk, drawing back the drapes at the window just far enough to allow a sliver of light to fall across the floor and its off-white low-pile rug. The sound of construction, halfway held back by the fabric, intensifies. The Commander watches workers move out on the wall like insects, hoisting materials up and down with cranes and lifts.

The phone on her desk buzzes, and she lets the curtain fall back into place as she picks up.

"Commander, there's someone here to see you." A captain, one of those still in charge of the city's external patrols.

She knows him. If he needed to contact her, there was a chain up to her to be followed, and a level of respect to be given. This had best be important. “Send him in.”

The Captain arrives at her door with a series of sharp knocks and a salute. The Commander settles into the chair behind her desk without offering him a seat, waiting for him to explain himself.

“Sir,” he begins, somehow further stiffening his spine. “I acknowledge that this is a sudden visit. I assure you that I wouldn’t make such an intrusion without reason.”

“Get to the point, then. What’s going on?”

Dropping the formalities, the Captain leans in over the desk, lowering his voice. “We’ve got problems. Little ones, but you know how they add up. All the publicity and the emphasis on safety, it only does so much. There are people who want out.”

“Are you implying what I think you are?”

“I suspect so.”

“Surely we don’t have deserters?”

“All civilians, sir.”

She can’t imagine why this was escalated up the chain of command to her. She was the one to advocate for continued external patrols until the wall’s completion, but that’s the only connecting element of involvement. She can only assume that the Captain, coming to her directly, must want to solve this quickly and quietly.

She’ll admit it only grudgingly, and not aloud, but he may be right to do so. If people were to find out that others were leaving the city, there’s a chance that, in the still-imbalanced, unstable state of fear, mass panic would lead to a mass evacuation. The Forces would never be able to stop the flood.

The answer to this particular problem is an obvious one, though not one to be used lightly. Perhaps she ought to thank the Captain for coming to her personally. The Commander stands, leaning over her desk to meet his eyes directly.

“Make it clear,” she says, drumming her fingers against her desk’s metal surface, “that anyone who leaves the city forfeits citizenship when the walls have reached completion.” That’s the simplest way to keep people in one place – too many have nowhere else to go without the city as an option. “Our strength is stability. Not just in the Forces, but the entire city. They need to feel responsible.”

“Responsible?”

“The Forces may be the guardians of the city, but the understanding is that civilians grant us control. We hold power because they trust us. It’s only right, then, that we make them feel trusted in turn. What would we do without the courage of civilians who hold fast, even though the outside world seems like such an expansive, dangerous place?” The Commander tilts a single eyebrow, glancing at the Captain.

His lips twitch, and he runs a hand through his short, pale hair. “So you think that we need to make them feel like they’re in control.”

“Correct. We are the guiding hand, not the hand holding the gun. The weapon is outside us. If we can keep the city united, we stand a chance.”

“But that doesn’t actively stop the people leaving.”

“The wall will take care of that when it’s finished. Getting in and out will be difficult enough to dissuade plenty of the people who are willing to leave now if they don’t get caught up in banding together for our protection first.”

The Commander settles back into her chair, neatly slotting her fingers together. A moment passes as she takes a slow breath, the stiff fabric of her uniform dragging against her skin in the stillness and near-silence of the office. “If too many people are willing to take the risk... find someone who seems fitting. Make an example of them.”

Examples show everyone what the cost of a stable state is. It might be time that people learn. If they’d rather have the alternative, the world outside their doorstep that could kill them at any time, that world needs to be revealed for all the terror it can cause.

It’s a risky game to play, but the Commander has spent long enough now making sure that the wheels of the city’s inner workings stay spinning to know this is justifiable. The city needs some foundation to build stability on in the long-term, and mutual responsibility holds up well to that.

“That wouldn’t be counterintuitive?”

“Making the people feel like they hold the power comes first. Then, when it seems like traitors leaving the city are taking that power away from them, it’s only appropriate to make an example of someone. They have to learn somehow.”

Slowly, the Captain nods. “I see what you’re getting at. Make them part of the security.”

“Good to know we’ve come to an agreement. I’m sure you can take it from here. I’ll make a statement when things are shifting.”

“Of course, sir.”

The timing of a statement will be important. Too soon and she’ll be responsible if it all goes wrong; too late and she’ll be only riding on the success of others. Luckily, the Commander has practice.

She returns to the window as the Captain turns to go, casting a lean shadow behind her all the way across the room to the door. The sun is dipping toward the horizon, soon to disappear behind the shell of the wall.

The Commander does not make easy decisions. She gave up that privilege when she accepted her promotion. Before her lies the pedestal, and the walk to it is lined with any number of potentially poisoned needles if things go wrong.

When the Captain leaves the room, her door closes behind him like a gunshot. The Commander doesn't flinch.



## Gray is the Dawn

“I speak two languages,” she tells him, leaning up against the doorframe, and the soldier tries to nod appreciatively. “My origin family spoke German. I know it isn’t standard, I know. That probably looks bad, doesn’t it?”

He isn’t allowed to say yes.

She steps out of the doorframe and gestures for him to come in. He steps inside gingerly, as if the floor is made of nails, and settles onto the couch only when prompted. She offers tea or coffee, the water already boiled, and one cup sitting on the coffee table. He declines with a small shake of his head, pulling out the tiny tablet and its questionnaire. “This will be fairly quick, ma’am. Not many questions.”

She fidgets with her cup of tea, twisting nervous fingers around the handle of the mug and raising it to her lips before lowering it again. She never takes a sip.

He taps the tablet once. “Tell me more about your family life. Do you have children here?”

“Yes, my daughter – she graduates high school soon.” She laughs once, gripping the mug tighter. “She doesn’t really know what she wants to do afterward, but I’m sure she’ll figure it out. You must have done that, right? Unless you just went straight into the Forces...”

The soldier holds up a hand, stopping her. “I’m sure she will, ma’am. Have you lived your entire life here?”

Quick as it may be, by the time he leaves the mood and the tea have dulled and cooled, left sitting too long. He gives the woman a formal nod and tucks away the tablet as he leaves.

That's seven citizens confirmed today. Most of it is done by remote survey, but whenever someone seems a bit out of the ordinary, he gets sent in. Him, or whoever else can be spared from a low-ranking squadron.

It's the same questions every time. He can press for answers in new ways, but the inputs don't change much – he confirms a lack of family ties in the city or a history of illicit activity, notes down whose stories don't match up with the profiles provided to him.

He'd be promoted if he could just have a chance to make a name for himself. Do something. But there isn't much to do now that the city walls have been completed.

He joined the Forces to do something.

When the walls were still going up, his squadron would be sent out on patrol along the city's edge. That was when everyone still worried about a last-minute threat to the city before the borders could be closed. As they had crisscrossed back and forth, he'd watched the workers bring in new loads of concrete. Slowly but surely the view of the outside highways and tree stumps had disappeared, hidden behind solid gray. He'd climbed the floors further up into the city so he could look out beyond them, but it was like the walls emitted fog. Everything had become a haze. The scraggly trees were just spindly shadows, and the highways, large as they had always been, winding off into the distance – it was like they weren't there at all.

The world has shrunk. Not that the city is small. Construction continues on the latest skyscrapers, but without the outside world, it hardly seems to matter. There's only so much to see, so much to do. He spends most of his time pacing the same routes through the same floors, watching the same flickering ads on the billboards. *Buy in on floor 400 and above today! See the heights of luxury!*

Luxury he'll never see. His bed in the barracks is the only bed he's known for the last few years – not that he needs much else. Everything in the Forces colors, gray and white. He hadn't realized how much of the world was gray even before the walls went up.

Another billboard. *Support the Forces! Support the city!* Images of soldiers in armor fade in and out on the screen. They raise rifles, stand tall at the edge of the city wall, and salute the viewer.

The soldier thumbs at the tablet tucked away into the pouch at his side. His armor is starting to feel heavy on his shoulders, heavy with the weight of the day.

The armor is still a requirement for patrolling soldiers. He wonders sometimes if it's really necessary, especially when all he's doing is surveying civilians. It's best not to question it aloud, though. The city's safety comes first.

That's why he joined the Forces in the first place. The city, and all the people within its walls, need protecting. The walls at the city's borders were under construction for some years, starting back when he was still in school, but even now that they're finished the threats linger. That's why there are still people undergoing the process of citizenship confirmation. Any threat within the city has to be weeded out – closed off as they are from the outside world, an issue within wouldn't be pretty. It's best for everyone if the Forces get everything under control before it has a chance to go south and keep it that way.

The walls might gray out the world into a single point of towering construction, but at least they ensure that what's within them is easy to track. No one leaves the city until citizenship confirmation is done, and it's been some time since anyone was allowed in through the closely guarded checkpoints. Every single citizen he confirms is one more person kept safe.

That's what it's supposed to be, anyway.

Instead, down the street from him is a commotion.

The soldier comes to a halt roughly half a block away and watches as a pair of armored, helmeted soldiers pull a man down the sidewalk. He's struggling, and one of them holds him in place as the other cuffs his hands behind his back. "Wait!" the man says, a pleading note in his voice. "My wife, my wife gets home in a few hours, she'll tell you-"

In a voice made mechanical and metallic by the helmet, the soldier with the cuffs requests a pickup for an apprehended civilian and pauses for a moment before requesting a follow-up in a few hours. "Suspect reports living with others."

Even from a distance, the soldier can see the man's face go pale. He goes still.

The soldier leaves before the transport can arrive, backtracking a block the way he came and finding another route. The new path takes him past an apartment complex plastered with posters, a messy overlapping combination of advertisements for nearby shops, notices of curfew, and someone's lost pet photos. A handmade banner, now tattered and worn, painted with bold letters: *PROTECT OUR HISTORY. SAVE THE MUSEUMS.*

Beneath it all, a flicker of white paint. The soldier uses an arm to lift several pieces of fluttering paper to see that someone has spraypainted the words *100 days of ISOLATION.*

A hundred days since the wall's completion is what it must mean. It's a surprise that the paint hasn't been cleaned away. The soldier drops his arm and frowns as his armor scrapes against the rough brick-and-metal-plating of the wall. The graffiti is outdated now; the wall was completed nearly two years ago.

The soldier wonders if the person who sprayed the wall with this particular message has since been arrested.

He moves on. He's goal-oriented, or that's what superiors have said whenever they commended him. He gets the job done and keeps moving. The way he sees it, where there's still someone to protect, he can direct his attention there.

Maybe no one will ever be allowed out of the city again. Maybe, one day, he'll venture out through the checkpoint on an assignment and find out that the world is actually gone. Layers of foggy nothingness that he could wade into and disappear within. Sound slowly muffled into muted nonexistence, life fading out into numbness.

As if it isn't numb enough already.

He makes two more stops, has two more discussions with incredibly nervous people who tap their fingers on their thighs where they sit and try in strained tones to encourage him to maybe spin things in their favor without ever saying it in those words. It would be easier if they said it outright and he could mark that down on the forms. He doesn't take any joy in thinking of the result of each questionnaire filled out, but the certainty is good. Certainty and safety go hand in hand.

No one else offers him tea or coffee. As the day wears on he begins to think that one of the two might be rather nice after all. His steady decline in energy must contribute to how the world blurs past him in waves and lines. The edges of buildings seamlessly merge with the edges of the oncoming night.

On his way back to the barracks, a man bumps into him in the street, clutching a briefcase, distracted by something on his phone's screen, eyebrows furrowed and worry crinkling in his brow. A dull-colored suit and tie and graying hair. He looks up in a panic and stammers out apologies to the soldier before scrambling to his feet and rushing off.

The soldier returns home. Idly, he wonders if the man in the suit has done the same. He can't quite shake the look of fear on the businessman's face as he tumbled to the ground, but tiredness has overtaken him, and his focus soon drifts to the idea of falling into bed.

It's a small place to call home. He has a single photo in a frame up over the set of drawers next to his bed, and he stares at it wordlessly for a few minutes.

Those were his friends. They're encouraged, all of them in the Forces, to bond with the other people in their squadrons in order to work as a more efficient team. He liked them all, though. Maybe they didn't like him enough to keep in touch once the squadron was dissolved and he was put on confirmation duty. None of them have tried to find him or send him a message.

He can't blame them. He's yet to have the will to do it himself.

It's not bad to have a break from the patrols outside the city. He spent so long pacing the perimeter with the idea of other forces swooping in to strike embedded in his mind. It's strange, now, to march the streets in his armor without having to think of it. Were something to happen, with the walls up, there would be a warning.

The fact that nothing happened to him while he was on those patrols means little. Just like keeping the peace within the city, any slip-up can end in disaster.

Confirming citizens is, he reminds himself, just as important as any other duty assigned to members of the Forces, for that exact reason.

It should be nice, even, that all he has to do now is traipse around the city taking notes on a tablet – although the idea of traipsing is very whimsical, and the city is not. People are still too on edge for that.

He thought that when there wasn't a direct threat, things would calm down, but it's as though a blanket of nerve endings has been laid across the city streets and each step sets them afire.

Things will settle down, he's sure of that, though it's hard to say what it will take to make it happen. How do you convince an entire city of peace?

It's not in his job description to do it, or to think of it. He thought, back when he joined the Forces, that keeping the city safe would be convincing enough of peace, of safety.

Doesn't seem like much of a "peace", even now. He doesn't like the way that man with the briefcase looked at him, fearfully – doesn't understand it, never has.

His whole job is to protect the city and everyone within it. He remembers looking up at the soldiers passing by when he was younger. Their gleaming armor, their serious faces. He admired them. Now it's his turn, protector, admired. Now he's supposed to watch out for signs that someone might not be what headquarters has called a "suitable citizen,". Now he's supposed to protect everyone by making sure that the city is only inhabited by those who belong there.

The forms are there to make it easy. He just has to answer the same questions, again and again. They worm their way through his thoughts all the time now, no matter where he is.

What does it take to find rest? Not for himself. He doesn't think he's in so bad a state as the city. You can't put a city down for a nap like a tired, crying child. There's no comfort that the city can find in the half-living space of sleep. The walls have made his life easier, gray or no gray. It's strange that they haven't done the same for the citizens who must have feared the worst before the walls' construction.

Even if he knew the source of the discomfort, he doubts there's much that one person could do about it. Not one person, not one squadron. He could have been a hero in battle, if ever one arose, but not in a time of peace, however dubious the peace may be.

The barracks are quiet all around him, a humming silence interrupted by distant rustlings, like the shuffling of some crowd out of sight. The breathing of hundreds of people somewhere within the walls, living in bubbled, sealed-off spaces. The main doors let out a rasping mechanical wheeze somewhere beyond his room.

With the light off, and only a narrow beam of light streaming through his tiny window onto the foot of his bed, the room is all faint outlines. He can see the rest of it beyond his sheets, dim and distant, its colors extinguished in the night. As he hangs, teetering, on the edge of sleep, he wonders if it'll be like how he imagines the space outside the city walls when he wakes up, and if his bed will be the only thing left in an otherwise formless ocean.

Instead, he wakes up to the light from his window slowly strengthening. The day has dawned gray and cold.

It'll vanish soon enough. If he pulls the blanket up over his head he can sleep a while longer. He chooses to swivel and sit up, though, letting his feet hang over the edge of the bed to brush against the chill of the floor. He will take what he can get of the day before he's out crossing the city again – and light through the window is rarer these days. As the city grows ever upward, the buildings block out more of the light, even here in the barracks, close to the city's outskirts.

He eats breakfast, surrounded by other people whose names he doesn't know but whose callsigns he thinks are distantly embedded in his memory. Food without taste, faces without names and names without faces.



All of the thoughts are nonsense, things that he didn't have time for in the days before the city walls grew up around him.

The days pass in a winding march that always brings him back, bone-tired, to his narrow bed. The monotony of his passage up and down the streets and levels settles in alongside the weight of his armor on his shoulders. Again and again, people turn away from him and hurry off down the street.

Around him, the world grows ever closer and taller, boxing him in. The soldier's thoughts turn in on themselves over and over. There is nowhere else for them to go, nonsense or no.

The morning sky hangs pale over the looming buildings as the soldier sets out on his rounds once again, tablet in hand.

## The Museum at Closing

When the visitors file out of the museum because it is getting late – mothers holding children by the hand, old men setting their hats back on their heads, a group of art students still in animated discussion as they wander down the polished steps – that is the best time to be there.

Diana likes the few remaining crumbling marble sculptures the best. They're going to be sent away soon, along with much of the museum's older work. With the city's borders narrowing to a close, the works on loan have to go back, and the Roman sculptures don't belong here. She'll miss them. "*There will be photos of them,*" people have reminded her. "*There will be those new holo-projections.*" It won't be the same.

There's a statue of Diana – her namesake, her mother says – the huntress. A goddess associated with the moon and the sky. Her name, though, was connected to daylight. *Dius*. Daylight, but a godly sort of daylight, a radiance beyond the mortal plane. And *dium*, the sky, somewhere the light came from, and the gods existed, out of mortal reach.

Diana much prefers the night to the day. The moon may be but a pale reflection of the sun, but it casts the world in a glow like no other. As the city slowly builds upward, her tiny bedroom window doesn't look out on the moon at odd hours of the morning anymore, but the glass ceiling of the museum's central hall still does.

The museum closes early, though. Not early to the elderly and the mothers with children, but early to Diana. So she finds somewhere in the Greek and Roman gallery to hide and waits until security has made their rounds, grumbling about the pay not being good enough these days to keep the job.

"It's closing down soon enough, anyway," one guard says. "Collection's half gone already."

“Maybe I’ll go join the Forces.” The other guard snorts derisively.

When they leave, Diana hauls herself back out from the dust and the shadows and turns on her phone’s flashlight.

If they are powerful-looking in the daylight, by night the statues take on a ghostly and luminous paleness in the narrow beam of light emitted by her phone. Diana moves in slow loops and curves about the room, in a dance with stationary partners. She finds the statue labeled as her namesake’s and hesitates before it, eyes tracing along the arms, curved to pull at a bowstring, taut, muscled. The goddess has all the grace of a warrior, with none of the lumbering armored gait of the soldiers who still walk the streets of the city as if a threat could arrive at any moment.

Diana hopes that it’ll stop once the traffic in and out of the city comes to a halt. She’ll miss the field trips outside – although she hasn’t been on one since middle school anyway, so there isn’t much to miss. It might be worth it to be able to run down the street without being eyed suspiciously. No one wants suspicion on them, not now, so close to safety. Forces-sponsored announcements tell everyone that citizenship confirmation will put the city’s fears to rest once and for all. Diana’s mother and all her friends mutter quietly about it, darting furtive glances and silencing themselves when they see her around the corner. As if Diana isn’t old enough to hear.

She’s been old enough for a long time, but she sometimes pretends that she isn’t. Youth is a shield, her own pale armor. It means that she doesn’t have to think about choices, of which there are too many. *What do you want to be now that you’re graduating soon? Will you be going into the Forces?*

The Forces are *safe*, which is why her mother suggests it. But do they all really think that she’d want to wear that armor?

Maybe all she wants is to sit with her statues for a while. But that's not very productive, not moving the city forward toward its future.

Diana shakes her head angrily, curls flying in all directions through the dusty air, motes and specks becoming a dazzling glitter in her flashlight's beam. Not the time to think about it. These moments should be something that matters.

She raises a hand, follows the curve of the other Diana's arm, mimics it as best she can, and then she turns and moves off through the galleries. The night is young, and there are other places to visit before the main event.

The art wing is already half empty. What's left are the modern works and one or two of the old classics. Diana pauses before the latter. They're from a time when the world was so much smaller, and yet so much wider and more open. They depict places full of greenery – she only sees that at the public gardens, which are slowly being surrounded by taller and taller buildings and starved of sunlight. *Sun lamps aren't the same, I know*, she says softly to the plants when no one is looking. She may not like the sunlight as much as the moonlight, but she still knows. Together, they are deprived.

Greenery. Greenery and towns, quaint little towns, towns where everyone must have known each other. She doesn't even know everyone on her block, or in her building. What would it have been like to grow up somewhere where you knew everyone? Everything looks so colorful.

She doesn't want to be one of "those people", wishing to live in another time and place. *If your city isn't your priority, what are you doing? Don't you know how important it is to be united right now?* From a slim and flickering screen on the wall of Diana's home, one of the

commanders of the Forces stands with her arms folded behind her back every few hours on the news, reminding the city that if they stand together now, they build a stronger city for the future.

Maybe that's why the museum is slowly being disassembled. Piece by piece, other times and places are being removed. Diana brushes her fingers up against a sign on the wall without bothering to read the embossed name. It's not worth it to look, not now. She has to keep her tiny light pointed at the world for it to make any sense, and in this place, in the dark, things don't have to make sense.

She doesn't want to be one of "those people", but she thinks that she is.

She doesn't want to get her mother in trouble. It doesn't matter too much if *she* gets in trouble, because it feels like there are a million ways she could do that, and all of them are fairly likely. Not because she's a bad person, because she doesn't think she is, but because it's easier and easier to get in trouble. Her mother worries about it, just like she worries about citizenship.

The paintings in the dark are old and getting older. Diana moves on to the next wing of the gallery and is immediately reminded of all her thoughts again. The history of the city is on display – the only wing that Diana knows isn't being taken down or sent back to its origins.

A plaque at the entrance to the exhibit talks about the founding of the city. The illustrious founder, who Diana could care less about, and all that. Although maybe he wasn't really so bad. He didn't insist that the city be named after him. Maybe there's a street out there somewhere that bears his name, but Diana isn't going to go looking for it.

Either way, it's another thing that she shouldn't admit, but she could care less about the plaque.

The display cases are full of old weapons and technology. None of it is out in the open like the statues, which somehow makes it less interesting instead of more. It's untouchable, and where's the fun in something being locked away behind glass?

The glass is cold under her fingertips. Not a speck of dust on it. She wonders momentarily if she should worry about leaving fingerprints, and then laughs to herself at the notion.

A rifle is laid out in the case. It might still be operational and no one would ever know. Diana is surprised that a place with so many accessible weapons isn't better guarded – there aren't even many cameras.

She thought about cameras when she was planning this. It wasn't a spur-of-the-moment decision. In the end, she decided that cameras mattered less than one more night in the museum. She's only surprised that no one else has thought of it.

An unfortunate guard must be asleep instead of watching the cameras. She can't blame them, because the guards who get to walk around the museum in the dark must have a much more interesting job than whoever sits in the security office.

From the history section into the section on spaceflight and technology. It's moderately more interesting, with all its little models and projections and deconstructions of engines. Diana has never been particularly interested in building things, but she can see the appeal of making something out of metal, something that lasts. Nothing lasts forever, though. That's why museums protect things.

Somewhere in the back of her mind, she wonders if the things leaving the museum are really going back to their respective places, or just being thrown somewhere into the indeterminate wilderness that might as well be a void outside the towering buildings of the city.

Diana is tempted to just keep moving, to see everything quickly, but she forces herself to slow her steps and then pause at a spinning holoprojector station. The newest tech, only recently installed, inhabits a space where once there was a giant diorama encased in thick plexiglass. The hologram comes to life when she walks close to it, lighting up the room in blue and silver. The light slowly swirls through the space. Passing a hand through it briefly disrupts the display, the lines glitching and vibrating, a spectral existence in more than one place. Diana's hand is transformed, more electric light than human skin. The traceries of veins are visible in the blue glow, like some luminescent fiber optic fabric. She hopes that when they find the footage of this later it looks like art in its own right.

She might look like a glitching display to other people, sometimes. Like her mother, who is always telling her how strange she is for wandering the city streets at night. *It's not safe yet, sweetheart.* Like her mother's friends, who ask if she's stopped making those protest signs. *It's what's best for us all, dear.* Protectiveness and judgment are one and the same, wrapped up in a skin of false niceties.

But that has no place in the museum, never has. Her mother worries about Diana going to the museum, too, but she never comes with her. No one else there has ever commented on how a young girl has no place among the ancient works. In the museum, Diana is safe.

Another holographic display comes to life, casting the whole room into the cosmos. Diana can count the stars across her chest and arms, twisting her hands to watch them waver before her eyes. She's moving in and out of reality, or drifting into the silent cold of space.

She's heard people say that the universe is art. She can't say she agrees. There's no guarantee that the universe has been carefully painted. No one took the time to work those faint blue tinges into the silver. There are no brushstrokes, the mark of a human hand. Beautiful, yes,

but not art – only fuel for the artist’s eye, an eye that has no place in a world where space can be cast across the room in the moment it takes for a heart to beat.

The thought makes something well up in her throat and chest and eyes, and then the room is no longer spectral and ethereal. It’s just a room full of digital displays and hunks of metal that happen to reflect light. Diana frantically rubs at her eyes and walks along the edge of the room out into the hall until she finds a bench and slumps down on it. Shoulders hunched inward and legs sticking out at odd angles, she might crumble under the weight of all the universe above her.

Her feet are small in their pale brown boots and they swim before her clouded eyes like an image seen through a pool of water. The boots are the ones that she bought because they made her think of ancient archaeologists tramping across a field in search of forgotten stone. Stone in the shape of a god in the shape of a human.

She has never once mistaken herself for a god, shared name or no. She’s never even been able to do something that mattered on a human scale.

It’s been a long time since she did anything that mattered. The museum brings her back to life, in a way, or preserves her the way it preserves anything else. That’s all she’s done in the last few years, wander the museum halls at any given opportunity and try to find something worth clinging to. She would like to be something worth preserving.

Another sniffle. She can feel the tears leaving her face damp as she tries to swipe them away with the edge of her shirt. Diana shoves herself back to her feet with some force as if the extra momentum will change everything.

She had grand plans for tonight. If you are going to go out, you should go out with a bang – all the old myths have a satisfying conclusion, even if tragic. Things come to an end, neatly wrapped up.



Is it so wrong to want something like that?

It can still happen. It can be neat, at least. Final.

The scale of the grand plans will just have to be reduced. Diana can skip most of the stops on her museum tour. She knows that place like the back of her hand, and seeing the spaces in the galleries where art used to have a home will only make the hollow aching in her chest worse.

So she returns to the main hall. The moon has found its way to her. The glass ceiling is so clear and clean as to be invisible beneath the light, only interrupted by the thin lines between the panes, which cast slim shadows in darkest blue across the pale marble floor.

The main hall is where the skeletons live. What everyone comes from, what everyone returns to. They stand in proud poses on their plinths, the skull of a dinosaur turned towards where the moon is hanging in the sky. The bones, too, are turned silver.

If only the skeletons would rumble to life and march across the city. But no one would know what to do with that. They'd be crushed to dust by rapid-fire weapons the likes of which they never saw in life. It would drift across the city the way dust drifts through the streaming stripes of moonlight to the ground below. Diana is draped in interlocking, slowly shifting bands of light and shadow. Something heavy lays itself over her mind, like a blanket separating her from the world, but the tears have stopped. She can look at the museum with clear eyes.

The moonlight twists and bends, though, and Diana rubs at her eyes again just to make sure that she's seeing things right. She has to scan the room with tired turns of her head until she finds where holograms have spontaneously come to life, despite no movement near their activating sensors. Their silver and blue have blended with the moonlight and created a bubble of

light that lifts Diana toward the ceiling, lifts her until she feels that her breath could mist the cold glass.

Slowly rising on a tide of shimmering moonshine, Diana raises her hands high, almost in contact with the glass. Her fingertips go blue and cold, repelled by a wave of frost, and Diana laughs through the new blur of silvered tears. Any closer and she could come into contact, break the glass, break out into the world, and be set adrift. The moonlight finds a home in the empty shell of her chest.

Awash in it, in the silver light and the blue of the cold and the sparkling brightness of the electricity that's hidden within it all, a spark of life. Feathered, edged in silver that builds and builds into a near-white brightness as Diana's feet find their way to the balcony overlooking the main hall, her hands to the railing, leaning forward, nearly at the tipping point with only the filigreed silver for support-

The lights in the room flick on. The spell breaks with the resounding crack of crumbling ice, and Diana turns to meet the Forces as they march in.

*"You are under arrest for breaking and entering. Do not resist."*

She has neither broken nor entered; she has been here all along, and she thinks she has more respect for the museum than the soldiers do.

She doesn't resist. She sets her frigid hands on her head and closes her eyes and lets them take her away, into the smooth and even blackness of the night. No more light, no silver and blue. The cold remains, though, biting and sharp as the wind whips around corners and down the streets. Diana is not dressed warmly enough for the night now that she has left the sheltering tomb of the museum.

She shivers overnight in the holding cell, saying nothing to the people around her and the soldiers on guard. When her mother arrives with her eyes darting from side to side in near panic to negotiate her daughter's release, Diana is still silent and cold.

They tell her mother about the breaking and entering and the repercussions of her actions. They don't tell her what was interrupted. Diana thinks about that moment, hovering in the space between ceiling and floor, about to tumble like the skeleton of a bird to return to stardust on the floor.

Outside her window, a new skyscraper, gleaming silver metal and glass, is under construction. Like a pale star, locked into place by the growing web of walkways and roads. Diana watches it and dreams of falling and flying to the space where the moon once hung.

## Sonar (Whalesong)

May can't go to sleep without imagining the ocean.

It's been that way since she was very young, when they first learned about the topic in school. The teacher turned on a repeating clip of rolling ocean waves and May was entranced. Her favorite view was when the clip transitioned to look up, toward the surface from beneath the water. The light had come through blue-green and wobbly, dancing across the camera like it was searching for something. It must have been unable to find the mystery desire – it pulled away as the camera went on to rove across the ocean floor, stirring up sand and silt and a million tiny little creatures.

May wondered, then, what it would be like to be in the camera's place, surrounded by water. Searching for more clips of the ocean handed her everything she could ever want, for a while. The time in which May could be content with seeing the idea of the ocean and not knowing its reality was short.

Surely it was nothing like taking a shower, or even a bath. No matter how many times she laid back against the smooth, cool metal of the tub and dipped her head beneath the surface of the water, the light was cold and white. The bulbs on the ceiling couldn't create that rush, nor could the tub mimic the depth. And her teacher had said it was salt water, the ocean. May couldn't imagine that.

She fell asleep to the sound of ocean waves, hour-long tracks of sound looping by her bedside. In her mind, she was under the water.

Looking at jobs that involved the ocean, she could find no current listings, the lack of which made her frown. May went to her parents before dinner one night, and while she was

helping her mother by fetching ingredients and utensils, she asked, “Mama, does anybody work at the ocean anymore?”

Her mother paused, her hands dusty with flour, looking down at her with a look of surprise. Then she laughed. “No, sweetie. No one does.”

That was all she got for a long time. It wasn’t until she was in high school that career days started to become a big deal. May wandered up and down the rows of tables in the hope of finding something, anything, that connect back to the ocean. Surely something had to. Miles upon miles of it, filling up all the spaces where the land wasn’t; there was no way the city had no ties to the ocean. Walls don’t eliminate the need for outside resources.

She came back from school after one particular career day and her father asked her if she had finally found anything interesting. May told him that she thought she might want to do something in the sciences – *scientists must study the ocean*, she thought – and her father cheered up, nodding appreciatively.

“That’s my smart girl.”

He had hopes for her becoming a doctor, she knew. The city always needed them, and it paid more than well enough to cover the loans they’d have to take out in a matter of years. He didn’t want her to do what he did, working security for some big corporation on the upper floors – she could do so much better, he said.

Meanwhile, her mother told her, gently, to look down at what was around her. “Sometimes, sweetheart, you don’t get where you want to go. Not immediately. So you have to find something you can do here and now, and then someday you’ll get to where you want to be.”

That was the thing, though. Her mother meant settling for a job that, realistically, wouldn't get May anywhere near where she wanted to be. Nothing had to do with the ocean. It was a future without a name or concrete features that she would be fighting for.

On the next career day, May lingered by the Aqueiet table. The company handled most of the city's water treatment, had for years. The representative cheerily informed her that "quiet is in the name because we work behind the scenes, but what we do keeps the whole city running!"

May got the feeling that not many people had stopped by to learn more.

"Where does the water come from?" she asked the representative, whose name tag read *Cindy H.*

"Oh." Cindy paused. Her tablet lit up with bluish light as she hastily swiped through it. "I don't actually know, that's not really my role. I'm sure you could find something more about it online, though." She handed May a thick logo-branded pamphlet, and, when May asked, was more than happy to hand over her business card as well.

Her father gave the pamphlet a critical look, but said, "If it's what you're interested in, kiddo, then you know your mom and I will help you where we can."

She wasn't very sure that it was what she was interested in, but it was the closest she could find to a step in the right direction. May spent the rest of high school and a college degree in chemistry listening to those same tracks of ocean sounds, hunting the web for more clips of the world beneath the waves to download. Always the background track to her days of studying, but never demoted to mere background noise.

Her first day at work blurs easily into the next into the next into the next. May watches the world turn from behind the control station at a water quality monitoring plant in the city's

lower levels on half a dozen brand-new holographic screens. She tracks data to make sure that the industrial sector has the water it needs for cooling stations and manufacturing, that the residential areas on the lower fifty floors aren't running dry as water gets funneled to construction sites far above.

The job is almost mindless. Her station records information for her. On days when May is sure that no one will need to talk to her, she puts in earbuds and lets the ocean roar drown out the sound of the plant around her humming.

The entire place blends into a blur of clean, sterile metal and white industrial plastics. May's station is made up of plating bolted down into the floor, with all those state-of-the-art holoprojectors – her supervisor was so proud of being important enough to get them when they were put in – set into a sleek board.

May didn't tell her supervisor, but she thinks she preferred the original touchscreens. She couldn't put her hand through them like they weren't there. These holo-screens require so much careful focus. Why an Aquiet plant needs them, she can't imagine. Couldn't they put this tech toward something useful? Exploration, something new. May can't imagine what the ocean would look like filmed through modern cameras, spun in wavering layers out across a room via holoprojectors.

Most of the information that the world – the libraries, her coworkers and superiors, the news – has to offer says the same thing: the last contact with the ocean was decades ago, long before the city closed its borders to the world. Following the closing, the only people who've been outside are soldiers, and construction workers in emergencies.

Joining the Forces might have gotten her closer to seeing the ocean than this.

May rests her eyes for a moment, staring down at her sensible plain black shoes. That offers little reprieve. The light from the holo-screens and the vicious overhead lights bounce off the metal tread plate flooring.

If only she could see the world through that ocean layer of green-blue filtered light.

Except she could, if she wanted to constantly wear holo-projection lenses. It didn't take long for those to be adapted to personal use – they were on the shelves and in advertisements not long after the holoprojectors got installed at the plant. May just doesn't think it's worth it. Too great an expense for her salary, and far too much for the falsification of a dream.

Time winds its way onward, washing over her. Opportunity slips away like sand dragged from a beach by the waves. May has mapped that pattern over time, watching it play out on repeat as she tried to imagine how it might feel to stand at the ocean's edge. She stared at her phone, projecting the video onto the bathroom wall as she rested her feet in a layer of water in the tub. That was when she was still young, long before she moved out into an apartment that didn't even have a bathtub to offer. Nowadays she stands with her face tilted up to meet the water streaming from the showerhead. Her dream condenses into the narrow streams, becoming ever less real.

While her work might have little to do with her dreams, it does have plenty to do with the state of the city. May hears the rumors just like anyone else: the city is going to tear itself apart at the seams, it's all coming undone, and people are sick and tired of the construction and the restrictions and the patrols in the streets.

It all started with the museum protests. May knows about those because she found an article on them while researching whales. The museum had a whale skeleton that vanished with the rest of its contents, not long after the walls went up. May only ever visited the museum once



or twice. She was very young when she went. They had the whale skeleton, strung up above the main hall, and the guide pointed out to her whole class a miniature hologram of a whale swimming in the corner. May had liked that, and the fossils of dinosaurs that had lived in the oceans long before modern whales had called them home.

They were stuck, though. May would hate to be stuck like that.

She does hate being stuck like that.

Those museum protests were years ago, but the city never found rest, only an uneasy half-sleep.

The Forces have been good at keeping consistency, May thinks. They try to make sure that the city doesn't implode, though it's only ever half-effective. She knows – she was a science student; she knows how to read sources and compile perspectives. She knows about the protests and knows that the Forces are a part of what people are angry at. She doesn't get into the middle of it, though. One way or another, Forces controlled or in a state of protest, the city is wrapped up in its insulated bubble.

Whales need air. She thinks it's funny and a little strange that such a large creature, so adapted to life underwater, would need to come to the surface to breathe. She also thinks that she herself is running out of air. She isn't sure of where the surface is.

All predictions come true in one way or another, May's mother used to say. She meant it as a cautionary statement, a warning not to think negatively. There's no way around drowning, though, and no way around the city coming undone again.

When the protests turn to riots – that's new, something that May hasn't found in the old articles about the museums – management sends out an email with safety protocols. Extra

security is brought in. May finds it doubtful that anyone would come riot at a water processing plant, but you never know.

One night it happens. No one comes to set the plant on fire – it would be very ironic if they did – but the riots get too close, and employees are asked to stay inside with the doors locked and the security gates down.

Late enough into the night, the overhead lights shut off. Down here, the streetlights outside are blue, and bouncing from wall to wall the light wavers, ripples, dances. May, folding a single piece of paper over and over at her workstation with the holo-screens shut off, looks up to watch the light play across the ceiling.

Most of the people who May shares the room and its other workstations with are absent, gone to the breakroom to sit in a circle and pretend that the fighting down the street isn't happening. She checks the room anyway, walking in a loop around it. With the certainty of being alone, she lies down in the middle of the floor. Next to her, playing out loud, loud enough for the sound to echo off the walls, May's phone runs an audio track.

The soft rush of water, the echoing wail of whalesong, the blueness of the sea depths. May can feel the pressure. A comfort, not something to be feared. The metallic repetition outside of Forces soldiers demanding that everyone up and down the street stay indoors fades into the background, drowned out.

Drowned out, drowning; what they have in common is resistance. May does not go willingly into overworked oblivion. The soldiers do not willingly let themselves be blocked out. Water takes what it will, gives what it wants, is never truly contained.

The rioters would be wise to burst some pipes. May isn't going to give them that advice, only think it. She doesn't need the trouble of picking a side. But all predictions come true in one way or another.

The ocean laps at her sides until it comes to cover her up, filling up the room as the night drags on outside. May drifts into a sleep layered with all the dim colors of the ocean's depths and the sound of whalesong.

## Black and White (In Ink)

In a momentary fit of rage, Alce almost upends her computer, then finds herself wishing for an inkwell so that she could spill ink in all its void-like blackness across the page. An inkwell, a typewriter, a piece of actual paper, that's what she wants right now. Something to crumple or ruin. It would feel appropriate to actually lose progress.

Alce has been stuck in writing limbo for weeks now. Not in the sense of writer's block, no, that's mundane and common and understandable. She has had writer's block before, and would much prefer it. Instead, her block is external. She's been told not to write about the way the city is turning itself upside down.

"Right now, it's our job to keep this city from turning itself upside down," her boss told her, as if it was something in their control. "The Forces are doing what they can, but us? We're the city's voice. People listen to the news. We've got to do what we can." And then she sent Alce off to chase down information about a new factory in the lower sector. "Find a heartwarming angle. Something people will connect over."

A heartwarming factory opening. Sure.

This isn't why she went into journalism. Even aside from the current situation in the city, journalism has turned rather far away from the rustling daily papers made of actual, literal paper that her parents read in the morning when she was young. Everything is relegated to the realms of the tablets and implants and phones that people carry with them. Alce's no technophobe, but she's just old enough to remember when things were different and to miss it. Before the city shut itself away, paper was more accessible.

On her days off, Alce visits the city's biggest library. She's got the credentials to be let into the archive rooms. She can hold up an old paper, years old, yellowed so intensely that it's

more of an orange-brown, so fragile that most people aren't allowed to handle it. She respects it enough not to even try to unfold its pages fully, with the crisp snap that she remembers, against the room's still, stale air. Instead, she satisfies herself by laying it down on the viewing table and carefully flipping through it.

When she's sitting at her computer she misses those archive rooms in the worst way. She's thought about going to write there instead, but to write all these everyday things in that space would feel akin to ruining something sacred, blasphemous.

She knows that it's pretentious, and she laughs at herself when she thinks about it. Still, she takes it a little too seriously.

She turns back to her keyboard. Another few letters, monotonous clicking and tapping against the keys. Progress is slow when she can't imagine anyone wanting to read the story. Everyone is hunting for the big news, and the answers they want it to hold: why were so many people arrested last week at the protest, and why were so many injured? What started it all – was it really one man working down in the lower levels? Eyewitness reports crop up and vanish; a strike outside a factory, a gang of hooligans, an anti-maglev group striking out at the factories making the first of a line of hovercars.

Alce doesn't get to write any of that. And she's not exactly the feature writer at the Core Journal, so even if it weren't for the instructions to keep people calm, she probably wouldn't get the chance to cover something this big, this intense. She still frowns at the page on her screen. A long moment of frustration hangs in the still air before Alce swivels in her chair to look out the window.

She chose her apartment for this window. She doesn't know who lived here before her, but it's incredible that they'd ever give the place up. The window, circular and taking up most of

one wall, looks out on the city's center, where all the sunlight that otherwise doesn't reach beyond the upper floors spills through the city in its entirety. Sky to ground, nearly uninterrupted. Alce supposes that it became unaffordable for the prior occupant.

If she doesn't write her story and get paid for it, she'll be in the same position soon enough.

This stupid, pointless story.

Nobody wants to hear about a factory opening. Not now, not here. They don't want to hear about some upscale boutique, either. Alce knows that she certainly couldn't afford to shop there.

It isn't her boss's job to see to it that Alce can make a name for herself, and it isn't in their interests, either. It's something she has to do on her own. But that's complicated because she can't very well go off on her own and write about riots with no platform and, without a steady job, no money.

For now, she references an article from another online news outlet and compiles a list of the blasted boutique's offerings.

Life continues as usual. "As usual" includes discussions with coworkers that say nothing at all, fake smiles, and the sounds of gunshots somewhere in the city streets at night as Alce lays in bed and watches stripes of light move across her ceiling from the window. Her brain is heavy from weariness, from monotony, from frustration. Her body is oddly light, like she's waiting to evaporate and drift off the mattress.

She gets up on the morning of her next day off, belts a heavy coat tightly at her waist, and marches out to the nearest platform elevator. The great elevator runs on its slow, steady schedule

up and down the city, from the heights to the depths. Normally Alce would step on earlier in the morning when the lev is moving upward toward the library, but today she watches the little bit of sunlight that her floor gets disappear as the platform descends.

Slowly but surely, the light becomes nearly entirely electric. It filters through the platform's windows in a spectrum, the entire rainbow slowly cycling through, like those videos of color being lost down in the ocean's depths.

Alce gets off the platform deep into the industrial sector. The buildings around her hum and glow, gray broken up by superheated metal's orange shades, the air filled with smoke and steam and a heavy clanging, thumping, the sounds of machines as work on the factory line. Alce wonders if it's more machines than people in there.

That would be a story to write – the jobs lost to further mechanization, people who couldn't keep up with the machines because they weren't willing to augment themselves. Those body modifications, made available to the public only recently, are becoming easier and more popular every day. Arms and legs and reinforced spines equipped to factory workers and dancers and even politicians when they were once sported only by the Forces.

And with the availability and affordability comes a wave of creativity. On the Forces soldiers, the advanced electric prosthetics were simple, shining metal. Now they sport everything from vibrant colors to spinning rings to lights set directly into people's skin.

She respects it, although she wonders how much of it is an actual willingness to take on the augments and how much is the pressing force of progress, the need to adapt and match the city's pace.

Alce has her own judgments on the augments, but she keeps them to herself. Her job is to work with concrete information, not personal opinion. The changes offer up a wealth of

opportunities for journalistic inquiry, though. She only wishes she could be the one to follow up on them.

Alce keeps a notebook in her pocket. It's another old-fashioned indulgence, because she could easily do everything she needs on her phone. The scratch of pen on paper is satisfying, though. She jots down ideas for later, like this one, and they stay right there on the page in whorls of dark ink. She loves to watch as the pen leaves its traces, maybe more than the act of the writing itself. She even likes the smudges it leaves behind on her left hand when she writes too quickly, the way it smears faintly across the page. If she writes enough, the ink is hard to wash off.

Whatever smudges she leaves on her hand this time are quickly covered up with dirt when a gust of wind knocks her into a wall. Alce grimaces at the grime along all of her left side.

She's still trying to brush away dirt when she gets hit in the face with a cloud of foul-smelling smoke. Alce waves some of it away only for more to emerge from somewhere down the street. She coughs.

There's a sign to her right on the wall that she didn't body-slam. Its text encourages residents to adopt wearing face coverings to prevent excessive smoke inhalation. Alce toys with the fantasy of writing an article to convince the city's planners to create new air purification systems for the industrial sector. It'd no doubt be struck down, though, with some pompous suit-wearing man reminding a room full of other pompous suit-wearing people that not enough people live in the industrial sector full-time to make such an investment worth it.

It does seem quiet and unoccupied down here. It's not especially early, certainly not early enough for everyone to still be in bed, but the streets are so silent that Alce wonders if people are on strike. Something planned that she has no way of knowing, and that puts her in the wrong



place at the wrong time. Not a thought that she should give much time to, but she's just unfamiliar enough with the area to wonder.

Another gust of wind comes rushing down the street, hard and fast enough to catch Alce's coat and snap it against her underlayers. She's better braced for it this time, but it still knocks her off balance just enough for her to take a small and stumbling step to the side.

It might just be the tight quarters created by the towering buildings that promote such high-speed gusts, creating the perfect environment for a fledgling breeze to grow. It's been so long since she did anything properly investigative that Alce's had no reason to travel down to the industrial sector – time enough, clearly, to miss the development of new weather conditions.

She wanders the nearby streets somewhat aimlessly for almost ten minutes, never seeing a soul, only fighting against more and more wind. The next gust is like a wall that comes rushing down the street and slams her up against a corner, jamming her shoulder. Alce groans and rotates the joint in its socket, lifting and twisting her arm. It's sure to ache later.

A door bangs open down the street and someone peers out, hair tied up in a knot behind his head. "Hey, you!"

"Me?" Alce raises an eyebrow at the greeting, crossing her arms.

"Yeah, you. You know there's a wind watch out, right? Dust storm's coming."

"Dust storm?"

"You wanna get blown away, or do you want to hear about it inside?"

She takes him up on the latter.

It's quiet inside. The back room of a workshop of some sort, Alce thinks. Tools are strewn across a sturdy desk alongside a complicated system of wires and delicate-looking chips. A single finished metal finger is propped up away from the rest of the chaos.

The young man offers her a spot on a well-worn couch, which Alce takes. It puts her back to a small window, through which she can hear something clattering down the street she just came in from.

“Can I get your name?” she asks, glancing around the room again. The couch sags underneath her as she settles in.

“Rakkell,” the young man says. “You?”

“Alce.”

“Dunno what you’re doing down here-” Rakkell waves a hand as Alce tries to open her mouth to interrupt; “No, don’t say you’re from down here, I can tell you’re not. Not the industrial sector, at least. Dust storms have been picking up for months now. If you don’t know about them, you don’t work or live here.”

She wasn’t planning to lie about it. She didn’t imagine she’d convince anyone like that; she’s better informed than that, at least.

“It’s not like I said I was from down here,” she says. “And I’m willing to bet that you don’t know much about the floors above you, either.” She crosses her arms and squares her shoulders, making herself as tall as possible on the couch. “And you don’t know about all the banned topics in the papers right now, do you? Hard to learn much of anything lately.”

“Didn’t know, but that makes sense. Not surprised that everyone wants lower-floor business to stay lower-floor business.” Rakkell snorts and shakes his head. “Let me guess, you just had to poke your nose in and see what’s happening? Some sense of justice? Or are you Forces?”

“I’m not with the Forces.” Alce bites back further words before her tone can reach the point of knife-sharpness.

“Yeah? Guess they’d probably know about the storms. Let’s hear it, then.”

“I’m a journalist. It’s my *job* to ‘poke my nose in’ to things. Someone’s got to do it.”

“Why? You can’t just leave it be? We’ve got enough going on down here right now. No offense to journalism, but you said it yourself. The papers right now can’t say anything. It’s Forces business. You’ve got about as much reason to be down here as I do to be in the boardroom of a company meeting.”

“You say that like you don’t *want* anyone trying to say anything.”

Rakkel blows a long sigh through puffed cheeks and pursed lips and mutters something about people who don’t know anything trying to play the hero.

Alce taps her fingers in the crook of her elbow, fidgeting uneasily on the couch. Rakkel’s observations leave a bitter, chalky taste in the back of her throat, but she doesn’t give up that easily. She levels herself, and can’t look him in the eye since he’s turned away from her at the desk, but stares firmly at the back of his head. “The storms. When on earth did those start?”

“They’re nothing new. Been getting worse over the last couple of years, though.” Rakkel glances back over his shoulder with an analytical eye, his eyebrow quirked. “It’s the upward construction. Making a giant wind tunnel, basically, and I think the politicians have either got no idea what to do with it or don’t care.”

Alce’s urge is to correct him. She suppresses it. “Why wouldn’t they care?”

“Bigger problems, like a city that’s going to burn itself down if they’re not careful. ‘S funny, you’d think that they’d realize by now – everyone down here wouldn’t be so angry if they worked on their infrastructure.”

“You sound like you know what you’re talking about.”

Rakkell sets aside the pieces he's been working with and stands to turn and straddle his chair instead, leaning his chin on a fist, his arms crossed over the chair's back. "I'm a mechanic, not a civil engineer. I just know the problems because I live here."

If there's anything that Alce can appreciate, it's that Rakkell has gone and gotten to the heart of things immediately. She's sick and tired of dancing her way around points.

"I think," she says, uncrossing her arms to lean forward on the couch, "that the people who need to know may just not know. If it was a public issue, something that people knew beyond the industrial sector... Politicians have some obligation to keep the people happy."

Rakkell makes a noise that she thinks is a cough at first, and then she registers it as a laugh. He shakes his head slowly. "Listen," he says, "I can appreciate the thought. But the Forces are what keeps the city running. The Forces make the real decisions. If they're more focused on industry than living conditions, nothing's going to change. And you're down here thinking you can fix things with, what, a single article?"

"Dedication and curiosity. Journalist's toolbox." Alce leans back and fights the urge to defensively cross her arms again. "I know I can't fix it. That's not my job, and not the point. All I could hope to do is... I don't know, set something in motion."

"You'd be lucky to be left to keep writing if you published something like that, I think. Don't know if it's different for a journalist, but you have to know that the Forces don't take questioning their authority lightly."

"But they need us. The system only works the way it does because they have the people on their side."

“Maybe that’s how it was back when all this started. I don’t know. I don’t remember anything from before the walls went up. But now? They’re practically being lenient about all the protesting, but something’s going to give soon enough. Curiosity gets people killed.”

Alce balls her hands into fists against the upholstery. She’s not optimistic or fool enough to think it’s work she can do alone, but surely there’s some way. It’s work that someone has to do.

This is far from what she expected when she came down here. She wanted to see things for herself, wander around, maybe look in from above on the rumored site of the most recent protests. She didn’t think that she’d be handed current issues on a platter and then have to keep her mouth shut.

“I don’t know you, Alce. But I think anyone who gives a shit can do more staying alive than getting taken out by the Forces.” Rakkell shrugs.

Surely taken out is too strong an expression. The Forces don’t go around shooting anyone and everyone who disagrees with them – there would be no covering all of that up. But Rakkell looks serious, and Alce isn’t going to push it by questioning him about that.

A moment passes with only the company of the wind rattling at the window and howling around corners. Then Rakkell gets up again.

“You want tea?”

“Tea sounds good.”

Rakkell turns on an electric kettle across the desk and takes down mugs from a roughly hewn wooden shelf on the wall above. A moment passes with the kettle humming softly and the wind continuing to whirl, and then he asks her if she’s planning to write about this. If her curiosity’s been satisfied.

“Curiosity may have been the wrong word,” Alce says, standing up and showing her hands into her pockets. “Journalism is about the truth. It’s supposed to be, at least. Watching everyone sew their own lips closed gets old.”

Rakkell drums a metal spoon against his desk as he answers that. “Nothing wrong with that, but you’ve got to wait. Find the right moment. If you go around trying to spout off the truth wherever you go, it’ll get you in trouble, and make people think you’re a pretentious asshole to boot. I’m sure you know that already.”

He passes her a mug after another moment of silence, a teabag already set inside it, and pours hot water in while it’s in her hands. The warmth spreads from her fingertips through her arms, and the scent of chamomile slowly rises from her cup.

She stares into the water as it changes color, twisting the string attached to the teabag in her fingers, and then tells him that she isn’t going to write about this. Not for the paper, at least.

Rakkell nods once in what she thinks is approval, and he doesn’t ask her anything more. Alce settles back onto the couch, pulling out her notebook to jot down thoughts in a hasty scrawl with her mug still held in her other hand, and Rakkell goes back to his desk and workbench.

The workshop has a quiet electrical buzz around them as the wind stays constant beyond the window. It’s surprisingly cozy despite the storm that rages through the streets and sends something outside jolting and banging against the walls.

By the time Alce thinks to look back out the window, the street’s night lights have come on, washing out the streets into pale blue amidst the still-whirling dust devils. The lev platforms run all night, but she has work tomorrow, and she doesn’t want the hassle of late-night patrols on the street looking at her askance.

She sets her mug down on the table. “Can I wash this out anywhere?”

Rakkel looks up from what has slowly been coming together to be a mechanical arm on the table in front of them both. “Don’t worry about it, I’ve got it handled.”

“I should be going,” Alce says, gesturing to the light outside with a tilt of her chin. “Places to go. Do you always work late?”

“Time flies when you’ve got a chatty reporter hanging around,” Rakkel says, words light, offering a tight smile over his shoulder. “But tonight’s a late night. This needs to be ready in a couple days, and the client can’t delay it. They have to get back to work.”

Another tiny note in her book. Alce nods once and tucks the writing implements away, and Rakkel shoves himself up from the workbench with a groan, stretching his arms and twisting until his back cracks so hard that Alce winces. He scribbles something hastily on a piece of paper and passes it over, and Alce takes it regardless of the oil stain that’s made its way onto the page alongside the numbers.

“My number,” Rakkel says, by way of explanation. “If you want to learn more, I’ll be around. Always got work to do, and talking during it isn’t half bad. So long as you’re not planning to quote me in an article.”

Alce can’t help but smile. For all his seeming bluster and suspicion, he’s gone rather out of his way to help her. “Thanks,” she says, “and thanks for all the information.”

Later that night, unable to sleep and thus back at her desk with pen in hand, Alce scribbles away at larger sheets of paper. An article takes shape, and then becomes longer than any reasonable newspaper article should be, but she keeps going anyway. Piece after piece of information, context sorted out into paragraphs, the chainlinks strung together under the dim yellow glow of her desk lamp’s single bulb, the city slowly rumbling on into the night beyond her window.

The pages don't go anywhere. She keeps them tucked away in a crevice of her desk drawer and pulls them back out from time to time to make edits when the other articles she writes for the paper are driving her over the edge. But eventually, someday, she imagines finding somewhere to publish her documentation. These pages, now nearly novel-length and ever-lengthening, would tell people what things in the industrial sector are like now, and why the city should work to remedy the conditions. What's gone wrong, and how the people who live and work there are affected. There are more journalistic segments, and then, mixed in, Rakkel's stories. He tells them whenever she stops by – the first couple of times she asked, and after that he just always filled the silence. He's told her of workers who get their limbs replaced just to keep up with the changing machinery and technology, a cashier in a tiny store who talks about how they're being driven out of business because of their proximity to the slow growth of industry when they won't be able to rent a new space for their goods on the floors above, a woman who tried to grow a garden and woke up one day to find most of the plants shriveled from a chemical spill. All that and more within the flimsy pages.

She doesn't know when, or if, she'll be able to put her idea out into the world. She can only hope it'll happen someday. The city's lower floors can only hold up the weight of everything on the floors above for so long.



## No Replacements

The sign outside the window is old and faded. From his hospital bed, Alek can see cracks in the framework, places where the sign is pulling away from the metal that holds it in place as it blinks on and off and on and off over and over, cycling through yellow to orange to pink and back again.

He'll be discharged when his newly enhanced limbs have healed enough for him to function independently, or when someone arrives to pick him up, whichever comes first. Sounds like a scheme to wring more money out of him for a hospital stay, but maybe it's just procedure for as big an alteration as this.

When they asked him if he was sure that he wanted to replace both legs from the hip down, he just laughed and said anything would be better than what they were before.

Other surgeries have, he thinks, been worse for him. Therefore, the hospital should let him go home.

Family showing up sounds unlikely. After the first round of surgeries, they'd practically disowned him without ever saying it in so many words. They'd done nothing to help him, and he'd almost ripped the stitches on his chest open in the process of reaching for fresh bandages on too high of a shelf. He had called his brother for support and it had gone to voicemail. His sister picked up, and all she said was that mom and dad were pissed that any child of theirs would make such an alteration.

If they didn't like that, Alek doesn't imagine that they'd like the idea of their child replacing his legs. And he's got no one else to call in. Friends, sure, and Forces squadmates, but this isn't their problem to deal with. It might just be the painkillers talking, telling him that he'd

be fine on his own because nothing hurts, but in that case, they could just keep talking for another few days and by then he'd be doing great.

But no. He makes what he thinks are some very convincing arguments and the nurse responds by raising an eyebrow at him and saying they should consider keeping him longer to make sure he's sane.

Currently, the legs are nothing but dead weight. They're keeping him trapped in this bed. Once they come to life and he can stand up, though, it's a world of new possibilities. New opportunities.

Someone brushes aside the curtain separating him from all the equipment in the room. Blue-lit screens flash at him from beyond the partition. Alek blinks as the nurse pushing through says, "Mr. Dorin? We can discharge you now, your partner is here to pick you up."

The moment of confusion is immense, marked by spikes and dips on those glowing screens, and then a familiar figure leans around the curtain. "Hey, Alek."

"Partner" may have been a bit of a misnomer. El isn't a romantic partner, and technically isn't his partner in the Forces either, but in every other regard, she's as good a partner as he could ever ask for. Partner in crime, in a fight, when the deskwork is piling up too quickly, the list goes on. If that's what gets him out of here, he'll take it.

Through the medication, though, he does wonder why she would come here to pick him up.

Paperwork – extraneous amounts, surely – is signed. Someone hands Alek a list of instructions and a prescription for more painkillers. Then he's in a wheelchair and out the door to where El's got a car waiting underneath the blinking, shifting hues of the neon sign above. The same one Alek looked out on constantly for the first day while he was loopy with so many

painkillers he couldn't think, and which has been a constant companion since. Yellow, orange, pink.

"Alright, if you want to help me pick up the painkillers, I'll be good to go at my apartment after that," he says as El settles into the driver's seat and starts the car.

"Your apartment? Alek, c'mon, as if I'm letting my partner suffer alone after this." El winks at him cheerfully. "Didn't think they were gonna let me pick you up, especially after you were alone there for a bit, but they took partner a bit too literally. I wasn't gonna argue. Had to get you out of there – were you really just staring at walls for a few days? You can stay with me for a bit, they said you're not supposed to be moving around much. Leo won't mind, he loves you."

"The walls were... fine. Good for staring at." Alek squirms and straightens his shoulders against the car's solid seat. "How'd you even find out?" He didn't tell anyone for a reason, just took his leave days and went. No one really needed to know. Not even El. He's more than capable enough on his own.

"You're obvious, my guy. Left a prep list for the procedure on your desk at the office, and you didn't answer my calls. I pieced it together. Helps that I'm one of the Forces' most brilliant minds when it comes to tracking people down."

Alek sits quietly with that one for a few minutes. El deflates her puffed-up prideful chest and guides the car in and out of traffic through the city's airspace between sectors, tracing the path on the center console. The prediction blinks yellow, noting slight delays, but no major traffic.

Left outside the pharmacy under the light of another neon sign, this one mercifully one constant shade of green, Alek weighs what to say when El returns. *Thanks for helping me out.*

*Please just drop me at home. Actually, I think your cat hates me and will take advantage of my helplessness to smother me in my sleep.*

“Listen, El, I appreciate it, but I think I should just go home.”

El passes him a bottle of pills and shuts the driver’s side door with a clunk, turning to stare him down. “Be honest with me, dude. Why do you want to be alone so badly right now? No way you don’t know the risks.”

The implants at the base of the legs could get messed up if he puts too much pressure on them too soon. He could reopen incisions. He could send himself into shock by ignoring his limits. He knows the risks, but he knew how difficult it would be last time too.

That had been before he knew that his family wouldn’t show up at all, but he’d made it through.

He did still think about it sometimes. Alek’s father had implanted lenses in his eyes for vision and communication at work, his mother had insisted on keeping herself looking young. And somehow he was the one who had gone too far. Maybe if he had gotten the legs replaced first it actually would have been less alien to them.

“It’s just easier.”

El gives him a look, the one she always gives him when she doesn’t believe him but knows she shouldn’t push it further. “Fine. Then tell me what made you get the legs, at least. Gotta be something special if you went to the trouble.”

Alek wishes he could tuck his knees up to his chest and curl into himself without a burst of pain.

She’s his best friend for a reason. El is insightful and clearheaded and speaks her mind, and she’s judged him for many things, but usually for good reason. Even when she questions

him, she has his back. She would understand. Alek just doesn't know how to put it into words. He blames it on the painkillers.

The silence stews for a moment before it boils over.

"If you can't tell me, you're stuck with me," El says.

"It hurt too much," he says softly.

"And this... doesn't? You went and got an intensive surgery, Alek. Your legs are gone, and you can't get them back. It was stupidly risky, and for what?"

"Why would I want my legs, anyway? And it's not that risky anymore. The hospitals have been doing procedures like this for years now." Alek rolls down the window and tilts his head toward it. El starts the car, but doesn't pull away from the curb.

The city air isn't exactly fresh, but it's full of existence, being. Alek can hear someone hawking synthetic fruit down the street, claiming the best prices in the sector, and kids shouting on a playground not far off. The pharmacy's doors slide open and closed as customers pass in and out. Drones buzz and whirl through the air, marked with Forces colors and logos of different news stations. He can let the conversation sink into the outside noise and it can all blur and swirl together into a soup that's been given a few too many spices at once.

"Fine. Your apartment. Let's go." He rolls the window back up, and El is on the move, like she was just waiting for him to give in. She probably was.

Leo is waiting and yelling when El opens the door and helps Alek inside, that tiny mouth full of lots of pointy little teeth opening wider than it really should be able to. Before Alek can protest, El bundles Leo into his arms, pushes his chair up to the window by the living room, and says, "Give me a minute. I'll take the sofa bed for a few days, just need to get some stuff set up."

Normally Alek would toss Leo to the ground. Cats have a knack for being just fine like that. But the typically squirmy orange fluffball is staying startlingly still, tail swishing slowly back and forth as he stares wide-eyed at Alek.

Maybe there's nothing that wrong with him after all. Alek cautiously lowers Leo to his lap, wondering for a moment at the lack of sensation from the cat's weight before processing why it's different. Leo seems content to curl himself up, tail over nose – the change in Alek's legs doesn't seem to bother him, at least.

The cat's sleepiness might be infectious. In the amount of time it takes for El to do what she's doing in the next room, Alex tips his head back and stares at the ceiling long enough to slowly fade out into sleep.

The next few days pass quickly and as a bit of a blur. Alek watches videos and sits with Leo and helps El when she brings work home with her. They sit in her living room and run through questions and track down information. Alek's never had a head for it, but he knows how to run searches, at least, and he passes along to El whatever he finds that seems useful.

After several days of it, there's still something hanging electric in the air between them, the static jumping from metal to fingers whenever Alek even thinks of prodding.

El's probably still upset that he won't tell her everything.

His head is decidedly less fuzzy now that the dosage of painkillers is dropping. His hips have a dull ache where skin and bone connect to metal and electrics, but not bad enough to stop Alek from getting up and taking a few stumbling steps around the house, trying to figure out his balance all over again, like a child learning to walk.

The next two days both dawn cloudy and gray beyond the distant rooftops, and Alek stares out the window in frustration at the drizzle. It's probably raining harder up above, where

walkways and roads don't block out some of the water, but any rain at all foils his plans. Hard enough to walk on new legs without the ground being slippery.

On the third day, he gives up. When El has gotten back from work, Alek calls through the door between rooms: "Hey, how does a walk sound to you?"

He listens to the rustling of fabric for a minute as El gets changed before she opens the door and leans out. "A walk? When you're supposed to be resting?"

"Just a short one." Alek holds up his sheet of instructions, printed out at the hospital just in case having new legs was to somehow also give him memory issues. "I'm supposed to start using the legs. Carefully. We can be careful."

El looks at him skeptically. "Careful?"

"I'm very good at careful."

He is not that good at careful. The number of injuries that El knows full well he's had because he tripped or didn't realize how low a doorway was or pushed himself a little too hard while running drills is probably too high to count now. But he's putting on his best face of earnest good intentions.

El shakes her head and rolls her eyes, but she finally shrugs. "Fine. If this ends poorly, it was your call."

The awkward silence lingers out on the walkways, dragging itself behind them like an unspooling thread that marks a thin path back to El's apartment. Alek spins his umbrella, the handle twisting in his hand. The patterns whirl light and shapes in multicolored blurs on his face, yellow-green.

Stores up and down the street are already flinging squares of light onto the water-splashed sidewalks and turning on their signs to send ripples of color splashing through

reflections in puddles. Alek grimaces as he takes a step slightly too far and stumbles to correct for it, his hip's aching renewed. El snaps her head around to look at him.

At that moment, something snaps and clangs above them, and they both look up just in time for a torrent of water to gush past El's tilted umbrella and hit her square in the face. In the rush of water, Alek slips, stumbles again, and winds up groaning on the ground when his feet betray him and go out from under him.

The ensuing sputtering and groaning break the silence. El slaps wet hair away from her face, curses once, and then drops into a crouch at Alek's side. "You okay?"

"Think so." He moves his legs slowly, one and then the other. The aching has strengthened, but he doubts it's anything that another couple of pills won't fix. If it's a setback, it's a minor one. The only problem is that it means he's not leaving the apartment again for another few days.

If he's saying something, he needs to say it now.

"Thanks," he finally says.

"For getting soaked? Alek, if this is a well-planned revenge, I thought we ended the prank war in June, and it's taking it too far for you to get hurt. Come on." El drops her umbrella on the street and offers him both her hands. Alek gratefully takes them and leans his weight on her palms as he carefully pulls himself back to his feet.

"It isn't the prank war. I'm not that dumb. Or that petty." Alek shrugs. "It's just been a weird few days. It's nice to be out. So thanks for the walk."

"Don't thank me until we know your legs aren't going to fall off once we get home."

Silence falls again as they meander their way through the streets in a slowly widening loop around El's apartment. They eventually come to a halt at the edge of a street bathed in



yellow light by a billboard. The street overlooks cascading levels of roads below, leading all the way down to what Alek thinks is one of the sector's main power centers. It's like a beacon, glowing at all hours of the day and night.

He unthinkingly scuffs at the pavement with one shoe. A crumbling bit of the road goes skittering away from his kick. The ache intensifies ever so slightly.

"Thanks," he says again, quieter this time. The silence is strange to break.

"You already thanked me."

"Not for that. For picking me up, and for letting me stick around."

"Alek." El is looking at him, deadly serious. He can tell by the set of her eyes and the slight flare of her nostrils. "You don't have to thank me for that. You're my best friend. Did you really think I wouldn't want to help?"

"Not... not like that. I figured you would. I just didn't want to cause any trouble."

"Trouble? Alek, you've got less sense than a brick, dude. You're not trouble. It's just helping out a friend. It was more trouble to have to track you down."

He takes a breath of rain-scented air and looks down across the grid of everything beyond the street beneath his feet. His umbrella is solid in his hands, and Alek thinks his knuckles might be white on the handle, even without looking at them.

"I got the legs because I had to," he finally says. The words fight free of somewhere in his chest where they've been sitting ever since El picked him up from the hospital.

She lifts her head up at that, looking back over at him for the first time since they started walking again. "Had to?"

“Yeah.” Alek closes his umbrella and adjusts his collar to shield the back of his neck. The rain has slowed back down to a drizzle. “You remember how I told you that things kept hurting? That I couldn’t keep up with the training and the patrols?”

“I do.” There’s a question in her voice, although she doesn’t say it.

She doesn’t have to. It took him the entire walk to be able to say something, and he’ll be damned if he stops now that he’s started.

“I didn’t want to only be good for deskwork.” Alek thumps his wet, closed umbrella against his palm. “And I couldn’t lose the job with the Forces, get stuck with a lower sector shopkeep’s job or something. I went through the same training as anyone else to be here. It isn’t my fault that my joints started... deteriorating.”

“Deteriorating?”

All she’s doing is echoing him, but he soldiers on. There’s no turning around at this point. “Yeah. Some sort of weakness. Dislocations, injuries all layered on top of each other. Even walking hurt. That’s why they kept sticking me back at the desk with you, even though it’s not my normal assignment.”

El nods, slowly, like things are coming together for her. “I did wonder about that. Not that you aren’t smart.”

“You can say it. Intel isn’t what I do.” He lifts one leg and shakes some water from the sole of his shoe. Droplets go arcing through the air, momentarily refracting all that yellow light.

It doesn’t feel like much. A twinge in the connection where the new leg meets the stump of the old one, and otherwise, something like numbness. That’s really all he could ask for, as strange as it is. “I can’t just give up on it. I know you’ve got my back. I do appreciate it. But I have to be able to do this stuff on my own.”

“Is this about the shit with your family? They’re trash. They should have your back, too.”

“Even if they did, would that fix this? I’d still be stuck.” A gust of wind blows the drizzle directly into his face. Alek passes his sleeve over it, swiping water away from his eyes. “Not letting that happen. I just want to keep moving. And you can’t do that without legs.”

“Yeah.” El shoves her free hand in her pocket, staring out toward the power plant.

The awkwardness has broken, even as silence fills up the space between them again. The crackling tension in the air is ebbing away. El looks over to meet Alek’s eyes again. “Gonna keep walking, then?”

He’s getting tired from the aching and the few days of doing nothing, but he nods. They make another couple of loops, this time closing back in on the apartment. Looking up as they approach the entrance to the building, Alek catches glimpses of a yellowish sky, waiting for the storm to roll in.

There’s no replacement for seeing that. No replacement for the ability to wander the streets.

The elevator ride up is quiet until they’re closing in on El’s floor. Alek watches the numbers tick slowly upward and then El clears her throat. He turns.

“If you think I’ve got your back, then you should tell me next time. I hope there’s not a next time, but you should tell me. If it was too much trouble, I’d say no. Got it?” El doesn’t move when the elevator doors slide open. She’s too busy staring him down.

Alek offers her his hand, wordless. She shakes it.

There’s no replacement for El, either.

## The Cost of White Flags

There is a cost for everything. You pay the price for groceries, you can make food for the week. You pay for an apartment, you get a roof over your head. Exchange makes the world work.

Following this logic, you pay a price for safety.

If the people walking the streets to protect you have weapons, those are weapons you don't need to carry. If there are people willing to fight for you, you can avoid that fight yourself. You have to place your trust in them. You have to understand that they are doing what they can for you, and they will take the necessary steps to ensure your safety.

Zel taps at the screen hovering before her and replays the video again.

*“We assure you all that we will not allow threats into our city. Our hard-won peace will remain intact. Today, the Forces are on your side because you are on ours. The entire people of this city are what make it strong. You can protect this city with us – support the Forces.”*

Sitting at her sleek, shining, dark wood desk, Zel thinks that the latest material has been simplified to the point of stupidity, but it does make things happen. It doesn't mesh well with everyone, but the message finds its way. There will always be those problematic people who disagree.

She used to work in advertising before the Forces hired her, so Zel knows that every word, every color, every shape, it all counts. The Forces' colors are designed to be calm and neutral, white and gray, promising peace. They both blend into the backdrop of the city and are cleaner than it. They're a force for good, for the benefit of the many.

Unfortunately, their image is less than pristine. The cost of keeping the peace is that they have to dirty those hands in their pale armor. Not everyone in the city appreciates their protection.

Zel just has to remind them of what the Forces are truly doing. That's what they pay her for.

She quite likes the responsibility. The image of the Forces can be made or broken in her hands – and she's good at her job, and likes the pay and the security, so breaking it is out of the question. But, if she were to choose it, the option is there. She holds a great deal of power.

In this city, power is all about connections in the right places and being able to do the right things. Zel is enmeshed deeply in both precursors. Everyone should consider themselves lucky that she has opted not to use what she's been given for anything but their benefit.

Zel is also quite careful not to say anything like that to anyone. It's best that it remains a secret.

She pushes back from her desk and gathers her wallet and phone. No matter how much image remediation there is to do and how much of the video needs color grading and tweaking, she has the right to a lunch break.

Out of the office building's wide glass doors and onto the walkways. The sky above is gray, a fine mist of rain sluicing the metal beneath it clean – not that it needs it; the upkeep on the walkways this high up is near-constant. Zel's heels click and clang sharply across the surface as she makes her way to the tram stop, where she sits beneath its glass-ceilinged shelter and watches the rain meet the ground so quietly that she momentarily considers the idea that it might all be a hologram.

That might not be such a bad thing. Zel rests a finger against her chin, tapping idly. Holograms are clean and clear and require much less upkeep than a city eternally exposed to the elements. But to prevent the real water from reaching them would require some sort of ceiling.

Zel is no infrastructure expert – that isn't her job – but she's fairly certain that to build such a thing would require the city to stop its upward construction. It does rather rely on that, with no way to build outward unless they were to dismantle the walls. And only a fool would propose that – the walls are what made the city as it is today possible.

The tram arrives, humming on its wires, and Zel embarks, her hair catching just enough rain to lay damp against her neck and ears during the ride.

Everything out the window is gray and white. Futurism reigns in this sector. When the city grew tall enough, the architects became enamored with the idea of living in the future up there, and the advertisers called it the “city above the city”. The city of clouds and hopes and dreams.

Did people truly not realize what such a future would cost? The true future, once reached, is enviable. Therefore, the cost of the future is jealousy from others. The city locked itself down, defended by the Forces because others envied it to the extreme. Now, Zel knows that there is envy within. She's seen what the floors down below look like, dark and rusting apart and ever covered with a layer of dust and dirt from storms that rake through the wind tunnels of the lowest floors. Set in that world, who wouldn't envy the push into the future up above?

That, however, is no excuse to act out toward the city's destruction. The lower floors are still necessary. After all, the rest of the city is built atop them. Zel speaks the language of commitment, the same as the Forces. With a little more commitment from everyone down below, perhaps one day those sectors could be restored to their former glory.

It just cannot, and will not, happen until the people understand that their resistance to the Forces, the city's engine of change toward the future, is only doing them harm.

A holographic billboard floating against a dim screen backdrop glows out of the rain at Zel from beyond the tram's window. It's one of her own designs – she remembers editing the final image just last week. That had been a late night. The image is of a person in Forces armor juxtaposed against a dark background, the city at night, with all its nighttime lighting aglow. *Visible in the darkest hours*, the text says. The tram coasts past it.

Zel eats her lunch at a cafe with smooth silver countertops and hypermodern furniture. She admires the care put into the aesthetics, but does think that the orange that's part of their color scheme is garish, something belonging to a store somewhere below the sector. Vibrant color has its attractions, but the orange sets a certain tone.

Tone is of the utmost importance. She's spent long enough doing her job to know that the slightest miscalculation, a cool tone instead of a warm one, a synonym not properly thought out, can destroy all previous effort.

She leans against the counter to ask the worker behind it what the shade is.

“Blood orange, ma'am.”

Zel leaves the cafe with an unexpectedly bitter taste in her mouth.

This is her city. She has risen to the top of her field, shaped the image of the Forces, and curated her position for optimal importance with a minimal level of direct involvement. Zel has watched the city shift itself around her, up in the clouds, to match the design that she has put forth. Clean, sleek, and solid – unquestionable.

All this work she does, and for what? For cafes with blood orange decor and walls to ruin the care she puts into the image of it all.

She's never had much of a taste for citrus.

It's comforting to watch the tips of the city's greatest skyscrapers pass her back on the way back to the office. Surrounded by wisps of cloud, still lightly spattered with rain, it retains those shades of white and gray so conducive to serenity. Zel breathes in a slow rhythm, each puff of air fogging the window by her side for the briefest of moments. In and out, misted and faded.

When the sun goes down and the city's lights come on, then the sector will have its color – the appropriate colors. Blue and silver are the shades of nighttime lighting, accompanied by the glow of lamps inside apartments and the roving slices of light from the headlights of cars.

Zel will be content after work, with the cafe in the past, but for now, she has more to do. Color grading and lighting adjustments, and a Forces recruitment video to be shown in schools later this month.

*“Today, we celebrate the anniversary of our city's secession. Our escape from the outside world. The people you see who march the city every day in Forces armor are a reminder of our safety. We fought. We won. You can be a part of winning in the future.”*

That one will have warmer tones, for passion and for courage. Zel will see to it that all is as it should be.



## Hazy Orange Sun

The sun glows orange through the industrial haze, beating down on a city already exhausted in the summer heat. Sunset, and the heat is still rising up off the pavement in waves, making the air waver before your eyes. Everything's a little surreal when the heat hits like this. It's like the last few years of running could be condensed down to one day of heat and humidity, a summer fever dream.

You don't rest. You walked in your apartment door all but dripping with sweat, and a shower was only momentary relief. The entire apartment complex boils over. And all you can think about is the next thing to do, the next chance to run, the next thing that's going to go wrong.

It's been a long time since you could properly rest. Few people get the luxury, even fewer in your position – “fugitive from the law in a city that's under constant guard”, what an occupation. You get by daily by running jobs for the mechanic shops that work unlicensed in the industrial parts of the city, acting as a bouncer at a bar the next day. Place to place, inconsistent schedules, long nights and days heavy with the weight of hundreds of eyes and all that summer heat sinking down on you. If it weren't for the strength of metal legs to hold you up, you know you would have collapsed long ago.

There was a time when you sweat this hard for a cause that wasn't your own. Before you had the mechanical limbs, and before the world was one long string of running. Training seems so long ago. You took plenty of hits then, too, but they were always from someone who offered you a hand up when all was said and done. Now every mottled bruise and scar is something real. The full force of the city's military police hangs over you wherever you go.

You trace the burn scar up your neck mindlessly, but not aimlessly. It has a beginning, on your jawline, and an end, where what's left of your arm merges with metal – your arm and hand's replacement. You've had two years to become familiar with it and the legs. You still sometimes forget that the original isn't there. The metal is cold, smooth, and solid, the one reliable thing in the heat haze.

It works to your advantage. A punch has a lot more weight behind it. The person on the other end can see metal fingers in a fist. The arm has helped you in innumerable ways, but there are days when it's still just an object attached to you.

There are days when everything feels foreign and disconnected. All you can do is deal with it.

You slide open your windows. The noise outside comes rushing in, the clamor and bustle of the shops down the street, the screams of a child, your neighbor complaining about the heat and how high the smog has been reaching in recent days: "...and don't you think that the industry is contributing to the heat? Everything down there is a giant machine grinding away. Heat rises!"

You're situated above a main street. The noise isn't always pleasant, but the apartment's cheap. When you're not being kept awake by the sound of the city living outside your window, you think you actually like it. You can watch the city stretch and sprawl. Look up or down, you can see the levels above and below, stretching into the distance. The signage of stores and advertisements meanders down the street like a colorful pathway against a backdrop of gray and brown walls. There's so much of the city all clustered in one place, repeated again and again down the blocks in varying instances and intensities.

When you first arrived after leaving the Forces yourself, you got lost. Over and over, wandering the streets with a map in your hand as spring turned to summer. You were shaky on your new legs. It's crazy that no one saw you as an easy mugging.

Eventually, you found your way. Now, even on a day like this, you've practically run half the length of the city in one go without a misstep. You know its concrete and metal maze-work like the back of your hand, just as well as you ever knew the identical halls of the Forces buildings.

There was plenty of complaining to do in training, you remember that. Although trainees never heard the end of it if they were caught in the act. Complaining might as well have been conspiring to overthrow the Forces' peacekeeping efforts in the city. You could sneak a dry joke, though, a brief flash of sarcasm on a night out between mouthfuls of the first decent food you'd eaten in weeks. You do miss that – now, there's no one to joke with who knows what you're up against. Back then, people were ready to commiserate, most of the time.

Most of the time. There was always an outlier in every group, and you can remember the one in yours. She annoyed you – half to death, you said. Stuck up, lived by the rules, always somehow perfect, and never asked questions.

You never called her by name, and you still can't. It's just that now you don't let yourself think of her by the nickname anymore.

She couldn't beat you in close combat. It was her sole failing, in her eyes. She tried, because it wasn't enough for her to just be good at everything else. Over and over and over until it was something you were doing outside of regular training hours, just the two of you in a room as she flung herself at you and you laughed her off because you were taller and stronger. And then one day you offered her the same hand up that you offered everyone else and they offered

you in turn, and you realized you'd be happy to stay there hand in hand if only she'd give you the option.

If only the Forces would give you the option.

You couldn't tell her that. But you could offer to train with her again. You could silently pass her a cup of coffee when you could tell she'd been up late the night before.

And then it was the two of you against the world. You had her back, and she had yours. Trained together, fought together, and made sure you had the tools to succeed. Everyone in the Forces worked together, but not like that. You would have thrown yourself into fire for her. Up until the accident, you thought she would have done the same for you.

It wasn't her fault. You never thought that. But when she never showed up while you were recovering, when they had to replace your limbs with metal and you had to decide where to go from here, when you would have given anything for someone to give you a hand up.

After the accident, you left the Forces.

Time passed. You didn't let it pass, you seized it and made yourself better. You made every day a chance to do better, to help more people. You turned what the Forces took from you into something you could use to fight back against them.

No one else, you told yourself, should have to be alone after something like that. But with a military police force watching over everyone, what else can be done? People live their lives quietly, hoping to be left alone, out of the line of sight and the line of fire. The people in the Forces are subject to it, too. Head down, do your job, and you'll be safe enough in the city.

For a long time, you couldn't stop imagining what she might say or do, and couldn't help but think about the possibility of seeing her around some street corner someday in her armor and offering her a hand again. She'd have some explanation. You would know if it was the truth.

You've never seen her, though. Two whole years since you recovered, which is a long time, in the grand scheme of things. It would be lying to say that you gave up, but you refocused. You ran and ran and ran under the sun until you burned just as white-hot and no one could touch you. You defended the people who really needed defending. You raced across the city on the paths that no one else would – could – take, rooftop to rooftop and from fire escape to walkway.

Most of it starts to look the same. It's all blocky gray buildings lit up in the same color streetlights and people whose faces blur together. It doesn't matter who you help, because their faces fade over time. Your one corner of the city, your tiny apartment, your bittersweet home – you can learn to like it, but it's all the same.

You could have sworn that time was supposed to heal. To cure all wounds. Hard not to laugh at that one.

The sun is sinking even lower in the sky outside. At least, you think it must be, because it's vanished behind other buildings and is only casting light through your window in stripes of gold and amber. Where it reflects off your arm the metal stops looking so cold, as if it's still fresh from smelting and sparking when hit. You can almost imagine it coming to life as you turn it back and forth for bands of sunlight to cross it, your fingers slowly spreading out to cast a strangely ridged, broken shadow on your wall.

The sun fades too quickly, and you lean your head back outside to see clouds sweeping in over the sky. A summer storm, somewhere far above the endless towering buildings. The bottom floors barely see rain anymore, something you know because you've spent so much time down there now. One of your closest contacts, a good friend, told you a story about climbing hundreds of floors via stairs and back streets with his young nephew so that they could get out of the industrial sector. They made the journey up above, winding in slow circles to the city's center.

The city opens up there, and they could feel the rain on their faces. You laughed until you realized that the kid had never felt rain before, and realized that you had only felt it when it drummed against your armor.

Now you have one arm left, and as the clouds roll in and turn the city into a dim gray mess of blocks and wires you stretch it out the window. A stray raindrop splatters against your palm. It's unlikely, and yet there it is. Tiny droplets of water refract fading sunlight across your hand. Your hand, patched with calluses and tiny dots and lines of scars, your knuckles bandaged from where you skinned them against a building when you were in a rush yesterday.

Just like the city, the sun never changes. It's all much the same. Light and life, sometimes altered by the weather, move in their patterns.

You can only hope to be so dependable. You're one person with a fire in your chest, and if you're not careful it'll burn you up. What use are you to anyone if you're a burnt-out husk shedding ashes into the street?

There's a price to be paid to be anything like the sun. It casts light from afar, but no one can get too close. It's dangerous. You've put time, and work, into being dangerous.

You just sometimes like imagining what it would be like to hold someone. There's always one face in your mind, pale and sharp, her lips set in a frown, probably about to call you an idiot. But the time for finding her has turned to the time for fighting her.

That's what would happen if you were to meet, there's no doubt in your mind. She's stubbornly loyal to the Forces, stubbornly perfect.

Neither of you can touch; you can only live in parallel lines across the grayscale map of the city.

The last of the sunlight is fading from the sky. Out of the light, your arm has turned once again to lifeless metal, but you stretch it out into the rain alongside your other hand, scarred but intact.

Tomorrow is another day threatening blistering heat, another chance to run the length and breadth of the city in an endless search for answers to a question you can't actually speak aloud. Every step a hesitation as you wonder who might recognize you beyond the metal limbs, who might strike you down with a single shot.

She always was a sharpshooter a cut above the rest.

If you were to go out at her hands, at least you'd leave behind some color in the world.  
The dying light of the sun.

## Faded Into Smoke

The day outside is the sort of utilitarian gray that comes before a possible rain that may never arrive. The city is still, muggy, with humidity hanging heavy in the air. Beneath your armor and undersuit is a layer of sweat, irritating your skin, caught by friction. All you can do is keep your face still and expressionless as you make your rounds of the streets. Formality to hide your frustration. The streetlights begin to flick on, encouraged by the slowly darkening sky.

A thunderstorm would, at this point, be welcome. Something to cut the thickness of the air, and to clear the streets to give you some peace on your patrol. There's less rain that makes its way down here than the barracks on the city's outskirts, where things are less built up. Still, enough finds its way to sluice the streets clean and send people indoors.

A storm would give you something to do other than march while your mind runs circles around you for lack of better things to do. On days like these, simultaneously too quiet and too agitating, you hate how easy it is to think of things that should be settled firmly in the past. There are some things that are better forgotten. Some people.

You passed someone who looked like them on the street earlier. The same prominent bridge of the nose, the tilt of their jaw and the way they held their shoulders. They were gone before you could look closer, fast enough that you could almost dismiss it as a hallucination brought on by the heat.

They're gone now, the person who weighs heaviest on your mind. Dead. There were two squadrons sent out to deal with a disturbance that should have been easy to handle. You hadn't yet been sent in when the news reached you – several injured, two casualties, and that was only among the Forces. They were gone, just like that. The Forces didn't dwell on deaths, so it was



like they'd just disappeared, their burial somewhere going unannounced. You'd never gone to find their grave. It would have been a waste of precious time.

So it was quick. Even though you knew it was your job to focus on the present, your first thought was that it wasn't like them to be so quiet.

When you'd first looked at them, back when you met them, all you could think was that they were atrociously *wrong* for this place.

No one with that much annoying, incredible tenacity, such refusal to conform, can make it as a soldier in the Forces. You watched them crack jokes with someone assigned as their partner during a training exercise and were torn between exasperation and wondering *What are they talking about?*

You wondered if they would bother to try to joke with you, too, or if they would assess you and find you unworthy.

That was answered when you got paired up a week later.

"Think gray and white are your colors?" they asked, raising an eyebrow. An extra button was undone on their shirt, and you snapped out a retort about the colors being more yours than theirs because at least you could be bothered to wear the uniform properly.

"They're not really colors, anyway." That was what they said in response, shrugging. It was like you hadn't even tried to insult them. They grinned at you. It was a smile that was a little too genuine for someone you'd just thrown a barb at. You hated it, and that was how they got under your skin the first time.

They burned with all the brightness and righteousness of a second sun, and as time passed you could barely look at them. You would have locked yourself away from their warmth if it wasn't for the fact that, for some indecipherable reason, they'd taken a liking to you. No matter

what you did, they were still there. You threw insults at every opportunity, threw punches a little too hard during sparring, and they would laugh like the bruises meant nothing. They settled beside you in the commissary and you tried not to look at them too closely when they chuckled and nudged you to share the joke like it was something only the two of you would understand.

The insults slowed. Their cheer became an easy sort of warmth, the smiles less broad but no less heartfelt. Sometimes, after a long day, you'd sit there in silence with them. There was no one point at which their company became bearable, or even when it became welcome – one day you just knew it was.

On the street around you, the wind is picking up. You can't feel it through the armor, but you can see it whirling little pieces of grit and trash through the air. No rain yet, but you can imagine it, the first few drops followed by the pounding heaviness of a proper summer storm. It'll wash the whole city into damp darkness, all the sound drowned out in a few minutes of water before the storm eases. You know these storms well. All the flashing of the signs and billboards and soaring drones and cars will be blurred out into muted distant static. It'll be just you on the street, with the hovering, glowing display inside your helmet for company.

Imagination has no place on patrol. You're good at your job, which makes it all the more strange now, as that imagined rain does begin to hit, that you're so lost in memories.

There was so little free time during training. You'd never had an issue with that until the first night they dragged you out into the city despite your complaints. They pressed a warm drink into your hands against the brisk night breeze and waved a hand when you said you'd pay them back. "It's a gift! I know you wouldn't have gotten it for yourself. You can just get me something next time if you care that much." A wink, the unspoken *so you'd better be here next time*.

Their stupid grin was contagious. You smiled back, a faint, wavering reflection of their light. You wanted more of this, for more of time to feel so slow.

Your entire life had been dedicated to proving that you were better. You wound up average height, blending into crowds but surpassing others in skills. You could gather information like it was nothing, retain things you'd heard once years ago. Firing a gun was like second nature, which advanced you into the specialization of handling sniper rifles in training. You received nods of approval from instructors and felt a dim glow of pride light itself in your chest.

And you were restrained, refined. You spent your spare time practicing and training and researching, and that made people look at you like a paragon of usefulness and discipline. The epitome of what it was to be a Forces soldier.

You liked it, being useful.

Somehow, you didn't like being useful as much as you liked it when that idiot and their stupid smile showed up for no reason at all. You did not like discipline as much as you liked it when they took your arm to tug you back out the door into the cold night and laughed at your shivering before loaning you their jacket.

"I don't get cold that easily." Of course they didn't.

Strange to think of the cold now, trapped inside the sweat-drenched heat of a summer spent in armor. The rain is pattering down in earnest, drumming on your shoulders and your helmet. You can't feel it, and even the sound is distant. Something in your chest rises up your throat like bile. You want to rip the helmet off.

So much for peace and quiet – you can't even have it in your own head. You're not one to rush into fights, but right now you almost wish for one.

They were better than you at hand-to-hand combat, which was unfair, and just another reason that they burned like fire. They were the one to rush in. In training, you watched them pin someone and then offer them a hand up. They wore a face of pure delight in the action of it and the success. You frowned again at the fact that you were so distinctly average in height and build, grimaced at the few inches they had on you which they used to teasingly tap the top of your head. And then they brushed some stray hair back into place behind your ear without a second thought, and you could feel the lingering heat of the fight.

You said you'd win eventually. Snapped it out, actually, which led to sparring that kept up until you were spending almost all your free time together, dismissing anyone else's questions with explanations of more training, which was more believable about you than them. They cared about that as little as they cared about any other judgment someone tried to pin on them. Nothing that anyone said could dampen the blaze.

You would give anything, now, for time to freeze, to lock in that moment of almost-closeness. Because it never got better than that, although you don't know what better would have looked like. You woke up once from a dream that they were asleep next to you under the same sheets, so close that you could feel when they inhaled, exhaled, over and over.

That dream never made a return after the accident. Instead, you dreamed of a voice without a face, and you woke up ready to scream because you didn't think you remembered what their eyes looked like anymore.

You remember their last words to you, because you hear them all the time. "*See you after.*" It had only become a lie in the aftermath. Their voice eventually stopped saying anything new, but in some twisted way, you were still glad to hear it, because you know someday you'll lose track of what they sounded like, too.

It might be better that way. It was hard enough after the initial incident to keep yourself together. You worked harder than ever, gave no one chance to question your behavior. Your squadron was ever persistent, even though you'd denied their attempts at friendship time and time again. They were the only ones to notice something. In time, though, even they gave up. You kept your secrets behind a professional mask.

Two years of hard work, of rising up the ranks, of there being a constant seething pool of acid in the back of your mind that ate up memories and emotions and light until you gave up and straightened out your uniform on your shoulders and stopped trying. Slowly, memories faded into a distant blur, like a light seen from so far beneath water that it has no color. You did not sink, because you were doing much too well for it to be called sinking. Rising up the ranks, sinking further into a sort of complacency in which you were very good at your job and very bad at doing anything else.

At the end of those two years, you've snapped. You are, were, better than this, but you're here thinking yourself in circles. The details of the memories are gone, but you trace the path again as if you can revive them.

The rain, still drumming against you, suits itself to melancholy. Slowly, you start to numb out. You push the pointed edge of your focus into every drop against you, into your footsteps, into movement on the street. You beat the memories back as best you can.

You don't want something to go wrong. Not really. You don't want a fight, don't want trouble, don't want anything but to be swallowed up by the grayness of the day around you. But you don't have to want things to see them, in the same way that you don't have to see things to want them. The two things are two different types of aching within your chest, one frightened and the other frightening.

Orange like smoldering embers, like the sun, somehow not put out even when the rain comes in. Reemerging into flickering life when the clouds roll away. You can't kill your desires. No amount of work is enough for that. You can only muffle their voice.

You deviate from your assigned patrol route for a single moment, stepping into an alley just long enough to strip the armor and glove beneath from one hand, extending it out from under an awning into the rain. The pattering on your skin is more relief than you had hoped, soothing away heat and sweat and an ache deeper than physical exhaustion. The one moment is enough to carry you back to the street, back to the route overlaid on your vision by your helmet's interface.

Closed eyes beneath the glass. For a moment the light, however gray it might be when your eyes are open, filters orange through your eyelids.

The world is beautiful when it's rainswept.

And still, you wish you could watch the sun come out again.

## Bloodrust

Regina paces at the edges of the street and watches the crowd, comparing faces to the one projected into her vision by her electronic eye in microseconds. Red flickers pass through her sightline, laid over the people and paint-and-poster-covered walls and dimly glowing signs.

It's pure luck, much as she hates to admit it, that brings her to the girl at the end of the day. Regina catches a flash of cyan glowing down an alleyway and freezes, feigning interest in a flickering menu in a window.

Plenty of things are cyan in a world filled with lights and body modifications and densely packed shops, but Regina has spent enough time hunting to know to trust her instincts. Sure enough, it's her prey that emerges from the alleyway, taking tiny flitting glances up and down the street even as she walks with her shoulders back, glowing skates exchanged for sneakers. Regina notes her walk: confident but slightly interrupted. Ill-fitting shoes, maybe, or an injury.

The girl, long ponytail whipping over her shoulder, takes a look out at the street before vanishing into a fast food restaurant. Regina finally turns from the menu, flicking rapidly through files overlaid on her vision.

Ideally, she would move in, get the girl outside and somewhere quiet, and then detain her for Forces pickup. Whatever they're going to do with her, Regina doesn't want anything to do with it. She tracks down people working the city's underbelly, usually. Not teenagers who've made messes they don't have the power to fix.

And what a mess the girl has made. If all the little things weren't enough, added up as Regina has while compiling her files, the most recent incident would be enough to bring the Forces down on her back. Spreading access to a private Forces communications channel is quite damning, and it's proof enough of her guilt that the message was sprayed in vibrant paint across

an entire street. The girl's signature colors, cyan and pink. Maybe the girl is a fool, or maybe she's just too confident. Either way, it's come back to bite her.

Regina stands in a pool of dim light beneath the restaurant's awning and sign, which is flickering like it's breathing its last. For a moment, as she looks into the window, she's reminded of scrounging the funds together to pay for a few mouthfuls of fries and a drink, years ago, before she was on the Forces payroll.

She isn't unfamiliar with feeling desperate, or rebellious, sometimes both at once. Those feelings are the kinds of things that lead to foolish actions. But a job is still a job, and now Regina makes sure that people who do the same things she would have done when she was young don't keep it up.

Early in her career, she made mistakes. She saw a little bit of herself in everyone. It tore holes into her to bring them in, especially the ones around her age. But she was better – that's how it was. In the game of cat and mouse, she'd won, and that was how she convinced herself to get it done. That and the promise of a meal in her stomach and a roof over her head.

Now Regina knows better. She gets in and gets out fast, before she can think about it for too long.

She is aware that she is making a bad decision when she lingers outside looking in. This isn't time spent analyzing, it's time spent thinking. Considering. Picturing things that blur the boundaries between the facts she has and what might be somewhere behind them.

It might be pity that makes her sit down at the girl's booth. Or sympathy, or commiseration, something else that doesn't pay the bills. But she swings herself into the opposite side of the booth and crosses her arms before her on the table, drumming her fingers.

Regina has the girl's attention immediately. Finally, she looks jumpy.



“Uhh, can I help you?” A lower voice than Regina expected, faintly hoarse. The girl grips her phone like a shield across the table.

“I do believe you can.” Regina stills her fingers against the glowing advertisements beneath. “You’re Catherine Im, correct?”

“Sorry, I don’t think you’ve got the right person.” The girl lowers her phone beneath the table. Regina’s eyebrow twitches once. She’s got one of the many blurry photos of the girl overlaid, translucent, across Catherine’s face right now.

“I know exactly who I’ve got, kid. It’s a formality. I wouldn’t report this if I were you, that’s just a quicker route to the Forces.” If the girl thought her movement to dial a number below the table was subtle, she might just be a fool. That would make this easier. Regina settles back in her seat and brings her arms in to cross them over her chest, all the tiny interlocking pieces whirring, the inlaid lights flickering into a dim, pale shade. “Don’t try to book it, either. If we do this the easy way you’ve got nothing to worry about with me.”

Catherine drops the pretense of innocence. “Like you could catch me if I leave,” she says. Regina sees the tension on the other side of the booth, the shift in weight as the skater prepares to throw herself out the door.

“I can and I will. But that’s the hard way.”

Slowly, the girl turns her head back to meet Regina’s eyes. “Then what’s the easy way?”

“Sit back down.”

The girl sits. “Who are you?”

“Hunter for the Forces.” She doesn’t need a name. “I can’t imagine you need to know what trouble you’ve made. So, here’s the deal. You sit here with me, explain yourself, and no one tackles you on the street and makes this messy. How’s that sound?”

“Like shit,” the girl says, grimacing, but she crosses her arms protectively across her chest and leans back in the booth, mirroring Regina’s pose, staying put. Smart enough not to run, then. “What exactly am I supposed to explain to you, huh? Sounds like you know everything already.”

“I know the facts.” Which is, in fact, everything she needs to know. Bounty hunting for the Forces is competitive, and getting attached to a bounty is what’s known as a bad idea. Regina’s phone is burning a hole in her pocket. She knows the number of her Forces handler, and could, should, dial it. “Tell me more.”

The last bounty she ever messed up on was the one with the bruised face. A girl who at the time couldn’t have been more than a couple of years younger than her. Regina didn’t know the circumstances of it all, only what she’d been told. She’d gotten involved with a group throwing bricks at the Forces, apparently, and when the patrol on the other end of it started making arrests, she’d fired shots before running.

Regina had underestimated her. Felt bad for her. She’d asked her where the bruises came from.

The way it had ended was a bullet that sliced through between her ribs. The doctors told Regina she was incredibly lucky it had missed anything vital. She’d sat still and said nothing in response, because there was nothing to say. Her handler then, some short-haired woman with thin lips, had reprimanded her with few words, but it had been all Regina needed to hear.

She had never been particularly trusting, growing up the way she did, but that was when she’d learned to stop caring. She was really surprised she hadn’t learned sooner.

Across the table, Catherine hunches slightly, tucking her shoulders in around her pale face. “I don’t tell my life story to cops.”

Regina laughs.

The girl looks far from at ease with the sound, and Regina waves one hand dismissively, still chuckling. “I’m no cop, kid. Bounty hunting’s as close to lawlessness as you get. I just happen to sometimes be Forces-sponsored. But sure. Fair. The Forces won’t want your story, anyway.”

Catherine looks sick under the orange-pink lighting above the table, her eyes following Regina’s hand and its spindly fingers. “Fine. But where do you want me to start?”

“I know the ‘how’,” Regina says. “Let’s start with the ‘why’.”

And Catherine, Cat, spills it all. The glory of the city seen from above, the adrenaline of the fall and the speed and the bright colors all blurring together. Restless energy, that much Regina can understand. Then Cat’s speech slows, the joy in it slipping away, and she mutters something about a tiny apartment in the industrial sector, and a friend who got injured and caught out past the recent curfew, the one in place to keep the streets quiet late at night. Detained, yet to be seen again.

“If they’re going to screw with people just for living, why not give ‘em something to worry about?” There’s a gleam in Cat’s dark eyes, and it isn’t just from the glare of the restaurant’s obnoxious lights. Regina sees something familiar there, and it spells her downfall. When she was Cat’s age, she was looking for a thrill, too. Just didn’t channel it through a pair of skates and the rush of night air. Regina threw punches in a concrete room too small for its purpose, sweating out the city’s gift of fear. Her handler set up her contract months later, after Regina got picked up for fighting in an underground club.

She loves the streets of this city because they give her something to do. She doesn't have to go looking for a fight anymore. Maybe, in her own adrenaline-seeking way, Cat's much the same.

"You knew you were going to get in trouble."

"Yeah. Been in trouble before, though."

"You got anyone to get you out of it?" That's the deciding factor, really. If a troublemaking kid's got relatives to bail them out or explain away their rebellion, the Forces can let it slide. They've just got a city to protect, and people who threaten it meet with a new kind of trouble. Kids can get off easy if their relatives are stable and can teach them better.

"Does it look like I do?"

It doesn't. Cat's clearly been laying low, trying to stay out of the eye of the Forces on her own. Doing a decent job of it, given how long it took Regina to track her down.

Without her job – well, Regina would hate to wander the city streets with nothing to do. But Cat seems to find something out there that's worth seeing. Just seeing, existing with. No interface between her and a target, no metal fists and knives and bullets in her arsenal. Just a pair of skates and some paint, cyan and pink.

This is why she doesn't talk to targets. Regina can see what'll happen here. She'll hand Cat over to the Forces and watch the kid disappear. She won't get a lighter sentence for being a troubled teen or having a tough time. The city's big enough that Regina will never have to see her again, even if she makes it back out anytime soon, but she'll always be around the corner in Regina's head.

"Come on, kid," she says, sliding back out of the booth. "Time to go."

Cat follows her out of the restaurant with surprising silent obedience. Only about a block down the street does she say, “You didn’t call them.”

“No. I didn’t.”

“So where are you taking me?”

“You need someone to get you out of trouble.” Regina pauses at a walkway railing, resting her hand on the rusting metal. It leaves orange-brown smears on the dark metal of her hand and the smell of something like blood in her nose. “And you need to keep your head down for a while.”

Cat’s footsteps fall behind for a moment and then fall out of rhythm as she hurries to keep up. Regina sighs softly.

This is nothing to smile at, but something unbidden tugs at the corner of her mouth.

“So, are you going to stop calling me kid? You don’t even look *that* much older than me.”

“I’m older than you think.” Just not so much older that she’s forgotten.

The two of them disappear down the next walkway into the shadow of a building above.

Terminus.