



THE MORTALITY EXPERIMENT

HALO SCOT

The Outpost

Kaj: 2 Weeks to Launch

Do you want to hear a secret?
What about *see* one?
You already have. As shadows, as mirages, as ghosts. The secrets you whisper to the dark *become* the dark. On land, that is. Offworld, it's a different story.

In the bowels of deep space, secrets become sentient. Rumors become reality. Nightmares become night monsters. Darkness gives voice to all your fears, all your guilt, all your fractured memories. No. Not voice. Gives body. Gives soul. Corporeal regret—that's the demon who festers in the void between stars. The ship is haunted. Not by ghosts, but by secrets. Secrets we brought aboard. Secrets we hid from even ourselves. Secrets that poisoned us in the dead of space till the only souls left were purest gold. Because secrets are sentient, are mortal wounds. And if we had known sooner, we would never have agreed to this mission.

I almost don't make it, as it is. Two weeks before launch, the Ward recruits me with the sole purpose of recruiting RJ. No one knows what the letters stand for. No one dares to ask. The last one who did ended up on a stretcher. She's RJ. *Just* RJ. For all intents and purposes, that's more than enough. In most cases, she's too much.

However, RJ is a brilliant holosurgeon. Best the Outpost ever had. I'm a mediocre nurse, but they need me to control her, to keep her in line. And I can. Most of the time. Problem is, she and I fell out years ago after some shit neither of us can fully remember. So when I appear at her bunk a minute to midnight, her reaction is just as violent as my imaginings.

"What the fuck are you doing here, Kaj?" RJ hisses in greeting.

She arrives at the door, blastgun in hand, barrel trained on my forehead. Villain-red eyes strike me with fury, fringed by spider-leg eyelashes and kohl. Twin lasers bore through my skull and pierce me with loathing. *Fuck off*, they shriek, bright as a siren. *Fuck off, and leave me alone*. Would that I could, RJ. Would that we both could leave everything behind.

I raise my hands in surrender. "Listen, RJ—"

"You know what? I don't give a shit. Get out before I paint you." She pumps the blastgun and jams the end against my nose.

I stagger back, trip, catch myself against the wall. "What the hell is your problem?"

"That's cute. Play dumb. Didn't work before, and sure as shit won't work now."

I told you. Rage doesn't begin to cover it.

"It's serious this time," I say.

She removes the gun from my nose, reluctant, and itches her head with the end. The muzzle tousles her buzzed chestnut hair. Everything about her is stark, angular, from her face to

her wiry build. The antithesis of a teddy bear. The archenemy, really. The nemesis of all things cute and cuddly.

“It’s always serious,” she says, “and there’s always a next time. Not interested. Don’t care. Night, Kaj.”

She tosses the blastgun in a corner as one would a blanket and slams the door in my face.

Fuck.

“Five minutes,” I call through the door. “Give me five minutes, and I’ll—”

The hallway sprinkler turns on, interrupting me, soaking me.

“*Night, Kaj,*” RJ repeats from the other side.

“It’s the Ward.” I shiver as my clothes drench and skin prickles. “There’s a mission. We could get away from this shithole.”

At that, the sprinkler stops, and the door cracks. RJ lingers in the opening, hesitant. She should be. Hell, we all should be. The Ward’s reputation is even worse than RJ’s.

“The Ward?” she asks.

I nod. “They want you. They’ll pay anything.”

She narrows her eyes. “You already agreed. Idiot. A blank check is a fool’s salary.”

“Money is money.”

“Said the paper to the gold.”

“I’m in no mood for riddles.”

“I’m in no mood for assholes.”

She slams the door, but I catch it with my boot. “Please, listen,” I say. “I’m sorry for...well, for whatever you’re pissed about, but we’re a team. A good one. And whatever the Ward has planned, I’ll need you by my side. I don’t trust them, RJ.”

“Then why’d you sell them your soul?” she sneers.

I shrug, embarrassed. “I need the money.”

“What happened to your last paycheck?” she asks. “You

should have enough cybs for the rest of the year.” She peers closer with those eerie red eyes. “You’re lying. It’s not about money. It’s about adventure. A bit young for a midlife crisis, aren’t you?”

Not when life expectancy on the Outpost is shit.

“You don’t understand,” I say.

RJ seethes. “No, *you* don’t understand. I can’t...I won’t...shit, I have...never mind. I can’t risk...you know what? Just leave.”

She kicks my boot, but I wedge the door open further. My clothes drip in the entryway.

“You can’t hide here forever, RJ. Live a little.”

“That’s the problem, Kaj. I’ve lived too much.”

“You could use the cybs.”

“Shut up about money.”

I appeal to her baser side. “Whores are expensive.”

“Clean whores even more so, but as I said, I am *not* interested.”

“Come on,” I plead. “There must be somewhere you want to go, someone you want to see. Isn’t there anyone you care about?”

Darkness storms her gaze, and I realize too late I’ve made a massive mistake.

RJ yanks open the door and launches me over the threshold. I fall to the floor and crack my head on metal. She kicks my gut, and the world spins. Blood fountains from my mouth as I stand, dizzy, and hold up my hands.

“RJ,” I slur through a mouthful of copper, “I didn’t know...I didn’t mean—”

And she doesn’t care. She grabs the blastgun from the floor and swings the barrel at my head. I duck and rush her stomach, but she elbows my temple, and I go down hard.

“You don’t remember.” She pads toward me with a feline gait.

I try to sit, but my vision tapers over, and my limbs wriggle like jump ropes. “You don’t remember what we did.”

“No, I don’t,” I admit, “but it doesn’t warrant this.”

RJ disagrees. She kicks me again, in the shin this time, and I double over as pain splinters up my leg. The cool metal of the blastgun rests against my jaw as she tugs back my black hair to expose my throat.

“A patient *died*,” she whispers, “because of us. Someone with a family, with kids. He was all they had, Kaj, and we killed him. We *orphaned* them.” Her voice wavers, and the blastgun digs deeper into my neck. Agony spikes up my skull in anticipation.

I shake my head, unable to focus. “That? No. There was nothing we could do. The gloves malfunctioned. I logged it after. Didn’t you read my report?”

“I don’t give a shit about reports,” she snaps. “I could have saved him.”

“With working equipment, yes, but the techs fucked up, not us. You’re a holosurgeon, not a god.”

“Excuses are for pussies.”

“For Net’s sake, it’s not an excuse.” I recover enough to shove the blastgun out of my face and roll to my feet. “You can’t save everyone, RJ, especially not here. You want to help people? Leave the Outpost, and join me. Ward tech never malfunctions.”

“That doesn’t make you suspicious?” she asks.

“Everything about the Ward makes me suspicious, but it’s an opportunity. An opportunity that pays a fuckton of money.”

“I don’t care about the—”

“And money means freedom.” I tread carefully, keenly aware of the blastgun still in her hand. “Freedom for you...or for...or for someone else.”

Emotion melts her expression, and her face slackens. It’s far

more terrifying than her threats or guns or rage. Only now am I afraid. Shit, I fucked this up.

“Leave,” RJ says, mechanical. She releases the blastgun and walks past me into her kitchen. Routine controls what her mind cannot.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper. “I don’t know what happened, but I heard a few stories—”

“No,” she interrupts, but there’s no malice behind the word, no passion or soul whatsoever. “You heard the fairy tales. Fix yourself up, and I’ll see you next shift.”

“RJ, wait—”

“Go, Kaj,” she barks with a shadow of her thunder. Then the storm retreats, and she continues cooking dinner.

I obey and leave, soaked from the sprinkler, bloody from her wrath.

You’ve now met—and suffered—my best friend. The worlds hurt her, so she hurts the worlds harder.

The Empty Path

RJ: 2 Weeks to Launch

The Ward.

I should say no.

Then again, I should have done a lot of things, and now, I'm alone. I have no one. Well, I have Kaj, but Net knows why he sticks around.

I sit before the synthetic fire. Flames pop like knuckles cracking. Everything is stress and release, ever-winding, ever-easing, spinning without end. The life I led became the lie I clutched. My world capsized, and the ground crumbled. Everything I leaned on collapsed beneath my burden of truth.

But *I* moved out. Left my ex, my family, my friends. Turned "we" into "I." Learned to sleep alone. Live alone. Most likely die alone. I know you hate me. Well, don't worry, because I hate myself more. I have enough baggage to fill a freight train, yet coworkers call me free and unchained, call this a second chance.

How am I free with my wings hacked off at the roots? How am I unchained when demons haunt me every night? How is this a second chance when it's a bomb in my heart?

They're wrong about this, and you're wrong about me. You wonder why I moved out if it burns like hell, hurts like a bitch, wrenches my heart from its strings. Well, darlings, that is a reason I'm not ready to admit to myself, never mind you.

Because secrets are mortal wounds. They rot from the inside out, weaken bodies, poison minds, harvest souls, vivisect spirits. Then why do I bury mine beneath my ribs, caged by guilt, imprisoned by regret? Why do I smoke when I know it's lethal? Why do I drink when I know it's toxic? Why do I live when I know I will die?

Everyone's running from something. I'm just running away faster.

This part of my journey I walk alone.

Organic Order

Mazha: 2 Weeks to Launch

It's my birthday.

I'm one year more, but I feel one year less, one year beaten, one year removed.

When do birthdays become apologies instead of celebrations? When do we start counting backward from death instead of forward from birth? When does the chime of each year become a dirge instead of a fanfare? Why isn't every day weighted as the same monumental accomplishment?

Go on. Call me idealistic. All my patients do. But I can't help it. I see broken things, and I fix them. Or rather, broken people. Labels can limit, but they also show us where we belong. It's my job to provide the right label, to order the organic, to sort souls into nice, neat, clean categories.

"Doctor Mazha, are you listening?"

No. I'm reliving memories, memories of him, of the him who left in the night with dirty dishes as his goodbye. Gone before

the moon, a ghost before the stars, chaser of the sun as he fled far from my heart. Shit, that rhymes. Can't be predictable now, can we?

"Doctor Mazha?"

Ah, yes. Duty calls. Duty by the name of Garrett.

"Garrett, I apologize." Now, what label did I give him?

With my gloves, I summon his holographic chart. I love order, organizing, categorizing people and places and things into buckets of sense. That's why I became a holopsych, to comprehend the incomprehensible. Light patterns the air, and one word buzzes, suspended in nothing.

"Panic disorder," I read.

Hyperventilation. Perspiration. Heart palpitations. Disorientation. Nausea. Tremors. Headache. Chills. Dread.

These symptoms earn Garrett that label. He's one of the easier ones, straightforward to categorize—

"You're wrong," he says.

I'm never wrong.

I pause, purse my lips. "Garrett, if you'd like me to explain my reasoning, I'd be more than happy to—"

"No," Garrett interrupts.

He pants, starts to sweat. As I told you, *hyperventilation, perspiration*—

"You're too young to understand," he says. "I want a *real* doctor."

I don't react as you might. I have no temper anymore. My fire burned out with the last hundred patients who said the same. So I repeat the answer I've given dozens of times, boredom dripping from each syllable.

"I assure you, Garrett, that my age has nothing to do with my competence. I hold a degree from the most prestigious

MedAc in the Protectorate, and I am fully licensed in interstellar holopsych procedure.”

Garett scrunches his bushy eyebrows, continues to huff and sweat. “You look like a kid.”

“I am not.” I twist my wrist, and the hologram flowers into a diagram. “Now, to manage your panic disorder: deep breaths, focus, close your eyes, relax your muscles, repeat a mantra—”

“Stop reading the bloody textbook,” Garett snaps, failing to complete any of the tasks assigned. “You’re so...clinical.”

I blink. “Yes. I’m a doctor.”

He rolls his eyes and clutches his chest. “I want someone... with a heart...not a Net-damn...robot.”

If he intends “robot” as an insult, then he doesn’t understand me at all. Most don’t.

“Perhaps you are right,” I say. “If my prescriptive style is incompatible with your needs as a patient, then I am happy to recommend other holopsychs within the field.”

“Forget it,” Garett says. “I’ll find one myself.”

He lurches across the room and slams the door behind him. I have that effect on people. My mind slides back to the dirty dishes.

No. Not now.

“Dr. Mazha?”

It’s my secretary. Spineless, but big-hearted. A waste of ambition, if you ask me. At least he never comments on my youth.

“Yes, Alix?” I ask.

“You have a neurocall,” he says. “It’s retinal-encrypted.”

Not Protectorate, then. Ice winds my heart. Only one organization has that breed of security, but why the hell are they interested in me?

“Ignore it,” I say. Best not get involved. They’re criminals, after all, in actions if not law.

Alix gulps. “Ignore...the Ward?”

As I said, spineless...possibly castrated.

“Yes.” I turn away, but his whine turns me back.

“Doctor, with all due respect...I don’t know how things were on Midica, but even your family can’t protect you from the Ward.”

I glare at him. “My family is dead. I need no one’s protection. And with ‘all due respect,’ Alix, you have no fucking idea ‘how things were on Midica.’”

Alix gulps again. If he wasn’t castrated before, he is now. “Understood, Doctor. I will ignore it, per your orders.”

He turns on his heel fast enough to melt rubber off his soles and squeaks out of my office.

My next patient isn’t for an hour, since Garrett left early, so I have no distraction from the dirty dishes or Midica or this Net-awful slump.

No.

I won’t go down that rabbit hole.

So I do what I always do to cope.

I make a list.

Immortal Cicatrix

Jace: 2 Weeks to Launch

“**B**ut, dude, *you* were the one who led me on,” Meatbrain says. “Then you ghosted me.”

He trails me up the engineering shaft. I move like a spider. Meatbrain moves like a drunken octopus.

“I’m an attention-seeking tease, not a fuckboy,” I say. “Drop it.” Should’ve been more upfront about that.

“But I bought you flowers.”

“I didn’t ask for flowers.”

“And chocolates.”

“Same answer.”

“But the way you moved your hips—”

I stop, and Meatbrain collides with my ass. This doesn’t help matters. I have a tight ass. “Listen, M—Darrel, I’m not ready for any type of relationship at the moment, however casual. Find yourself a nice guy, someone sweet and sensitive, someone who can appreciate you.” There must be at least one person in all

the worlds who can.

“But I don’t want anyone else,” he complains.

But, but, but, but—

“I’m not interested,” I say. And I’m not worth it. Too many broken pieces to cut yourself on.

I move again, but Meatbrain grabs my arm. Panic ribbons my limbs, and instinct possesses me. I twist out of his grasp, elbow his diaphragm. He cries out, silent, wheezing like a busted accordion.

“Next time, it’ll be your dick,” I snap.

I crawl down the duct. After a few seconds, Meatbrain’s clumsy movements reverberate through the metal tube.

“You’re an asshole,” he says behind me.

“I didn’t ask you to come,” I say.

“When I fuck up, I own my mistakes, unlike *some* people.”

“Well, you’re right. You were a mistake.”

“You little shit,” he says. “Why don’t you head back to base before I break something you can’t fix?”

“And leave you to recalibrate the sensors alone?” I ask. “Not a fucking chance.”

“You think I can’t handle it?”

“You’re the reason they’re misaligned in the first place.”

“I used *your* program.”

“For *nukedrive stabilization*.” I breathe deeply, like the holopsych prescribed. And like the holopsych, it does jack shit. “Darrel, it’s obvious your talents lie elsewhere. So go elsewhere, and lie low for a bit.”

Meatbrain scowls. “I don’t know what your deal is, kid, but keep acting out, and you’ll have real problems.”

Oh, Darrel, you adorable, oblivious boy. How little you know about me or my landfill of “real problems.”

I fake a sigh. “Sorry, love. I’m going through some shit.”

The universal code for: *Everything’s on fire, but don’t ask me why.*

Darrel takes the hint. Or he’s thicker than I thought.

“No worries, Jace.” He hesitates. Thinks. That’s not a good sign. Meatbrain rarely thinks. “So you wouldn’t be down for... you know?”

Yes, I know. Yes, he’s a coward for not asking outright.

“What part of ‘I am not a fuckboy’ don’t you understand?” I ask.

He blushes candy-apple red. “No, no, not like that. We could do it, you know, as friends. Friends with benefits.”

Naive fool. There’s no such thing in my experience, and I’ve had a *lot* of experience.

“Darrel, let me make myself perfectly clear. I am *not* your friend, I do *not* want to fuck you, and if you ask again, I’ll ensure you never fuck anyone else. Okay?”

Meatbrain slams his fist against the metal shaft; the sound rings through my skull like an anvil. “Okay.” He turns and shimmies back the way we came. Actually, “shimmies” is too graceful. “Lumbers” is more apt.

“Where are you going?” I call after him.

“Elsewhere,” he mocks, “to lie low.”

Finally. Now, I can wank in peace. I mean work. Well, you know what they say about killing two birds with one stone...

Several minutes later, I’m at the sensor configuration panel swearing at fused circuits. Fucking Darrel and his fucking incompetence. This is the third time this month I’ve covered for him. At least it gives me an escape from the blundering wannabes.

Jacccccceeeeeeeee...

I freeze, paralyzed, as *she* returns. Her scent, her voice, how she hisses my name like blades across whetstones.

Hissed. She's dead. Gone. A ghost. She can't hurt me, and I won't let her haunt me.

Idiot. As if I have a choice.

I clutch the vent's sides as scars reopen and memory ravages my wounds. What she did to me and what she asked of me avalanche my soul with self-pity and regret. No, not regret. Something stronger. Guilt? Shame? There isn't a word.

Jacccccceeeeeeeee...

Jace, my sweet Jacccccceeeeeeeee...

I convulse with remembered trauma. My mind blanks to save my soul. Screams echo off the metal prison, and my mouth fills with blood.

"Jace."

Meatbrain reappears. He's pale and sweating and way out of his comfort zone. His voice rips me back to reality. Well, back to the *present*. Because what happened with her is more reality than I can bear.

"Dude, what the fuck happened?" he asks.

At first, I think he's asking about *her*, then I realize he doesn't know. No one does, and no one ever will.

"Sorry," I say, wiping blood from my lips. "Bit my tongue."

"So you screamed?" he asks, skeptical.

"Told you I'm an attention-seeking tease." My voice wobbles on every word. Meatbrain doesn't believe any of them, but he wants to, so he nods and tries a nervous laugh.

"That you are," he says.

"Thought you were elsewhere," I say.

"I was, but I heard you...and I thought..." Another nervous laugh. "Well, I thought you were dying."

IMMORTAL CICATRIX

In a way. Again and again. With each passing day.
“I’m good, Darrel.” I refocus on fused circuits. Meatbrain
takes the hint and leaves.

This can’t happen again. She’s gone. Forever.
But memories aren’t.

Jacccccceeeeeeee...

Let me inside, Jace.

Sidon

RJ: Age 8

I was happy once. At least, I think I was. Or perhaps dreams churned false memories of a life I desired.
No.

The love was real.

The grief is real.

So the memories must be, too.

They say start at the beginning to find your truth. Well, it did jack shit before, but I could try again.

I was an only child, born on Sidon to loving parents I adored. I wish my story ended there. It doesn't, but theirs does. I remember those raw, early years in the way of a child. Swaths of color. Blurs of emotion. Vignettes of nostalgia. Dad banging around the kitchen in the morning, making crêpes on the stove or muffins in the oven. Mom inhaling books at lightspeed—real books, not holo shit—ink on her fingers and parchment in her hair.

A roomful of toys, stories, and make-believe, bright and bold with the inconsideration of youth.

A couple goldfish in a crystalline tank, circling captivity, pretending at escape.

Vacations to Gao, Yuan, and Hattusa where all I wanted to do on foreign, magnificent worlds was swim in the hotel pool. It drove Dad crazy, but Mom shrugged it off, as she did most things.

Those were the only happy moments in my life, and I claw for them as a cat would a mouse. But the mouse fades with each deepening scratch as memory yields to time.

Dad calls from the kitchen. "R—, come here."

Fool. Did you really think I'd let it slip? You haven't earned my true name yet. Kaj told you what happened to the last one who asked. Best listen to him.

"It's time for dinner," Dad says.

He's always early. I'm always late. Mom is the bridge between us.

I'm eight, awkward, lanky, stuffed into a body I can't quite control. Down the stairs I tumble in a tangle of limbs, and I barge into the kitchen, sit for supper. For our last supper.

Damascus

Kaj: Age 9

They're in the hallway. I hear them right outside. So I scrunch myself further into the janitor's closet and close my eyes, will them away.

"Kaj. Ka-aj."

They sing my name with two syllables. A taunt. A curse.

"What's wrong, stinkwad? Why aren't you with your girlfriend in detention?"

There's a vomit of laughter, and I sink further into shame. Jeje asked me to do her homework, so I did, then she got detention for cheating while I got suspended for a week. I only wanted to help, and I shouldn't even be here, but *they* won't let me go.

"Come on, pibsqueak," one of them says. It doesn't matter which. They're all the same. "Take your beating like the good little boy you are, then you can scoot on home for dinner."

I don't move. Don't breathe. Don't even think.

"This isn't fun anymore. Get your scrawny ass out here so we

can leave.”

“Go away,” I shout. It’s stupid. They won’t. They never leave me alone till they’re done with me.

The closet door rattles, but the lock holds.

“Get out here, Kaj, or you’ll be real sorry you didn’t.”

I’m always real sorry I didn’t. Real sorry I did. Real sorry I earned the attention of the Mount Damascus bullies in the first place. I don’t remember what started it, but they always make time for me.

Bloody elementary school.

The lock busts, and the closet swings open. Four bullies topple inside. In less than a second, I’m yanked up, tossed out, and thrown to the ground. The biggest one kicks my stomach, and I yelp like a pup.

“Please,” I whisper, “let me go home.”

One of them grunts. “Thinks he’s special. Heard his dads are Ward or something.”

Another kick in the gut. Punch to my jaw. Knee to my groin.

“They’re...not,” I spew, losing consciousness, awareness, as I rapidly spiral toward the welcoming dark.

“Then why do you think you’re better than us?”

“I...don’t.” Pain crystallizes through me like winter’s first frost.

“Yeah, you do. That’s why you did Jeje’s homework. To prove you’re smarter.”

“What?” Confusion cuts through agony. “I wanted...to help her.”

“Then why didn’t you help us?” the scrappiest one asks.

I cock an eyebrow. Or rather, I try to, but bruises stiffen my face. *Why do you think, genius?* “If you quit beating me up, I *will* help you.”

They pause. Small mercies.

“He’s lying,” one says.

“Kaj never lies.”

“Too much of a wimp.”

“Maybe we should let him.”

“Yeah, if I don’t get my grades up, my moms’ll murder me.”

As the bullies argue, I slide through the cracks in their attention and roll into an adjacent hallway. Half of me aches, and half of me numbs. I sprint home, face-plant twice, and stumble into my dad’s cottage. Their features morph in horror, but I shake my head and settle their fears.

Because the bullies are wrong.

I *can* lie.

In fact, it’s the one thing I’m good at.

Excuses.

Stories.

Making things up.

Though I’m sure I’ll pay for it later.

Carthage

Jace: Age 10

“Let me inside, Jace.”
My sister bangs on the metal door. The clang echoes through the tunnel, through my skull. Agitated, I unlatch and swing it open. Saia trips from the suddenness, barrels through the entrance, and shoots me a glare that could wither an army.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” she asks.

Saia stands opposite me, bony arms crossed. We’re in an abandoned magtrain tunnel, far beneath Carthage, her icy city trapped in eternal twilight. For some, this is a place of quiet, of peace. For Saia, it’s a place of secrets, of possibility, of experiment and curiosity.

“Well?” she presses.

“Shut up.” I tighten my parka. It’s always so bloody freezing on this Net-damn planet.

“You little shit. Come on, we got work to do.” Saia starts

down the tunnel, dives into the dark, and procures a soggy sandwich from an inside pocket. “Hungry?”

She’s always starving after a beating.

“No, I just ate,” I say, and I did. One piece of pumpkin bread, one hundred calories max. Chased by seltzer, zero calories. My breakfast and one of three—*only* three—meals I allow myself per day. Today is unique, however. I also let myself chew half a stick of cinnamon gum for exactly two minutes to celebrate. It’s Independence Day, the anniversary of when the Protectorate freed Carthage from the Ward. We’re still on “friendly” terms, if the notorious entity deserves such a benevolent word.

“You’re too skinny,” Saia says, reading my thoughts. I hate that, out of all people, she’s the one who knows me best.

“You’re too sociopathic,” I return.

She smiles in the only way she can, a lion drooling over her prey. “No such thing.”

“Where is he?”

“At the chargers.”

“Do Mom and Mama know we’re here?”

“Such a good little boy, Jace. No, they don’t, and if you tell them, you’ll regret it.”

That’s what she always says: *You’ll regret it*. The ambiguity worries me more than the threat.

We continue down the magtrain tunnel, toward the magnetic chargers. It’s silent, save for the click of our boots against metal. Red emergency lighting borders the dark titanium tube, ushering us straight into the forges of hell.

I smell blood before I see it. A copper tang stings my nostrils, waters my eyes. Scarlet streams from behind a cargo crate, and I stifle a gag.

“Pussy,” Saia mutters.

"I'm going home," I say, coughing back bile.

This is too much. She's gone too far. Bullying was one thing, but this...shit, I don't want to know what this is. I should tell someone, but Saia would beat the crap out of that someone. You see my dilemma. I save those I can and mourn those I can't. Probably why I feel the constant need to punish myself.

"Come on," Saia says.

She grabs my parka and tugs me the rest of the way. My feet shuffle against the tracks in a spastic attempt to keep up. She's bigger, stronger, and faster, while I'm a spindly, half-emaciated pretty boy ignoring self-induced starvation. I always think about my next meal, yet I always regret thinking about my next meal. I'm so Net-damn hungry, yet every bite brings a guillotine of shame. I should focus more on my severely damaged sister, yet hunger throbs with urgency, and my head pounds with dehydration. This is my fault as much as hers.

"Please, help me." The voice is a shadow, the boy a wraith. He faces me, eyes swollen shut, face a pustular glob of flesh. I freeze and fall to a knee.

"Saia," I whisper, "what have you done?"

"I forgot about Lio for a day or two, and he turned all squishy." She describes the boy as if he's rotten fruit. "Anyway, I need your help to move him. Well, threaten him first not to tattle, *then* move him out of here. You know, the usual."

I gape at her and stagger to my feet. "Do you feel...*anything*?"

She stares, confused, then annoyed, then enraged. "Yes, Jace, of course I feel. Right now, I feel very fucking cold, so hurry up."

I shake my head and retreat. "No. Not this time, Saia. Do it yourself. I'm going home."

"Fine," she says, nonchalant, and I tense. "Run back home like

the coward you are. I'm sure Mama will understand...*this*." She gestures at my scrawny frame. "Mom, on the other hand? Well, let's just say I take after her, and neither of us likes pity trips."

I grit my teeth. "It's none of your business."

"No, it's not," Saia says. "I don't care if you starve yourself to death—more cybs for me in the will—but for some inexplicable reason I can't understand, I venture our mothers will. So if I tell them you're withering away on a self-destructive path, I further venture they'll interfere. And when they interfere, you'll lose control—that's what you value, isn't it? Control? Imagine a holosurgeon force-feeding you till your innards burst with unwanted nutrition, fat bubbling on your limbs, your body a sack you no longer fit inside. Because that's where they'll drop you as soon as I tell them: a hospital. They think this is natural, that you're fine-boned. Just wait till I tell them the truth."

I quake in the tunnel, hands wound into fists, raw and aching as she exposes my deepest fear. "They won't believe you."

"Yes, they will. You're their Jace, their adorable boy. They'd do anything to save your life."

"I'd lie."

"I'd lie better. Come now, baby brother. You know how this ends. You're no fighter. I'll keep your secret, and you'll keep mine."

Guilt. Shame. Remorse. Regret. Why does language fail when it matters most?

"Okay," I whisper.

Judge me. You should. But Saia knows me better than you do. Control over this—over my body, my food—is my only anchor. And if I lose my anchor, I lose my sanity. Besides, I'm only cleaning up Saia's messes, not making them.

But messes can turn into murder.

CARTHAGE

No. I won't let it get that far.

“Now, Jace,” Saia orders.

Go away. I don't want you to watch this part.

Midica

Mazha: Age 11

Seven moons peek through abbey arches and anoint Midica's Gothic spires in heavenly halo. Monasteries entangle through the sky city, indistinguishable and undefined. My world of worship stretches toward the stars, toward starships we built, yet I remain in this floating dungeon.

"You always did like it here," Mother says. She gestures around us at the Moon Vault, and her robes billow as she does, silk the shades of galaxies.

"I don't," I say.

"Then why do you visit so often?"

"To remind myself why I want to leave."

Mother tsks and writes me off as naive. "Come now, Mazha, you can have any world you want, any star, any system. Our empire is at your disposal. There's no reason to be glum."

I frown. "I don't want your empire. I want my own."

She laughs at me. I don't like being laughed at. "In time, love.

In time.”

“You don’t take me seriously.”

“Yes, I do. But you take everything *too* seriously. Relax. Live. Enjoy. Youth is the greatest treasure poorest spent.”

“I hate philosophy.”

Mother sighs. “You hate everything.”

“Not everything,” I chance. “A holopsych came to class—”

“No, Mazha. I don’t trust nanotech. It’s too...invasive.”

“It’s safe. You can only connect to the Net using gloves, and it’s programmed with safeties that—”

“Safeties?” Mother scoffs. “Your *brain* connects to nanites. How on Midica is that safe? The Net is an omniscient god that harvests souls.”

“That’s a gross exaggeration,” I say, annoyed. “There are myriad encryption methods for privacy, and there’s never been a reported case of sabotage.”

“A *reported* case, Mazha. And with entities like the Ward running amok, that does nothing to settle my nerves.”

“But holopsychs help people. They use simulations as exposure therapy and can cure—”

“Enough.”

Mother sighs and twists my ice-blonde locks. We share the same hair, the same starlight skin, but my eyes—the pale blue-green of glaciers—are my father’s, and his ambition possesses me.

Fear not the worst scenario, then nothing in the worlds can hurt you.

Wise words, Father. Wise, but inhuman.

“This is about the diagnosis, isn’t it?” Mother asks.

I tense. *Diagnosis*. She doesn’t use the label, because the label is a life sentence. *Obsessive-compulsive disorder*. I count powers

of two to settle myself.

2, 4, 8, 16, 32, 64, 128, 256...

"No," I say. "It's not."

"Because I'm sure the other kids—"

"Fuck the other kids."

Mother retreats a step. "Mazha!" Then she shakes her head, always pious. "Never mind. Come. It's time for prayer."

I take a deep breath, reset.

2, 4, 8, 16, 32...

"Go without me," I say. "I have studying to do."

"For what?" she asks.

"I told you. Holopsychology. I'm already behind."

"Mazha..."

Condescension laces her voice. I'm always patronized. Always belittled. Always squashed like a bug beneath the heel of my almighty legacy.

"It will help me understand." I motion to my head, where my demons reside.

"Midica will help you," she says. "We do not open our minds to blasphemy."

"It can cure me."

"It will ruin you."

Fury shoots down my limbs, and I coil my hands into fists to prevent its expulsion. "What the hell do we worship, anyway? Earth? It's a myth."

"It's our past," she says.

"It's nothing."

"It's our home."

"It's lost, and so are we."

I storm away, across the Moon Vault, away from the place I despise in the city I hate on the planet I loathe.

“It’s not lost,” Mother says, quiet.

I pause but don’t turn. “You’re right. Earth is not lost. It’s worse. It’s forgotten.”