

MANNIGAN

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A Speck of Light

L. Ross Coulter

Special thanks to:

Rory, my beautiful wife.

Sadb, my darling daughter.

Larry Contreau.

Prairie (the cat)

&

Ross Ake, AKA The Mix Curator

(youtube.com/@TheMixCurator)



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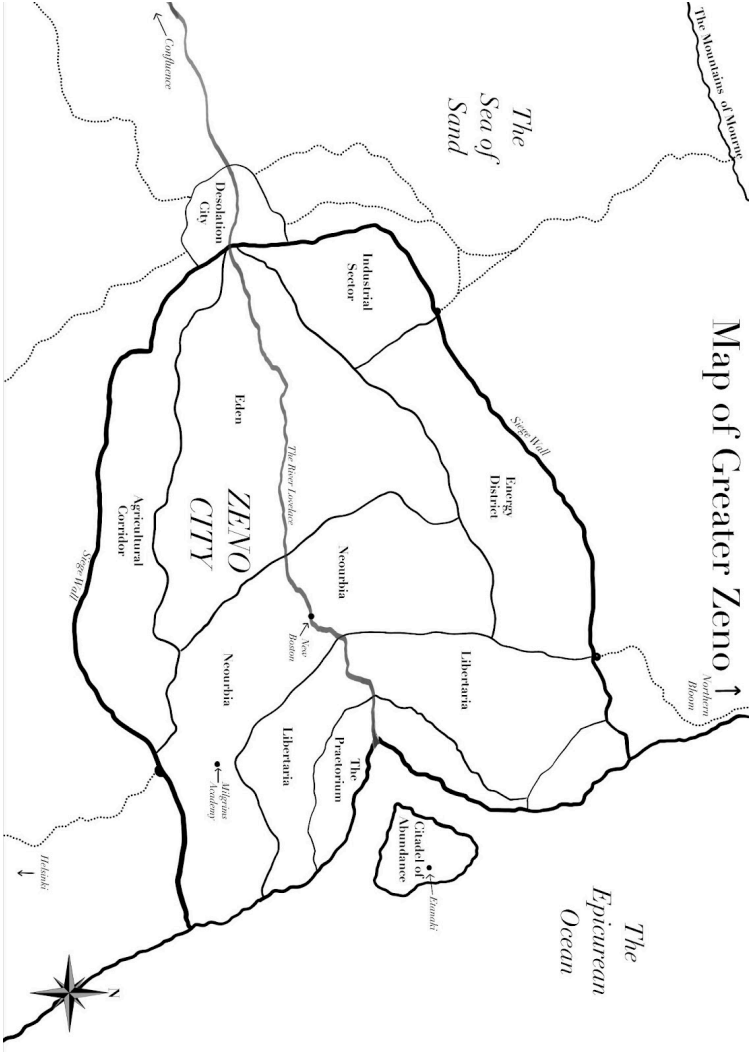
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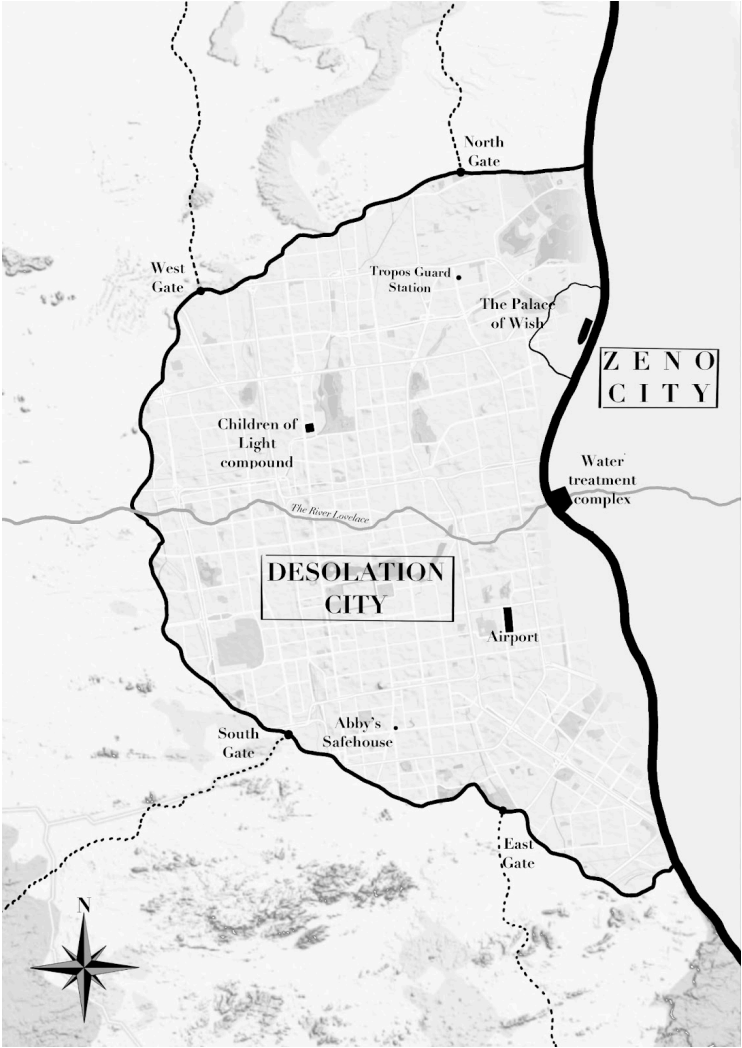
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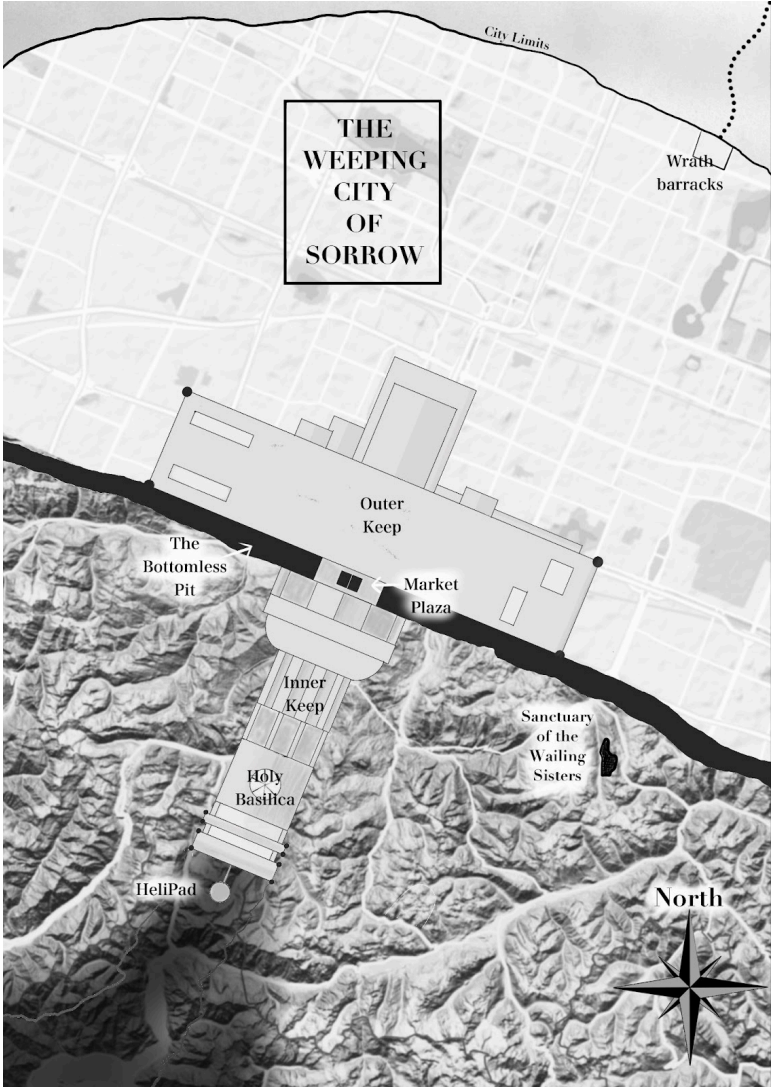
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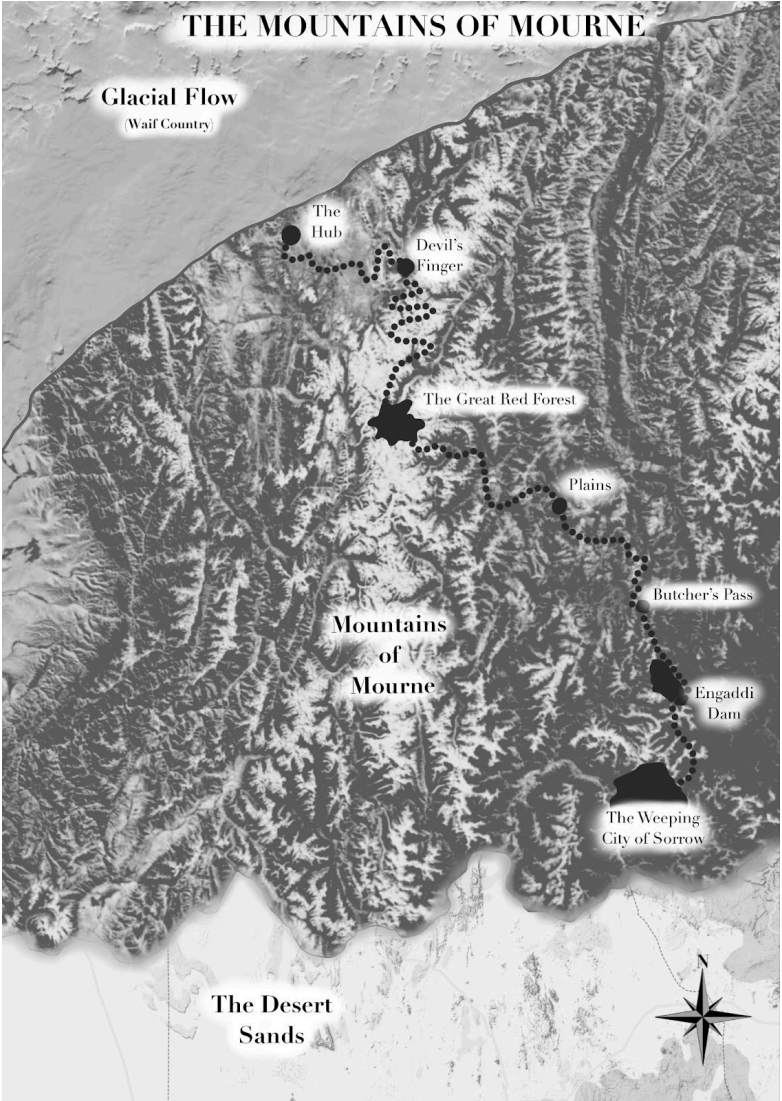
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MAPS









Prologue

IN THE BEGINNING



When the first one struck the earth, it was already too late. For the fear unleashed by the news of their sighting unlocked the gates of war; and mankind loosed a hell of his own creation.

When the last one struck the earth and the seas subsided, flames calmed to embers and the ground shook no more. But fueled by an ocean of fire that spewed out from the depths, suffocating the shame of a trillion evil deeds done, an endless black cloud of dust encompassed the earth.

So as the grass withered, the flowers fell, and their beauty perished.

From what remained, survivors rose, and a new hope was born. A transcendent being. An enlightened

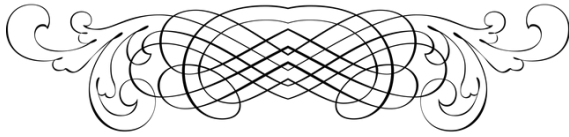
mind. A man. Who, in great wisdom and boundless mercy, came so that he could give.

First, for the suffering of the earth, he gave the engines. Ten in all, each pierced a hole in the blackened sky, and where the earth again received day's light, life began to grow.

Then, for the suffering of the flesh, he gave the cities. Of these there were seven, one of each where life had been restored, and as his people grew beneath his wing, a hundred million sons and daughters were reborn.

Yet, still seeing much suffering in the depths of the mind, he wept, grieving their forms and how they had been made to be. So, as his final gift, he gave the Servant. Elegant and graceful, his greatest work, she was perfect; a sentience without measure. And draped like a web of white charmeuse across the cities, she gave her will to the salvation of man's torment.

*“To you, O’ mighty Vitruvius, architect of mankind; we give
thanks.”*



*Feel the raindrops,
Dancing with grace.
Descending in final violence,
As they softly kiss your face.
Smell the fresh chaos,
Like you've smelled it before.
please let me in,
when I knock on your door.
Soon it is quiet,
Balance returned.
Order restored,
atonement confirmed.
You will let me in,
as I have been here before,
we wept together,
huddled on the kitchen floor.
Once I am in,
let us wipe clean the page,
I am your deafening silence.
I am your rage.*

Chapter 1

PRISONER NUMBER 52398



Thick with the incessant crawl of a million mechanical motions, the air chatters with their sounds. It is hot. Humid. Legs and arms are outstretched, his ankles and wrists are held by cold metal braces. Not quite standing or being suspended, he is hanging somewhere between; not in pain, but not in comfort.

Ahead of him, a man is held the same way as he, and ahead of him again, another. And another and another. Each encompassed by a large metal band that tethers the extended limbs of their naked bodies.

Some burrowing beneath their skin, a twisted web of wires runs across their wretched forms, like starving serpents searching for a meal. And gazing down his own withered body past a band of tubes spewing from his nose and mouth, he sees their vicious tendrils wrapped around him.

He tries to scream, but through his stuffed throat and gaping jaws, nothing more than a shrill gurgle emanates. Eyes watering, he scans around in panic as his stomach knots in

dread. Line after line, row after row, level after level; all he can see are splayed naked bodies, each captive within a metal band of their own, feeding and being fed. Endless aisles of perishable human product, stacked and preserved meticulously in a ghastly display of incomparable utility.

Connected by a labyrinth of glass walkways and elevators, hooded figures clothed in sterile white coveralls amble about their business. And as he stares at the huge letters sprawled across the concrete expanse that reads, 'STANFORD CORRECTIONS FACILITY' in faded yellow words, he knows it is not a dream.

He remembers, although not with clarity, the day his parents didn't come home. He stayed up late that night. Making an ungodly mess of the kitchen floor, he ate cereal from the bag, before washing it down with a mug of lumpy hot chocolate. Before, comforted by the faint odor of his mother's perfume from her soft sweater under his head, he held his teddy and fell asleep on the couch.

When morning came, he was woken by the doorbell ringing. Hoping to see their familiar faces, he rushed to the window and looked out through the curtains.

A thin couple stood on the porch, a man and a woman. And as the woman saw his movement at the window, she looked up smiling, and waved. Down the stairs, and stretching on his tippy toes to reach the latch, he opened the door to them.

"William, good morning!" the man said cheerily, adorned in a crisp pinstriped blue suit, with a matching tie and a white high-collared shirt.

Crouching down to him, and giving a friendly little wave, the woman smiled. "Hi there!" she said.

She was pretty, like his mom, with her golden hair loosely tied at the back and red lips that matched her long sleeved suit jacket and elegant slim formed dress. But her eyes were strange. Although in no way detracting from her beauty, they were different; one with tones of green and blue like a beautiful tropical fish, and the other, with a powdered gray pupil and an iris of midnight black.

“Hi,” he replied, feeling a pang of caution and clutching his teddy tighter.

“My friend and I are with the Vitruvian social services,” the woman spoke again. “And today, we have some good news for you!” Looking at Will with an air of expectation she paused, as if waiting for him to respond in excitement. “Don’t you want to know what it is?”

He remembered hearing his parents talk about them and their strange eyes. About how glamorous and proper they were, and how kind they all seemed. He remembered too about how they weren't to be trusted. But they were not what he had imagined, certainly much nicer than he expected.

“Are you, Kol?” he asked.

“Well aren’t you a funny one?!” she replied with a giggle. “Of course we are dear, how else would we know where to find you! But never mind that! Don’t you want to know what the good news is? No?. . . Well, I’ll tell you anyway! Yesterday your mommy and daddy were invited into beautiful Libertariania on official business. Nothing for you to worry about of course, boring grown up stuff mostly. But while you wait, it means that you get to go all the way to the other side of Neourbia and spend a few days in Boston! Isn’t that wonderful! We have a special place there, just for kids just like you.”

“Can’t I stay here till they come back?”

“By yourself! Oh, no silly! Our job is to keep you safe. And we certainly can’t do that here!” Wrinkling her nose in distaste, she glanced over his shoulder into the hall. “But don’t worry, where we’re taking you is a marvelous place – made by the great architect himself, bless his generous soul. You’ll have so much fun and make lots of friends. And of course,” she continues, gesturing to the stuffed teddy in his arms, “you can bring your friend Jeff there with you! Now, give me your hand and let’s be off. The car is waiting.”

With a gentle calmness in her eyes and a warm smile in the corner of her mouth, she offered her delicate hand, and grabbing it, he followed her down the steps toward a gleaming white vehicle parked on the street.

Curved and sleek with dark shaded windows, the rear door was already open, but approaching a row of stern Malleus soldiers that waited with their weapons raised at the house, he stopped in his tracks. On top of eight slender titanium legs with a metallic body littered by bulbous sensors, a spidered machine stood behind them. And as its mounted weapons and claws twitched and flickered in spasmodic bursts, it watched his every move.

“Oh don’t worry about him!” the woman exclaimed, as she noticed his hesitation. “A silly old Arakhna like him is only interested in flies! You’re not a fly are you?!”

Will shook his head, and giving him a knowing grin as she pulled him along, they continued to the vehicle.

“Mind your head now,” she said, as Will stepped in.

“Good morning William,” an automated voice rang out. “Your destination today is the Milgram Academy. Please take a seat and choose what you would like for entertainment on your journey.”

He remembered the softness of the plush fabric as he sat down and the bright and cheerful images dancing across the screens on the seat in front. But it was the sound he remembered the most. And as the door began to close and the harsh bark of the soldiers' commands cracked like whips in the air, he remembered the mechanical whir of robotic legs as men and machine stormed up the driveway and disappeared into the house.

* * *

With a shudder, the metallic band he is held within begins moving upward. But with a jolt, it turns sideways to slide parallel to the rows of the other captive bodies. Silently picking up speed, hollow faces flicker past in front of him, bloated and flared in the mechanical nest that coils around their shriveled anatomies. With eyes closed, they almost seem at peace. But then, as he sees terror and tears streaming down a sunken face, his heart sinks, as one, not sleeping like the rest, looks back.

A sudden bump rattles his body as his mechanized captor stops and changes direction. Upward now, propelled into the darkness above, he strains his neck to lift his head. And as the momentum of the machine slows he passes up into a room through the floor.

Rotated backward, blinded by a searing bright light, a hatch slides closed beneath his feet. Faced by a long strip of neon lights suspended from the ceiling, he flinches as a voice echoes in his ears.

“Manning — William,” it announces. “Prisoner number 5-2-3-9-8, please confirm.”

“Copy, 52398,” a different voice resounds in response.

“Disconnect, scrub, and discharge. He’s out of here.”

“Copy that.”

A masked face looms over him and a rubber gloved hand on his forehead stretches his eyelids back. Blinded, a burning sting of a bright red light flashes into his eyes. “Welcome back. 52398. You are not forgotten.”

From behind, several metal arms extend around him with claw-like appendages on their ends. Hovering over his body in careful motion they examine him, first poking and prodding before, with a candid chirp, he is engulfed in a mist of frigid water. Shockwaves coursing through his bones, the sounds of motors and machines whine shrill in the air as the tubes in his skin are pulled free. With a wave of torment, pressure turns to pain, and ripping at his back and stomach with deliberate purpose the foreign bodies are wrenched from his flesh. Desperate gurgles and screams involuntarily spewing from his throat, every muscle and sinew spasms. And with each twitch and tremor, he drifts further away.

Chapter 2

A BRIGHT WHITE ROOM



As if glued shut, his eyes are heavy. Struggling to move, a hand holds him still on the bed.

“Call the doc and get him down here!”

A shimmer of light blinds him as faint outlines of figures move around a bright white room.

“Will? Can you hear me?” A woman’s voice. “Try to stay still. You’re going to be alright.”

“Marissa,” he forces the word out, but barely a noise emanates past his dry, cracked lips. His body aches as he tries to move.

“Don’t talk. Just stay still. Please!”

“Marissa,” he gasps, struggling to sit up. More hands grab him, firmer now, forcing him down.

“Please Will, just stay still! Where’s the doc?!”

“I’m here, I’m here!” Another voice, a man’s this time, slightly out of breath. Will can sense hurried movement around him.

“Will, can you hear me? I’m Doctor Barkoba. We need you to stay still! You’re going to be alright but we need you to help us. Please Will! — Abby, 2mg of midazolam, quick as you can, he’s going into shock — Breathe Will, it’s going to be ok. We’ve got you.”

The pinch of a needle biting into his arm, Will is engulfed in a tingling warmth. Releasing his arms and stepping back, the silhouetted figures of the doctor and the woman are faint, but as the light of the room becomes more bearable his mind slows.

Nineteen or twenty perhaps, in light blue scrubs, she is not much older than him, and with a strawberry blond ponytail, her forehead is wrinkled in concern and pale cheeks flushed. Next to her, with a crisp, white overcoat, a thin weathered man sporting a pair of neat round glasses studies him, before, taking a step closer, he sits down on the small bedside seat. “Abby, pass me the water,” he says.

Feeling the end of a little plastic straw on his lips Will sips. It hurts. But cool on his swollen throat, it’s a gentle relief as he swallows.

“Slowly now, too much will make you sick.”

“Where am I?” The words quietly slip out of Will’s mouth.

“You’re in the Halfpenny rehabilitation center at Saint Juliana’s,” the doctor replies. “But don’t worry, you’re safe. We’ve had you for quite a while. You were sent to us from Stanford prison a few months back. You have been in a coma ever since.”

As the words ring in Will’s ears, it doesn’t seem real.

“Marissa,” he whispers with dread, as if the mere utterance of her name may make the answer shrouded by the

haze of his foggy mind a sudden reality. "Please, where is she?"

"Marissa?" Glancing down at the screen in his hand, the doctor pauses for a moment before looking back up to Will's forlorn gaze with his kind dark eyes. "I'm sorry Will, I . . . I don't know how much you remember, but she's gone."

Will is cold. He can hear his heart racing in his ears. Flashes of borrowed moments flicker through his mind. The first moment their eyes met. Her smile and the feeling of her hand in his. When his world had burst into color and filled his head with simple dreams of a happy home filled with the pattering of little feet. Her long dark hair and then, the light blue headscarf she wore to cover its absence when she lost it. Her cold skin. Her casket. And the surge of summer rain that danced on its top as it was lowered into the earth. It was true, he could feel it, but as if a sullied dream, it felt as if it had never really happened. Yet suddenly washed by a flood of memory's pain, he sinks beneath a world torn apart.

"Breathe Will," the doctor continues, as a machine by the bed begins to beep in distress. "Just breathe. You're going to be alright."

His chest aches, his fingers are numb.

"Please Will!"

The machine's squealing rises.

"Dammit! He's going to hurt himself! Give him another dose. Put him under."

Flinching at another sting in his arm he is washed by a wave of sudden darkness. The shrill panic in his head slipping into dampened tremors, engulfed in silence he slumps back into the sheets.

But then he sees it. At the window, more specter than creature; the shadowed form of a black raven. Its wings

spread open and head pointed to the early morning sky, its silken feathers glisten like oil under the golden gaze of the early morning sun. Thunder rumbling from the heavens, it leaps from the ledge, and as Will slips into the abyss, it rises into the new day.

Chapter 3

THE PROSELYTE



The sound of curtains being drawn wakes him as sunlight streaks into the sterile white room.

“Morning Will, how are you today?” Abby chirps. Pressing a button just out of sight, a motorized buzz beneath him raises the bed, leaving him propped as he groggily looks around.

“Sorry to wake you,” she continues, “but Doctor Barkoba said he’d be down to see you, so I thought I’d get you up — Sit forward for a sec will you?”

Will obliges, and after taking the pillow from behind him, she switches it out with a new one she has on the bedside table.

“How are you feeling today?” she asks. Smiling at him with a hint of concern, she glimpses at the shadowed scars and dotted punctures that dash across his limbs and pallid face. “Do you think you’re up to eating yet? I can bring you a light breakfast if you’re ready?”

“Ok,” he shrugs, his voice weak through his swollen throat. “I’ll give it a try.”

“Are you sure?”

“No,” he gives her a pained smile. “But I’ve got to eventually, right?”

“That’s the spirit,” she grins. “Ok, give me a minute – I’ll be right back.”

Hurrying out of the room, Will is left alone with his thoughts. He liked her. It had only been a few days, but she had a way about her that somehow seemed to make things a little easier. His limp body ached with even the slightest movement and every draining motion seemed to deplete him further still. Yet whether giving a gentle hand as he winced to climb out of bed, or lending an arm as he hobbled to the bathroom at the end of the corridor, her presence always came with a patient smile. Time alone was agony. His mind was foggy but always returned to thoughts of Marissa and the things that would never be, so Abby’s visits were a welcome reprieve. There was another nurse too, a large stern woman—‘Lillian Albut’ by the title on her nametag—but coming in only to take blood samples and scan him, she hardly said a word.

“Here we are,” Abby remarks, as she bustles in. Garnished with an assortment of breakfast items, she sets a metal tray down on a table in the corner of the room, before wheeling it over to the bed. “Just for tasting though. If you’re hungry, we can get you more later. But for now, only a little. It’s been a long time since you’ve had anything solid. You’ll need to give your body time to adjust.”

Despite the lingering odor of disinfectant, it smells amazing and realizing the call of hunger, Will straightens up

as she swivels a section of the table around and parks the food over his lap.

Seeing his weak hands fumble with the packaged utensils, Abby takes them from him.

“Here, let me,” she says, sitting down on the bed beside him before opening them and handing him a fork.

“Sorry. Thanks.”

“No, not at all. You have healed amazingly, but you’ll be pretty weak for some time.”

“Yeah, I’ve been better,” he replies, mustering a half-hearted smile. Pointing out the window to the courtyard below to where a group of uniformed teens are gathered, he continues, “I meant to ask — what’s with all the students? Some kind of field trip?”

“Who? Them? Oh no. They’re students here with Saint Juliana’s.”

“Saint Juliana’s? The university?”

“Yeah, of course. Sorry, I thought you were from around here.”

“I am,” he replies. “I’ve spent my whole life in Boston—well, down close to the tenements—but I never knew this place was a hospital. Thought it was just a school.”

“Oh, well it is a school. It was all a hospital at one point but was replaced by Galton General across town when they built it years ago. Halfpenny house here is the only medical part left. The rest became the school. It’s a cool building actually, I can give you a tour when you’re feeling up to it—in a chair, of course!”

“Sure, I’ve got nothing else on that I know of,” he winces through a pained grin.

“You don’t need to check your schedule?” she laughs. “I’ll have to check with the doc first before we do anything,

but it should be fine. I'm sure it would be nice to move around a bit. You've been cooped up for ages. Oh, and hey, before I forget, now that you're feeling a little better, is there someone we can contact for you? We tried looking through records when you got here first, but nothing seemed to come up."

"No," Will replies, giving a slight shake of his head as he puts the fork on the tray. "I'm ok. Thanks though."

"Well, no worries. If you change your mind of course, let me know, but the world outside isn't going anywhere anytime soon. We'll get you better first! Anyway, are you done with that?" she asks, glancing at his barely touched meal.

"Yeah, thanks. It's making me feel a bit funny."

"That's ok, you got more down than I expected. There's a whole lot of drugs in your system. If you can get it to stay there you're doing well."

Looking up as there is a knock on the open door, doctor Barkoba walks in carrying a clipboard in hand.

"Will, how are you," he asks, crossing over to the bedside. "I'm sorry I haven't been into you sooner. Your tests and paperwork took longer than I thought."

Pausing for a moment to sit on the edge of the bed, he takes a deep breath as he continues, "So, how are you? It's been a rocky road for you. But Abby's taking good care of you I assume. How are you feeling? You had a little breakfast?"

"Yeah," Will replies.

"Good. The food's not great I know, but it's not bad for a hospital. How about your pain? Are you comfortable?"

"I'm ok."

"Are you sure? And are you sleeping? We can adjust anything you need"

“No, really,” Will shakes his head. “I’m fine. Thanks though.”

“Well, that’s good to hear. But do let me know if anything changes. And please, no thanks necessary. We’re here to help.”

“I will. Thanks.”

Hesitating for a moment, the doctor looks over to Abby, “Abby, do you mind giving us a minute? I just want to run through a few things with Will.”

With a knowing look Abby gives a little nod, and as she heads out the door, the doctor turns back to Will, “Look. I suppose helping you as best we can kind of leads me to the bigger issue I wanted to talk to you about. After what you have been through, for us to help you properly you need to make a decision about your next steps. And to do that, you need to know the truth.”

“What do you mean?”

“About your time in Stanford, and your condition. . . I don’t know the full details—we are not privy to that here—but based on the state of your body, I would say that after they put you in stasis you were likely sectioned under one of the common good laws. While you were in there. . .” Shuffling on the bed, he glances down at his hands. “They. . . They took nearly everything.”

“I—I don't understand.”

“Your organs. . . your parts. Most of what you have left are cheap biosynth replacements. Even your platelets and marrow have been harvested to almost nothing. And the toxicity report. . . You must have been part of at least a dozen pharmaceutical trials.”

Will falls silent, his ears seem slightly hollow. “Why? What does that mean for me?”

“I don’t know,” he shakes his head. “I’ve been here for more than forty years and I have never seen so many procedures done on a single donor. What they’ve done to you, it’s. . . It’s a miracle you have survived so long. But realistically speaking, you’re not going to live more than another four or five weeks.”

“Weeks?” Will chokes out the words. “But I feel like I’m getting better?”

“I know, I know,” Barkoba nods with a furrowed brow. “But that’s just the drugs doing their job. It’s not a treatment at all. If anything, at the doses you’re on it’s probably killing you faster. As your body deteriorates, the medication will become less effective. We can increase the dosage of course, but unfortunately, the higher the dose, the worse the side effects. I wish I had something better to tell you, but ultimately the choice for you—especially as you get closer to the end—is going to be between discomfort and consciousness.”

Will listens to the words in silence.

“Will it hurt?” he whispers.

Barkoba sighs, “Well. . . that’s the thing.” Shifting in his seat as he lays his clipboard down on the bed. “If you don’t want it to, it doesn’t have to. We can, and will of course, keep you sedated as much as possible. But the pain you’re feeling now is only going to get worse. And honestly, worse is an understatement.” Reaching into his small chest pocket he pulls out a small white tablet between two fingers. “I won’t pretend I understand what you’ve been through, or what you’re going through, and I don’t claim to have all the answers. But I have never believed in needless suffering or life without personal choice. So, however terrible it may be—and it is the last thing I ever wished to believe—but I believe that this is your

choice.” Placing the tablet gently on the bedside table, he gives Will a solemn glance. “And please, make no mistake, I am not saying that you should take it at all, I am simply offering you the choice. Do you understand?”

Will pauses to look at the little pill, so small it’s almost invisible against its surroundings. “Is it painful?” he asks.

“No. Just like falling asleep.”

“Can I think about it?”

“Of course. Take as long as you need. This is strictly between you and me. Whatever you decide it will stay that way. Alright? And Will, I know this is difficult, but just know that we are here to help you through this. You are not alone.”

* * *

Will stares stunned out the window, as the room hangs in silence. Fleeting shadows of Marissa’s whispered prayers haunt his mind. He had always wondered what the end would be like, but had never thought it would be like this. Wasting away to nothing in the company of strangers. What was the point? Where was the meaning?

Lost in his thoughts, he hardly notices as Abby returns and sits down beside him.

“Are you ok?” she says in a hush, resting her hand on his.

His words are just a whisper, “Did you know?”

“Yeah,” she replies, “I’m sorry. I was not allowed to say anything until Barkoba had told you himself.”

“It’s fine. It’s not your fault. I was just wondering.”

Frozen for an awkward moment, she breaks the quiet, “Did you still want me to show you around?”

“Now?”

“Yeah. It might help take your mind off things. I can take you over to one of the campus buildings and maybe into the courtyard if it’s not too cold. We could even go up to Barkoba’s office. If it’s clear enough, you can see the Etanaki out in the Citadel from up there. What do you think?”

“Ok,” he answers with a defeated shrug, “Sure.”

“That’s the spirit. It’ll make you feel better, I promise. Let me get your chair.”

Rolling the wheelchair across the room and parking it beside the bed, she locks the wheels in place with the small foot lever. “You need a hand to get in?” she offers, as he slips his bony legs over the side of the bed.

“No thanks, I’ll manage,” he replies, mustering all his strength to slide off the sheets and lower himself into the chair.

“Hey Will?” She looks at him with kind eyes.

“Yeah?”

“I’m sorry for not telling you about. . .” she trails off and takes a breath. “If it was up to me, I’d have preferred to have been honest with you from the start, I would. This whole thing, it’s . . . It’s awful. I know you must feel—well, I mean—I can’t imagine what you’re going through, or what you’ve been through . . . but I’m so sorry.”

Will could hear the sadness in her voice. She really cared.

“Thank you,” he replies. “But it’s fine, really. It was going to happen someday, right? Knowing the day doesn’t change anything. Honestly, I don’t know what I was living for anyway. Since my. . . Marissa—” he stops short, choking back the tears forming in his eyes as his voice trembles. “Life, for me, ended a long time ago.”

For a moment Abby stares at his despondence, and as her eyes well up, she crouches down in front of him. “Look. I know we haven’t known each other for long at all, and I can’t imagine how you’re feeling, but I believe everything happens for a reason—even this. And one reason I can see already is what you’ve given me. . . . Even after all you’ve been put through, you’re still a decent person. Most of the guys we get in here haven’t been through half of what you have, and all they have left is anger and hate. But you—”

“You think my hate and anger is any less?!” he snaps, a sudden wave of anger exploding from the melancholic grip on his chest. “I have so much hate you couldn’t know! You think I don’t hate myself? For not doing more? Doing better? That I don’t hate the people that could have helped, but didn’t, because it was against the rules? The people that decide who’s gonna live and who’s gonna to die based on some arbitrary numbers in a program?! You think I’m better?! I’m not! I’m worse!—Far worse! I have so much anger and so much hate you have no idea! So much that it makes me sick! I feel I could burn the world to dust and let it swallow me whole and I wouldn’t even care!!”

Without a word, Abby throws her arms around him and pulls him tight, pressing her soft warmth against his frail form. He resists at first, but as a deep pain within him releases, his body shudders as he sobs into her shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” he sniffles, “I’m just tired.”

“I know it mightn’t feel like it,” she says with a teary smile, pulling back from him and resting her hands on his, “but you’re not alone in this.”

“Thanks,” he glances up at her as his shallow breaths return and his trembling shoulders settle. “For being so nice to me. I know you don’t have to be.” With a deep breath he

steadies himself. "You couldn't be more different from the other nurse if you tried."

"Who? Lilian?" Abby says, looking at him, her cheeks rosy and eyes slightly red and watery. "Why? Did she do something?"

"Oh no, I'm sure she's nice. Just very serious, that's all."

"Well, with a name like 'All-butt', wouldn't you be a bit serious too?" she replies, a broken grin curving in the corner of her mouth.

"That's how you pronounce it?!" Will chokes out a laugh. "It is not?"

"It is," Abby nods, her face lighting up in a smile

"Seriously!? I've been calling her 'Lilian' just in case. But I didn't actually think. . . That's an unfortunate name to be carrying around!"

"And an unfortunate butt to be carrying around too!" she chuckles, relieved by the sudden change in mood as they both burst into laughter.

* * *

The building is quite modern, with traces of its real age only showing through in the figured craftsmanship of the heavy doors and ornate cornicing that encircles the perimeter of the ceilings. Clearly not the first tour she has given, as they meander down a series of corridors that lead away from the room, Abby pushes his wheelchair in a steady, practiced pace.

A rainbow-colored mosaic on the wall ahead indicates the entrance of a children's ward, and turning the corner, they are soon greeted by curious little faces. Some so preoccupied in games or books, do not seem to notice them as they pass, while others, with welcoming little grins, wave polite 'good

mornings' before going about their business. One little girl, pulling a metal stand with a machine on top, stops her slow procession down the corridor to stick out her tongue as they pass. But as Abby gives a theatrical grimace of shock, the child's sullen air breaks into a big beaming smile.

Will smiles too, but in truth, it hurts to look at her. Although his perspective had changed since he met Marissa, he had often wondered if there was any wisdom in bringing new life into the world, knowing full well that it would be hammered to the point of destruction. The girl's pale skin and dark shadowed eyes are such a bleak contrast against the bright optimism brimming from her gentle spirit. Still suffering and hurting, but with such accepting grace. Not mired by bitterness or regret, just here, present . . . an angel on the earth if ever there was one.

At the end of the ward, a double door opens onto a large enclosed glass bridge. They are several floors up and the view of the enormous courtyard below is spectacular. Alive with a host of chirping birds oblivious to the world outside of their private paradise, it is dotted with large trees and decorative water features. Students, going about their day, sip coffee along lines of neat wooden benches, while others mill about laughing in jovial groups.

"So this takes us across from Halfpenny into Juliana's," Abby narrates. "There's another one on the west wing too. You can always cross through the courtyard below, but the bridges are handy when you're up here. If you look down there," she gestures to the courtyard's opposite end, "you can see the main gates. See there, just under that arch."

"Oh yeah," Will replies, straining to follow the direction of her pointing finger.

“The campus isn’t much to look at I know, but there’s a viewing point up above the gates that looks out over Halfpenny and the city—it’s pretty epic.”

Leaving the sterility of the wards behind, they cross the bridge into the gray, monolithic structure of the university that wraps around it. Despite its gloomy exterior, the hallways are bright and well kept. Lined with classroom doors, the studious mumble of lectures babbles out, and through the windows that line the other side, the true splendor of Halfpenny house is magnificent. Admiring the sharp contours of the grand romanesque architecture, they make their way down the long corridor, and rounding the corner at the end, they head down another sprawling hallway that stretches out in front of them.

“So this is the north wing we’re in now,” Abby continues. “You can still see Halfpenny on the left. But the viewpoint is just up ahead. We’ll stop when we get there. You’ll like it, I think. It’s really cool.”

Moments later, as the walkway opens up, the tiled flooring under them gives way to a thick glass platform. Solid glass windows on both sides stretch almost to the top of the building, with Halfpenny on one side and sprawling views of NewBoston on the other. Through the stack of glazed bridges on the floors below they can see the main campus entrance, bustling with people as they enter from the street. And just as Abby had promised, Halfpenny House is breathtaking.

At least a dozen stories high, its extensive stone cobbled towers and parapets stretch even higher, like some grand castle from a fairytale. It looms far taller than the university around it, with some stone sections and windowed rooms protruding as if by magic, over the distant courtyard below.

Will is taken aback. Except in pictures of the Citadel, he has never seen a building quite as magnificent or as strange.

“Cool, right?” Abby nods, pleased with his reaction. “We’ll go up to Barkoba’s office next,” she says, pointing toward a long set of windows embedded in the tallest section of Halfpenny’s steeply sloping roof. “Right up there.”

“Will he mind?” Will asks, pulling his attention from the view to look at her.

“No. He won’t even know, he’s doing his rounds. And anyway, it’s a total tragedy to have a view so beautiful and not share it!”

For a while longer they stay to admire the view before continuing on their way through to the adjacent side of the building and circling back to Halfpenny House. Crossing the connecting walkway, the hushed practicality and sharp odor of the hospital quickly replaces the youthful excitement of the campus corridors.

“This is us here,” she says, as she rolls him through the waiting opening of a shiny elevator. “We’re going right to the top.”

* * *

As a chime rings, the lift car shudders to a stop, and stepping onto the detailed designs of the rich, thick carpet of the doctor’s study, a musty draft of cool air blankets them. Quiet and dimly lit, giving an expansive view of the city and the rest of Neourbia beyond, full height windows run the length of the room. Large bookshelves and beautiful antique furnishings adorn every other square inch, and paintings of people and places from the old world hang proudly on the walls.

“This stuff must be worth a fortune,” Will whispers in awe. “Where did he get it all? Is he loaded, or an art thief?”

“Barkoba?” Abby laughs, “No, nothing so exciting. I’ve known him since I was a child, I’m pretty sure he’s just a regular old person. These have been here as long as I can remember.”

“Who’s that guy?” Will asks, as a huge gold-framed portrait in the center of the room catches his eye. The largest by far, it is of a pale slender man dressed in a pinstriped suit, with trailing tailcoats and a top hat sitting on his graying head. Marked by the shadow of an angry scar running down his left cheek, his thin face and hard, steely eyes mask a subtle yet discernible touch of sadness in his demeanor. With lips tense, as if just about to speak, he grips a cane tightly in one hand and the leash of a large, snarling dog, sitting at his feet, in the other.

“A bit ominous, I know,” Abby replies, following Will’s gaze. “Halfpenny’s founder. Dagda Mannigan. Cool story, actually. You wanna hear?”

“Sure,” he shrugs.

“I’ll do my best,” she smiles. “So apparently, way back in the earliest days of Zeno, he and his followers built Halfpenny and a town around it—right around the time when the second insurrection was squashed by the Malleus. I think the Citadel, the Praetorium, and some of Libertaria would have been populated to some extent, but out here and the rest of Neourbia would have still been a wasteland. Anyway, with survivors from the dustlands coming in from the west and people fleeing the insurrection in the east, this whole area became a refuge for anyone that needed help. Some time later, stories started coming out about high ranking Kol being assassinated in Libertaria and the Citadel, and it wasn’t long

until Malleus started trawling through Zeno looking for answers. When they came here, they came like they always do, and it was a bloodbath. Storming the place and wiping the town off the map, they slaughtered every man, woman and child they could get their hands on. Some people think that things were made up to justify another Malleus genocide—and the records from the time are a bit vague, so who knows what really happened—but the story is that the whole thing happened because it was the charitable mister Mannigan who was responsible for all the killings and the Kol were looking for revenge.”

“Crazy,” Will says, raising his eyebrows. “Was it true?”

“Who knows,” she replies. “I’m no expert! But usually no smoke without fire, right? — Anyway, I didn’t bring you up here for a history lesson. Come look out the window. It’s got to be one of the best views of the city around.”

The sun is setting on the horizon, and as its soft pink and orange luminescence lights the room casting thin black shadows, they are bathed in its gentle warmth. Wheeling himself over to the window, he stops beside her to gaze at the sprawling city stretched below quietly subdued by its glow.

Much like the rest of Boston, the tall, red-brick row houses are perfectly recreated in the classic colonial style to mirror how it would have looked in the old world. With the epic scale and magnificent detail bearing the unmistakable opulence of Vitruvian homage to the time before, it is nothing short of stunning.

Looking past the city limits and over the top of Neourbia’s walls, the twinkling Libertarian skyscrapers towering beyond are engulfed in a cloud of transporters that swarm like drifting flies. Beyond them, the burning white beam of the Vitruvian Column blazes steadily up into the

heavens. Following its brightness down to where it meets the earth, he can just make out the angular silhouette of the structure that it emanates from.

“Is that the . . .”

“Yeah,” Abby replies, following his gaze. “The Etanaki. Cool, huh. Always reminds me how fragile everything is and how easily it could all be snuffed out—but in a nice way, you know—it’s humbling.”

Will gives her a skeptical glance, “Snuffed out? In a nice way?”

“Well, you know. I just mean. . . if that machine,” she motions towards it, “or engine, or whatever you want to call it, ever stops, and the light of the Column goes out. It’s goodbye sun and hello frozen wasteland. Except for maybe the Waif and whoever else is out there, I don’t think the Darklands are survivable for anyone, especially people like us that are used to the comforts of the city. Most of us wouldn’t last more than a few weeks—and the ones who did? They’d probably wish they were dead. But this isn’t new. We all know it, and how everything hangs so delicately in the balance. But still, every morning when we wake up and every night when we go to sleep, we pretend it’s not our reality. Like the end of us all isn’t separated by the blink of an eye. I feel like we’ve been propped up by our own self-centered sense of righteousness for so long that we’ve forgotten that we share the very thing that permits us to exist. But if the Etanaki just stopped? All our bitterness and all our judgment would mean nothing. And in an instant, we’d all be the same. So, when I see the Column, it reminds me that it’s only a matter of time until order is returned. You know what I mean?” Turning to him with her brow raised, she squints as the last of the sun’s pink light glows in the strands of her hair.

“Yeah. Maybe.” Will nods at her pensive expression. “We all stand on the scales of death in the end, right? Mind you, I’d be careful who you share that with. People have been branded as proselytes for less.”

As the changing color of the setting sun sinks beneath the thin black band of the dust wall that hugs the horizon, they stay transfixed on the beautiful spectacle, occasionally pointing things out, but exchanging few words. Gentle clouds of angry oranges and reds reflect their color on the streets and proud buildings, engulfing them, almost as if the city itself has burst into flame. But as the last embers of the day disappears into a slit on the skyline, and their shadows crawl further and further across the carpeted floor under their feet, the sun’s blaze subsides leaving only ashes, as the city descends into night once more.

* * *

Staring at the screen in the corner of the room from his bed, various segments enacting their self important tirade fizzle out with inconsequential meaning. Aches and pains racking through his body, the muted numbness of his misery bubbles up from the sullen beating of his grief that claws inside his chest.

Outside, the shrieking winds of a storm wage war on mankind, and listening helplessly as it sweeps by, it seems to shake the very foundations of the earth. He thinks of her — his Marissa, his joy. She is all he can think, yet he is numb. There are no tears to soak his pillow. Veiled shadows and distant laughter echoes, as memories of her gentle smile haunt the empty hollow of his heart. Until, as if silence itself whispers in his ear, his mind quiets and stills. Holding the little

white pill in his clammy hand, a minute passes, then an hour. Heart racing, he moves it to his lips and swallows it.

'Soon, my love. Soon.'

It is hardly discernible, but there, like an orchestra tuning and preparing their instruments before a symphony, the cold needles of death slip up his body.

A gentle touch at first, each one a thought, a fear, a desire. But as they gather in strength, they sting, like a thousand strands of burning roots. Touch turning to pressure, they begin to squeeze and choke, as each pointed tip penetrates a hidden river of sadness. And submerging deep into pools of his tender misery, searing clouds of steam rise in screams from their place.

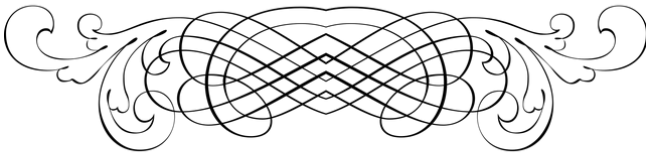
He sees her. There, in a fog on the edge of a precipice, washed in a warm haze of light. With long black hair flowing down the undulating bloom of her long red dress. Drifting like the single note of a song. But as she turns, a blinding white light speaks whispered words.

Quiet at first, it's like a soft summer breeze carried over still water. And then, rising, it crashes as if waves rushing up a stoney beach. Yet, as it grows in might and fury, and the heavens roar with the surge of all the oceans; he hears it.

'Be still my child,' it whispers, rumbling with gentle thunder in its presence. *'For neither life or death will separate you from my love.'*

Choking for air, his eyes flick open with a start and forcing his fingers down his throat, bile spews from his mouth and nose. He sees the little pill on the floor glimmer in the darkness and breathes, as the soft patter of rain from the passing storm outside soothes his senses.

Lying back, he rests his head, and for the first time in a long time, he is at peace.



Peeled back my eyes into colorless sleep.

That speck of light.

Trapped, a heartfelt trek, I'm dust, yet unique.

That speck of light.

Controlled dementia drives me blind you see, or don't.

That speck of light.

Thoughts of things that I've left behind; of will, or won'ts.

That speck of light.

Of nights in fresh delight, my flesh delights.

Of self, enticing fight and flight.

Sweat drips, skin slips, the mirror rips, not quite.

Panic bottles in, dry throat itch,

one last kiss on lips, that's nice.

I softly close the door, as not to wake you;

my precious speck of light.

Chapter 4

TOWARD THE ARK



In delight of the storm's passing, warm rays of light stream through on Will as he stares out the window. Spellbound by the little white clouds that drift across the otherwise unblemished blue sky, he hardly notices as Barkoba enters the room and sits down on the bedside.

Still lingering in his trance, he looks at the doctor, unsure of what to say as he examines his expression. His voice is hollow and as he speaks, it is as if his words are coming from somewhere else.

"I tried," he says, in a defeated hush. "I couldn't do it."

"I know," Barkoba replies, with a sympathetic gesture towards the security camera in the corner of the room. "That is why I am here."

"Why?" Will snuffles. "You have another one for me?"

Barkoba pauses and takes a pensive breath before looking into Will's eyes. "I'm here because of you, Will. And

everyone like you. Do you think what happened to you or Marissa was unique?”

Will’s ears sting at the sound of her name and his face feels hot as he sullenly shakes his head.

“Can I show you something?” Taking a small touch screen from his pocket, the doctor places it on Will’s lap. “Scroll down till you get to line 752.”

Will complies, and scrolling down through the long list of names on its display, he stops as he comes to Marissa’s.

“What is this?” he asks.

“Keep going to the bottom and take a look at how many more pages are after this one.”

The list of names is several thousand long, and eventually reaching the bottom, he sees the page count:

11 of 324.

“Who are these people? What’s it got to do with Marissa?”

“They are people like her, all deemed ineligible for resources for the good of collective sustainability. And that’s just for this year in her age category. There’s one for each sector of the industrial districts and one for prisoners and camp workers. I’ve even got one for minors in state care who will likely not make more than they take. Do you want to see them?”

“No!” Will replies, pushing the device across the sheets. “Why are you showing me this? Is this supposed to make me feel better?”

“Better? No. On the contrary Will. I’m afraid feeling better is a luxury afforded only to the blind. What has been done, and is being done, is a scar from which there is no healing. I came to ask you a question; If you could prevent

what has happened to you from happening to someone else, would you?”

“What? Of course. Who wouldn’t?”

“And why do you say that?”

“Because . . .” Will stops short and hesitates, taken aback by the question. “I don’t know? No one should have the power to decide someone else’s worth, right? It’s not our place!”

“No, it isn’t, is it,” Barkoba replies, relaxing his tone. “I’ll ask you this then; If someone had the power to stop all of this from happening to future generations and make the ones responsible pay for what they’ve done—should they use it?”

“Well sure. Yeah.”

“So what if I told you that I had a way? Should I do it?”

“Look,” Will interjects, irritated by the bizarre line of questioning. “If you had a way to stop the Kol, all I’d want to know is why you’re here talking to me and not out there doing it. I’d love nothing more than to see them all burn, but it’s going to take a lot more than a list of the dead to do it!”

As Barkoba watches him in silence, Will returns his attention to the clouds outside the window and clenches his jaw. Sliding the touch screen back into his pocket the doctor clasps his hands as he straightens up and continues.

“When I was young,” he begins in a soft tone. “I met an old man who told me a story so strange, that I thought he must be ill. And yet, here I am, an old man about to tell the very same story. You are not the first to be hurt by the Vitruvian Empire, and you won’t be the last. For as long as they have ruled the earth, people have stood against them, fighting and dying. But there are those who remain; waiting and planning until the time is right to strike so hard that Vitruvius himself will fall on his knees. So, as did the man

who told me the story, I have waited and I have planned. And I am not alone.”

Will gives him a dubious glance. “You really think anyone stands a chance against the Kol?”

“With the right means and the right method, yes. The Kol will fall, and balance will return to the world. But not, I’m afraid, without you.”

“Me?” Will scoffs. “What possible use could you have for me? I don’t know if you noticed, but I’m not exactly the picture of health.”

“When the Empire was in its infancy, a man came here to Halfpenny and set about helping survivors and refugees rebuild civilization. He claimed to be part of an order that had been called to the safekeeping of an object of great power, that was said to hold both terrible change and perfect balance. An object that would free the one who held it from death itself. The history books will tell you that the man was a zealot and a fiend, seeking only to stoke the fires of rebellion; so when the Kol came and turned all that he’d built and all who he knew to ashes, justice had been done. But what they don’t tell you, is that there were a few who remained, a few who remembered his order and its vision. A few who became many and who see—just as you do—the evil and injustice that cannot go unanswered! So in all the time that has passed since the beginning we have carefully curated the means to bring change. It too is a list, but not one of the dead. It is a list of the men and women of the Kol, whose power directs the madness that surrounds us. Men and women for whom without, the empire will descend into chaos. But you asked what use there is for you? Well, we have a problem. Our method is not quite complete. And until it is, the object of power will render no judgment.”

Will raises his eyebrow. “You don’t think—”

“Please,” Barkoba cuts him short, raising his hand. “Let me finish. I know how this sounds, and I don’t expect you to take my word that any of this is true. But I can show you. You can see everything with your own eyes and determine for yourself. And I assure you, that when we are done, you will see that everything—Legion, the list, the object—is every bit as real as I am.”

The room falls silent as Will studies the doctor, perplexed. “Why are you telling me all this? What do you want from me?”

Barkoba lingers as he looks Will in the eye. “Whether by chance or by design, it would seem that the object is as unique as is the one whom it will allow to wield its power. And since the man who started it all, it has sat dormant. But in the generations that have passed, we have not been idle and have learned what makes it tick. From chemical and biological composition, to the psychological traits and quirks that form throughout our lives, it has the need for a very special person to suit its very special purpose. And with all that we know, we believe that person is you.”

Will is quiet, half in the expectation of the doctor to say more and half in the expectation of waking from a dream. “But. . . Why did you give me that pill?”

“I know.” Barkoba lowers his head. “And I am truly sorry. But you must be offered every choice before this one, including the choice to leave it all behind. The path I am offering you will make you well and extend your life, but you will not escape the suffering it brings, or the dark times that lie ahead. Through those times, if it is the path you choose, you must always know you were given a choice and that the choice was made alone by you.”

Will stares blankly at the doctor as a sea of questions swirl in his head.

“Don’t,” Barkoba interrupts, as Will opens his mouth to speak. “You have done enough. No amount of my words or your answered questions will serve to help you know the truth. If you want to understand more, you must choose to see with your own eyes. So please, think about it, and make your choice. If you would like to look for yourself, just talk to Abby—she knows what to do. If not, it was a pleasure meeting you. But whatever you decide Will, thank you. You have given me hope for our future.”

Standing to his feet, the Doctor gives him one last look, and turning on his heels he’s gone.

* * *

“Is it ok if I come in?” Abby announces as she gives a gentle knock on the open door. “I came earlier, but you were asleep. How are you today?”

Coupled with painful exhaustion, the heat of burning thoughts hang like a thick fog over his head as she glides to the bedside. Vague memories of the Doctor’s words solidify as he takes in the surroundings of his waking world. There’s a tray of cold food on the table by the bed, and the voluminous billow of clouds thickening outside are stained purple in the evening sky.

“I’m ok,” he mumbles through cracked lips.

“No, you’re not,” she replies with a sad smile as she lifts a cup of water to his lips. “Barkoba came to see you?”

Will nods.

“I’m so sorry for what you’ve been through Will—I really am,” she says, glancing apologetically at the floor. “If

there's anything I can do, just. . . I'm here for you, in whatever way you need, ok?"

"Ok," he replies. "Thanks."

He watches her as she moves around the room, first checking the equipment and clearing off the table, before leaving for a few moments to return with an assortment of light food. Waiting patiently as he slowly sits up, she lays the tray in front of him and takes a seat on the bed, before looking in polite silence out the window.

The pallid sight of the meal is unappealing, and as he picks over it, the pang of nausea tickles his throat.

"I don't know if I can eat," he says, pushing the tray away in disgust. "Sorry."

"That's ok," she replies, avoiding his gaze. "I'll take it away."

Reaching to pick up the tray, she stops as Will lays his limp hand on her wrist.

"He said you'd know what to do," he whispers. "If I wanted to know more."

Abby pauses as their eyes lock frozen on each others. "Yeah," she replies, with an earnest softness in her voice. "If it's what you want."

Will examines her sincere expression. "So you believe it? Everything he said? You could be locked up, or worse, even for talking about it."

Taking a slow breath she sits back down beside him. "When I was a kid, the Legion brought me here, from Stanford."

"Stanford?"

"Yeah," she says, lowering her head and pulling her hair to the side to show the faded pockmarks dotting up the back of her neck. "See, we match." Straightening up, she fixes her

hair. “I don’t remember much from before it, but my parents disappeared into the system protesting against religious abolition when it was introduced up north. I was too old for re-education, so they charged me as a probable seditionist and sent me away.” Flashing a tight lipped smile, she shrugs. “I guess they weren’t wrong.”

“So you grew up here?”

“Mostly yeah. Or, not here exactly, but with Barkoba.”

“I’m sorry. . . I—”

“Don’t be,” she replies with a dismissive shake of her head. “It made me who I am today, who I was meant to be. So do I believe? Yes, without a doubt. The Legion are my family, they’re my life. And Barkoba is a good man—maybe a bit zealous for the cause sometimes—but he’s only doing what needs to be done.”

“But even against the Kol? The Malleus?”

Clenching her jaw she glances at him in sudden frustration. “If you knew what was going to happen to you before it did—Would you have done nothing but waited for it? We can’t just sit back and let it happen. And what about the ones who are already gone? Don’t they deserve retribution?”

As if he has truly seen her for the first time, Will’s heart beats in unison with her anger, feeling the familiar weight of her sorrow as she stops and takes a shallow breath.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers, falling quiet as gentleness fills her eyes again.

“Don’t be,” he replies. “So when do we go?”

* * *

Even though his end is only around the corner, Will still clings to his dignity. So rejecting Abby’s gracious offer, he

dresses himself, aching as he pulls the pants over his frail legs and slides his withered arms into his sweatshirt.

Returning with a wheelchair, she makes some adjustments to the hospital equipment around him before helping him shuffle off the side of the bed into it, and with a kind smile, she pushes him out into the narrow corridor.

Passing other ambling patients as they wander through the ward, Will examines each sickened body as they meet, mentally weighing the extent of their mortal woes. Some, frail and crippled, give a sullen glance as if to exchange their shared sorrow, while others seem no more than spectral husks. But although all are stung by their shattered forms, their greatest pain clings like shadowed cloaks as they drag behind them the burden of their heavy hearts.

At the end of a quiet hallway, they come to a halt in front of a large elevator and giving a happy chime, its silver doors slide open to greet them. Waiting as they close behind, Abby holds her hand up to the control panel as with a shudder the elevator begins its descent. Down the shaft, the dull pressure pops in Will's ears as he watches the neon numbers on the display count down. Until, the bold letter 'G' flickering off, the elevator stops with a jarring bump, and the doors open to reveal a gloomy passageway stretching ahead into the darkness.

The air is cold with damp, and judging by the musky scent, low ceiling and rubble walls, it is a place long forgotten by time.

"Where are we?" he asks, as the wheelchair rumbles over the cobbled surface of the claustrophobic hollow.

"Remember the story I told you about the guy who built Halfpenny?"

"Yeah."

“Well, while he was building in the world above, he and his followers were also down here looking for something that had been hidden for a very long time.”

Emerging out of the darkness, a heavy steel door studded with rusted rivets blocks the passage ahead of them.

“They called themselves the Legion,” Abby says, giving a wave up to a camera tucked in a natural crack between a protruding rock, prompting the steady mechanical clicking of gears to pull the door open. “And, as the ones before them, they believed they were the keepers of human equilibrium.”

Glancing at Will, she follows his wide-eyed stare as together they gaze into the immense cavern carved into the solid bedrock that unfolds before them, its gaping vaulted ceiling glistening with the jagged tips of huge stalactites.

“And this,” she continues, the vast emptiness swallowing up the sound of her voice, “is where it all began.”

Several hundred feet high, it is easily as wide as a city block. Far above, as blades of daylight streak through the craggy roof, the air is filled with an ethereal mist that echoes with the playful percussion of falling water. Spanning the chasm’s lower depths, a thin metal walkway dangles over the abyss. And as Will looks along its length, his astonished gape falls on a huge cubic structure hanging in the void.

Encased in glass and suspended as if by magic, the surrounding blackness irradiates with a gentle light glowing from inside its transparent sides. Stairs and platforms joining its host of levels, offices, laboratories, and sleeping quarters fill its form, dotted with furniture as if an elaborate doll’s house.

“Well,” Abby says with a smile. “What do you think?”

“It’s . . .” Will whispers, lost for words as he gawks up at it.

“Come on, let me show you.”

Trundling onto the narrow platform that terminates at a single door on the side of the gigantic glass cube, Will peers in wonder over the edge as they rattle across in the eerie silence. Nestled between jagged rocks that extend upward like sharpened teeth, he can just make out the faint outline of the ruins of ancient buildings.

“We don’t know exactly how long the caves have been used,” Abby says, as if she can hear his thoughts. “But from what we can tell from studying the ruins, people have used them to hide, and in some cases thrive, through some of the hardest moments in history. The Legion must have known that the fire and floods of the Tribulation were coming, as they hid everything down here that was needed to preserve their way of life. All that it needed was to be rediscovered. So while we do what we can to ease the suffering of the world up there, we wait and prepare.”

Approaching the shimmering structure, Will looks up as a crowd of men and women gather at the windows above, pressing against the glass as they draw near.

“What are they looking at?” he asks with mild unease under their imposing gaze.

“Not what—who,” Abby replies, as the glass slides open ahead of them. “Some of them have waited their whole lives for someone like you. So welcome.”

The interior of the grand glazed structure is as impressive and surreal as the exterior. Littered with exquisite paintings and inspired sculptures from times long forgotten, every space available is adorned like the gallery of a fine museum floating in a case of ice. Stacked with what must be thousands of hand-bound books and manuscripts, tall ornate bookshelves garnish the glass floor of the long hallway ahead.

But its magnificence is quickly diminished by the unnerving stare of the people who line its walls in noiseless patience. And as Abby wheels him forward between their ranks, he is greeted by each with reverent bows of their heads.

“Don’t worry,” Abby says, leaning forward and lowering her voice. “We’re just at the end here.”

Reaching the end of the hall, they turn into a dim, wood paneled study encircled by cabinets displaying a further host of parchments and other peculiarities. Seated around a large walnut desk in the center, a handful of well-dressed men and women stop their chatter as they hear them enter, as Barkoba, sitting at their head, stands to his feet.

“Will,” he exclaims. “I am so glad you decided to join us. Come,” he ushers to the front of the desk, “join us.”

“Thank you Abigail,” he says, nodding to Abby as she brings Will’s chair to a stop and turns to leave the room. “So, Will. What do you think of our home?”

“I don’t know what to say,” Will replies. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“And I suspect you never will again. But this is only a prelude to the wonders that brought you here. Now, I will not inundate you with too much. But before they leave us in peace, can I introduce you to my colleagues; they have given their lives to the servitude of the cause and are excited to meet you.”

With a proud motion to each, he introduces them. “Professor Menashe and Doctor Akiva are the heads of our research division.” Glancing up at their expectant smiles Will mumbles his acknowledgment as Barkoba continues. “Logistics and special operations are spearheaded by Doctor Khita and Doctor Galgula, and, of course, Professor Eleazar who runs our eyes and ears in the cities.” He stops and pauses

to look at each one with gratitude. “Without them, this place, the list, and most importantly, you, Will, would not have been united at this moment in time. We owe them everything. But, as there is still much to do — ladies, gentlemen, if you could give us some privacy.”

As his colleagues file out of the room with hushed obedience, Barkoba stands patiently, waiting until the door clicks shut, before walking around his desk and sitting in the large armchair.

“I will not bore you with talk,” he starts after a thoughtful pause. “Look.”

Gesturing towards a large screen embedded in the wall, live footage from inside a gloomy crypt flickers on, focused on a white marble pedestal standing in its center. Perched on its top, a black cube rests in place, not quite still, but shimmering, as it hovers over the smooth surface. No bigger than a closed fist, its faces glisten like sliding oil, bending and twisting the light around it, as if drawn to its peculiar form.

“We have had it for a very long time,” Barkoba continues. “But in all our years, we have never understood it. It is, for lack of a better word, an object like no other, unbending to the laws of men and their universe. It cannot be touched or moved or measured, by any means of the earth. To even try comes with great risk – and believe me, we have tried. But, for the little we have learned, we have learned enough. We know it contains the power of great change and we know that the man who kept it through the Tribulation, had harnessed that power. We also know by the prophecy of the same man, that when the day came for its need, there would be another just like him, and great change would come again.”

“And you think that’s me?” Will asks.

“I do.”

“And if it’s not?”

Barkoba hesitates and looks up to the ceiling with a pained expression across his face. “With the exception of this room, this building is made almost entirely of glass. Clear, transparent—brittle. We strive to hide nothing from each other, and I will extend no less to you. If I am wrong, and you touch the object, I have no doubt that you will die. You are not the first to try.”

Will’s forehead wrinkles in a frown as he contemplates the doctor’s words, “And if I don’t die?”

“Your injuries and sickness will be no more. With its gift, you will be given power over death like men have never known. You, like those before you, will have the power to balance the scales of this broken world. To bring justice and vengeance to those who have made their gardens amongst the bones of the dead.”

Barkoba pauses, tapping a button on his desk, as the image of the object goes dark.

“But it is, and always will be, your choice,” he continues. “We can, if you wish, bring you back to your hospital bed and you can spend your last days there. Whatever this may be, it can only be, if it is what you choose.”

“And if I choose to stay—and survive. . . what then? You’d have me what? Be your executioner?”

“Such an ugly word. . . but yes, by your hand, and others, it is judgment that this world needs. But you must understand; the ones marked for death are drenched in the blood of innocent lives. They are undoubtedly guilty. We have examined each and every one of them for years, and only by the most stringent standards of our morality and law have we listed their names. Without them, the Kol and the Vitruvian Empire

will fall and this Godless swamp they force us to wade will cease to be! I wish it were not so, but think of Marissa, Will! Your parents! They weren't alone in their suffering! Think of the countless others. With every day that passes, more just like them are labeled and snuffed out by idle deliberators, walking carelessly about wherever they wish! As they trample the masses like delicate flowers beneath their feet, are we to do nothing?!!"

Drawing a long deep breath he slides open a drawer in his desk and produces a small gray case, unzipping the side to reveal a long steel syringe, and leaning forward over the desk, he places it in front of Will.

"If you are accepted and given the gift, then yes, the Legion would ask that you would bear the names of the guilty and carry out our works. But I hope that you understand. Our works are the works of good men, moral men. We are only trying to do what is right, and what needs to be done." Pausing, he gestures to the needle, "That is it. The list."

Will stays motionless, studying it carefully before tentatively picking it up to feel the cold weight of it in his hands as Barkoba carries on.

"It contains the biometric signatures of each and every one. In your bloodstream it will become an inseparable part of you. With it, and the right tech, there will be nowhere for them to hide."

"And if I said no?" Will's voice cracks as he asks the question, feeling the heavy hand of tiredness subdue his body.

Barkoba's tone softens. "The choice is always yours to make. We would not intervene."

They both sit silently, the ticking of the old grandfather clock on the wall filling the space between them. The mere mention of Marissa has thrown Will's mind into a spiral. His

parents. . . His whole life feels like one long freefall, forever flailing and grasping desperately in the air for something to hold on to, always one thought from being able to elaborate on what is wrong, but distinctly aware that something is far from right.

“Ok,” he says, casting a fatigued glance at Barkoba, “. . . I’ll do it.”

Prying loose the little cap uncovering the needled point of the syringe, he pushes the point into his arm and presses the button. Removing it slowly from his skin, he looks up at Barkoba, who is looking back at him with tear-filled eyes.

“Thank you Will,” he whispers with a tremor in his voice. “You have made the right choice. Together, we will change the world.”

Chapter 5

HIS NAME IS MANNIGAN



As the bedroom lights flick on, a strobing blue beacon on the bedroom roof flashes in unified rhythm with the monotone pulse of an alarm. Sitting up with a start, Will looks frantically around. But no sooner than his eyes have adjusted to the brightness, the door bursts open as Lillian rushes in.

“Sorry for the intrusion!” she yells over the racket. “There’s a situation up top! We’re going into lockdown!”

Grabbing his wheelchair she slams it into the bed.

“What happened?!” Will asks, wincing with each droning undulation.

“The Malterra came through the front of Juliana’s about twenty minutes ago,” she replies, throwing back his covers and ushering him towards her outstretched arm. “They may be looking for something else, but we can’t take a chance. Here, put this on. The caves are cold.”

Helping him shuffle into the chair, she wheels him out the door to the elevator at the end of the hall, mashing the buttons in impatient succession until the doors close. In keeping with the rest of the crystalline aesthetic, the sides of the elevator too are glass, and first dropping through the many floors of the Ark below, it pops out the lowest floor into the yawning blackness of the cavern. Held in a thin steel frame, it plummets into darkness, the huge glass cube growing distant above as they descend through the vastness of the cave. Until, reaching a host of bright white lights that illuminate the bottom, it opens onto a large concrete platform joined by several crude rubble trails.

Resounding with calls of urgency, the energy in the air is tense, as hauling equipment back and forth, a group of men and women load up a row of rugged vehicles parked in a line near the edge.

“Lillian!” the sound of Barkoba’s voice calls out. Waving from the back of a large pickup truck, he shouts again, and as Lillian waves back, he grabs the side of the rusted roll cage and clambers down.

“Sorry about the early hour. You ok?” he asks as they approach. “Will, how are you? My apologies for getting you down here in such a hurry.”

“Is everything ok?” Will asks.

“It will be, yes,” he replies, “but we can’t be sure. If by some miracle the Malleus find us, we could only hold them off for so long.” He glances down the platform at a rumble from further down the chamber, before turning back to Will with a worried frown. “I know this is not exactly how we planned, but we are going to have to expedite our visit to the object. But it is still your choice. Are you sure this is what you want to do?”

Stifling the urge to acknowledge the simmering pangs of fear gripping his chest, Will nods, “Yeah.”

About to speak, Barkoba stops short, as far above, a deep rumble reverberates through the cavern's gloomy depths. Listening, frozen, to its booming tremor, a shower of dust and pebbles rains around them.

Reaching for the side of a small device in his ear, Barkoba's face pales. “Jesse, what was that? Everything ok?” he says, listening intently to the response. “Ok, ok. It's ok. We've planned for this, remember? I know it's hard, but just let them do their thing—Do not engage!. . . I know, I know! But they're not our people, so just hang in there. If we have to, blow the tunnel. But until then, stay out of it! In the meantime, send the signal; full evac. Get everyone who's not needed out of here.”

Finished speaking, he rubs his temple and takes a long breath, before turning his attention to Will and Lilian with fresh determination. “Ok, we've got to go . . . Lilly, Aaron has a spot for you up front,” he gestures towards the line of waiting vehicles ahead, as their engines roar to life. “All going well, I'll see you in a few days, ok?” Opening his arms to her, she moves to him and they give each other a firm hug.

“Good luck,” she says.

“You too. I'll see you soon.”

Giving a half hearted smile, she turns to go, and joining a group tracking across the platform she heads towards the other vehicles.

“There's Abby now,” Barkoba remarks, raising his hand as Abby approaches from one of the connecting trails, “Abby!!”

Dressed in tan coveralls arrayed with functional pockets and zips, she's followed by an Autocargo unit that rambles behind her on four large rubber wheels.

"Is everything alright up there?" she asks as she hurries over, gesturing to the thundering volume above. "Have they found us?"

Barkoba shakes his head, "We'll be fine. You got everything we need?"

"Yeah, it's all there," she says, motions to the Autocargo unit that has parked itself behind their truck to unload onto the flatbed.

"Good. Well come on then, no point hanging around – Will, let's get you up back," he says gesturing to the vehicle. "Abby, you're up front with me!" Climbing up onto the flatbed he reaches down to grab Will's hand. Pulling him up, he props him against the side. "It's a bit of a bumpy ride, but nothing to worry about. It's not too far."

The truck's sturdy engine starts up with a growl, and revving a few times, it idles into a smooth gurgle, sending plumes of black smoke billowing up into the upper expanses of the cavern. Probing into the blackness ahead, the array of headlights mounted on its front flick on, and with a jolt, they begin moving down a trail.

The deep thunder from the world above reverberating through the cavern like crashing waves, Will watches in silence as the Ark's glowing form grows steadily smaller behind them. And bumping and bouncing down the rocky trail, it is soon as if the darkness of the cave will swallow them whole.

To their sides, the faint outlines and looming shadows of crumbling buildings rise from the cavern floor, separated by narrow winding alleyways that disappear between them. He can almost see the ghostlike figures of laughing children as

they play and the bartering chatter of traders in the market stalls that would have once lined the streets. But now, lost to time, this is all that remains; a city returned to stone, and a people returned to dust.

‘Is this what is destined for us all? To be crushed under the relentless wheel of history. Formed in a shape and held in a time by a lifeless mechanical beat, only to be ground to ash and returned to nothing in a fleeting burst of hope?’

Rattled by a sharp turn in the road, the transporter’s engine whines with the strain of the steep ascent as they climb rapidly up the curve of a long stone bridge. The carcass of the dead city dropping away behind them, the sounds of a river rushing below fills the cold damp air as they fly over the crest and rumble down the other side.

The trail leveling out, a cauldron of bats rises screeching into the darkness as they enter a narrow tunnel. Amplifying the blare of the engine to a howl, it is deafening. But with nothing to see but the hypnotic flickering of the light on the tunnel’s walls that rush past, Will covers his ears and eases back to the soothing vibrations of the ground beneath the wheels.

* * *

Skidding on the loose dirt, the truck rolls to a stop. It is quiet, and as the engine shuts off, it is only the changes in the cavern’s pressure that heave like a dragon’s breath, and the occasional patter of unseen waters falling from high above that fills the silence.

“Well, what do you think?” Barkoba calls back to Will, as he and Abby step out and gaze up.

Bathed in the beams of the headlights, an enormous unblemished shard of rock stretches upward, protruding from the heart of the earth like the tip of a giant's sword.

"It's incredible," Will replies.

"It is, isn't it? It is the resting place of the object for as long as we have known it."

"Was it built by Legion?"

"We don't think so. We have studied it extensively. It predates any known records by thousands of years, and by some estimates even predates civilization. And it may not look like it, but from what we can tell it was formed naturally—or what we would consider natural at least. But come on, there is no time to lose."

Striding forward, he heads toward the single shadowed doorway at its base, as Abby climbs up into the back of the truck and helps Will shuffle down. With one arm held over her shoulder they hobble towards the structure's strangely smooth surface, until, stepping across the threshold, they are engulfed in total blackness.

"One second," Barkoba's voice rings out from the darkness. "There!"

With a thud and a click, an array of lights recessed into the stone floor illuminates, casting a warm glow into a vast hollow of the ceiling that slowly constricts into a conical point far above.

As if cut from the rock itself, the room is a perfect circle. Around its circumference, five ornate sarcophagi, each adorned with strange creatures and inscriptions, are centered around the white marble pedestal that stands proud host in the middle; And on it, the dark object, drifting motionless on top. It is smaller than it had looked on the screen, and the more Will stares at it, the more its shimmering black faces

seem to move. Bending and flowing, it is almost as if it pulses or breathes, rippling with some unknown life. As if you could dip a finger into its surface and be left with a blackened stain, or perhaps, if you slipped, you could be consumed by it entirely.

“We call them the Judges,” Barkoba remarks, ushering toward the tombs. “We believe each one wielded the gift in their time. And,” he continues, following Will’s unshaking gaze from the little black box, “if it accepts you, like it did them . . . you will be the next.”

Will examines it. It is like nothing he has ever seen. Small, but somehow taking more space than it should, as in subtle distortion, the light and the space around it seem to draw toward it as if listening to its call.

“What do I do?” he asks in quiet fascination.

“Simply touch it,” Barkoba replies.

With a hesitated thought and a resigned breath, Will slides his heavy arm off Abby’s shoulder and takes a pained step forward.

“And Will,” Barkoba continues with heartfelt sincerity, “whatever happens. Thank you.”

Will nods in appreciation and looks back at Abby’s pallid face. Her sorrow drifting like a summer wind, she gives a saddened smile as he turns to face the object again. And taking the last few strained steps toward it, he raises his trembling hand.

*‘Here at the beginning of the end, I will end as I began;
in the hand of mercy.’*

A blinding flash pierces his skull and he is engulfed by a bitter cold.

Into darkness and the empty nothingness of chaos, he falls, soundlessly tumbling in a spiraled descent through an empty void.

In endless insignificance, a light is born. Only a speck. But one with such furious energy that it stings his eyes and warms his frozen skin; and as he gravitates towards it, it grows. A little at first. Then, a little more, as time adds days to weeks, and weeks to months. Further and further it expands, until, in terrifying speed, his body seizes and he braces for impact. And then — nothing . . .

* * *

A dull whining sounds shrill in his head. Opening his eyes, he squints in a daze at the vivid brightness of his surroundings, as nestled within a rich jungle of giant trees and vines, a disordered cluster of small huts made of clay and thatch form a primitive village.

The air, thick with smoke, is filled with anguished screams. Gunshots ringing out in the distance, he flinches. But hearing the frantic patter of feet splashing through the mud, he turns, as clutching an infant in her arms a woman in a torn dress runs past with terror in her eyes. Behind her as she flees, a dark-haired soldier raises the long barrel of his musket. And as his iron helmet and silver breastplate gleam with the burst of flame, he fires.

Will's fingers tingle, as the beat of his pounding heart drums in his head. Clinging to the still silence of her child, the woman's chest heaves with shallow breaths as the soldier walks over to her limp body. First prodding her back with the tip of his leather boot, he sets his musket down. Before,

drawing his needled sword from its scabbard, he plunges it into her neck.

An agonized wail of anguish diverts Will's horror to the form of a bleeding man. Naked, but for a loincloth and painted streaks of vivid color, he thrashes as he is dragged from between the huts by three more of the armored brutes. Dropped to his knees before a large rock, they laugh with callous cheer as they hold his bare arms across it. And as their ax falls and his wrists divide, he looks to the sky and howls.

He is alone now. At the end of a bloodied trail in the mud where he crawled to his wife and child. Shuddering as he holds them in his handless arms. His eyes seem to shine; raw, exposed, and alive in a furious blaze. Burning, not in fear or pain or sadness, but with the heat of a blinding rage, and all the hate of hell's darkness.

In only the space between breaths, Will sees him again.

Now, as he kneels before a plinth of stone. His bandaged wrists held fast in prayer, he bows his head to the small black box that shimmers on top.

Another breath, as he reappears.

Now, in the stifling heat and fumes of a metallurgist's forge, his bristling shape illuminated by a burning glow. Birthed from his mutilated wrists, razored swords protrude, their bare handles driven by the blacksmith into each of his impotent stumps. But when his screaming stops and the blades ghastrly beauty gleams gold in the flickering light, his laughter seems to shake the world.

Another breath.

A rain swept battlefield, bathed in the light of the moon. Fires burn and wind howls through the trees. Rivers of blood stream between piles of the dead and the dying. And there, him, the man with blades for hands, panting like a satiated

beast among them, his body glistening crimson with the carnage.

Another breath, yet this one harder, as Will sees a beautiful Queen.

With rose red lips and long red curls, she's wrapped in tartan and robed in a royal blue cloak. But bound and gagged, tears stream down her face. Searching the sorrow in her eyes, he sees their reflection. And as the abhorrent sight of the cruelty that she is forced to witness soaks his soul, he mourns for her suffering.

Again, he sees her. Fallen before a shining altar. Reaching out, she trembles as she hums her broken heart and laying hands on the little black box, it gifts her its wisps of twisting shadows.

Chest tightening, as the amber hues of a rising sun kiss the rolling crest of a lush green hill, he fights for another breath.

Now in a crown of gold, she waits on a pale gray horse, and shrieking her terrible grief she raises her sword. With a roar, her army moves, sweeping like great waves over the encampment in the valley below. And as burning men and banners fall beneath her furious violence, the earth runs red with her song.

The faint clutches of unconsciousness reaching out, Will gasps for another fragile breath, now gazing on the crowded triage of a battered hospital.

Joining the anguished screams of patients, thunderous tremors of distant bombs blend in wretched ululation as a doctor hurries past. His pallid face and sallow skin are worn by the sins of war and his eyes echo a despondent heart. Yet he is no stranger. Will has seen him before. Not quite the same, this man still carries the marks of youth, but it is him.

And looking to the word stitched neatly beneath the Vitruvian seal on his stained white coat, he sees his name.

Mannigan.

It is dusk. High in a candle lit window, the man sits alone and weeps, as the city burns to dust on the horizon. Watching the relentless hells of war reduce it all to ash, walls rattle and the ground shudders beneath his feet.

First, just like a single droplet, Will feels the heat of his pain. Yet, as one drop turns to two, and two to three, the sky opens and it begins to rain. Light at first, dancing in delicate symphony, soon the full grandeur of his sadness comes alive. Roaring to crescendo, the heavens flood the earth as the man and his sorrow wash through him like a thousand jagged knives.

But then it stops.

In the sudden hush, Will's blood runs cold. His eyes blackened by a deathly gaze, the man lurches at him and stares straight into his face, plunging to the depths of his soul. Stripping it bare in an instant, he sees him. He sees all there is to be seen, he knows all there is to be known. And as fire and blood spew from his open mouth, he speaks with the bellowing voice of the tortured multitude, "RISE!!!"

Chapter 6

THE GIFT



Vaguely aware of a speck of light faintly coming through what must be an opening at the furthestmost tip of the concave roof above, it is quiet. Staring up at Barkoba and Abby leaning over him, he looks puzzled for a moment at their worried expressions.

“He’s breathing. Will!” Barkoba yells, shining a light into Will’s open eyes. “Are you with us? Talk to me?!”

“Stop,” Will whispers through a dry throat, flinching at the blinding glare. “I’m ok.”

“My God. . .” Through a nervous smile the doctor looks up at Abby’s pale face. “He made it. What happened? How do you feel?”

Will’s mind reels with what he has seen, and for a moment he lies in silence.

“Sore,” he replies. Raising his hand to examine the black square burnt into his palm’s flesh, he squints as little wisps of smoke trail from it.

“A souvenir,” Barkoba remarks, peering at it. “Are you alright to get up? Here, let me help you.” Putting an arm behind Will, he tries to help him sit. “Abby, come on girl. Give me a hand.”

“I thought I was supposed to feel better?” Will winces from the pain as they pull him up and prop him against the marble plinth.

“Yes, well, you should. . .” Barkoba answers. “But give it time. We don’t know exactly what to expect. For now we’ll consider it a miracle that you are alive.”

“But that means he has the gift though, right?” Abby asks. “Are we going ahead with the plan?”

“Yes, but—I don’t know, I. . .” Trailing off, he glances at her with a look of concern. “I can’t send you off until we are sure. It can’t be for nothing. Hold on. I’ll be right back.” Getting up, flustered, he heads out the door towards the truck.

“I knew you’d make it,” Abby smiles, turning to Will with a look of relief. “I knew it!”

“Well . . . ‘ta-da!’” Will laughs weakly. “Now what?”

“I don’t know. Barkoba, he’ll. . .” She looks towards the doorway. “We’ve got to go to Desolation first and find Solomon. Once we’ve found him, everything can begin and then we can. . .”

Turning to the sound of hurried footsteps, she stops short as Barkoba rushes back through the doorway with a sunken expression on his face and gripping a snub nose shotgun by his side.

“Jesse just blew the tunnel!” he exclaims in a cracked voice. “I’m sorry Will, I really am — but there’s no time!”

Lifting the gun as beads of perspiration form on his brow, he levels it directly at Will, “Put your hands up — Now!”

In slow perplexion, Will raises his hands. “What are you doing. . . Abby?”

“Bar!” Abby screams, scrambling to her feet. “What are you doing!! Stop!!!”

“I’m sorry, my girl. I can’t send you out there until I’m sure.”

“Sto—!!!”

With a deafening explosion, Will’s arm explodes into vapor, sending a spray of bloodied mist into his face as the shockwave hits him. Slumping to his side, the sound of his scream is muffled by a shrill high-pitched squeal that permeates his head, as Abby shrieks with wild-eyed fury and tackles Barkoba to the ground.

In raw disbelief he lifts his arm, or what it used to be, and stares blankly at the mangled end of an elbow before him. It feels more numb than anything, and as he tries to wiggle his non-existent fingers, a tingle radiates up to his shoulder. Clutching the ragged limb to his chest, he recoils in sudden shock as fine tendrils like thousands of tiny hairs begin to grow from his bloodied stump, weaving and winding into each other. Pain rising in excruciating agony, they blend and multiply in a grotesque spectacle, stitching to one another to form intricate patterns of muscles and veins. In stupefied horror, he watches as the base of what appears to be a thumb forms on the head of his newly sprouted wrist. And as the mass blooms the roots of a hand, he yells over the howls of Abby’s anger, “Stop!!”

Turning towards the sound of his voice, Abby and Barkoba freeze.

“Look!!” Holding up his extended arm, the fleshy fibers weave like breeding snakes as they form the tips of his fingers.

Abby scrambles over to him, stopping short to stare in horrified wonder at the sickening marvel.

“Thank God,” Barkoba gasps.

“It’s. . . It’s you. . .” Abby whispers. Staring shaken, she glances back at Barkoba who is kneeling in silence. “The gift. . . He has it.”

For a moment they are quiet, as the subdued resonance of the cavern’s solitude soothes the adrenaline that courses through their bodies.

“I am truly sorry.” Barkoba’s hushed tone breaks the silence. “It was never my intention to cause you pain. I just couldn’t. . .” Stumbling on his words, he shakes his head at his momentary madness. “I couldn’t send her out there with you—I had to be sure. I’d never forgive myself if I was wrong.”

“Couldn’t you have done it another way?!” Abby snaps. “Like any other way?!”

“I know, I—”

“We could’ve. . . I don’t know? Like, cut him or something! Did you have to shoot him?! What is wrong with you!!”

“I know!! I’m sorry!” Barkoba replies defensively. “I just couldn’t. . . What if I’d made a mistake. Miscalculated or interpreted the texts to suit my own needs! I needed to know that he was what we thought he would be! If I’d led you all astray. . .” he lowers his head. “I’d never forgive myself. I couldn’t send you out into the dustlands for nothing. I had to be sure.”

“Don’t you dare make it about me!!”

“No! I didn’t m—”

“Can you two stop?!” Will cuts him short, as he pulls himself to his feet. “Please. It doesn't matter. What's done is done. If the Malleus are coming, what matters is getting out of here. Where are we supposed to be going?”

“So. . . you'll still help us?” Barkoba asks.

“Not you,” he scowls, shaking his head. “My arm still hurts. But I'll help her.” Turning from the doctor, he looks at Abby, “If it's still what you want?”

Studying the doctor's shaken form, Abby pauses, before turning her stern focus to Will. “Yeah. It is.”

“Thank you,” Barkoba says in a hushed voice.

Will inhales as he examines the doctor's earnest expression. “So what now?”

Clambering up from his knees, the doctor glimpses at Will in humbled remorse. “I have passage booked and a craft waiting to take you over the city walls to Desolation. Abby will fill you in on the way. If you would, Abby.”

Her cheeks still flush with anger, Abby glares at him for a second before turning to Will. “Can I give you a hand getting to the truck?”

“No, I think I can manage,” he replies.

“Well, come on then,” she says, turning to the door. “Let's go.”

His body still aches as he limps with Abby back to the truck, but a prickle of energy in his legs he has not felt for some time drives him forward. Grunting in discomfort, he hoists himself onto the truck's flatbed as Abby climbs in beside him.

“Here,” Abby says, tossing a pair of coveralls from one of the cargo chests to Will as he sits down. “Put these on.”

“Thanks,” he replies. “So what's in Desolation?”

“There’s a man there, Solomon. He has a way to help us find the people on the list.”

“You don’t know who you’re looking for?”

“No—or well, we do. We just don’t know exactly where. Most of these people are powerful Kol. They are not people that want to be found. But Solomon has a way. He used to be Kol – Malflatus if you can believe it.”

“Really?” Will raises his eyebrows, “Jeez.”

“Yeah, I know. Apparently he disconnected from the network in the Praetorium and fled to Desolation. Barkoba said he stayed hidden until the price on his head caught up with him. But when he was sent to the Queen for execution, she found out who he was and kept him for herself. So she faked his execution and kept him alive as leverage against the Kol.”

“So where is he now?”

“Tucked away somewhere, apparently. We’ll find out once we’re there. Legion has contacts who are waiting for us, even one close to the Queen. We shouldn’t be much longer than a few days.”

Will studies the staunch determination in her expression. “Have you been out there? You know—out of Zeno?”

“No. . .” she replies. “You?”

He shakes his head.

* * *

Scuttling along the dirt trail that winds and twists through the darkness, Will and Abby sit in silence listening to the reverberations of the engine’s low growl. Eventually passing under a stone archway into a narrow tunnel, they burst into an open clearing bathed in the light of the sun.

Spattered with tiny blue and pink flowers, and carpeted by a lush green grass that blankets the ground, it is quite beautiful, and as they squint up at the soft blue sky that radiates through a large opening in the cave roof, the truck skids to a halt.

“I don’t see him?” Barkoba calls out, as he climbs out of the cab. “You see anything?”

“No, nothing,” Abby replies.

“Not to worry, I’m sure he’ll be here soon. Let’s get loaded up anyway. We can wait inside.”

With a swift stride to the center of the clearing, he stops short and crouches down, reaching ahead as if clutching for the breeze. Grabbing what appears to be the cavern floor itself, the air in front of him shimmers as he lifts it up and ducking under it he disappears.

“Did you. . . ?” Will starts. But interrupted by a muffled noise, a mass of fabric draped over a huge object appears in front of them.

The side of the material’s edge lifting up, Barkoba peers out from under it.

“You two coming?!” he calls with a wave.

Hopping down from the truck and ducking under the edge of the fabric, Will stares up at the hulking form of a sleek black aircraft, taking a moment for his eyes to adjust to the dim light. As much an aircraft as it is a work of art; as if carved from a single piece of obsidian, the smooth lines of the magnificent machine’s sharp geometry cut through each other in perfect elegance.

Will whistles through his teeth, “Must be worth a fortune!”

“It is,” Barkoba replies, with a pleased grin. “Legion has a few wealthy benefactors and you’d be amazed what the

Trafaka can get their hands on if you pay them enough! It's a C-class Vitruvian Hawk. Go on in, take a look. Otto should be here soon but we might as well get some rest while we wait. I'm just going to help Abby load up."

The door on the side is open and as Will approaches, two simple steps protrude organically from the craft. Lined with rich ivory paneling it is detailed in a dark walnut trim, the cabin is luxurious and impeccably clean. Almost afraid to touch anything he moves cautiously inside. But as he slides into one of the plush leather seats, watching as the faint thud of the hatches closing outside shakes the little porthole windows, he exhales with a satisfied breath.

Chapter 7

OVER THE WALL



Wrapped in a red blanket embroidered with the Vitruvian seal, Abby, in the seat beside him, is still asleep. Donning a cushioned headset in the cockpit up front, the pilot is busy as joyful whirs and beeps sound out and the craft comes to life.

“Abby, wake up my girl,” Barkoba says as the door slides open. “It’s time to go.”

“I’m up,” she mutters, sitting up in a momentary daze. “I’m up.”

Taking in her surroundings she pushes the blanket off. “Ok, I’m ready. Let’s go.”

As Barkoba’s gaze lingers on hers, her expression softens in sudden comprehension of her words, and she grabs his hand. “Bar . . . I—”

“No,” he interrupts, tears welling up in his eyes. “No goodbyes. . . please. I am so proud of you. I hope you know that. Now—go and do what needs to be done.”

With a sudden howl, the aircraft's engine starts up, and as a blast of air rushes into the cabin, the doctor pulls away and steps out of the open door. Turning to face them, he shields his face from the whirlwind of dust and shouts over the noise, "Never forget! Vengeance is ours!! Let's make things right!"

Screaming with a deafening shriek, the floor shudders as the craft begins to rise. And as Will struggles to breathe against the crushing ascent, he watches as Barkoba, growing smaller below, waves goodbye.

It is over in a moment. Streaks of the morning sun blazing through the windows, the engine's roar dulls to a pleasant hum as they begin to hurtle forward through the sky.

Leaning around from his seat, the pilot smiles through a pair of big shaded sunglasses.

"I'm Otto, by the way!" he says, raising his voice over the chatter of the cockpit instruments. "Sorry about the rush! I was running late, so I thought it best just to get going and skip the small talk. Time is money and all that! Abby and Will, right?"

Giving a muted wave, Will smiles back, before glancing at Abby, who stares blankly as if she hadn't heard.

"Well it's very nice to meet you," Otto gives them a thumbs up. "We'll be a few hours over Zeno until we hit the dustlands, so get comfy. And providing I did the paperwork right," he adds with a chuckle, "I'm hoping the Malignus won't blow us out of the sky!"

* * *

As the city's expansive sprawl unfolds beneath and the mechanical thrum of the engine pulses through the cabin, Will is lost in thought.

The view is incredible. Although he has seen it in pictures and videos, he has never seen the city from the air with his own eyes. And having left Neourbia only a handful of times for brief holidays in Eden and the occasional work trip to Libertaria, he had never fully grasped Zeno's vast enormity until now.

They're just outside Libertaria by the look of it.

Peering past the shining spikes of Libertaria's skyscrapers, the fortified battlements of the Praetorium span the full length of the coast, accompanied by the monstrous shadows of the Malignus warships hovering above it. Past it, nestled in the sparkling waters of the bay, is the Island Citadel of Abundance, host to the needled flame of the Vitruvian column that spews skyward from the Etanaki's silhouetted form. And beyond that again, shimmering over the ocean, the rising sun creates a luminous halo that hugs the foreboding black wall of dust on the horizon.

Below, as the craft veers into a turn, he can make out the vast wall that separates it from Neourbia. Cutting the gray mass of the cityscape as it snakes its way through Libertaria to the sea, the winding banks of the River Lovelace come into view. And as he squints at the distant shape of its larger bridges straddling the water, he sees the familiar footprint of Boston, the place he had once called home. Further north of its urban sprawl, another city. D.C. perhaps. Or maybe Chicago. But blinded by the sun's rays bouncing off the plains of the energy district beyond, it's hard to tell.

Continuing their journey west, the white light of the column gleams like a silver pin behind as the sparkling sea

fades out of view. Until, spotting the walls of the Neourbian city limits, they approach the lush green edges of Eden.

Supposedly the equivalent size of Neourbia and Libertaria combined, its natural splendor is vast. With rugged mountains, lakes and forests, it extends so far that it was not uncommon for its more adventurous visitors to vanish in its rugged grandeur, and as the thin gray line of the border passes under the craft, Will can see why. Endless shades of green, twist and bend through the ever changing natural landscape. Blending and mixing across windswept, grassy plains, epic yawns of rising cliffs and climbing peaks break the open mouths of dark ravines before spilling into lush valleys of evergreens, scarred by deep blue rivers.

On their trips there, he and Marissa had not seen much of it. More interested in each other's company and spending the rare cash that was so much effort to save, they had ventured out to camp a couple of times, but usually stayed in small towns, never fully delving into the real wilderness that Eden had to offer. It had always been a conversation they enjoyed, though. They had always talked about leasing a cottage on a bit of land and growing old there; learning how to farm and do things the old way, only venturing back to the city for their grandkid's birthdays or other big events.

"Come in DD-722." Crackling over the radio in the cockpit, a voice interrupts the silence. "This is Zenon border control, do you copy?"

"Loud and clear border control, this is DD-722," Otto responds. "What can I do for you today?"

With a rumble from outside, a fighter drone sweeps into view through the window. Arrayed with cameras and sensors that flicker in every direction, it levels off parallel to them as

another one appears through the window on the opposite side.

“722,” the voice on the radio calls again. “Please confirm your cargo and the purpose of your border crossing.”

“Copy that. Cargo is 1 male, 1 female and medical supplies. Purpose of crossing is humanitarian aid training in Desolation City.”

The radio hisses static as Will glances at Abby’s nervous expression.

“Copy that 722. We detect weapons in your cargo bay. Please confirm.”

Otto pauses, “My apologies border control. Weapons are small arms, self defense only—in case of emergency.”

“Copy 722. They’re not declared on your transport documents. Please transfer your weapons license.”

“Yep, sure thing. . .” The tension in Otto’s voice is palpable as he waves out to the drones. “Please stand by.” With the touch of a few buttons, he clambers out of his seat and back into the cabin.

“Sit tight,” he reassures them, lumbering down the aisle between their seats. “We’ll be clear in a minute.”

Opening a hatch behind them and rummaging around, he scans a small briefcase with a device from his jacket before shuffling back up to his seat.

“Come in, border control,” he calls.

“Go ahead.”

“Files transferred there now. Please advise.” Another endless hush followed by a silence holds their breath as they wait.

“Come in 722.”

“Yes, border control, go ahead.”

“The fee for incorrect documentation has been deducted from your account. You are clear to exit Zeno. Have a nice day.”

With a flash of their afterburners, the drones bank sideways in unison and disappear into the sky with a thunderous shake.

“Whoa, thank God for that!” Otto remarks with a sigh, taking off his headset and wiping sweat from his forehead with his sleeve. “All good back there?”

A comforting wave of relief washing over them, Will and Abby sigh as they relax in their seats, “Yeah, all good!”

“Good. Sorry about that. . . paperwork huh! I could’ve sworn I scanned those in—but anyway,” he laughs, “we’ll be over Zeno’s outer walls shortly and from there, about an hour to Desolation.”

* * *

The huge siege wall that separates Zeno from the harsh reality of the dustlands is somewhat surreal. But as they get closer to its monolithic form that rears from the earth like an ominous beast, it is its sheer scale that is most incredible. The towns of the industrial zone at its base are like dots compared to its majesty, and the putrid trails of smoke from their countless chimney stacks like fine wisps of hair. Yet breaking over the top of the wall’s parapets, it suddenly seems small, as the blinding heat of the sun starved Dustlands stretches out before them. Like a lake of fire, it is seemingly endless, broken only by the great ice flows and the endless wall of dust beyond the reach of the Vitruvian column.

“And that’s it folks,” Otto calls back as some warnings flash on the control console. “We’ve just left Zeno airspace.

Welcome to the sea of sand.” Gesturing out the windows, he rolls the craft rolls into a gentle pitch. “If you look north, you can see the Mountains of Mourne. See—up there, above the clouds.”

Trailing his gaze upward, Will nods as he sees the snow capped peaks sticking up like jagged shards of glass into the heavens.

“There’s a whole lot of strange going on out there though, I don’t know if I’d want to visit, but it sure looks nice from here! And that,” he adds, pointing along the line of the siege wall, “is where we’re headed.”

A plume of smog hugging the golden sand, the dark shape of the desolate city rises in the distance, and as its shape comes into view, the craft starts a slow descent. Speeding parallel to Zeno’s monstrous outer wall that towers above them, Will and Abby are suddenly aware of the breakneck speed they are actually moving and the sheer size of the wall itself. Craning their necks as its top stretches out of sight, they stare in awe at the massive size of the looming structure.

“Well?” Otto asks with a grin. “What do you think?”

“What were they trying to keep out?” Abby asks.

“Seems a bit overkill, right! But hey, in all the war and weather, it’s never been breached. So it has served its purpose—Sorry, one second.” Pausing, the cockpit is filled with the shrill beeping of an alarm. “What the. . . ?”

Joined by a flurry of red and yellow that illuminate the console, the shrieking of a warning siren blares.

“Seatbelts!—Now!” Otto yells, “HOLD ON!!”

The craft pulling into a hard left turn, Will fumbles for his seatbelt as some bags slide across the floor. But no sooner than it clicks into place, the air is sucked from his lungs as a blinding explosion rips through the side of the craft. Straining

against the force of every shudder, in panicked shock his fingers dig into his armrests. But with a sudden rattle, a barrage of bullets spray across the cabin. A ghastly hole steaming from the back of Otto's head, howling wind and smoke sting his eyes as the craft lurches into a nosedive. And as the ocean of desert sand rushes up to meet them, his eyes squeeze shut.

