

The Heartbeat of a Million Dreams

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HALO SCOT

1

Infinity's Sorrow

SLADE

I'm not supposed to exist.

That's what I've gleaned from over two decades of running. I'm an error, a fluke, a mistake, a monster. Something about me is *wrong*. But I don't know what. I don't know how. I don't know why they've chased me since birth. All I know is they want to kill me. Or if not kill me, trap me. I scare them. I'm dangerous . . . apparently. Though I don't know who—or *what*—I am. Just that I'm a horror large enough to excuse infanticide.

That's what they tried. The ruthless ones. My trackers. My hunters. My nightmares. In the hospital, they slit my throat—my tiny, wobbly, infant throat. I still boast the scar from where the doctor sewed me back together. She saved my life that day and on so many days after.

I don't know her name. She won't share it, for her family's sake. She knows mine, though. Everyone does. It's printed on every billboard in every block of the city. *Slade Hawk: WANTED*. The only gift my parents gave me: a strong name, a superhero name, a name that damned me till streets claimed my salvation.

Only at the end do you recall the beginning with fondness. In the moment, it's a cage, but in retrospect, it's a sanctuary. Nostalgia's a vile drug, a wicked poison, an insidious parasite that feasts upon memory's charismatic lure. I remember music

first. A nursery rhyme filtering through filmy windows, a half-remembered melody, a hearkening of roses. Someone used to sing to me while I hid in dumpsters. Her aria cut through the thick scent of decay and made me forget that I, too, was trash. Harmony elevates demons to lofty ideals.

Lofty. There's my antithesis. All that waits for me above this cursed city's scribbled skyline is pain. They caught me once, those sadistic skyships with their corrupt justice, and unraveled me to infancy, to my first scrape with hell—death at birth, an oxymoronic paradox. No, best stick to the starforsaken subway and the underworld's vapid ignorance. Shadows help me fade.

Though shadows are harder to come by these days, and spotlights are even more bloodthirsty. "The Reckoning," that's what pensioners call it, souls who can still afford hope. The rest of us call it massacre—or genocide, if you're fancy. Whatever the reason, rebellion brews on the horizon, and in rebellion's wake, regret often follows.

A man brushes past me. I freeze. Explode. Synapses fire in artillery, and thoughts confetti as infantry. I breathe, count, stim, hum, but nothing re-centers my Fabergé-egg mind.

"Lady, you're blocking the doors."

A voice. Too loud. Too harsh. Too cruel. Too much. The Big Bang stirs inside my skull, and my universe readies to detonate.

"Move."

The same voice, accompanied by a hand. He waves in front of my face as if I'm a ghost. Again, too much. Too cruel. Too harsh. Too bright. I squeeze shut my eyes and strain to order my shotgun-blast thoughts.

"You can't just stand there. What the fuck is wrong with you?"

Every word is a bomb, and his anger slivers deep. I try to explain, to plead for mercy, but he huffs and leaves before I become human again.

A hand grabs my arm and tosses me into a corner, away from the oncoming train. Aggression destroys me, missiles through my psyche, and I curl in on myself, a fetus once more with no warmth from the womb. This world isn't built for me, and I'm not built for this world. My suffering lasts but a moment, yet it feels like infinity.

Are you a moment? Or are you infinity?

Because one day, you will die. One day, no one will remember your name. One day, the universe will forget your face, voice, hopes, dreams. Then what do you live for, when life is lost? What is the meaning of a voided existence?

Do you create echoes, ripples in time, impulses and emotions that string together generations? Or do you make your moment shine like a star, then hope it travels far and reaches eyes blurred by tears on a cold, dark, winter night? Do you pray your star lasts after you're gone, a ghost traveler, a reminder of what once was yet will never be again?

So I ask again: Are you a moment? Or are you infinity?

Is infinity a moment lost long ago that outshines the rest, but fades in the end, too? Or is the end a moment? Infinity? Destiny? Fate harvested from heartstrings to answer whys and hows? Does fear shape fate? Does dread paint destiny? Do we mold our own monsters from murder and myth? Does it matter? Do you matter? Or are you the only thing that does? Do these moments, these infinities, capture meaning from madness, a kiss on a balcony, a laugh on a train? Does love immortalize life in the transcendent metropolis of a trillion, selfless vows?

I don't know. No one does, despite fractured prisms of false promises and shredded hope. But what I *do* know—after a lifetime hated, feared, revered, destroyed—is that love renders life bearable, worthwhile . . . and its loss carves answers from pain.

Because you will love. You will lose. You will live. You will die. But you must endure mortality's ultimatum, or this gift will squander beneath terror. Fear of death wastes life.

But the moment passes. Infinity, too.

And in the subway's corner, inside my virtual womb, I pray away brokenness, jagged ends, shattered wine glasses leaking blood. I wish I were another girl. A fierce girl. A fiery girl. Fearless and ruthless, brimming with rage. The world forces her hand, her cruelty, her power, and when life damages her, she replies in kind.

2

A Storm of Souls

KOA

“**S**he’s chaos, Mack. Can’t trust her.” I pace the high-rise, nervous, off balance. I hate this city. More so, I hate what it symbolizes.

“She’s *scared*, Koa. Give the kid a break.” Mack *tsks* me and shoots me a you-should-know-better glare.

“She’s a kid no longer, and you best remember that. If she ever discovers who—or *what*—she is, she’ll bring vengeance down on us all. She’s a weapon.”

“She’s a *wonder*, and she has a name.”

“A name that triggers every alarm in the city if spoken aloud. It’s too risky. I can’t accept your offer.”

Mack sighs and runs a hand through his golden dreadlocks. “There are two types of people in this world. Most evolve into dogs: friendly, compliant, typical, predictable. But some evolve into wolves: cautious, curious, fierce, powerful. And some of those wolves lead the pack. The kid’s a wolf. She’s their leader. If we help her, we give voice to the silent ones and strength to the shadows. She is the bridge between their world and ours, but if that bridge crumbles, time will never heal.”

I lean against the grimy glass and peer through my fingers at the rusty city. Solarcar headlights blink blood in the dust, burrowing between skyscrapers that grew too tall and spread too far in a concrete jungle, a storm of souls.

“There’s a reason they chase her,” I say. “There’s a reason they’re afraid. I’ve never seen them like this before. No one has.”

“She is the voice for those who have none,” Mack whispers. “Of course they’re afraid. They should be. Her greatest power isn’t what’s inside her; it’s what she represents.”

“She’s a symbol.”

He nods. “A symbol, an icon, a brand, an eagle standard others will rally behind. And when they rally, we must stand among them, not opposite.”

“You’ve grown soft.”

“And you’ve grown sour. What happened to the fairy witch I stumbled across in the greenhouse moor, braiding heather and dancing with lanterns?”

She’s still out there, but she’s no longer me.

“Think on it,” Mack says. “We have time. Not much time, but time enough. She needs you, and you’re the only one who can help.”

“Help,” I echo and scoff. Mack’s right. I’ve turned bitter, sweet wine to tart vinegar. “If help is what you’re looking for, then I best stay far away.”

Regret clouds Mack’s gaze. “That wasn’t your fault. You can’t blame yourself for what happened.”

“Oh, I can, and I will, till I’m buried in a grave,” I spit back. “I failed, and I can’t fail again. Find someone else, someone better.”

“There is no one better. Slade needs you.”

Alarms blare, as promised. Mack enters a code into a wall console, claiming “poor enunciation.” The Bone Lords don’t buy it. Within seconds, we’re searched, scanned, questioned, and damned to a week-long watch list, tracking our schedules and routines. Shit. More time playing “nice.”

On our way out of the building, as we adjust our goggles, airmasks, and dustsuits to combat the harsh, Martian clime, I whisper to Mack, “Was saying her name worth it?”

He grins, sparkles, with cunning and mirth. “Always is.”

“But they’re trailing us for a week.”

“As planned. Time to plant false starts and fool’s gold.”

3

Hope Should Be Heard

SLADE

On my way through the subway, I thumb a harmonica: my favorite one, the one engraved with a prayer. I can't read the prayer—it's Italian, or Latin—but its cursive hypnotizes me and calms my hummingbird heart.

They're close. I can sense them. Or perhaps I'm paranoid. Probably both. But if I don't play, I don't eat, and if I don't eat, my mind will mutiny . . . again. I *could* steal dinner. It's my usual bet. But the city's up in arms lately, so best play it safe. *Safe*. No such thing in Kasei.

Lucky for me—and luck is rare for me—rush-hour bedlam distracts the commuters. As they dive beneath the Martian surface, they rip off airmasks, goggles, and gloves, then unzip dustsuits to collarbone level, tossing solarcapas over shoulders as some would hair.

Mars is habitable—that's what Earth tells us. By "habitable," they mean lazily terraformed to feel less like prison and more like home. They filled Valles Marineris with water, then filtered and piped it northeast to Kasei, the sole Martian colony, the exodus of starchildren. Within an impact crater, our city stands, a smartglass overworld and an industrial underworld. The underworld is safer.

Inside buildings and subways, we can breathe the air, but outside in the cold, dusty desert, we must wear airmasks and

dustsuits to survive. Greenhouses struggle to make enough food. The days are temperate; the nights are frigid. Constant reminders we don't belong.

"Hey, kid, play our anthem," a white-collar type shouts.

I cringe at his outburst. Everyone's always so loud, and the subway's the loudest, but it's also the safest, a beehive to hide from wasps, the subterranean esophagus of the Martian beast.

"Yeah, play it loud," another adds. "You know it?"

Of course I do. Every starchild does. It's a forbidden tune, a stunning, musical string. But I can't attract more attention.

"Can't," I whisper, because talking burns my ears.

"Afraid of Bone Lords?" the first asks.

No, but they're afraid of me. They're afraid of us all. Humans evolved. Some of us, anyway. We starchildren can starshift: bounce between matter and energy at will, and stop time in the act. It takes immense effort, so we can only starshift a short while (hence, the lingering need for subways, solarcars, and skyships). But this miracle was enough for Earth to banish us here, out of fear, to this desolate existence.

Bone Lords are starchildren, too, but they're starchildren who work for Earth. They believe we're all slaves to control, to sedate. And if not for the Order of Roses, we would be.

"Come on, just once," a third commuter begs. "Hope should be heard."

The crowd billows—*too loud, too bright, too much*—and I dig my fingers into the harmonica, will it an anchor to see me through this storm.

"Can't," I repeat.

Someone scoffs. "Good luck paying for dinner, then."

I'm lost again. Forgotten again. One of the hive. One of the stars. A hazy constellation only ghosts can see.

Rage rises within me, a fire on the horizon. The world flares, and I weaken, a feathered shadow on a melting lake. People grow tall as titans, monstrous colossi with me as their pet. Every shoulder brush is a psychic amputation; every crowded surge is a volcanic undertow. I urge myself to think, breathe, move, escape, but human stench clogs my nostrils, and cottony panic coats my tongue.

Rusty dust smears the floor, a Martian threat in her city of

blood. Footprints mar this sandy path as boots shuffle through chalky metal. Naked pipes jut from titanium walls like arteries freed from a broken heart's chambers, and trains sleek as antique bullets roar through tunnels with time's eternal fury.

I collapse to a knee as this roar overtakes me, submits me, forces me to genuflect to all I'm not. Commuters ignore me, continue with their evenings. This place doesn't affect them as it affects me. The train is a train. The tunnel is a tunnel. But to me, it's a zoo of brutes, an orchestra at full blast, creation's strain against a symphony of struggle. Deafening is an understatement. Barbaric is more apt. Cruel is most.

The harmonica shakes in my hand. Or maybe the shaking is me. Chicken or egg, but cause can't change fate. I withdraw the instrument from my pocket, unholster my weapon, and blow through reeds with a whisper, with a prayer. The song is old—older than Kasei—a song called “Londonderry Air” to some, “Danny Boy” to others, a song with many names and lyrics and dreams. Each note calms the current inside me, and riptide slows to a steady, oceanic pulse. Wave in, wave out, brushstrokes upon a shore. But one thing yet jabs, a stick in the stand, and I'm stuck on this stick, in this sand, in this song.

Something is not right. I survey the usuals that stampede through the subway: Top Hat Jack, Chapped Lips Sima, the Bearded Drones, the Uptight Chiefs. Then I zero in on their dustsuits, scan for anomalous details: a broken zipper, a cracked airmask, a splintered lens, a scuffed boot. But besides a few undercharged solarcapas, nothing satisfies my hyperaware scrutiny.

What itches my subconscious? What tickles instincts earned from a lifetime on the run? I play louder, set the harmonica as my compass, weave through the throng in search of a poisoned needle in a toxic haystack. People toss starcoins into my solarcape's pocket, Martian currency forged with Martian iron, engraved with a nine-pointed star: our symbol, our brand, our emblem of doom. I don't notice them. Well, of course I notice—I notice everything with no filter, no reprieve—but I've trained my hyperspecific mind to chatter in the background as I focus and fixate on the odd, on the off.

There. To the right. At the subway's edge. Above a brand-new wanted poster of yours truly. My likeness shimmers on the

smartglass billboard; she glares at me, and I glare at her. Twenty-three years of fight-or-flight reflexes cram into a wiry, anxiety-ridden frame. Copper eyes with golden cores. Warm brown skin, ruby scarf around my scar. Silken, mahogany hair streaked with blonde, ponytail to tie me together. Loose hair frays my soul, unravels my identity. I could punch before I could crawl; I could kick before I could walk. And because of this monster, the monster they made, I spot the aberration above my poster.

It winks. I wink. It winks again, and when it does, I'm gone. The tracking beacon rotates on a hinge—disguised as a light bulb, but light bulbs don't move. Its indigo gaze hitches up, then down, as it hunts for my shadow, for my ghost.

Adrenaline floods my system, and my world narrows to this hidden hallway. Forward, onward, downward, into the entrails, beyond human reach. No blueprints reveal this corridor's location, but an accountant did on the way to his mistress. Years ago, that was, but you always remember your first. I didn't mean to kill him, but he meant to kill me, so I turned the tables on the sorry adulterer and learned how to win, how to cheat. Survival is my queen.

Now upward, backward, eastward, always onward. I loop over my path, braid a retreat, and their footsteps crescendo; they always do. I can pick a pocket, swipe an ID, hot-wire a solarcar, mask any persona, but they always find me, though they never keep me. I'm recognizable as the sun, yet slippery as the sea, and even with my heart in timpani, I run on, and I run far.

"She's here!"

Shit. Here we go again.

A Bone Lord screeches around the corner and points a white-gloved hand at me. Her dustsuit is pale as bone, the uniform of the damned, of imitation skeletons that haunt my every waking—and sleeping—moment. I turn on my heel and sprint opposite her accusation. But she screams my name, and alarms blare its curse.

Too loud, too bright, too close.

Too much.

I squeeze my harmonica, stim against its smooth shell, and charge toward a closet that once served as an escape.

Another figure blocks me, this one in scarlet, red as his

namesake. Odd. The Order out in the open? Roses usually play their cards close. He points at an adjacent alley and disappears across the subway.

It could be a trick.

It could be a ploy.

But I've neither time nor luxury for speculation.

I take the alley and plunge further underground. My pounding heart choruses my pounding feet as I charge through mystery toward freedom, or farce. Why would the Order of Roses help me here, help me now? And is the patter behind me them or Bone Lords?

"Ssssslllllaaaaaade."

Behind me. A hiss of my name. More alarms, and the alley bleeds red. No Rose to save me now. Two wraiths slither through the tunnel and starshift. Light sears in timeless swords as they pierce the universe and arrive near me—or near where I was. Because I've starshifted, too, further ahead, but I don't know where I am, so I can't go far. It's far enough for hope, though, and I shimmy sideways up a stairwell.

They starshift. I starshift. We ping-pong through the subway as a twinkling constellation. Breath burns my throat. Blood hammers my ears. Muscles shriek in protest, and nerves tighten to snap.

I fuck up. They don't. My latest starshift is too short, and they overtake me. Hands cuff my arms and shove me to the floor. My jaw cracks on metal, and air wheezes from my lungs. I thrash, flail, kick, scream, but I'm empty, no fire, drained to a fleshy husk.

A knee pins me down, and Mars crashes through my fragile brain. I overload. Explode. Twist and turn and break free. The Bone Lords throw twin punches; I grab their wrists and matchmake. Their knuckles crush each other's noses, pulverizing cartilage. Gory torrents gush from their nostrils, and they grab their faces, blinded by pain.

I cup my tender jaw and run, starshift, run, starshift, till I surface the subway and don my mask, spread my cape. It's dangerous to walk above, but a storm's stirring, and dust veils my escape. This is not my plan, schedule, routine, sanctuary—this is spontaneous sacrilege that drills through my norm. *Norm*. I'm the opposite. The antithesis. Its nemesis and rival.

Breathe. Count. Calm. Repeat.

I remember the doctor's words and attempt her instructions, but every breath is too loud, every number too wrong, every calm conquered, every repetition a gong. The tide rises within me, an electric surge, a boiling kettle, a threatening earthquake before the volcanic eruption. I can't function in daily life, never mind a life shattered with assassination attempts. What did I do? Why kill *me*?

Somehow, I wander through smartglass skyscrapers, around veering solarcars, through reddish haze, to where I always promise I'll never go again, to where promises always die.

"Come in, child. You'll catch cold in this storm."

Her voice soothes me, a grainy lullaby, and her kind, black eyes narrow in a soft, maternal scold. She's tall, bald, dark, regal, and stands in her doorway as queen of her domain, always waiting for me.

"But your family," I whisper. "I can't."

"You can, and you will," the doctor says—the nameless one, my salvation and savior. "Stay for dinner, and let me see to that jaw."

Guilty, I obey. I have no other choice. By now, Bone Lords crawl the subway, and skyships scan the surface. Inside is my only refuge.

"Here." I hand her the starcoins my harmonica earned. "It's not enough—not nearly—but it's a start."

She huffs, insulted. "Keep your money. Your company is overpayment."

"My company is a death sentence."

"Well, we're all a little wild, child. Now, come in. You're letting out the warmth."

4

Ricochet Hypocrisy

KOA

The library is quiet this time of night; the regulars have gone home. On Earth and Mars, college life is much the same: burned-out days, blacked-out nights, dreams wasted as freshmen on Saturdays.

The University of Mars campus is airtight to allow staff and students free passage without airmasks. Smartglass walkways connect buildings, and all paths lead to the library—my library. It's the hidden headquarters for the Order of Roses, and as their leader, I take pride in its grace.

Darkly academic, the library bends and twists with titanium walls, arches, and spires in a surreal tribute to Dalí and Gaudí. Kaleidoscopic windows fracture Martian sunsets through smartglass panes, which all connect to the campus computer. My jade eyes catch my reflection, and I will the pale, curvy ghost forward, onward. Vaulted ceilings lend eerie echoes—with or without attending students—and rows of tables stretch through looming stacks of books and tablets. Chandeliers swing low on metal chains, bathing the library in a dim, flickering glow.

I tiptoe through the vast space, though there's no need anymore. After a week of constant surveillance, of Mack tilling tricks like some do gardens, the Bone Lords eased up in their pursuit. Annoyed, I should add. They don't appreciate ricochet hypocrisy.

"You're here late," my graduate assistant says. Miro Wize is

always stuck in a book—sometimes literally, like now. He pours over a small-printed text, dark fingers trapped between pages.

“Likewise,” I say as I sit behind the reception desk. “Not interested in the midterms party?”

“Interested in the exams, not the party,” he says. “Pointless to celebrate impending failure.” He frees a hand from his book, then tugs his black curls, nervous.

“You’re peachy.”

“I’m practical.”

“There’s more to life than studying.”

“Not on Mars,” Miro says. “Without passing grades, I’m doomed to Echus Chasma’s filter tanks.”

“Your grades are more than passing,” I say. “You’re top of your class. Relax.”

“Relax? With Bone Lords cracking down and Earth itching for an excuse to invade?” He shakes his head. “No, Professor Brye. We need to prepare, not relax.”

“And we *are*, but the Order can only do so much without arousing suspicion. We keep Bone Lords in check. We protect starchildren—”

“Do we? Heard a rumor that Mack Calloway helped *her* in the subway, but then he abandoned her to skeletons. Should’ve stayed.”

“Too risky,” I say.

And I can’t fail again. I tie back my wild, red hair, open a spellbook—Earth’s term for encyclopedias on the history and science of starchildren—and pretend at purpose. Miro and I wear matching dustsuits, rose-red uniforms with thorn-like daggers hidden in our sleeves. Earth forbids us weapons—they say we are weapons enough—but necessity mothers protection, even if Bone Lords confiscate most knives (and repurpose them, the bloody hypocrites).

“We should make a stand,” Miro whispers. “The Order is timid.”

“The Order is *cautious*,” I say. “And we will. In time.”

“Sl—” He almost triggers the alarms but stops himself with a grimace. “*She* thinks she’s alone. She thinks she has no one. We can at least—”

“No. Enough, Miro. There are more pieces at play than you know, and rushing the game could mean disaster for us all.”

I ignore my guilt and swipe the spellbook, scanning entries for this year, 2345. Miro lets it go, but I don't, because there are no pieces, there is no game. There is only fear, my fear, fear of failure, of failing *her*. She's not ready yet, anyway. I'm certainly not. And she has the doctor, the nameless one. That's good for now. That buys me time.

"If she is what we think she is . . ."

I was wrong. Miro hasn't let it go.

". . . then the stories are true. Do you know what that means?"

All too well.

"Truth doesn't change reality," I say. "What course is hardest? Let me help."

Miro allows my sloppy segue with a tilted glance. "Modern History. Twenty-third century. The Starchild Diaspora of 2257."

"Mmm, that was a brutal period." I rewind the spellbook to its earliest entries and show Miro the smartglass tablet.

"That can't be right," he says, reading the glowing text. "Earth couldn't have done *that*."

"Earth did much worse. This is the watered-down version." I twist a silver earring, edgy, tense, as if speaking about savagery could summon it again.

"Watered down? Slitting our throats and fucking our windpipes as we bled out and suffocated to death is *watered down*!?"

"Shh," I say, skimming the library, but there's no one here. Still, sometimes walls have eyes and windows have ears. "Yes, *very* watered down."

Miro chews his lip and fidgets in his chair. "Then what *really* happened? The facts, Professor."

"Earth exiled us here with Bone Lords to supervise, and the Order of Roses grew to supervise the supervisors."

"Every preschooler knows that. Give me details. Give me more."

I sigh, pause, wish innocence eternal, but Earth stole our hearts, then Mars stole our souls.

"Massacre," I whisper. "Atrocity. Sins previously unseen. Earth broke us apart piece by piece, sharpened our bones to carve up our meat, then dangled our mangled carcasses from flagpoles and lightning rods in every capital city. They slaughtered the families of those who fought and raped the families of those who didn't. And the

survivors . . . Well, they kept some alive for ‘scientific’ pursuit, and they sold others to governments under threat of their loved ones’ deaths.”

Miro gapes, then gags. “That’s *awful*.”

“That’s only the start. Our history is bloody and barbaric, filled with child labor and baby farms.”

“Baby farms?”

I hesitate. “Acres of fetuses, rows of embryos, snatched from starchildren’s wombs and subjected to rigorous ‘analysis.’ In truth, our exile was a mercy. If not for the Diaspora, we’d be extinct.”

“What *caused* the Diaspora, though?” Miro asks. “Earth was fine, brutalizing us at will. Why the sudden fear?”

“Not fear. Terror. And no one really knows.”

“But you have an idea.”

“A guess.”

“An educated one. *Please*. I won’t tell anyone. Promise.” Miro beseeches me with his warm, brown gaze, and I bend. An inch.

“Okay, but this stays between us,” I say, and he nods. “It’s only a theory. Come with me.”

“Where?”

“To the sunloft. I assume you’ll want proof.”

Miro follows me, uneasy, as we wind our way through headquarters, footsteps weak against the library’s gravitas. Near the back, there’s a stairwell that spirals toward heaven, and I grip the railing, knuckles blanching with our ascent. It’s dangerous to tell Miro. It’s dangerous to not. If I’m the only one with this information, I’m the only one they’d kill. But if I am one of many, if ideas infest cities, that is a swarm even Bone Lords can’t stop.

I remove a pewter key from my dustsuit and free the lock, then open the heavy door.

“Here is where we keep the forbidden texts,” I say, waving my hand over the circular room. Tablets line the wall, and a ceiling skylight imitates the distant sun.

“Forbidden?” Miro’s eyes widen, and he straightens his dustsuit in witness to victory.

“Yes.” I withdraw a smartglass tablet and scan my thumbprint. The screen wakes, and I turn it toward my assistant. “If you read this, they could imprison you—or worse.”

Miro takes it without hesitation. Knowledge and he are close as twins. "What is it?"

"An eyewitness account right before the last bombing of Valles Marineris."

"Wait, what? I thought Earth filled the canyon with water, then left. What do you mean by 'last'? There were more?"

"Just . . . read."

His brow furrows. "Can we trust the source?"

I shrug. "It's anonymous, but it corroborates other events we wrote off as geological. Then again, 'reputable' sources are often government-funded propaganda mills, so who can you trust, really? But as I said, this is just a guess."

"A guess dangerous enough to risk incarceration?" Miro smirks. "Sounds real enough to me. Forbidden is often fact. People fear truth most of all."

He starts reading, and his smile fades. I follow along with him and squirm at the bloody words.

"The Reckoning," that's what they've called Mars for a hundred years. But it's 2257, and war's no closer to over.

"This is the year of the Diaspora," Miro whispers. "But a hundred years? I thought we came to Mars after."

"We've been on Mars much longer than records state," I say. "Keep reading."

Kasei in the north is where Earth built our city, but Marineris in the south is where they built our cage. I'm sure my words will burn before anyone can read them, but I write anyway, a promise through pain that there is something more, that we will carry on.

There aren't many starchildren left here, on the canyon's ridge. They took Ma and Pa yesterday, and Jack-Jack followed soon after. It's only me now, me and Gram. Though she's five decades older, I'd bet on her.

The things they do to us . . . they're too cruel to tell. I thought I knew struggle, knew suffering, knew strength, but I was wrong as the Order was in their hope to stop the Bone Lords. If they run out of holes, they carve new ones. If bodies waste away, they pump waste back inside. We're less than animals, treated like corpses without the mercy of becoming one, until the final test when they set us all free.

They're looking for something. They're frantic. They're afraid. None

survive the final test, yet Earth's fear still remains. I heard them whispering once—about gods and titans, about stars and shadows. They saw me watching, then punished my curiosity.

Miro dry-heaves, then breathes, then steadies himself as he scrolls to read the rest.

But I passed their test. I wasn't supposed to pass their test. They think me a monster, call me a nightmare, want to kill me, and I want to let them. Bone Lords took me in a skyship to the center of the canyon, and myths came for me. Most are stars, but I am shadow—

"No, no, no, no, no," Miro says. "That's it? Where's the rest?"

"Gone," I say. "Or never written."

"They killed her after this. But you have a theory. What is it?"

"It's nothing more than a wild guess."

"Knowing you, Professor, it's been cross-referenced by at least a dozen primary sources. You're the youngest Ph.D. on Mars, only twenty-five and leader of the Order. I trust your wild guess more than most dissertations."

I smile. "Only most?" Then I frown. "This stays between us. No exceptions. Understand?"

He nods.

"Okay," I say, then speak the sword I could die on. "Sl—She isn't the first. What she is . . . they're rare, but they're by no means extinct. This source . . . I think they were the same thing. And I think their final test caused the Diaspora. Then Bone Lords bombed Valles Marineris, closed the cells, and forced *all* starchildren to Mars, not only the guinea pigs. Earth left us alone—for the most part—thereafter."

"But what *are* they? What is Earth so afraid of?" he asks.

"A myth as old as the sun."

"About gods and titans?"

"About stars and shadows."

We exit the sunloft, descend the staircase, and re-emerge in the library's heart.

"What's the myth, Professor?" Miro asks.

I stall beneath a chandelier and straighten books on a table. "That our world is broken. That light and dark face the same mirror. That the sky is alive with a million whispers."

"And how does this relate to that source? To *her*?"

I pause, breathe, face the window, confront the city. “They’re the mirrors.”

5

Waterboard Existence

SLADE

“Come in, come in,” the doctor says. “Before the storm thickens, child.”

She ushers me into her home, a three-level townhouse squashed among clones in a cookie-cutter community. We climb the stairs to the top floor, an office off limits to her four children, to save them from me. I’m a walking death sentence for all who help me, a consequence for kindness.

Walls unsettle me. They impede escape. I perch on the window seat and scheme getaway plans while the storm rages outside. If Bone Lords enter through the bottom floor, I could jump out the window or hide under the desk. If they approach from the air, I could shimmy down the stairs and dash for the nearest subway entrance. If they parachute from skyships—

“Noodles? They’re fresh,” the doctor interrupts. I hate interruptions.

“No,” I whisper. “Thank you.”

“You must eat.”

But this is neither the right food nor the right time. Dinner is one bagel in one hour with one pint of milk. Next, I’d read the same chapters I read every Monday night from the same book I read each week. After, I’d watch one hour of television on the smartglass panel near the janitor’s closet in the subway. Last, I’d find a dumpster and

cradle my harmonicas to sleep. *That* is the schedule. *That* is the routine. *That* is the god I worship, the one who's never abandoned me. Structure. Repetition. Rewind and repeat.

"Stomachache again?" the doctor asks.

"No," I lie.

She hands me noodles. Reluctant, I eat. I'll need fuel to run, to heal, to continue this waterboard existence of drown, gasp, drown, breathe. But my body buzzes, and my mind shrieks: *This is wrong, this is wrong, this is wrong, this is wrong.*

"I have an extra copy, if you'd like to read," the doctor says. She hands me the book that follows food: *The Martian Chronicles* by Ray Bradbury. I prefer his Mars to ours. Less blood. More hope.

She used this book to teach me to read, to speak, to function through fiction, to replicate reality. I've stolen many since to help craft my character, but Bradbury's words always shine supreme. He was the key that opened the door to the stars, and I'll never forget the freedom stories bring.

"I'll read it later, but thanks," I whisper, finishing the noodles.

The doctor leans toward me, and I shirk away. "I'm sorry, child. I'll be quick. I promise."

She grazes my jaw. Lightning shoots through my veins. Every nerve ending fires. Every skin cell melts. I'm a bomb ready to detonate. A grenade about to explode. Everything is *too loud, too bright, too close, too much.* The storm outside becomes the storm inside, and I suffocate on dust, touch, wind, wound, stifled by cruelty, buried underground with skeletons and beasts.

"Done," the doctor says after an infinite moment. "Your jaw is bruised, not broken, and you're almost healed. Lucky, I'd say, compared to the others."

The others. The times I limped to her doorstep with limbs attached by sinew, with organs spilling from my gut. Bursting external as I often burst internal.

"Not as broken as usual," I rasp.

"You're beautiful, not broken," she says. "Different, not damaged. A butterfly."

"Beautiful? Different? No. I'm trapped. Powerless. Worthless. Unvalued. Disrespected by society and her people. They're too strict, rigid, and bigoted to see me as anything more than dirt. I'm a moth,

not a butterfly.”

“You’re worth so much more than they make you feel. I wish I could change the worlds, but I can’t.”

But I can.

“I should go,” I whisper.

“I wish you could stay,” the doctor says, voice syrupy with regret. If she had no kids, she’d make me her own, but my very presence threatens all their lives.

I should thank her for all she’s done. Smile at her generosity. Assuage her guilt with falsehoods. Placate her shame with gentle understanding. But I don’t. My fuse is too short, and it’s been lit too long. Emotions rise inside me with a leviathan’s wrath, and I spit out the hard, blunt, unadulterated truth—my version, at least, the rendition of reality spewed forth by insecurity.

“No, you don’t,” I croak. “You wish I were someone else. Someone safe. Someone normal. Someone without baggage.” Never understood the term “baggage,” but I pick up things from passing conversations and paste them into my own.

The doctor gapes. “How could you say such things? You know how much I care about you.”

I shake my head. “You pity me, but you don’t care. Best to bite the bullet.” Another borrowed phrase, another copy and paste, but from her confused expression, I see I used it wrong. That’s the trouble with mimicry—masks can slip, and costumes can rip, revealing the angry distress in the raw, roiling core.

“If you need me, I’m always here,” she says, calm, in lullaby.

I always need you, but I won’t risk their fear.

“One day, I’ll repay you,” I rasp.

“You already have.”

“No, I haven’t. I tallied the cost of your services in starcoins, and I owe—”

“Child, stop,” she says with a chuckle. “Some things are worth more than money. If you want to repay me, *survive.*”

So I do. I leave her clean, smartglass home for a ditch I follow to a surface dumpster. Even with goggles and airmask secured, dust clogs my nostrils, iron’s sting on my tongue. The storm wails in protest: *You don’t belong here. Go back underground with the rest of the ants.* I would—and I should—but they’re still looking for me there.

Too many Bone Lords in the subway tonight.

I cut through wind, reach the dumpster, and dive in. Its lid shuts above me with a dull *click*, and I wriggle down through trash. My dustsuit protects me from the mess, but it doesn't protect me from the smell. Subway trash is stale, boring: crumpled newspapers and cigarette butts, passive-aggressive pamphlets and neurotically chewed gum. But surface trash is rancid, disgusting: sour bananas and moldy sandwiches, putrid undergarments and noxious fumes. I gag and adjust my airmask settings. It weakens the repulsion but erases nothing.

At least it's warm. The dumpster is sealed; between my body heat and the balmy trash, I should survive till morning. Martian nights are harsh as Earth's hatred, but neither is invincible. I've done this before, and I'll do this again, then I'll return underground to my blessed routine. I hate change. I fight change. But change chases me.

As I drift into a shallow sleep, I hear Bradbury's words in my head, see the doctor's smile in my mind, and yearn for this—for peace, for family. Though I've never stayed long enough on solid ground to learn how to stand without storm.

6

Bleeding Melody

KOA

“**T**he time to strike is *now*. They’re scared shitless, making stupid mistakes. We wait any longer, and they’ll recover, as they always do. Then we won’t stand a chance.”

Mack paces the library’s conference room, restless, winding dreadlocks around gangly fingers—golden snakes around gnarled branches. The senior Order members trace his path with echoed unease, bristling around the table like anemone tentacles. The room belongs five centuries prior, with its dim lighting, imitation-oak paneling, and hodgepodge of antiques. Typewriters and fountain pens violate the bookshelves, along with brass globes, wind-up clocks, and stolen Renaissance sculptures. In spare bits of emptiness, windowless walls flash erudite quotes in rambling calligraphy, along with oil paintings from the Earth cities of London, Paris, and Florence. We remember our history—no, we *heed* it.

“*Sit, Mack,*” I say. “You’re hurting my neck.”

His hazy, hazel gaze challenges me, but he listens. Sits. Nods. Obeys. Because he must. I’m their leader, and I’ve secured my position with moral sacrifice and ethical surrender—mostly with fake blood and pig flesh, but they don’t need to know specifics.

Fewer attend today than usual. I want to blame their absences on midterms: half of campus (the studious half) drowns in caffeine to pull all-nighters, while the other half drinks, shoplifts, and lights

couches on fire to celebrate. I *want* to blame midterms, but I *know* it's more. They're afraid. Association with the Order of Roses risks more than death.

"Koa, *please*," Mack urges. "You've seen them. They lost *her* during rush hour. She slipped through their fingers with less than a scratch."

"They've pulled shit like this before, fucked up to draw us out," I say. "We have only this library, while they have the sky. I won't risk our people in an angsty attempt at rebellion. Be smart. Wait till the right moment."

"There is no right moment. Every day you wait, you put her in danger, and they grow stronger as we grow weaker. There's talk of an invasion. We *must* reclaim our world before Earth attacks."

The senior members fluster, rattled, whispering venomous rumors and hostility. Miro is here, too; he's the only one silent. Instead of joining the squawking, he watches me, curious, reclined in his seat. He agrees with Mack, that we must take action soon, yet he respects me and is a unique listen-before-you-speak type. His patience is a scarce virtue, as rare as Martian water, and for this, I respect him, too.

I raise my hands. After a few death glares at key instigators, the room quiets—for the most part. Murmurs pierce the wary static, and it takes several minutes to reduce the boil to a simmer.

"They control us with fear," I say, voice calm, face neutral. "*This* is what they want. Panic. Terror. They want you to react, not act, and make rash decisions based on hate. So if you want to play into their hands, if you want to follow their plans, by all means, continue your tantrums. But if you want to make a difference—an actual, substantial, permanent difference—then shut the fuck up for one stardamn minute, and listen to what I must say."

No one moves. No one speaks. Reptilian brains retreat, and heartbeats slow to *adagio*—thanks to airborne beta-blockers I pump through vents. Another trick up my sleeve (literally). I weaponized my red dustsuit with as many tricks as a subway prostitute, all necessary, all illegal.

I scan every attendee; all members squirm in their high-backed chairs. They don't trust me. Or rather, their fear of Bone Lords overshadows their trust. I worry about spies, but I worry more about

mutiny, so I must not fuck this up.

“We all took an oath,” I say. “A *blood* oath. We are family now. No, we are more.” I lift my sleeve and reveal the inside of my left wrist. The nine-pointed scar I cut upon initiation glimmers silver in the faint light. We all share the same symbol, the symbol of Mars. “Maybe this means nothing to you, but it means *everything* to me. It means I am a warrior of Mars. It means that, together, we are Mars herself. It means that, to build a beautiful future, we must use thorns against our past. We are Roses, red as our world, bright as our blood, and we are the last hope against Earth.

“There is power in silence, strength in shadows, and if we act too soon, we lose every advantage. I promise we will take back what’s ours, that we will banish every trace of Earth from our rosy sands, that we will vanquish the Bone Lords and show them no mercy, but we must wait till we are ready. And when we are ready, I will give you more than vengeance; I will give you victory.”

Most members relax and smile—thanks, in part, to my drugs. They permit ambiguity, the vague war speech and promise of pomp, because things are stable, things are steady. Not Miro, though, and certainly not Mack. But Miro has faith in me. He lends me a smile, then leaves with the others. They starshift away in ghost constellations, branding human afterimages onto the room. Mack stays behind. He disagrees, but he won’t disagree openly about this—yet.

We trade red dustsuits for black to blend, then leave the library the old-fashioned way, through a smartglass walkway on foot with the rusty world outside. After passing academic buildings in the campus center, vintage-inspired dorms bloom in the outskirts, and students perch in windows like ravens. UMars overflows with cliques of book addicts obsessed with mortality. Most study Greek and Latin classics, parroting esoteric and existentialist studies in literature, theater, and art to passersby. I teach most at some point during their college careers, and I mourn all when Earth stifles their potential.

After a few minutes of strained silence, Mack says, “Great speech, shitty plan. Or rather, lack of plan. What the hell are you doing? She’s as ready as she’ll ever be. We are, too.”

“Use a weapon too soon, and it backfires,” I say.

“Use a weapon too late, and it burns out. It’s time, Koa. We’ve

waited long enough.”

“Why are you in such a hurry?”

“Why are you not? Do you know what her life is like? She sleeps in *dumpsters*. She steals to survive. She runs for her life every day of her life.”

“That’s a safer existence than the one you have planned,” I snap.

“Safer?!” He blinks. “Is that what you think? That she’s safer chased, starved, and trapped in the subway?”

“Yes. It’s not the life I’d choose for her, but it’s a life she can fight through, a life she can control. You want to use her.”

“I want to *save* her.” Mack stops on the walkway and spins me to face him. “She’s depressed. Anxious. Obsessive and overwhelmed. Isolated and lonely. No one understands her, and she can’t communicate what she wants or express how she feels. She’s smart. Too smart. Smart enough to know she’s different. Smart enough to suffer because of it.”

“She’d suffer more with the weight of the worlds on her shoulders,” I say. “I won’t fail again.”

“You didn’t fail before. Ayaan wasn’t your fault.”

“Don’t say his name.”

“Don’t curse his memory.”

“He was my responsibility,” I say.

“And he made his own choice,” Mack says. “You can’t blame yourself.”

“Yes, I can. I pushed him too hard, and I won’t do the same with her.”

Mack sighs and shakes his head. “You know, for all that talk of fear, you’re the most afraid of all.” He pauses for a second, calms himself with a breath. “Have you ever heard her play harmonica?”

“No, and you shouldn’t have, either,” I say.

He ignores me. “It’s the most beautiful, heartbreaking sound. Every tear shed and every sob suffered bleed into her melody. I cried listening to her, and I never cry. She’s hurting, Koa. She’s hurting badly, and she needs *you*.”

Though my heart aches to help her and my blood pounds in answer, I pull on my airmask and goggles, then say, “I’d kill her.”

Mack copies my routine, slips airmask and goggles over his

face, as we breach the smartglass walkway and head into Martian streets. Smartglass skyscrapers rise around us as we skip around solarcars and dance with skyships' shadows. Our solarcapes ripple behind us, charging and absorbing the dwindling sunlight. Though our ancestors skipped in the low gravity, we've already evolved, adapted, even further than Earth feared.

This is *our* home. Kasei is *our* city. Rebellion brews in tunnels, in alleys, and if I don't act soon, Mars will crack along the fault line of past mistakes and future dreams in a bloody earthquake of destiny. They sent us here to die, but we survived, and to thrive, we must push harder, reach farther, and fight our fingers to the bones to become knives in Earth's twisted heart.

"Koal!" Mack shouts my name in harmony with another—a deeper, darker, more distressed scream. We race down the street to the nearest intersection, and the scream becomes a choir becomes mass hysteria.

The crowd seethes in cyclone as some rubberneck and others retreat. It's a human squall, a tempest of knees and elbows that floods Kasei with thunder. Mack and I push through anarchy toward a meaty splat at a junction between streets. Ice stabs my chest and frosts my thoughts as I greet the corpse at my feet.

It's Zeo. One of ours. A Rose. A senior. A member of the Order.

"No," Mack gasps and sinks to a knee. Tears streak his cheeks as he holds Zeo's lifeless hand. I haven't thawed yet, so I remain standing, thinking, drinking it all in.

Zeo wears his red dustsuit, limbs spread in a star, a ridicule of starchildren staged by Bone Lords, no doubt. His chest suffers a vicious welt, a two-inch-deep gash carved with our symbol, the nine-pointed star, a dozen times larger than those at our wrists. The wound brims with oil, slick and black, set afire only moments ago and left as an omen: a burning star, a blazing sun. They're close, then. Close, scared shitless, and making stupid mistakes, as Mack said.

But something's off.

"He should have changed," Mack sobs. "Why is he in red?"

And that's it. Because Zeo *did* change. I saw them all fade from red to black, blood to shadow, when they left the library. I always watch. I always check. So either Zeo starshifted back to change

again—unlikely, given his fierce loyalty—or a Bone Lord has access to headquarters.

“Koa?” Mack asks, sniffing, standing. “What does this mean?”

I scan the crowd, spot patches of white skeletons sprinkled through the writhing horde. “It means there’s a spy.”

Something pricks my shoulder, and pain spikes my arm. “Earth sends her regards,” the phantom hisses, then I fall.