

Enclaves  
by  
Justin Piesco

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of  
Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Fine Arts

Florida Atlantic University  
Boca Raton, FL  
December 2021

Copyright 2021 by Justin Piesco

Enclaves

by

Justin Piesco

This thesis was prepared under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor, Becca McKay, Department of English, and has been approved by all members of the supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of the Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters and was accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.

SUPERVISORY COMMITTEE:



Becca McKay (Nov 1, 2021 15:30 EDT)

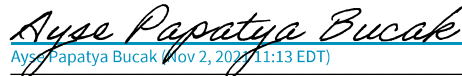
---

Becca McKay, Ph. D.  
Thesis Advisor

*Kate Schmitt*

---

Katherine Schmitt, Ph.D.



Ayşe Papatya Bucak (Nov 2, 2021 11:13 EDT)

---

Ayşe Papatya Bucak, M.F.A.



Oliver Buckton (Nov 2, 2021 11:24 EDT)

---

Oliver Buckton, Ph.D.  
Chair, English Department



---

Michael J. Horswell, Ph.D.  
Dean, Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts  
and Letters



---

Robert W. Stackman Jr., Ph.D.  
Dean, Graduate College

November 3, 2021

---

Date

## Acknowledgements

I am grateful for all the support and guidance given by my thesis chair, Becka McKay, and my other committee members, Kate Schmitt and Ayşe Papatya Bucak. Your knowledge, insight, and humor has helped me persevere through all the difficulties I've encountered. I also want to thank my students whose writings have kept me on my toes with perpetually stranger and more interesting arguments. And finally, I would also like to acknowledge my support system: my father, my sister, Adam, Truong, Jeanette, and Mitch. Without you all, I'd still be writing page one.

Thank you.

## Abstract

Author: Justin Piesco  
Title: Enclaves  
Institution: Florida Atlantic University  
Thesis Advisor: Dr. Becka McKay  
Degree: Master of Fine Arts  
Year: 2021

Enclaves is a fiction novel set on an Earth ravaged by climate change and follows characters trying to find meaning in a life constantly threatened by weather. It addresses themes of adventure, death, competition, and capitalistic consequence.

## Enclaves

Adam.....	1
Adam.....	6
Lyta.....	9
Adam.....	15
Adam.....	27
Lyta.....	35
Adam.....	41
Lyta.....	49
Adam.....	56
Maxine.....	75
Adam.....	81
Lyta.....	89
Adam.....	94
Manón.....	96
Lyta.....	105

## Adam

Adam sped over the water-logged sidewalk and slid atop the grass and road, not once breaking eye-contact with Kishan who stared behind goggles in awe. The wind froze pellets of water to the few exposed pieces of skin on Adam as he flowed on his skim board. He barely ducked a fly-by branch that might have taken his head off if he'd been moving at an even slightly slower pace. Just as he was about to reach the younger boy, Adam kicked up the board, caught it in his arms and slowed himself down with a light jog. "And that's why," Adam said, "luck matters more than skill."

"Let me try!" Kishan shouted, his voice muffled by the cloth wrapping on his face.

"When you're older," Adam said, "I'll even give you Dynamo, here. But you have to keep this quiet for now. With Donald getting flattened by that stray wall the other day, you know how paranoid our parents will be about us even being outside."

"People always die, and parents are always mad," Kishan said. "Just let me try!"

"How about this; when my parents take me on their next trip out, I'll leave this outside our back door for you."

"Thank you!"

Adam lifted his board and rested it on his head. "Let's race to Grandma Maxine's. Winner gets the next watch she makes." Adam took a step away, but turned back to Kishan. "If you can catch me, Dynamo might let you have a quick ride today."

Adam smiled beneath his own scarf when Kishan took off without waiting for Adam to count down. Kishan's legs splashed through muddy runoff and half-melted plastic bottles.

Kishan will probably die out here, Adam thought. He probably would too. At least they could have some fun before they went. Too many of the others just hid inside and got crushed by trees or caught a cold and died anyway. Adam's parents said that in the old days, humans had medicine and plants that could protect them from disease and infection.

Adam gave Kishan a few more moments to lead, then threw down his skim board and launched himself forward. It was an especially bad day to be outside. Adam could tell. Rabon had more natural barriers like inclined hills and strong, sturdy trees than the area outside of town, but even the bigger trees creaked with each gust, and Adam's legs strained to keep his balance. As he caught up to Kishan, Adam bounced off his board and into the ground of mush. "We should both head home. We'll find a better day to race."

Kishan breathed heavily and nodded. An empty plastic bottle caught in the wind bounced off Adam's head, and they both laughed. "See you tomorrow!" Kishan said before trudging off.

"Maybe," Adam whispered, under his mask. Adam hung back and watched Kishan get inside his home. He held out his board which jerked like a sail. He tried to keep it flat as he walked, like a bulky divining rod. Rain made the board, and him, heavy and awkward. Adam debated just throwing the board aside to join the rest of the trash. Kishan did seem to want it, though.



His home hid behind the collapsed remnants of an apartment complex. Most of the loose slabs and metal rods had been solidified into place with new concrete, creating a stable, albeit ugly, shell for the Adam's family to inhabit. Adam wedged his board between a small, makeshift shelf in the concrete by his front door, and walked in on his parents throwing clothes and notes to each other, stuffing all of it into packs.

"I brought your watches from Ms. Maxine," Adam said. "They're wound."

"Have some fun after you got them, I'm guessing?" Adam's dad, Sal, said.

Adam almost laughed. "A little bit," he said. Adam shimmied off his jacket and took out the bag he'd stuffed before he left. It was filled with notecards, pencils, and spare socks. "Can't I just travel with you? We all know I'm going to eventually."

Adam's mom stepped in and handed Sal a coffee. "Your mother is the most agile and athletic person I know," Sal said. "And we've been sidelined for over a month because she slipped on rocks and busted her ankle. If you're in any less than top physical and mental shape, exploration is too dangerous."

Thunder vibrated the windows. "It's not exactly safe here," Adam said. "I need something new."

"You get hurt now," Adam's mom, Nella, said. She already had her bag stuffed and tied down. She set her own coffee down and jumped lightly on her feet. "It could mess with your long-term growth. Although, my ankle is feeling mighty good, Sal." She sat next to Adam, her bag pushing him slightly to the side, and patted him on the back. "Then again, telling kids to slow down is what every parent has said to every moody teenager ever. How much do you think it's ever helped?"

"Not at all?" Adam said.

Sal kissed Adam's head and said, "Exactly! So, keep reading and eating and growing, and when you're ready, we'll go adventuring together."

"You'll just have to suffer a little longer because," Nella said, "We should be finding some of the coolest shit you've ever seen on this next trip."

Adam groaned. His mom looked away from him to try to hide her excited smile. "You both are messed up," Adam said. He stood up, kissed his mom on the cheek, and asked, "Can you at least tell me what you're looking for?"

Nella bounces after him. "There used to be this God-like system called 'the internet' where you could input questions, and it would answer you!"

"Like a robot?" Adam said. "And how have you not mentioned this over the last month?"

"Actually, your mother and I are going to search for robot-like technology on our next trip out—but the internet wasn't a robot, exactly," Sal said. "More like the system through which robots and people communicated. In the same way a sink and a toilet aren't plumbing, a robot isn't the internet, right Nella? But even more than that, we keep hearing this odd high-pitched noise out east of here and coming across rumors and hints of high-tech enclaves on earth!" He held up a

Nella said, "And it makes sense that some of our ancestors ventured off world when the Event occurred, but it also stands to reason that a small pocket of elites would hunker down—either because of the real or imagined fear of space flight. It's been hundreds of years, but we still may find them and all of their high-tech stuff."

Adam threw down his bag and said, "Come on, you have to take me to find them! I'm out here trying to find what I want to do with my life based off of books from

hundreds of years ago, but you might find some space-age mecha-town that blows away my brain! You both always say I'm smarter than everyone else in town, and I'm already taller than Mom. Let me come along!"

"Well," Sal said, sipping his coffee and leaning back in his chair. "If you can answer this one question, I'll consider it."

Adam sighed. "You're about to try to trick me with a dad joke, aren't you?"

Nella laughed.

"This is a serious question, actually," Sal said. "What will you do if you encounter laser turrets that disintegrate trespassers on sight?"

Adam groaned. "Those aren't real."

"You're probably right," Sal said, "but that's not the point of the question. And you've answered wrong. The correct answer is simple: you would die. Think about that for next time."

Adam frowned. He had almost died four times that morning.

Adam's parents spoke briefly about their plans, telling him they were likely going to be gone for another month. They gave him a dozen or so books to read and told him to help the town where he could.

"Life is as scary as it is exciting, Adam," Nella said, heading toward the door. "Our goal is for you to be even better than we are. Try to be patient."

Sal smiled. "It's not like we're going to discover and solve all of humanity's problems before you're seventeen."

Adam tried to think up a new reason for them to let him accompany them. He kept trying for the next hour after they left.

## Adam

When Adam was younger, his parents were always smiling and talking and stuffing as much bread and jerky in their packs to go into the wastes for weeks at a time, bringing back news of the past and of others. Depending on how far out they went, they'd find other pockets of people in various stages of technology. The constant threat of flooding near coastal areas, coupled with the likelihood of tornadoes the further inland they went made inter-communal projects difficult if not impossible. Adam's grandparents on his mother's side also ventured off often, and even as Adam learned to speak as a child, it felt like they were speaking another language. One second they would speak about the intricacies of human head, and the next they're referencing some ancient story about the birth of Zeus. As he grew older, he poured over as many books as he could to make sense of what he heard, but he was always months or years behind.

Adam grew up in Rabon, a town roughly two miles inland, and had never been further than the outskirts of the old State library—the place he often visited since books were the closest he could get to information, adventure, and life experience. When he was thirteen, he snuck out on a morning where seemingly less rain fell and the clouds were a welcoming gray. Because mild weather happened so infrequently, he planned to run as far away from town as he could to see ibis, palm trees, or panthers. While climbing a tree near the edge of town to see which direction he wanted to go, wind pinned him to the trunk before snapping the too-thin branch beneath his feet. Though he

didn't break any bones from the fall, he landed on a stone that gashed the back of his wrist, the blood loss great enough to force him to forgo further travel and rush to the Fishers who stitched him up.

In the silence of his parent's exit, Adam looked at the scars on the back of his wrist, reminded of the lesson on venturing out alone. Still, two years had passed without seeing any further than the Rabon library. He flipped through his parents' piles of handwritten notes around the home, knowing he'd already read most of them. The typewriters with a stack of bound books between them, each housing final/revised notes since ink ribbons were so difficult to find/replace in typewriters—pencils and crayons were seemingly endless.

Adam heard a knock on the door but debated opening because seeing the disappointment on the Fisher's or the Benton's faces when he tells them his parents aren't home was always frustrating.

Adam braced himself for opening as the door jerked inward. Several people rushed around outside but nowhere near the door. Assuming the knock came from rocks or debris, he forced the door closed and realized he'd let too much wind through. Sketches and maps crumpled and fluttered, but Adam just let them go. His mother was the more detailed artist, though his father tended to draw more. Often, they drew the same location and traded to learn from and expand on the other's perspective. Their last trip had been over a month long, and long trips away were followed by extended periods at home, reviewing and cataloguing whatever they'd learned. In front of each of their travel books—leather bound pads the size of her hands, there were several pages of lists.

The most recent number at the end of the lists was: 35.) Don't climb a tree above a point where the trunk is thinner than you are.

Adam had most of the entries memorized, like 1.) If you don't know where water is, finding it is your priority; and 7.) Always let your partner know when you're relieving yourself; 10.) If lost or separated for more than 5 hours, return to the most recent point of shelter, but there is no shelter, return to Rabon; but number 35 was Adam's lone contribution to the list.

Frustrated that all he could do was read, Adam scrounged for a historical text, one that he knew the Smiths had already read, in this case *New England Metalwork*, and prepared the book as an excuse to visit them and practice smithing.

While walking to the Smith's house, townspeople scrambled around the road, shouting about an emergency gathering, but the last emergency gathering was due to the Johnson's roof collapsing after a storm, so Adam avoided making eye-contact with anyone. He missed that many of the townspeople gathered clubs, spears, and knives.

## Lyta

Lyta explored the Enclave's fence to verify electricity ran through all of it. She carried her younger brother, Gerald, in a harness on her back and waved her hand over a few feet of the metal links at a time. After every few feet or so, she nodded to Gerald who made a note on his brightly lit Tablet, then they continued along repeating the process.

"I get that Grandpa William says so," Gerald said, "but he seems lazy, and the tablet doesn't support what we're doing. It makes no sense."

"Agreed," the sister said, without stopping her hands. "Once we leave, though, it won't matter."

"If it won't matter, can't we stop now?"

"I'll feel better believing everyone is safe."

Gerald dropped his hands to his sides. Lyta checked more of the fence for the faint feeling of heat. Then, Gerald grinned, held his Tablet up behind his sister's head, and as she held her hands over a new section of fencing, slammed the Tablet into the back of her neck. She flinched forward, catching herself on the fence and for what she thought was certain death. The metal links radiated warmth but no more than any other piece of metal left out in the sun.

"Damn it!" she shouted. "What the hell?"

"I'm sorry," Gerald said. His eyes reddened.

“No, calm down,” she said. “I’m just embarrassed. This is another one of those things I should have questioned much earlier. What has everyone been doing all this time?”

“I could have killed you! I don’t know what I was thinking!”

“You trusted your brains. Something too many of us have forgotten to do.” She hefted him up higher onto her shoulders. “Plus, if the danger was real, you’d have just died too since I’m carrying you. Risking yourself gets you off the hook.” They turned from the fence and headed back towards their town. “We just need to leave.”

The outdoors hummed with the laughter of chubby, naked adults dancing between glimmering pavilions, mashing buttons on food dispensers that spewed out handfuls of assorted foods and candies. Vibrant blue and green spheres of light shimmered in the air above the town as voices blurred between the townsfolk. With salt, chocolate, and saliva covering their fingers and bodies, the people groped and fondled each other in a constellation of snacks and jiggling skin.

From his sister’s back, Gerald said, “Maybe we can disassemble one or two of the dispensers and use the parts to repair the fence?”

“And get our hands bitten off?” she said. “It’s not worth fixing one problem by breaking another. We’ll just leave in the morning.”

As they walked, a group of adults sauntered toward them from the nearest pavilion, waving, smiling, bouncing, and chatting in cherubic unison.

“Hey, youngins! Still carrying around that funny rectangle?”

“You both having fun with the fence?”

“We missed the two of you today!”



“Though, it was nice to have a change of pace, you know?”

The sister formed her lips into a grin, nodded at the group rather than any specific individual, then turned to walk away. The brother craned his head around as they left, spotted someone and said, “Hey Doctor! The fence is broken, so we’re heading out to get me fixed up tomorrow.”

“You and the fence are fine! Things end. Death is a part of life!”

The sister continued away from them and said, “So, I can kill you if I want?”

“Of course!” the doctor said happily.

“What an exciting journey that would be for both you!” said another of the group.

“No person has killed or been killed in centuries!” cheered another.

“Have you an interesting way of doing it?”

Lyta whispered to her brother, “I love them, but they’re the worst. Read another history article on the Tablet.”

“But I’ve already read five today! That’s why I knew about the electricity.”

The sister glanced back to make sure the group wasn’t following. The naked adults had already gone back to touching, patting, and pleasing each other.

In the morning, the siblings left.

When Gerald, again strapped to his sister’s back, said he was glad she didn’t kill the Doctor, the sister answered, “We change ourselves with our actions. It’s okay to be mad, but we can’t let our feelings be an excuse to cause harm. Then, no matter your reasoning, you’re one who causes harm.”

The two trekked over a grass-covered path leading from their enclave and into the forest beyond. Gerald poked instructions and read directions from the Tablet. Rays of

light squeezed through even the thickest tree branches onto the rocks and bushes along the path, making their journey seem as inviting as it was endless.

“The Tablet says if we jump up and down for three hours, I should be cured,” ,  
“but you can’t pause or trip, or we’ll have to start over.”

Lyta grunted and pumped her legs forward, her brother hanging like a bag of rabbits on her back, never quite sitting still. “You know,” she said, “you’re heavier when you lie.”

Without looking away from the forest before them, Gerald snapped back, “The Tablet says that’s not true.”

Lyta shrugged. “Regardless, we have to find the food machines out here before it gets too late.”

Gerald relaxed. “I am hungry. You’d think we’d at least have found a water dispenser by now, but at least the animals are interesting.”

Gerald pointed out trees and birds along the path, having memorized the general information of the area over the last couple of days. He was eager to see everything in-person, having never left the enclave before. The sister envied his enjoyment. She had journeyed around the exterior of her enclave as a child, days after she accidentally discovered the Tablet. But her own excitement had long waned since, no matter what her brother said or pointed out, she could only look forward to the wishing spirit.

Both siblings assumed “A spirit that grants wishes without restriction” sounded like the most ridiculous lie the Tablet could offer, but they could think of no other course to take as the illness crept further up Gerald’s body, and the Tablet was never wrong.

Better to take a journey to nowhere than allow an illness to journey up a loved one. The path, at least so far, seemed flat and even. Her brother wasn't as light as he used to be.

"I'm going to need to set you down for a few minutes," Lyta said. "I don't know how we're going to make it more than a day outside of our enclave if we don't find the machines soon."

"This is really strange. The Tablet only shows the locations of food and water receptacles from back home. Maybe we need to find the local Tablets?"

"People had to survive out here before us," Lyta said. "Maybe they just had different devices?"

The two continued on, but as night fell, they debated returning home. "We must be doing something wrong," Gerald said.

"I can't keep walking with you on my back without something to eat. Maybe we should just call it a night? I guess we can sleep on the grass?"

"What if the animals get us?"

Lyta considered it, but she set her brother down anyway. "I don't know."

"I don't think we should stop here," Gerald said, pushing himself upright against a tree.

"I don't have a choice." Lyta laid her head on a soft-looking patch of grass. "Just let me rest for a few minutes." The sky had yet to turn dark, but Lyta was exhausted. Crickets hummed in the distance. Trees flinched with the wind.

"Lyta, get up," Gerald said. She ignored him. He was always talking, that one. "Lyta..." he said again.

A couple carrying bags as large as Gerald stepped out from behind the trees. The man hesitated and held out a hand as if to shield his partner from them. The woman with soft brown hair pushed past him, holding her hands open at shoulder height, “We’re sorry to intrude, but do you two need help setting up a campfire? We also have food to share. You both look like you need it.”

The couple stepped toward the siblings. The woman had an almost equally large bag with rolled blankets hanging from it. “Stay back,” Gerald said.

Lyta stirred, but could only muster the strength to turn her head toward them. “Food would be nice,” she said, “but I’m just going to sleep for a few hours.”

Adam

After seeing the empty chair behind the counter of the Smith's home, Adam realized the strangeness of Rabon's situation. The Smith's lived in a refurbished burger place, and Maxine Smith wouldn't be dragged from her lounge chair behind the front counter in the thickest of hurricanes. Even when Rabon convened during the storm of '79 to discuss complete evacuation inland, she'd said, "You all use your best judgement. I'd rather die here than spend more time outside when it's not sunny." She was the town's only watchmaker and repair-person, and the front counter was always littered with tools, oils, tiny screws and gears. "I'm like all of the little things you folks expect me to fix; too much water on me, and I'm ruined."

Adam ducked out of the rain and under the delivery-window overhang. He pushed back his hood, rubbed the water from his hands and double-checked that the note cards in his bag were still dry. He took one, wrote, "Was just visiting to say, 'Hello,' and to thank you for my birthday watch. You all are great. A," and slid it through a crack in the window.

Adam thought back to seeing the Bentons rush towards the beach and started in the same direction. He wondered if there was a beached whale or manatee. Would that be enough to get Maxine outside? Doubtful. If the animal was large enough, the whole town might be necessary to try to push it back in the water, but so what? Death was normal. Risking human death for an animal was not. The rapids and inconsistent size of

the waves made saving any such creature a danger, and more likely than not, in a week or so at least one current would drag even a large vehicle back into the ocean. Between sand flurries and the likelihood of random debris, doing anything near the beach was a unnecessary risk.

Adam called after a group of people in the distance who couldn't hear him over the weather. He then tightened his jacket and hood around him and trudged forward. He tried to imagine what else could cause the frenzy. His mom made it a point of saying that the most important concerns the town should have were people, resources, safety, and people. In a world where a random gust could demolish any "thing," she always said people were the greatest resource, and the most adaptable source of safety. While more of the town's de facto advisor than leader, Fisher and Samuel were more the leaders, Adam's mom repeated the idea at every town meeting she attended, and it had become the Rabon motto. Whatever the townspeople were rushing toward had to be fitting into one of those categories. Maybe they were rushing to salvage meat? Adam thought. Or maybe something more important washed ashore. The only people that could wash up would be corpses since boat travel in the ocean was impossible since no boat could outsize tsunami waves. Although, Adam thought, multiple corpses would certainly draw attention. Pirates maybe? Disease?

Adam began to move faster, excited to see what had arrived. He saw thirty or so people standing at the top of a hill, standing tall but still close to each other. The backs of their jackets and hoods were difficult to read, but they all stood planted to one spot like they'd been buried in sand up to their knees. Whatever craft or person or mystery to have survived was likely severely damaged, so their fear was strange. Kishan, in his bright

orange jacket, flailed at the back of the crowd, trying to push his way around them or see over their shoulders. Maybe it was just shock? Adam thought back to stories of treasures or mermaids washing upon the beach and pulled his hood tighter around his face to hide his smile.

As he approached, Adam saw that nearly everyone from Rabon had arrived. Most stood more rigid than they would simply for the gusts, almost as if their collective mass could stop a wave. Rather than heading directly into the group like Kishan had done, Adam swung wide along the hill line toward a tree and peered from behind it. Maxine holding her husband. The Bentons cupping their hands around their eyes like ancient binoculars. Fisher and Samuel at the front, speaking calmly to each other but also loud enough for the crowd behind them to hear. Nearing the shoreline rowed a large aluminum craft, carrying a several cloaked figures. In the far distance, floating beneath the dark pitch of clouds and thunderbolts anchored an even larger craft, seemingly big enough to hold dozens of people, if not more.

A large, metallic sphere jettisoned along a cable beneath the waves. The sphere seemed stalled a hundred or so feet from shore, but a section along the middle opened and paddles lanced out from the sides, pushing the sphere ever closer. Whoever rowed the craft collectively spun themselves towards and away from waves, careful to keep the opening from being caught. Their paddles flinched and recoiled like the legs of an octopus, and while their journey was slow going, there was no doubt they'd soon arrive on shore.

Adam saw that the townspeople were as shocked as he was. Adam had once nearly drowned trying to take a kayak into the water on one of the few sunny days a year

he'd experienced, and while he could chalk some of his salty failure to inexperience and not yet having the proper muscles for the job, the breadth of his loss seemed unsurmountable. With tree-climbing and hiking through storms, there can be a possibility of pauses or reprieves. With boating, anything less than constant, muscle-rending perfection, meant the kind of body crushing death and drowning that would lead to no part of you ever being found again.

The crew of the ship, having finally arrived at the shore, calmly, haphazardly, emptied out of the craft, carrying bags, metal fixtures, and even a few weapons.

Two people from Rabon walked toward the strangers. While it was difficult to tell because their hoods were also up, Adam guessed they were some combination Fisher and Samuel or Syntia and Dave. Fisher and Samuel were an older married couple who tended to take charge of the town meetings, in no small part because they had the best memories. Once, when members of Rabon wanted to renovate a four-story hotel into a storage facility and marketing hub, Fisher, without pausing, wrote out a three-page listing of materials needed from each of those in attendance, recalling specifically what each person or family had access to and in what specific amounts; Samuel, after glancing over the list, for what Adam thought was only a moment or two, then spent the next half hour dictating to everyone what would be necessary for each person to do, and that if anyone felt unwilling or unable to accomplish their task, the entire venture should be postponed.

Syntia and Dave also could have been the two representatives from Rabon since they seemed to insert themselves into all difficult situations whether they were best suited for it or not. They were the most athletic of folks in Rabon, having the agility and strength of panthers. They were also the kind of folks who would just as readily rush to



ask why a person is leaving their house during a storm as they would toward a bear rampaging through town, and they would do both with the same urgency. “Because I’ve been inside every day for a week,” Adam had said whenever they asked him, “And you’re outside too!”

Adam admired and respected all of them, but Fisher and Samuel were the measured speakers who held the town’s trust, and Adam hoped they were the ones speaking.

The tallest of the strangers stepped forward, arms wide and hands open. The person slid their pack to the ground and removed the mask from her face. She was the tallest person Adam had ever seen, her height matched by the size of her smile. Rain pelted at her face as she spoke quickly but calmly. The strangers behind her set their craft further up the shore and removed poles and a large canvas tent. The woman held a hand over her eyes to shield them from the weather while she looked at the hooded members of Rabon. She pointed to a clearing near Adam, and after those from Rabon nodded, she directed her crew members towards it. She shook the hands with the pair from Rabon and spoke to them in bright, winding gestures while her crew set up a small pavilion.

Everyone focused on the woman, the fact of her happiness and ease more distracting than her sudden or actual appearance. If the two from Rabon were Fisher and Sam, Adam imagined Fisher would attempt to hide his fear behind an angry exterior. Sam would wear a calm expression like a welcome mat on his face. Neither were used to being the first to interact with new folk. There hadn’t even been new folk in Rabon in

years, and every time any arrived, they tended to be escorted into town by Adam's parents.

These strangers' arrival was concerning, but Adam's parents had often spoken about the best way to initiate first contact: 1) assume you are going to die—it takes the pressure off; 2) Remember your priorities—are you protecting someone else or yourself? 3) When in doubt, be kind. While he couldn't hear what she was saying over the rain and wind, Adam thought the strange woman seemed to be following all three. After more grins from the woman and head shakes from the hooded Rabons, they all moved toward the hastily erected, wall-less shelter. "If you want to bring anyone else over," the woman said, "You absolutely should."

"No, this will be fine," Samuel said. "We can speak for our town when I say we're happy to welcome you all for the night. I suspect you'll want to be on your way in the morning."

Samuel was followed by Syntia. Where were Fisher and Dave? Were they mixed back in with the rest of town? Why not have all of them over to discuss?

The woman half-smiled and half-criinged. "This is not an ideal explanation, but the tides are going to prevent us from leaving if we don't leave soon—which is certainly our intention." She reached for the bags of one of her crew and began unpacking red and green fruits or vegetables that Adam could not identify. "Normally, we'd offer your town all of these things as a show of good faith over the course of a few days or even a week before asking you this, but with this beast of an inlet being what it is, we're speeding up our timeline."

Samuel glanced at the items the woman took out, then looked over at her compatriots and sized up the bags on their shoulders. Adam smiled. Samuel was already accounting for all the potential goods.

“The foods are the showier items, but we have practical things too.” She took out several thin plastic tubes, each roughly the length of a book. “Even if you already have a source of clean water, these are portable purifiers. They will help you venture out and expand your scope of influence in the area. If you’re one of those boil-all-the-water towns, we get that, but we have brought fifty or so of these straws with us for you to have. We also have high quality metal tools, and you’re welcome to all the weapons, bags, and gear we brought with us. Strange as it might seem, there are no strings attached to these items.”

Adam almost yelled out. The ‘straws’ alone would make travel for he and his parents magnitudes simpler. He thought, I might even be able to save enough time to track my parents down right now! Or at least take a trip a few hours inland to practice living in the elements without having to constantly rush home!

Samuel, though, picked up the round red fruit, smelled it, then returned it to the woman. “That’s very kind of you,” he said, “but I can’t get around the fact that your dreadnaught overshadows the whole of this. You want something in return, and you know we are likely not willing to offer it.”

The woman nodded. “I can understand that. The weather makes trust difficult. I feel like you don’t want the whole, ‘we’re fighting the demons of our past speech,’ and with Valentine out there staring down at us, I can’t deny we’re mighty intimidating.” She held the fruit back up to Samuel. “I can take a bite first if it will help? I promise I’ll get

to the big ‘ask,’ but part of why I volunteer to take these visits is to see people bite into an apple for the first time. There was one old man who hated it and spat it onto my feet, but he might have just had a hard time with solids. Weird guy.” She hesitated. “But it’s delicious. I promise.”

Samuel looked at the woman like he’d caught the eye of a child who’d broken one of his windows. They both knew there was a problem, and as much as the child may want to talk about love or gifts or anything else, there was no sidestepping the broken window. At the same time, though, Adam was certainly curious enough to try the apple. Poisoning one person with thirty more at his back would only spell her and her friend’s end.

Still, Adam could tell the woman read Samuel just as he did. She exhaled, exaggeratingly. “We have two requests. We are trying to connect all of the large townships we can, so humanity can regain some sense of community again. We’ve brought technology and instructions for its use. You can test it out, see what we and the rest of the world has to offer, and I know you’ll find it to your liking. We ask only that you share what you know with the rest of us.”

Syntia shouted, “That’s incredible! I doubted that kind of thing was even possible! You freaks are might be all right.”

Samuel scowled. “No. We won’t accept until you tell us the second request.”

“My name is Ondrea,” the woman said, “And this request is one that my town was offered when I was barely an adult, and I leapt at the chance.”

Samuel’s expression didn’t change.

Ondrea said, “We’re looking to create a new-world communication program, and the only way we can do it is by putting as many different groups into contact as possible. With weather and tides the way they are, we won’t be able to travel from the boat to the shore for over a month, and we can’t afford to wait around here that long.”

“Bottom line?”

“We would like someone from your town to join us. We need them by tomorrow.”

“No, Ondrea,” Samuel said, without flinching. “We need everyone in our town. Your request is impossible.”

Adam jumped from behind his tree and said, “I’ll go!”

His parents were gone. He could return in the future. And he’d be safe aboard a life-changing, Sci-Fi nautilus where he could learn far more than any book he’d read. If they wanted to test him, he was almost willing to swim to their ship.

“Adam!” Syntia said, speaking for the first time. “What are you even doing here? You absolutely are not going! Go stand with everyone else.”

“I’ll go,” Adam said, speaking directly to Ondrea. He turned to Samuel. “Just make sure to give my parents some of those cylinder things, and tell them I’ll be back as soon as I can. They’ll completely understand.”

“I’m a little worried when someone is this excited to go with strangers” Ondrea, the tall woman, said, “but an excited young one is a perfect candidate to join us.

“He’s not going,” Samuel said.

“It’s what’s best for the town!” Adam said. “I want to go. My parents are never here. You all are busy with your own lives. And they need someone. It’s for humanity! Don’t be selfish!”

Samuel appraised the group quickly, then stepped back to the rest of those from Rabon. “It turns out, I will need to have more people here to discuss. Syntia, stay here with Adam.” Adam felt ready. Samuel would have to let him leave, and even if he didn’t, Adam was confident he and the strangers could outrun the town to the boat, and from there, no one could chase them in the actual water.

“Kid,” Ondrea said, watching Samuel’s back like she was eyeing a chess board. “He’s not going to let you leave, and there will be violence if we try to just take you.” She directed her crewmember standing closest to Adam to walk him back with Syntia. The crewmember appeared to be another woman, slightly shorter than Adam, but she had yet to remove her face covering. Kishan had worked his way to the front of the Rabon and was straining his eyes toward Adam.

“There won’t be violence,” Adam said, but he watched as Samuel made it back to the crowd and started pointing back at them. Adam guessed Samuel verified his location with the strangers because right after Samuel pointed, Kishan grinned and dashed toward them. Some from Rabon gave chase, but they weren’t going to catch him before he arrived at the strangers, but Syntia leapt toward him instead, meeting him halfway.

The escort walking next to Adam turned her head down but spoke loud enough for Adam to hear. “She lied about not being able to make it back for a month. We can make another trip out here this time tomorrow, but it’s even more dangerous than we made it look coming in. We’re leaving all of this gear here for your town regardless of

your decision, but if you tell me right now that you're willing to leave with us, we'll come back tomorrow and take you with us."

"I'll be there."

"Listen, kid," the woman said, "This isn't a joke or play time. We could literally die just trying to row back to the Valentine. Even when we get back there, the work for survival is hell. Humans aren't meant to live in this weather, and they're sure as hell not meant to live on a boat for as long as we do."

Adam almost worried as all Rabon started toward them, but he'd long since made his decision. "I'll be there," he said. "Tomorrow."

Ondrea smiled and winked at him. Then she stood tall and shouted, "Kid, I'm not getting myself or my crewmates killed just so you can have an adventure! If your town says you stay, then you stay! Let's go everyone."

Samuel approached, picked up the bag Ondrea had brought with her and handed it to her. "I'm sorry I can't try your apple," he said. "But you leaving is for the best. Our town is happy and self-sufficient as it is. Safe travels."

Ondrea said, "I feel like this weakens my initial argument a bit, but we literally can't take these bags back with us. Rowing out here with them the first time is bad enough. Take them as a gift of good will, and maybe reconsider having someone join us if, in a few years, we ever make it back here."

Samuel nodded, and after brief discussion allowed the strangers to rest for a bit before asking them to return to their ship and leave the coast. He had Adam and Kishan escorted away from the shore by Syntia before the strangers could speak again, but Adam

was already planning out what all he could stuff into his bag before he went to bed that night.



## Adam

Adam had become so used to the sound of wind and pebbles against his home throughout his life that he'd never thought to be paranoid about the sounds' possibility of being someone watching him to prevent him from leaving. He doubted he could take much more than a small backpack since the travelers had discarded their duffle bags, so he packed a single extra pair of clothes and a blank notebook.

The air was stifling. The sun had long since set, not that it had been a bright day anyway. While watching out his window for hints of Syntia, Dave, or even Kishan, Adam thought about what else he should bring with him. Water travel had always been hypothetical rather than practical, like asking what he would do if he had super strength or could fly. He'd joke about it with his mom whenever she got back from training in the shallowest parts of the ocean, but when even she said she was worried about going out too deep, the matter was moot. "Maybe," Adam's father had said, "We'll find something that will get humans back to the water, or maybe the weather will normalize in our lifetime, but right now, we have to keep our focus on land."

"The water is so much more frustrating than we can space travel or high medicine," Adam's mom had said, "because we can see it, taste it, and throw our entire bodies into it, but still know we can't experience it the way people used to."

"Maybe we're lucky about that part," Adam's father said, "Your mom would swim out and go be a fish forever if she could. Leave all of us behind."

“Why do you think I’ve been training so regularly?” she said. “I’d easily be able to drag both of you out with me.”

Her sadness was never longstanding. They both loved the idea of travelling in the water or into space, but meeting new people holing out in mountains or in old towns or in the high floors of skyscrapers was more adventure than they could ever experience.

“Remember,” Adam’s mom said, “We’re part of the whole of humanity. We can lean into personal wants to help us determine what we want to pursue, but the pursuit should still always have the potential to help others.”

“Seeing new people happy is great, Adam,” his dad said. “Trust me. Your life always comes first, because you can’t help others if you’re dead, but the pursuit of newness is...”

Adam remembered his father trailing off to write out the rest of the thought into a small, plastic covered notebook. He searched through drawers and shelves to find it, skipping over logs from some of his parents’ recent trips along inland rivers and completely ignoring his own cataloguing of experiences interviewing the townsfolk. He would miss them, but what use was their feedback on his life now that he found a life path outside of any of their limited experiences or expectations? The notebook should have been easier to find because it was the part of the family’s emergency “essentials to bring with you,” but Adam had all but ignored it until now. He flipped to the back of the notebook to look at the map sketchings his father had made. The drawings were more referential than literal with scrawled cartoon indicators and anthropomorphized landmarks. “It’s not the most exciting read,” Sal said, “but it’s a step-ladder for when you start reaching out into the world.”

Adam stuffed the notebook in his bag, wrote out a goodbye letter to his parents, explaining his reasoning, his nervousness, and how he'd found his purpose. Alongside a poorly drawn grinning self-portrait he also wrote how excited he was to know that soon he would finally be the one with wild stories for them.

He peeked through all of his windows to see if he was being watched and left before morning. It was no more difficult than normal to take in the somberness of the library as he passed. Every step felt like the moment after waking from a deep sleep. Buildings blurred in Adam's eyes but glittered clear in his mind. The greying winds and mist ran over him like ominous bursts of oxygen, welcoming him into the haze.

When he arrived at the beach just under an hour later, the fog was still all-consuming. Adam pulled goggles from his bag and stretched them over his face to stem the clouds of sand from pelting into his eyes. Most always wore goggles, but he hated how they felt on his eyes. He hunkered down next to a tree that would have a fair view of the coastline if the sun ever blinked from the clouds once morning arrived.

Rather than seeing another whirling rowboat racing to the shoreline, Adam noticed a torchlight down the coast flicker briefly in the distance before disappearing. He stared after it, but after ten minutes of waiting, doubted he'd seen it in the first place. After another ten minutes, he saw another ball of flame shine out before disappearing but this time from slightly further away.

Well, Adam thought, it's either the travelers, or Dave and Syntia have driven them off and are looking for me. It should be fun to find out either way.

He started forward, careful to stay close to the tree line. If there was another burst of light in the next ten minutes, Adam missed it, but he kept pushing through the wind

and the brush. After reaching near to where he saw the first torchlight Adam slowed, looking for any evidence of confrontation or life. Footprints never lasted more than a few moments. Adam wondered how much better tracking skills his parents had from all of their experience. If they could track down bird's nests between slabs in caves entrances based off of near-silent chirps, if they could find entrances to underground tunnels going only off of old maps, if they could circle behind their own pursuers--a claim Adam had been initially skeptical of, but was ultimately validated by the fact that his parents had yet to die--and if they could track down a perfectly preserved vault carrying mint condition *The New Teen Titans* comic books, they could certainly search out a blinking signal before the signal carrier found them.

Although, Adam thought, what if the travelers had drones like the old comic books? The light burst in and out again, but Adam wondered whether the light was natural fire or some kind of electricity. If they had that kind of technology, they wouldn't waste it on him, right? He laughed under his breath. They absolutely would not row through a torrent if they had ways of communicating with technology only. Still, with the fact that they had such a ship as the *Valentine*, anything was possible.

Finally, Adam saw a single hooded figure hiding next to a tree, holding a plain, wooden torch. Adam did not recognize the figure's clothes and wondered if there was a meaning behind the disguise. The figure was easily a foot shorter than Ondrea and did not carry the same kind of assured movements. They jerked their head around as if feeling that Adam was there and wanting to make sure they spotted him first. Adam had the sense that Ondrea could skim the coastline once and know everything going on there for the next hour. The figure stuck the wooden torch between their legs, lit it using a match,

ran toward the ocean, and then ran back to their tree, smothering the flame with a rug. Clever, Adam, thought. Dousing it would make it unusable, but smothering the torch just meant it could be relit.

The figure glanced around, then raced down twenty or so feet behind another tree. Adam followed slowly. Should he announce his presence? Something felt off. The figure continued glancing around the tree, rubbing their gloved hands against their goggles. They leaned back against the tree, set the unlit torch down between their feet, then pulled off their goggles.

“Kishan,” Adam muttered. Adam whistled a high-pitch note and jogged towards the kid. Kishan glanced up, recognizing the whistle from games the two had played, then put his goggles back on. Kishan was barely twelve but was still the closest in age to Adam in a town with only a handful of children.

“Hey buddy,” Adam said. “Fire is dangerous, and you know you could get hurt being out here by yourself. What are you doing?”

Kishan laughed. “I wanted to ask you a favor.”

“You can’t come with me,” Adam said, “As great as it would be to have someone I know with me.”

“I still can’t swim,” Kishan said, looking out at the heavy waves. “But I thought maybe I could go out to the boat for a little while before you all leave. Just a visit is fine, right?”

“I don’t know that I can make that kind of promise, buddy. I don’t even know if I’ll make it out to their ship.”

“You just don’t want me to go.” Kishan kicked at the ground. “I could tell people you’re leaving, you know.”

Adam pulled down the covering around his mouth and showed Kishan that he was smiling. “Buddy, I would give up on going in a heartbeat if it kept you from doing something I know is dangerous, so if you want to tell on me, you go for it.”

“You could at least give me Dynamo,” Kishan said. He picked up his torch and straightened his clothes. “Maybe you can take me next time. I know you’ll make it back.”

“I like your confidence. I have no idea what will happen.”

“You’re gonna have fun,” Kishan said, smiling, “and my mom always says we shouldn’t plan for failure.”

Adam looked out onto the beach, hoping not to see anyone. “Okay, I promise you can come with me in the future,” he said, “but only if you’re ready, have read at least a thousand books, and have found and perfected riding Dynamo.”

Kishan jumped at Adam to hug him then ran back toward Rabon, laughing as he left.

Kishan arrived in Rabon years earlier, clinging to the backs his parents, Daniel and “E,” who sprinted behind Sal and Nella. At five or six, Kishan wasn’t ready for the long journey forced upon him by a tornado taking out his childhood home, but his family was fortunate enough to have recently made contact with Adam’s parents who offered to take them back to Rabon. Kishan was slow to open up to people, but after seeing the few children in Rabon—the first other children he’d seen in his life—he only ever wanted to play catch or race. His sense of adventure was almost as great as Adam’s, but Adam

could not see the younger child ever being happy without others. Every few dozen feet or so Kishan would turn back to Adam, as if making sure Adam was still watching, wave, then continue on until he was finally out of sight and beyond the hill closer to town.

“Kids, right?” a voice said. “I almost snatched him up to take him with us instead.”

Adam jumped. There was a stranger leaning against the tree closest to Adam’s tree. She looked at him, and Adam felt like she saw him as no different than Kishan--easily surprised, without any sense of being able to keep himself hidden.

“I’m Ramona,” said the stranger. “It’s impossible to recognize anyone outside with all our generic clothes and face coverings, but you’re at least the right height. Either you’re Adam, or there are way too many people who don’t believe we’ve left yet.”

“I’m Adam,” Adam said.

“You’re looking at me like I snuck up on you,” Ramona said, “but I got here long before you did.”

“You followed Kishan’s fire,” Adam said.

“Poetic,” Ramona said. “What did you expect me to do? I’m here to meet someone at the beach, and there’s a crazy signal right in the middle of everything. Still, I’m glad you’re here. The too-young ones never acclimate well. Too old, and they try to change everything. You’re right in that sweet-spot.”

If not for the tone of her voice, Adam wouldn’t be able to distinguish Ramona from any of the other strangers besides Ondrea. Dark gray wrappings surrounded her body, and even the glass of her goggles seemed tinted. Ramona’s voice felt like a violin humming. Adam followed after her toward the shoreline, expecting to see other

travelers. He knew he had questions, hundreds of them, likely, but he couldn't muster them. Wind pushed against his chest, making it difficult to breathe. Ramona was still talking when she gestured at a round sphere split in half by a hinge. The domed halves reminded Adam of a giant clam. Ramona stepped into one side of it, and Adam saw there were three seats inside with large harnesses on each.

“Where is everyone else?” Adam finally asked.

“It's just me,” Ramona said.

“How are we supposed to get to your ship then? How do can we row like you all did to get out here?”

“Ha!” Ramon said. She moved him into a seat, buckled him in, and put a helmet onto his head, strapping it underneath his chin. “You couldn't row well-enough on a calm day.” She closed and latched the dome. He'd never been in a darker place in his life. The closest he could remember was the time his parents had dragged him into their bathroom during a hurricane--that time was almost fun. In this darkness, his breathing became difficult. He thought he could hear latches and clicks, but he wasn't sure if it was just an illusion from his head spinning.

“You ever wonder,” Adam thought he heard Ramona say, “what it's like to be caught on a fishing line? It's real fun.”



## Lyta

The way Sal and Nella poked and prodded the food dispensaries and the electrical systems of the Enclave made Lyta stare in awe. The couple viewed her home in a way too similarly to how her people viewed each other. Were they enamored by machines? Lyta once overheard Sal speaking to the air regulator, saying, “You are the weirdest, sexiest piece of metal I’ve ever seen. So cool.” Nella was more measured, seemingly trying her best to emulate the new people she was encountering. Nella made it a point to hug and kiss on the cheek every person who approached her, but Lyta could tell she wasn’t quite right either. When a few of the Enclavists propositioned her, Nella said that she maintained a strictly monogamous relationship with Sal.

“Monopolis?” One of the elders asked. “You treat it as a kind of service?”

Nella appeared embarrassed, as if she’d just given away some secret. She paused for a moment to stare over at Sal whose body was half beneath one of the water purifiers, then explained, “Monogamous. It’s where two people...” she hesitated, “perfect their sexual activities with each other before expanding their physical relations to others.”

The nearby enclavists gasped in delight. “Brilliant! An act of expertise!” another said. “You must demonstrate for us!”

Then, to Lyta’s immense confusion, Nella made a motion like a wild beast was stalking toward her and said it would have to wait for another time. She also said that, later, she would be thrilled to know more about their sexuality and preferences.

You could just watch them, Lyta thought. She counted no less than four groups within the nearby area lavishing each other with sexuality, five if counting the pair singing to each other from nearby trees. What a strange thing for Nella to say.

Gerald, alternatively, seemingly fell in love with Sal. Sal would carry him from machine to machine to terminal, and they would constantly ask the other questions. Lyta enjoyed having time without Gerald, and her back all the more so, but she could not figure out how people as different as Sal and Nella could exist. Did their enclave function so differently, that the two didn't know how to act? Why did they insist on eating all of their food rather than stopping once they were full? Why did they keep reaching for their hoods every time they exited a building? All her life, Lyta had doubted the existence of others, but she'd also always assumed them to be a kind of extended family.

Lyta went to a small globule building to find an extra tablet. Several enclavists napped together, with one stroking the hair of the sleeping others. "I'd like to ask the tablet a few questions," Lyta whispered. "Will that bother you?"

"Honey," said one of the nappers without opening his eyes, "If it does, we will simply leave. Bear us no mind."

There were enough small tablets for the town to use--and potentially lose--for decades to come. Lyta grabbed one from a stand, and it switched on at her touch. Her eyes tracked over the light surface, and she asked, "Why are humans different?"

One of the semi-napping enclavists said, "Life would be boring otherwise."

The tablet blinked out an equally unhelpful response, putting forward anatomical structuring and gene sequences alongside an array of fiction stories. The stories were

ones she'd heard Gerald drone on about humans flying in boats to the moon, creatures called 'elephants' that were somehow both monstrous beasts of war and lovable geniuses, humans electing to turn their faces and bodies into rubber. Apparently, every human in the past wrote, but not every human wanted to read and narrow down what would be useful to the future, and instead she was left with nothing but the boringly technical and the annoyingly fantastical.

Lyta considered for a moment then, to avoid answers from others, typed out "What makes humans different?" Many of the responses were identical, but she noticed an article titled "Nature Versus Nurture: Humanity as Nature." She first assumed it to be a fictional story about humans existing as trees, but the tablet labeled it as academic research. Lyta clicked into it, but the article read like a pre-machine elder in the throws of dementia vomiting every large word they could imagine. She glossed over the subject headings and for the first time, she realized she may have been making the wrong assumption about the Coleman's.

Lyta jumped up, returned the tablet, waved to the nappers who gave her yawning smiles in return, then left.

The sky hummed its blueness as it always did. The grass pillowed under her feet. The breeze glistened across her face and through her hair like the opening notes of an orchestra. Lyta rushed against it all in the direction of where Gerald's tour with Sal was likely leading. Another enclavist noticed Lyta's jog and ran smiling alongside her for a few buildings before losing his breath and happily plopping down next to a tree. She last saw Gerald showing Sal the nuclear power grid, so they'd likely have made their way toward the Spirituality Chamber near it.

Lyta ran to the chamber doors that slid open before her, and in front of the hundred or so beds with enclavists attached to machines stood Sal with Gerald on the floor rubbing his head. “Gerald!” Lyta said. Sal stared at the bodies. He seemed scared. Possibly upset at the way they were arranged.

“I’m fine,” Gerald said. “Sal, I think accidentally, dropped me.” Lyta and her brother looked at Sal standing like a tree whose limbs were about to fall off.

“Sal?” Lyta asked. She helped Gerald sit upright. “I wanted to ask a question about your enclave. Is it much different from ours? Is our machine room really so odd to you?”

Sal walked toward an elderly enclavist named Joseph who’d been in the Spirituality Chamber since before Gerald was born. Lyta couldn’t remember a time when Joseph and those of similar age weren’t riddled with green tint around their eyes and extremities. Their long grey hair covered most of it, and those that decided to join at a younger age looked on different than anyone else.

“You’re probably wondering why so few of us are in here,” Lyta said. “Most people find contentment in each other, and Gerald and I want to make sure that he lives a long life, even if he ends up choosing to join a new enclave.”

“Plus,” Gerald said, “We have too great a sense of adventure.”

“But,” Sal said. He seemed unable to look away from Joseph. “Why?”

Sal’s eyes had reddened like he’d fallen out of a tree and broken a bone. When Lyta was a child, she broke her arm and couldn’t let herself cry for the few minutes before she was carried to the surgical facility for instant-care because crying made her

shake and the broken bits of bone would scrape together when she shook. Sal was obviously fine, so the distress was strange.

“I may have kicked him when he dropped me,” Gerald said. He crossed his legs using his hands.

“Sal,” Lyta said, “Do you not have old people?”

“Why would they let children see this?” Sal said. His breathing was ragged.

“This is more than I ever expected.” He brushed some of Joseph’s hair to the side, then jabbed his fingers at the monitor next to him. “We barely have electricity, and you’re all keeping... husks? My dad died at forty-three from an infection.”

“What’s an infection?”

“Not now, Gerald,” Lyta said. “Sal, why wouldn’t you take dad to your medical center?”

“No one has a medical center. No one. Not anywhere.” Sal started crying.

“Nella and I found a hundred-year old first aid kit last month and thought we’d captured magic. You don’t even have rain!”

“Is the first aid kit the kind of magic that could help Gerald recover?”

“I already asked Sal about fixing me up,” Gerald said, “but his enclave can’t do it either.”

Sal ran his hands over the back of his head like he was reaching for comfort from something on his back. “We don’t live in an enclave.”

“What?” said Gerald.

“Do you live underground?” Lyta asked. “I knew you had to be different somehow, but I never expected something so different.”

“Can we talk to an adult?” Sal asked.

“They’ll just try to have sex with you,” Gerald said.

“We had to stop including the sedatives in our food when we realized we couldn’t concentrate enough to look for a cure for Gerald,” Lyta said. “I do miss them, but it was to quit them or have a dead brother.”

Sal rubbed his hands against his face, then started writing with a pen into a notebook. Lyta had never seen a real pen or notebook outside of a tablet before. They seemed impractical. Sal drew out sketches of the layout of the room and the enclavists dreaming in their half-death. Lyta and Gerald both tried to ask questions of Sal, but he would only respond, “Ask me after.” The three continued in silence except for Sal’s scribbles on paper and the soft hum of the machines.

At one point, Sal asked, “Can they wake up?”

Lyta said, “I don’t think so. I mean, I’ve never seen someone do it, but we also stay out of here for the most part because it’s so boring.”

Sal almost didn’t answer, but just as Lyta was about to repeat herself, he said a monosyllabic, “Mmm.”

Adam

“Is there skill in reeling us in?” Adam asked, even as he was still steadying his wits and exiting the sphere onto the Valentine. His body wouldn’t let him see straight, but his mind would sooner drown than miss the opportunity to ask questions of the two strange rubber-hooded figures lifting him onto the deck. “And is it hard to learn?”

“Oh great,” one said. “Another talker.”

The second punched the first in the arm. “Glad you’re safe, miss Ramona,” he added.

Pushing Adam forward, Ramona said, “Always.”

Adam’s eyes adjusted to the waves, and his life seemed to add a dimension. He’d become used to keeping his balance in harsh winds and on slippery floors, but now, even the floors shifted. He felt like he was taking his first steps on a city of water. Dozens of unidentifiable people hurried around the ship, moving boxes, carrying tools, fighting through the elements like ants against an avalanche. “Who can I help first?” Adam asked. “If you show me how to lift this--” Adam looked over the edge of the Valentine at where he’d just been pulled from and involuntarily sent his vomit plummeting hundreds of feet down and into the water. He’d never been higher than the third floor of the Rabon library. “I may need a glass of water first, if there’s time,” he said, “but then I’ll be right back and can help lift.”

“See, Clides? He’s a good kid,” the person who’d punched the other said. “I’m Tonya.” The thick metal cabling itself seemed too heavy for two people to reel. The pair looked too small to lift without help, too, with neither being much bigger than Adam. A strong wind could sweep them overboard. Adam’s eyes tracked the distance of the cable from the sphere to where Clides and Tonya stood. Where he expected to see a giant rotating gear with handles for the two of them to work, he saw a metal box with flashing red and green buttons.

Clides said, “We’re never going to need help pushing buttons, kid.”

Adam started to ask more questions. Is that electrical? How do you have electricity for something so nonessential? How are you storing the electricity? But Ramona herded him forward, through doors and down into open areas within the Valentine. “Once you get your basic questions and answers out of the way, look me up, okay?” Ramona said. “I love playing delivery girl, but after the tenth or so bout of ‘Oh look! Everything is so new and unbelievable’ from an awestruck land-baby, I just started ignoring the entire conversation.” They walked through a dining hall and a barracks with strange, netted beds strung between the walls that Adam couldn’t recognize.

“Do people sleep in these things?” Adam asked. The ship rocked to the side, but Adam caught himself on the wall. The beds all swung in unison like they were part of a choir. “They look so uncomfortable.”

Ramona said, “Yep, that’s one of the questions I’m bored of answering too. It’s strange no one knows what a hammock is. Nice catch on the wall, by the way. A good rule I don’t mind teaching everyone is to always know your handholds. The sea is always rocking this death trap, so try to eye out places to grab whenever we get jostled.”



They walked past other travelers who wore less and less clothing the further into the ship they travelled. Most still wore full attire of shoes, pants, and cotton shirt, but also passed one or two people walking around in only towels. An older man walked naked down the corridor to the barracks with only a towel on his shoulders. “Carry your change of clothes with you!” Ramona shouted. Adam stared at the man as they passed, eyeing his grey hair, semi-spotted skin, elongated genitalia. The elder glared at Ramona, grasped his crotch, and kept walking

“How old is he?” Adam asked, feeling as much shock as he did when he first saw the lights on the bow of the ship. “Is he okay?”

“Who, Ross? He’s fine,” Ramona said. “He’s like sixty. I think.”

“Sixty!” Adam said.

Maxine, the oldest person in Rabon was already fifty-two, and Adam felt like she was ancient. Between illness, flying debris, collapsing buildings, and everyday slips and falls, no one lived beyond their mid-fifties. Adam said, “If he’s sixty, he has vital knowledge to pass down! Why are you yelling an elder?”

Ramona groaned and nudged Adam through a door to a mostly empty mess hall. As she shut the door after him, she said, “Go ask Ondrea.”

A group of people sat at the side of the room, eating food from bowls that Adam could not identify but that smelled delicious. The saltiness wafted over Adam, the gravity of which stunned him. His parents could cook, but a smell of this quantity in such a large space felt like stepping out of an ice bath and into a bowl of his favorite soup. A bowl so large he could swim in, inhale its steam, and consume its richness for hours without tiring or finishing.

Adam found himself sitting in front of Ondrea who was speaking with a shirtless blond man standing near her, but Adam continued to stare toward the smell emanating from the others.

“I used my size advantage on you, to keep your shoulders mostly pinned to the ground, so you’d have to rock your legs up if you wanted to get me off of you. You bucked a little too hard and gave up your neck.” She glanced toward Adam. “We’re just reviewing training, one second.” She turned back to the man. “But your instinct to do everything you could to get back to your feet was a good one. We’ll keep practicing.”

“Wait,” Adam said, “Am I going to have fight training?” The blond man had light bruising around his neck and torso. Why would they even need wrestling training when they had swords? And who would they be fighting? Was it just for fun?

“Do I look like a fighter to you?” Ondrea said. Before Adam could answer, she laughed and said, “It’s more about physical conditioning and team building, but maybe. Are you hungry? Go get food.”

“Can we go there first? I want to learn how to get people on the ship too, but I’ve always wanted to learn how to fight.”

“You were staring down the kitchen door like it was sunken treasure two seconds ago, and now you’re done thinking about violence? Get food and we’ll talk when you’re back.”

Adam started to protest, but Ondrea had already returned to the blond man. Adam practically phased through the door to the kitchen, ghosted past the cook ladling out soup, and reemerged in front of Ondrea in moments. She had finished speaking to the man, and Adam had already drained the soup bowl down his throat by the time he arrived back to

her. He remembered the soup being good, but he'd already forgotten what type it was. "Who are we fighting?" Adam asked. He set his bowl down at the end of the table and leaned toward Ondrea. He clasped his hands together beneath the table, and concentrated on keeping his feet from tapping. "Are you pirates? And will you have me ready in time to help? I've read a lot of superhero comics, so I have lots of ideas on strategy and tactics."

"Oh, buddy," Ondrea said. "Walk with me. We'll go check out the gym. You tell me about these superheroes and why you want to be one."

Adam started with the powered heroes, like Superman, Wonder Woman, Storm and Thor--all ones that had the most volumes in the Rabon library. He said, "Obviously, Storm and Thor are the best because they could solve all of Earth's current weather issues, but if I had to pick powers to have right now, I'm also leaning toward Aquaman and Prince Namor now that I'm on a boat--they are practically invulnerable underwater."

Ondrea silently nodded along as Adam mentioned more heroes and their abilities.

Ondrea directed other travelers around the ship as they walked, too. She listened to Adam, but also made sure the crew cleaned, didn't shirk responsibilities, and kept busy.

"My personal favorites are Batman and Captain America," Adam said. "Neither can shoot beams, but they are both great at all forms of hand-to-hand fighting. They're also super smart. Well, not *super* smart, I mean, they're smart for humans."

Ondrea guided Adam through an open door and into a small gymnasium. "The captain has a philosophy," Ondrea said, "and it's one we joke about while also taking very seriously."

The length of the gym was covered in wooden floors with fraying black mats. Stacks of free weights lined the walls. Twenty or so people all sweating profusely and in shorts and rash guards lined the edges of the mats, shouting at two people circling each other in the middle of the mats. The smaller of the two moved quickly, almost like they were dancing and any pause would mean missing a beat. The larger seemed content to only make small movements that kept them facing the other. Ondrea shouted, “Ey!” calming the storm of movement and shouts like she had a superpower. “What’s the captain’s philosophy on fighting?” she asked.

Adam hoped the answer was something badass like “To our dying breath” or something over-the-top like, “the first punch is a warning.” Many of them seemed to embody both ideas. All of them being muscled yet light, regardless of their overall size. A few rolled their eyes at Ondrea’s question, but they all shouted back, “Fighting is for fools!”

Adam laughed, at first, waiting for a punchline or an addendum. “That’s right,” Ondrea said before turning towards the larger of the fighters, “And I better not see any shots to the head, Charles.”

The two fighters returned to circling, pawing slightly at one another, then the smaller one darted at Charles’ legs, spun on the ground on their own back, weaving their legs between Charles’s, causing him to fall down. The smaller fighter kept tight to Charles’ legs and began to crank. Charles winced in pain and attempted to roll away, but then gave up by tapping the other’s legs quickly.

“Fuck!” Charles shouted, as the other let go. He flopped to the mats on his back, slamming his fists as he did so. Adam thought about how villains always grew angry

when defeated by heroes smaller than themselves. They would bide their time after a defeat, then try an underhanded form of vengeance when the hero slept or had their back turned. They would go after a family member of the hero or a nearby innocent bystander.

Charles stomped toward the other, held out his hand to help them up and said, “What time tonight, Alec?”

“It’s getting harder for me to catch you,” Alec said. “I guess an hour after dinner, we’ll start takedown defense drills?”

“Nice. I’ll be there.”

Ondrea clapped Adam on the back and said, “Okay everyone, this is our new crewmate, Adam. We do not let him train until he explains why fighting is foolish. Got it?”

Most nodded, a few shrugged, Alec and Charles seemed not to notice as Alec demonstrated the positioning of their legs in connection to Charles’.

“Wait,” Adam said, “You won’t just tell me? Why would you keep knowledge from someone who wants it?”

“You know,” Ondrea said, “You think like a kid, but I like that you have the words of an adult. You’re an interesting guy.”

Adam started to say that wasn’t an answer, but she was being as clear as she wanted to be. He’d have to ask someone else. Maybe it was a word puzzle. The crew was obviously not foolish. And they were obviously fighting. Was it a bad pun? His dad made plenty of bad puns, but those training seemed to take it perfectly seriously. Was foolishness somehow a positive thing? Maybe it was his lack of experience kicking him in the mind again. Adam thought about going to ask Ramona, or maybe even the

two reelers. He'd get to fight training eventually since there didn't seem to be any form of specific exclusion in the crew. He wished he'd taken his time with the soup.

## Lyta

The excitement toward the outsiders stagnated much faster for the rest of the Enclave than Lyta had expected. She and Gerald still grasped at every word from the mouths of Sal and Nella like each syllable might be the final ingredient to curing Gerald's condition. Once the adults realized that the outsiders had no interest in performing for—or reveling with—they, they had gone back to their own lives of calm and leisure.

After a day or two of debating whether the trouble would be worth it, Lyta and Gerald brought Sal and Nella to the elders, Mel and William. Mel and William were the first generation born within the Enclave over a hundred years prior, back when births were more common, and as such, they had a angrier, disgusted view of life within the Enclave. Lyta was glad that most had grown past her elder's views, or died with them, because as informative as the elders were, they also tended to be less coherent and more aggressive.

Before entering the elders' domed building on the outskirts of the Enclave, a rumbling wafted over their heads. Lyta paused when she heard the sound, half expecting the building before her to collapse. While their expressions were vastly different, both the children and the outsiders paused.

“What was that?” Gerald asked.

Sal and Nella stared at the sky, the few white clouds almost too distant to see amongst all the blue. “It sounded like thunder,” Nella said. “Since we’ve been here so long, I’d almost forgotten what it sounds like.”

“What’s a thunder?” Lyta asked. “Or is it a person?”

“Let’s just go in,” Sal said. His eyes seemed asleep, like he was in a dream and had already forgotten the sound.

Upon going inside, Lyta saw the two elders sitting in their usual soft, colorful chairs in front of their flashing wall of games. William’s head leaned forward at a bird-like angle with white patches of hair fluffed behind his ears. Mel—her own hair non-existent—sat upright, making her look taller than her companion. Both tapped their fingers on small displays attached to their chair’s arms, causing the cascading blocks to twist and turn as before settling into place at the bottom of the screen. Every time a full line of blocks filled a row, a small explosion of glitter and chimes burst from the edges of the game. Sal and Nella eyes drank every flicker on the screen, but Lyta could not understand why. None of the games in the Enclave had ever held her interest, but Tetris felt too much like a battle against inevitable, crushing defeat.

The smell of the room had made Lyta flinch less and less over the years, but she still wished her grandparents would stop being the only two members of the enclave to avoid spending time in the steam rooms or baths. Even taking short walks around their own building through the warm sprays of perfumed mists jetting overhead, would clear off some of the staleness and filth and of their old age. Instead, the elders almost perpetually remained in their white-walled shell of a room, clicking away on their game as lights sparkled across their wrinkled and spotted bodies.



Lyta set Gerald down on a chair with small wheels and pushed him behind the two elders. She gestured for Sal and Nella to follow her. The two outsiders glanced at Gerald's chair, then back at each other. "Seems like a chair with bigger wheels could help Gerald get around outside, no?" Nella asked.

"I've seen pictures," Gerald said, "but nothing like that actually exists. Around here, anyway."

"We're concentrating!" Mel said. She let out a wordless growl but did not take her eyes off the monitor as yellow, blue, and red blocks of various shapes rained down. Her bricks began piling higher, while William continually cleared his out.

"Why don't you just make a chair yourself?" Nella whispered to Lyta. "If you have the materials, Sal and I can even make one for you."

Sal leaned toward Nella and said, "I love you, but we need to focus on the death cradles. This isn't a good place."

"We're not stupid," Lyta said. "If there were wheels big enough to travel outside, we'd have already made the chair. This chair gets stuck in the grass, so it's easier for me to just carry him."

Mel slammed her hand down on her console as her blocks piled past the top of her screen. William clicked away for another minute or so before wheezing out a taunting laugh. "Every fucking time," Mel said. She stared at the screen as numbers and names flew across. *Game Over!* blinked in bright blue letters on the monitor behind her. The screen then shifted to a top-ten "Tetris High Scores" chart. Mel's name sat number one, but William had eight of the other nine.

Mel shouted over her shoulder, "What do you want, inbred ones?"

Sal and Nella exchanged horrified stares.

“Grandma Mel!” Gerald shouted, happily. “We brought outsiders!”

“No, you didn’t,” Mel said. “Tell your idiot sister to spin your grandfather and I around so we can have a look at your ugly faces.”

Once turned, the elders looked over Sal and Nella. “Are you my kids or Mel’s?” William asked Nella. He looked over Nella’s shoulder as he spoke.

“They sure as hell aren’t mine,” Mel said. “Mine are dead or in the vegetable farm. They must be yours.”

Lyta watched Sal and Nella inch toward each other and whisper. As Gerald attempted to explain to the elders who Sal and Nella were, Lyta watched the outsiders grow more upset. Mel cut Gerald off before he could explain the last several days, and William seemed to be growing bored and was inching his chair back around to the monitor. Sal rubbed his eyes and made an expression Lyta had not seen someone make except for when they were physically injured. Nella kissed Sal’s forehead then approached her.

“We really appreciate you, Lyta,” Nella said, “But is there anyone else here that can answer our questions? Even just basic ones like why there’s no sun and yet there seems to be sunlight. We’ve visited other towns, but they’ve all been doused in rain and wind”

“You can thank your ancestors for that, fool,” Mel said. “There’s not much real light so they made devil-boxes that force the clouds to reflect the light from hell or wherever. I remember Aunt Christine saying something about the wind being solved with something strange, but that bitch was rarely worth listening to.”

“Devil-boxes?” Nella asked.

“That’s what she calls everything around here,” Gerald said. “No one tells us what a devil is, though.”

“Oh, shut up, boy! You’re a devil too. We’re all devils, and this is hell.” Mel laughed and winked at Gerald. “But hell is less frightening than death, but you’ll find that out before I will!”

“I’m not letting him die,” Sal said.

Lyta turned to Nella before she could say anything. “Do you know what hell is? I’ve asked, but Mel just shouts, ‘This! This!’ and laughs at me.”

Nella looked to Sal who scowled. “Depending on who you ask, there are a few different opinions,” Nella said. “But your grandmother seems to be using it as a metaphor for the worst possible place to be.”

“Young ones,” William said. “Our next round is about to start. Just take what you need and go be happy. Leave the Enclave if you want. Stay if you want. You’re thinking too much. This isn’t a town for thinking.” He turned his chair around and began the next game. Across the top of the screen blinked out a red and black text ribbon announcing incoming arrivals. “All I think about is winning, so I win!”

“Don’t start when I’m not ready, Asshole!” Mel said, jerking her body to shuffle her chair around. She shouted over the back of her chair, “And devil-kids, just take some pills and leave us alone!”

Lyta watched Sal shake, his jaw clenching and releasing. Nella whispered something to him and took him outside. Gerald asked the elders why they didn’t play any other games besides Tetris when there were so many better ones stored in the

archives, but Mel just growled, and William's head lolled as if he hadn't heard. Even as the game started, the text ribbon continually repeated "Incoming arrivals! Incoming arrivals!" Gerald pointed, saying that he had never seen the text before, but the elders continued to ignore him. "Stop trying to distract us," Mel said. "That thing's been going off now and again for days. It doesn't mean anything."

"It's probably a glitch," Lyta said, picking Gerald up.

Lyta took her brother outside into the subtle breeze of clean wind and moisture. As jarring as walking into the stinking cloud of their grandparents' home was, stepping outside had the opposite effect: like a bird finding its way out of a densely branched tree.

"...all of them, Nella," Lyta heard Sal say. "Remember the Vulture-worshipping cultists who ritualistically ate their dead? Delusion aside, at least they valued each other. They valued *something*."

"That's disgusting," Gerald said from Lyta's shoulders.

Nella hugged Sal. "How would you two like to return to Rabon with us?" she asked. "We have a pair of doctors who might be able to help with Gerald's legs."

"What's a doctor?" Lyta asked.

"What's wrong with my legs?"

Nella said, "I... well, when you said Gerald was dying, the only thing that seems to be..."

"Doctors help people," Sal said. "They're like superheroes."

"What is wrong with Gerald?" Nella asked.

"The computer says my blood is bad."

Sal whispered in Nella's ear.

"I don't know if our doctor can help," Nella said, "but we'll take you to her to at least find out.

Lyta almost threw her brother into the air. "Then yes! Please take us!"

Gerald repeated his question about his legs. Lyta shook her head as if to tell him not to worry about it. "Are we leaving now?" she asked.

Sal and Nella discussed for a moment, Sal limply gesturing around the Enclave for items they should investigate and take before leaving. Nella nodded as he spoke, pointed back toward William and Mel's home, then whispered into Sal's ear. Sal perked up. Lyta thought he might begin to cry again, but instead he looked almost happy. "If you do that," Nella said, "Then I'll take the kids and gather everything else. We can even leave tomorrow, depending on if you need my help."

Sal took a deep breath, then walked back with Nella into the machine room. Lyta didn't follow, thinking maybe they needed time to talk. Maybe one even wanted to give up and plug themselves in.

"I hope we leave soon," Gerald said.

"Well," Lyta said, "It doesn't seem they want to stay.

## Adam

When Ondrea first brought Adam to the barracks, she told him hammocks, human-length net bags unheard of in a town with creaking walls and constant wind, were the norm on the Valentine. Watching them swing with the ship, Adam saw them as the least comfortable and sleep-worthy furniture possible. “I can only sleep on my stomach,” Adam said, when Ondrea showed him to the barracks. Dozens of the crew already slept in the hanging rope sleeves.

“I can find you an extra pillow or blanket,” Ondrea said. “You can secure yourself to the floor, but between the swaying of the boat and the threat of loose objects falling onto and speeding across the floor, hammocks are the only real option. Try sleeping on your side if you can. I have other ideas, but you won’t like them. Make sure to keep the helmet we gave you on at all times. It’s life or death.”

The floor jerked hard, and both Adam and Ondrea gripped onto a nearby hammock for balance. A personal bag fell from a hook on the wall and slid down the floor to the other side of the barracks. Adam imagined bags dropping on the side of his face as he slept on the floor. None of those sleeping, including the person in the hammock Adam and Ondrea used for balance, seemed to notice the fall. “If you go the floor route, make sure to secure yourself to the wall.” Ondrea watched the bag slide back across the floor as the Valentine rocked back. “But I’d recommend the hammocks.”

“One of the ways to force yourself to sleep is to make your body so tired it chooses where to sleep for you.”

Adam put one foot onto the hammock and nearly toppled over the other side. He tried to bend himself into an inverted-U to be on his stomach, but after his spine-wrenching pain condemned him for his stubbornness, he moved to his side and slipped in-and-out of consciousness for the next few hours. There was a comforting warmth in having a room full of people around him for the first time in his life, but his dreams flicked between those chiseled sailors smiling while welcoming him and chastising him, saying, “How are you going to stay calm enough to help us explore when you can’t even calm yourself to sleep?”

Before forcing himself to try to sleep, he spent hours asking anyone who would wake up enough to listen questions like “What is that gray sludge on the side of the ship?” and “What powers the Valentine?” Apparently, he had begun to ask the same question multiple times, and he only noticed when crew members yelled at him to go to sleep. He had argued the repetition was because he still didn’t understand, but he hadn’t slept the previous night in Rabon either.

Adam felt like he was a small piece of trash flung through wind currents his first night on the Valentine. The seemingly perpetual shift-changes made sleeping all the more difficult. Every three hours or so, some of the crew woke, dressed, and left while others entered and took their hammocks. Somehow equally off-putting, though, was the quiet. The barracks was deep in the ship, and while the occasional blanket slid across the floor, the subtle glide of linen resembled nothing of the constant rocks, twigs, and trash against the walls of his home. He had never heard snoring before.

Even when he found sleep for a few moments, his dreams riffed through his worlds converging. He stood at the base of a mountain, hurricane winds blowing from all around him, a stampede of those from Rabon and the Valentine pushing and trampling each other in a race to the top. His parents held hands while keeping pace with the thickest group of people, but Adam soon lost sight of them in the blur and shuffling of backs. Even after chasing through faces he hardly recognized, if he bumped into someone, he would wake up, swinging hard in his hammock.

Adam considered giving up entirely when he felt someone shake his him. “Hey, chatter-face,” a voice not nearly far enough from Adam’s face said, “You aren’t sleeping, are you? I can get you out early if you’d like some food.”

“I’m not sleeping,” Adam said, “but I’d be lying if I said I was awake.”

“Perfect! Open those eyes! I’m going to bless you with my teachings today!”

Adam recognized the voice from the deck before opening his eyes, but that made seeing him without protective gear on for the first time even more jarring. “Clides?”

“You got it, buddy. Remember, I’m the short one with all the dance moves,” he said, rocking his shoulders while tugging on the hammock. “Get up, we have a fun day planned. Let’s jump to it.”

Adam breathed in and forced himself up. “Breakfast?”

“You don’t want to start by learning something,” Clides asked? “Where’s that gusto from yesterday? You’re not telling me food is more important to you than excitement, are you?” Clides looked over the other hammocks as he spoke, pointing at each of them and mouthing numbers.



“I mean,” Adam said, “I do want to learn. I’d like to learn everything, but I sort of loved the food here yesterday, and I didn’t really eat enough, and I didn’t take enough time to appreciate it.”

“Well, it looks like everyone else on your shift is already out, so I’m not sure what to tell you.”

“Oh,” Adam said.

“Get your clothes on, and we’ll get the lesson started.”

Adam put on the white shirt and blue pants Ondrea had left out for him and drifted behind Clides while trying to stay awake. “Don’t forget your helmet. And seriously,” Clides said, “there is so much for you to do and learn right away, it’s unbelievable.”

“That sounds good,” Adam said, shoving the black helmet over his ears. Adam could smell a wave of sweetness he didn’t recognize as they walked along the interior of the Valentine. He assumed he must have just missed breakfast. He drifted behind Clides, barely opening his eyes as he walked.

Clides nudged Adam and said, “Sit here for a second.”

“No problem.” Adam sat down and put his head on the table in front of him. He hooked his feet around the base of the table to keep from sliding. Despite the voices around him, Adam almost fell asleep. Warm air comforted him. Maybe he would dream about his parents on a happy adventure on the moon instead of being trampled.

“Kid, you can’t be sleeping already.” Clides had returned and slid a tray of warm oatmeal in front of him. “Eat up! It’s delicious!” Clides looked down at the oatmeal he

had gotten himself and cringed. “Actually, that’s like the third lie I’ve told you this morning.”

Adam ate without opening his eyes. “This is sweet. It’s okay.”

“Captain Tran acclimatizes all new people the same way, and it’s garbage if I’m being honest.” Clides grinned. “Not my job anymore though, so that’s nice.”

“Is it cleaning?” Adam asked. “In stories, the new folks always clean.”

“Yes and no. Everyone cleans, so you’ll do that for sure, but our goal isn’t to make you hate it here. You’ll be lead around the ship by the most recent person—bad timing on your part if I’m being honest—to arrive before you to meet everyone else and take out their garbage. It’s a day’s work because it’s a big ship. After you meet the general folks, the area leaders size you up and argue for who gets to apprentice you. Usually, they’ll argue for who wants to take you on, but if you’re super annoying and don’t have any decent moves or you just ask a lot of irritating questions, they might argue that someone other than them has to take you.”

Adam finished eating and asked, “So the person in charge of the reeling group argued for you?”

Clides smiled and stretched out his arms. “They all argued for me. I just picked the person arguing for me who sat closest to Ondrea. I would have picked Ondrea, but she manages the whole of the groups rather than leading individual ones. Turns out my lead isn’t close to Ondrea, they just happened to sit next to each other on that day. Ondrea’s so sexy though. Do you want the rest of my oatmeal? It’s a little mushy.”

While finishing the rest of Clides’ breakfast, Adam listened to Clides talk more about Ondrea and how he and Tonya would get into debates on who had a better chance

with her. Adam felt like if he was more awake, he'd get along well with Clides' sense of humor. "Tonya was the person here right before me, a few years ago now," Clides said. "So far, the Valentine hasn't picked up anyone either of us are interested in, so we mostly just spend our late shifts dreaming about being cuddled in Ondrea's arm. A small part of me wishes I got brought into the engineering division because they have some cool tech stuff, but they're so isolated from everyone else, I think I'd rather have been left home."

Adam had started to wake up as the warmth of the cinnamon oats nestled into him. "What do the engineering people do?" he asked. "Are they in charge of making the Valentine run? There can't be enough people on here to do all of that, right? You must have outside connections too."

"Okay, you're awake," Clides said. "Remember, I'm just a reeler. Those kinds of questions will set you up better with the section heads." Clides paused. "And you're, what? Fourteen? You haven't asked a single question about specific people. I think my first five questions here were some variation of 'Is she seeing anyone?'"

Adam thought for a moment. He was interested. "I like meeting new people," Adam said, "but I feel like I'm on a new planet. I think if I get to know the planet, I'll be learning about the people of that planet and what they care about at the same time, right?"

Clides stood up, patted Adam on the shoulder, then returned both of their trays to the kitchen. Adam looked around the mess hall, still in awe of the all the people and the bright lighting. Adam expected himself to be full but felt like he could stomach two more bowls. Even as the Valentine rocked hard from the unseen waves, sending people lurching into one another, Adam and Clides caught hold of tables and each other and continued their conversation like the jostling was barely a breeze.

Clides returned and said, “You make sense, but you’re still kind of boring, kid.” Clides balanced himself then offered Adam a hand. “We need to make a quick stop for initiation, then I’ll take you to your first alien encounter. Don’t let her eat your brain.”

“You have an alien!” Adam said.

“What? Not literally. I feel bad about pawning you off on her today, so I was trying to make light of the situation. Manón hates it here, but she walks a fine enough line that we all have to deal with her.”

Adam started to ask more questions of Clides about the Valentine and Captain Tran, about what the thought process was behind taking on strangers into what seems like a tight-knit community, about how he could practice getting used to the waves ramming against the ship, and about how they deal with what must be constant bone breaks and sprains. The ship jerked sideways slamming Adam and Clides against the wall. Rather than answer Adam’s questions, Clides shook his shoulders like he was listening to music and said, “This storm is perfect. I’m going to win today.”

Adam followed Clides to a storage room with a handful of others inside, all securing crates to the walls. Adam recognized Charles as the man who lost to Ondrea during the martial arts training. Ramona had wedged herself behind a crate closest to the door, almost like she was a lookout making sure they were not ambushed, but the small, surprisingly tall room only had one entrance, so there was not much to look for besides Clides opening the door. Ramona was already waving at Adam by the time he noticed her. The third person in the room was a man roughly Adam’s father’s age, but with a slightly smaller frame and much darker, more accusatory eyes. “Clides,” the man said,

“What have you told the new kid?” The man tightened the canvas strap around his crate. “Also, when we finish here, can you take this box to Ross? I told him I’d find our random cabling a week ago, and I only found it today because we needed to set up for Adam. You know how awful it is to have old man Ross angry with you.”

“He’d probably just grumble under his breath and say, ‘Thank you?’” Clides said.

“But there’s so much disappointment in his voice. I’d rather do anything else.”

“I got you, brother.”

“Thanks, Cleet.” The man turned to Ramona, “I need to limber up. Can you explain the trial we’re giving Adam? Make sure he understands the seriousness and implications.”

Ramona nodded. “Of course.” Then while seemingly trying to stifle laughter said, “This is a test of strength, bravery, and will. Where you and I previously were fish on a hook reeled in by Clides, we will now experience the life of a fish with more freedom.” Clides sat down on the ground and rubbed his knees. Charles did the same, but where Clides wore happiness and excitement like they were friends riding his shoulders, Charles carried a fear greater than when almost having his leg snapped the day before. “If you fail,” Ramona said, “You’ll either be thrown from the ship, or you’ll be ridiculed for your cowardice.”

“Can I sit this one out?” Charles asked. “This is probably the stupidest thing we can do. We have injuries enough as it is.”

“No,” Ramona and the man said simultaneously—something that made Clides laugh. Ramona said, “This is the kind of tradition that must be preserved.”

The ship continued rocking hard on its sides, but none of the crates flinched. The canvas straps held tight. Perched between two crates, Ramona smiled, unbothered and unmoved even as everyone else struggled to maintain their position. “The goal is to touch the ceiling,” she said.

Adam waited a moment for the Valentine to steady, then jumped as high as he could, and his fingers almost brushed the ceiling. He readied himself again, but the ship lurched, so he caught himself on the crate nearest Clides.

“That was adorable,” Ramona said, “but you have to touch the roof with your head.”

“Can we do anything else?” Charles said. “Start a fire? Play with knives? My knee still hurts from yesterday.”

“I’m going to get it this time,” Clides said, “And we’ll all get out of here early. Watch this.”

Adam looked at the ceiling and down at his legs and shoes. In his entire life, he had barely jumped anywhere. There never seemed any point to jumping indoors unless he wanted to try to hide something on the top shelf of the kitchen cabinet—although, even then, his father was taller for all the good hiding food would do—and jumping outside when everything was wet was—the Valentine jostled hard again—just as dangerous as jumping on this ship, really.

Clides moved to the center of the room, held his arms out wide to balance himself, then just as the ship rocked, leapt into the air, and flew upwards, flapping his arms like they were chicken wings, his head inches from the ceiling.

Adam stared in awe. Each took turns trying to leap into the air at the peak of each wave, float in the air for as long as they could, then hope the ceiling lowered before they did. Since Adam's feet were stationary, each jumper appeared to be leaping their entire height off the ground. They were using the waves to defy gravity. Ramona's jumps were more half-hearted than the others, but in exchange she always landed on her feet. Clides and the middle-aged man threw their bodies into the air without regard for their footing and landed on their backs more often than their feet, making Adam wince every time he heard them slam down. Adam only made the jump once, though he found himself laughing along with the others as he picked himself off the floor. Charles groaned as Clides chided him into jumping. Charles groaned as he moved to the center of the room, then, seemingly without effort, jumped, floated, touched his head to the ceiling, and landed almost as cat-like as Ramona. Without making eye contact with anyone after catching himself back on the floor, he sat down and pulled up the legs of his pants and began rubbing his joints.

"I hate all of you. This kills my knees," Charles said. "Since I won, the game is over. The moment the Valentine evened out, Charles left, the rest watching in envy.

"There's just nothing we can do, Captain," Clides said. "He's too athletic."

"I think you're right, but the measured competition keeps me young and motivated."

"Captain?" Adam asked.

"Oh, yeah. Don't overthink it," the man Adam now realized was Captain Tran said. "I'm just here to dance and chase the demons away. Great first jump. Now go explore the ship. Welcome aboard."

Ramona and the Captain left without saying anything else to Adam, and Clides picked up the box Captain Tran had mentioned and led himself and Adam out.

“You got here at a good time,” Clides said. “This is an every-Thursday thing. I’m impressed and a little disappointed you didn’t vomit up your breakfast.”

“Wait. Can we slow down?” Adam said. “What just happened? Where are they going? That was the captain?”

“Well, I was mildly hazing you with the heavy breakfast—something I’ll definitely get yelled at for if the Captain or Ondrea find out; although, I guess if you keep your food down, no one will be suspicious. I won’t hold it against you if you say something either because I’m just too impressed by you, and I’m still taking you to Manón, so you probably will need to lash out at someone at the end of the day, and it might as well be me. I’m hoping she warms up to you since you two are close in age, but if I’m being honest, she is just the worst. Doesn’t laugh at any of my jokes.” Clides reached out and held Adam’s shoulder. “You seem like a good kid. It would go a long way for the cause if you could get her to lighten up.”

“What do you mean? And why didn’t you tell me that was the captain?”

As they walked, Clides looked like he wanted to put on a positive front but was uncomfortable, like he had just tried disgusting tomato soup but found out that Ondrea had prepared it for him. “Unlike you, Manón wasn’t exactly a volunteer,” Clides said. “I mean, we didn’t force her to join, but her community did. They basically volunteered her, and we didn’t find out until she told us when she came aboard. The whole recruiting process can be quick and sloppy. Not a lot of great options out here. Anyway, She’s



angry with all of us. She wouldn't even participate in the jumping initiation! And I didn't want you interrupting the competition to ask the captain annoying questions."

"That doesn't make any sense," Adam said, "I thought I'd be getting rowing lessons today, not inside flight-training and diplomacy tutorials. I'm not prepared to convince someone about a cause I still don't understand. Right now, you all seem... eccentric."

"Thank you? Nothing like learning on the fly, right?" Clides said, smiling and turning a corner. "And here is Manón who will be glad to answer all of your questions. Hi, Manón! I hope your day is going well."

Adam felt like he had not gotten a breath since breakfast. The girl before him mopped the floor next to a bucket of water hooked to the wall. There was an additional dry mop nearby. Manón was thin but athletic, with long brown hair tied back but hanging beneath her helmet. She over at Clides, smiled in a way Adam could only describe as sarcastic, then continued mopping. As Adam approached her, he noticed they were the same height, and he found himself standing more upright. Manón glanced at Adam and said, "Are you a prisoner or an idiot?"

Clides cringed and said, "Manón, please don't do this."

"If I have to choose," Adam said, "I guess I'd go idiot. Being locked up seems boring. Being an idiot will mean always having more to learn, and learning is fun."

Clides and Manón both turned toward Adam incredulously. Adam made himself appear happy. The few seconds before Clides wordlessly left probably felt longer to him than it did to Adam.

The gray floor already shined, spotless, but Manón continued mopping over all of it. “It seems dangerous to mop a ship that is already difficult to stand upright on,” Adam said to Manón. “Although with the weird jumping competition, I guess it’s a more reasonable risk to keep things clean and everyone healthy?”

Manón shouted past Adam, “Maybe dancing can make being abducted feel easier, new guy. Why don’t we try that first?”

“I don’t really dance,” Adam said.

Manón went back to mopping.

“You need to get the dry mop and dry the floor as best as you can as I clean it.”

“Do you like to dance?”

“I took the cleaning job because these lunatics will leave me alone while I do it.”

Adam nodded. “Cleaning is important.”

“I’m supposed to show you around, introduce you to folks, but they’ll feed me even if I don’t, so I’m in no hurry.”

“I’ve already met the captain, apparently, so if you just want me to help with cleaning, I can do that. I met a lot of folks last night before bed,” Adam took up the dry mop and followed after Manón. “How did you end up on the Valentine?”

“I feel like you don’t realize,” Manón said, smiling in a beautiful mix of mirth and doom, “You’ve joined a cult. These people are cultists.”

Of the many life positions Adam had imagined for himself, cult follower had not been one he’d considered. Cults were common antagonistic forces in stories he had read, and normally followers had blissful, fulfilling lives until the leader inevitably killed them all. In some cases, the leader would die, and the followers who were not incarcerated

would be rehabilitated. That said, they did seem to have a strange fighters club, and he would yet to meet the captain.

“At least,” Adam said, unsure if it was the floor or his head that was spinning, “They’ve been nice to me so far?”

“Everyone seems nice when we’re all destined for gruesome deaths. Watch your head.”

“Want to go test their niceness, then?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, if you’re supposed to be showing me around, why don’t we explore where we aren’t supposed to? You hate them. I’m here to learn. Maybe we can discover something cool.”

Manón continued mopping.

“My parents said that once you’re sure a new group of people aren’t going to kill you, you have a short window to break the rules under the guise of ignorance,” Adam said. “We can open doors we’re not supposed to and say we got lost, or we can look through bags or boxes and say we got confused. I’ve never tried it before, but now seems like an opportunity.”

“They will probably kill us.”

“They are feeding and training us, and they just gave a lot of random materials to my hometown in exchange for me. They aren’t going to kill an investment. Where should we go first?”

“Do you really trust these people?”

Adam shrugged. “What are they going to take from me if I do something wrong? Notes from my parents? I’d share them already if they asked.”

Manón grabbed her things and started away without another word. Adam followed, curious and excited. They passed rooms full of monitors and lights that Adam had only ever seen pictures of. They passed an entire deck that functioned as a nursery, growing potatoes, corn and other vegetables. Rows of lights lined the ceiling of the nursery with light sprinklers misting water onto various sections of the plants. Adam urged Manón to stop so he could look around, play with the electronics or stare at the plants, but she continued, ignoring him.

“What about your family?” Adam asked as they walked. “What was life like before here?”

“Great,” Manón said. As they walked through the interior of the ship, they passed members of the crew. The crew would often grin or nod at them, and Adam would smile and wave in response. Manón glared. Adam recognized Ross directing others around, even though the old man had finally put on clothes and a helmet, and noticed he carried a small silver rectangle in his hand. Adam did not get a good look at the device.

“Was Ross carrying a tablet?” Adam asked.

Manón set her mop and bucket down and secured them to a wall next to a door in the middle of a hallway.

“Sorry, you mentioned your family, and I ignored you,” Adam said. “Were you saying they were great, or your life was great? I’m hoping both, but you might have also been being sarcastic.”

“I’ve been wanting to go through here.” She gestured toward the door. “It’s supposed to be a prison space.”

“Is it locked? We should just go in, and if anyone catches us, I’ll say, ‘Oh! Sorry! I got lost!’ Can I ask, though, why do you want to go in the prison?”

“Because it could very easily be my fate. You should judge a people by how they treat their prisoners,” Manón said. She looked angrily around. Adam followed her eyes and saw others walking in and out of other doorways. He thought he saw Ramona speaking to Tonya at the far end of the hall, but they were far enough away that he was not sure. “I’m afraid if I go in, they’ll keep me there.”

Adam tugged the door open and went inside.

Manón stifled a shout behind him, “Idiot! What are you doing?” Adam brushed his hand on her shoulder, gesturing her inside, but he did not see the face she made because he was too busy staring at the long rows of clear enclosures.

“Huh. These do look like prison cells,” Adam said. “We probably shouldn’t be here.” Adam walked forward, tilting his head sideways as he moved to each new cell like he was moving through the Rabon library trying to decide on a new book to read. Manón grasped for the back of his shirt to stop him, but after failing to do so stood in the doorway unsure of whether to follow.

Clear cushioning lined the walls and floors of the cells with a horizontal pole stuffed waist-high between them around the entirety of the enclosures. Hammocks hung from different angles in each of the cells, though some seemed to be wound up and folded away into the walls to give a moderate amount of extra open space. As Adam

walked, he noticed that while there were over a dozen such cells, only three of them were inhabited.

The prisoners shouted at each other, ignoring or not noticing Adam and Manón. Manón stepped through the door and again attempted to reach Adam, but Adam heard one of the prisoners mention being able to hold their breath for an hour, which, impossibility aside, made Adam move forward faster.

“You would still die, you lunatics!” said the large, balding prisoner on the right.

“Not if I survive the initial drop from the side of the ship!” said the prisoner across from the first, this prisoner’s face and hands a latticework of short, pink scars. “If land is in sight, I can make it there as long as I stay underwater where the waves can’t get me.”

“If you can make it, I can too!” said the third. This last prisoner sat cross-legged in the corner of the cell closest to the other two, their back and stomach exposed due to having pulled their shirt over them, obscuring their head and face.

“It is humanly impossible to swim in these waters,” said the balding prisoner. “My son died when he was fifteen trying to swim on a calm day, and he was more athletic than either of you could ever be.”

“Apparently, there are underwater currents too,” Adam said. The three paused. Manón stepped forward, but kept her distance behind an adjacent cell, not quite hidden due to the cell being transparent, but less noticeable because of the lighting. The balding and the scarred prisoners glared at Adam, as did, Adam assumed, the one whose head was covered. Adam smiled and said, “I’m Adam. What are you all talking about?”

“Let me out and I’ll show you,” said the scarred prisoner.

“I’m sorry. I don’t have any keys,” Adam said. “Plus, I read a lot about police officers before, and letting out prisoners is the opposite of what I’m supposed to do.”

“Then we aren’t telling you anything,” said the scarred prisoner.

“We’re talking about how we’ll survive once we escape!” said the covered prisoner.

The balding and the scarred prisoners yelled a series of insults at the covered prisoner who retreated to the back of their cell.

Adam watched intently. “Have you tried being good to the crew? They could just let you out and take you to land. Being nice to people is way more effective at getting them to help you than anything else.”

“They’d only die there,” Manón said.

“I’d survive anywhere!” the scarred prisoner said.

“You, girl, explain,” said the balding prisoner.

“The Valentine only stops at places where habitability is possible. Their equipment is apparently tracking zones unaffected by Earth’s weather, and they land at shores closest to the zones because even outside the safe areas, there seem to be lingering stabilizing forces. What that means is that landing anywhere except the places where there are likely already other people is impossible.”

“There are safe zones?” Adam asked.

“Supposedly, but no one here has found one.”

“When you say habitable,” the scarred prisoner asked, “Do you mean there are places where you don’t have to steal food from kids to survive?”

Manón rubbed her forehead. “You shouldn’t steal food from kids anywhere, but I don’t know what habitable means. Lighter winds and rain, I would guess.

Adam turned to the balding prisoner and asked, “What would you do first if you got out?”

The prisoner considered for a moment, happily slammed a fist into the side of the cell and began telling a childhood dream of running outside for days, through rain and snow, with branches and rocks always seeming to move out of the way. Each of them exchanged stories of what they had always imagined doing if the sun was out or if the rains fell any lighter. The scarred prisoner would mention using ropes to cause friction burns without winds blowing the ropes away, and Manón would move her body between the scarred prisoner and Adam, almost like an extra barrier. Adam said he would likely stay on the Valentine, so he could keep meeting people. They all laughed with each other, including the covered prisoner who mentioned how much safer it would be to start fires while not being locked in a confined space—to the horror of Adam, Manón, and the balding prisoner.

Adam liked hearing Manón speak. She seemed more comfortable with the prisoners than she did with Clides. She said she liked the idea of being alone in a safe place with nice weather. Adam said other things and asked other questions, but for the rest of the evening until he and Manón made their way back to the barracks, he wondered what he could do to help Manón find such a place.



## Maxine

It was not lost on Maxine that even though she was the oldest in Rabon, she was also the only one who could tell time. Day and night cycles blurred when clouds were so thick that they made the sunrise seem hours behind where it should have been. Sometimes, thick fogs of darkness lingered on the town long enough that the others could be forgiven for missing entire days or weeks. At points, they only had the alarm of hunger blaring through their stomachs as a point of reference.

Maxine did not get much work done on the darkest days since lighting enough candles that she could see the gears and tools in front of her made her, and worse, her hands, sweat. With gloves, the sweat never got in the way of her work, but her movements felt sluggish, and her mind would drift towards the hope that she could prop her side window open even an inch. Though that, obviously, was impossible since a gust of wind blowing away even a single part could render an entire watch useless until she found or made a new one. Living in one of the few heavily windowed buildings remaining in Rabon was already risk enough, but she refused to live in a state of perpetual darkness. Death could come for her if it wanted, just as it often came to so many, but her life would be as precisely the way she wanted it to be for as long as she could make it. She wanted windows, and hers seemed to be the weather-proof, indestructible kind, likely courtesy of some overthinker from ages past.

Maxine cleaned her tools at her counter, each pin, screwdriver and set of tweezers arranged on an immaculate green felt covering. The covering was the workspace her father used throughout his time as a watchmaker, and while its use had rendered it an inconsistently flat surface, it was still one of the softest pieces of material she owned—perfect for keeping her materials safe from small accidental bursts of wind. Perfect for helping maintain cleanliness between cleaning days. Such days reminded her of rest days in her younger years when she used to exercise more often. Nothing ever exciting happened on rest days, but they were necessary for overall improvement. Now much older, Maxine preferred to only tinker, but a craftsperson who did not take time to care for her tools would never last long. She saw it more as a meditative experience. Cleaning, polishing and fine tuning the metals and herself.

No one had needed a new watch or asked for a repair in weeks—they would be sure to do so soon, she knew, but they'd all been busy tending to new crops, building structural improvements to their homes and city walls, and mapping out as many specific landmarks to the surrounding area as they could—something Syntia and Dave hoped would please the Colemans whenever they returned. The strange outsiders had apparently provided not just equipment, but detailed explanations of how to generate power via underwater currents, and the town flourished beyond anything Maxine had ever imagined. She still refused to leave her home, and she knew any improvements would be insults to the parents of a boy the rest of the town let be abducted, monuments to the sacrifice of their child, but she tried not to begrudge those enjoying a sense of growth not seen in generations.

As Maxine stared down at her hands, appreciating that she had lived for as long as she had, Kishan knocked at her front door. Maxine did not need to look up to know it was the boy since no one else ever knocked so excitedly. She put a second cloth overtop of her workspace then walked over, Kishan already pulling down his mask and grinning. She pulled her buffer curtain around the inside of the glass door, so that when Kishan opened it, none of the excess nature would blow in. Kishan hurried inside, shed his outdoor clothes and was already halfway through his thought by the time Maxine could hear him.

“... and mom and dad say we might even be able to light up our buildings with electricity like our ancestors! We’ve had a lot of lightning in the sky for the last few hours too, but we haven’t had much thunder. I’m not sure why.”

“Electric buildings would be impressive, all right,” Maxine said. She brought the boy inside and helped him hang his wet outerwear to dry. She wished there were more children in Rabon, as difficult as they could be to handle and care for. While her great love was to create more with her hands, she enjoyed how children always brought something new to her life. “I suspect I won’t be around for the brightest days ahead, and even if I were, I plan on staying right here, but I’m pleased for you, young one.” Maxine leaned her head against the window to try to glimpse the lightning but could only see the perpetually angry gray and black of the clouds.

“If you’re staying here,” Kishan said, “Of course you’ll still be around.” He pushed his boots next to the front door and ran in his socks once around the dining area, weaving between the tables and chairs, occasionally sliding through some of the standalone booths, smiling all the while. Maxine used to tell him not to run for fear of

him slamming his head on a chair or a table, but running outside through puddles or over slick ground and rocks was so much more dangerous, so she let him be. Children needed to be able to run. “Samuel and Fisher say it’ll be forever before most places have lights, maybe in five to ten years if we’re lucky.”

“Samuel and Fisher have seemed happier since Adam left us, haven’t they?”

Kishan frowned. “I miss Adam.”

The boy stopped moving, sat down at a table, and began cradling his hands together like he was holding a kitten that was not there. Maxine pulled Kishan’s hand toward her face, his hands making her feel like she was holding and preserving his youth. “I see you’re taking care of the watch I gave you.” Kishan looked up at her and nodded. “I often laugh when I think about how my parents spent years teaching and training me to make something so fragile in our world of destruction. In olden times, back even before my parents were alive, no one would ever give a hand-crafted watch like this to a child. Did you know why?”

Kishan shook his head. A few subtle flashes of light gleamed off the boy’s eyes. Maxine glanced out the side window and saw a faint orange glow in the clouds dissipating back into the darkness. She assumed it was more of the lightning he had mentioned earlier. “Did those kids accidentally break their watches?”

Maxine smiled. “Sometimes. But adults had to be careful too. The bigger problem was that the amount of time dedicated to precisely creating and placing the wheels or a gear far surpassed the amount of time a child would use the watch before knocking it out of balance. Children would run and accidentally fling their watches from their wrists or drop their watches in water—although, for a time, waterproof watches

were normal, but they used internal power supplies, rather than the winding apparatuses we need.”

Kishan looked at his watch. It had a simple wooden face with plastic hands. Maxine saw that the leather band was tighter on his wrist since she had last seen it and would need to be replaced soon. She had even made the band long when she first made it, with holes allowing for the boy to grow. Maxine was pleased to see him outgrowing her expectations. The soft sound of thunder rippled through the windows and tables of her home. “But every time I finish building or repairing a watch, I give it away immediately,” Maxine said, “because we never know how long a person will get to use it. Most of the time people do not leave Rabon—aside from the Colemans—and when people have watches in sync with each other, I feel like it’s easier for us to share the same schedules and thoughts. We are all a bit closer, even if not for very long.”

Kishan started to speak, and his words flashed through Maxine’s mind alongside the shattered glass from her walls exploding inward alongside a torrent of light. She could imagine all his thoughts in that moment. Kishan was about to thank her for his watch. He was about to ask her about how many others she has made in her life. He wanted to know how her parents learned to make them, and, completely honestly, if her grandparents were the ones to invent watches because he had no real concept of the grander scale of time beyond the hours in the day. He was a good boy, and as she dove on top of him cradling his head tightly underneath hers, the wind and branches and glass reverberating through the remnants of her home, she felt only a small comfort in him squeezing her back. Her greater fear, the fear sparked by the now-shredded green felt mat she glimpsed thrown from the counter, the fear that caused the tears in her eyes, was

that if she survived, she would no longer have the tools or the semi-sterile location to continue her work. Her windows were clearly gone.

Adam

“I’m need a dozen volunteers to stay with me on the Valentine to keep it running in case it survives the upcoming wave from the hurricane,” Captain Tran said, shouting from the top of a table in the middle of the mess hall, “but the rest of you are going to shore with Ondrea to visit the remnants of the beacon of light.”

Adam sat next to Manón at one of the tables near the edge of the hall, wondering how his time away from home seemed to be getting cut short already. The previous night with Manón, Blain, Harry, and Pearl had been cut short at the explosion that had nearly toppled the ship. At the time, Adam thought it was an abnormally large wave, but when Manón and Adam sprinted from the cell block, searching through the torrent of others, they found Clides and Tonya who were on the upper deck performing reeler maintenance when the explosion hit. They said a white cylinder of light flashed down from the sky, blasting clouds clear beyond the horizon, and touched down somewhere miles inland. “Kids,” Tonya said, “We’d never had a clear view of anything before, so we obviously made for the railing for the once-in-a-lifetime view. Green trees were like waves along the shore growing over the rusted metal structures of the past. There were about as many pieces of random plastics and soggy paper wads as you’d imagine, but the glowing backlight made everything feel still and quiet.”

“It was beautiful,” Clides said, nodding. “Then the shock hit us.”

“A vibrating thump,” Tonya said. “Like thunder erupting in our chests. If anyone on the deck hadn’t been attached to their lifelines, we’d have lost a lot of people overboard.”

Adam had been imagining that moment ever since. For him and Manón, they had been thrown around the prison section, but their helmets absorbed the worst of the damage. Listening to Captain Tran in the mess hall, Adam wondered what he wanted to do. Stay, and face a harrowing tidal wave when the receded waters inevitably crash back toward land--though, the benefits of survival would be a lifetime story of heroism. Or flee to shore, but potentially be a part of a meteoric discovery and see something no human has ever seen--though, there is just as great a chance of that being equally dangerous.

“If I have the chance to get off this ship and make it safely to land,” Manón said, “I’m taking it.”

“I’m going to shore too,” Adam said. “The chance to see aliens outweighs the chance to be a hero.”

“Stay or go, you’re probably going to die,” Clides said.

“Stay or go, you’re definitely not going to be a hero, kids,” said Tonya.

Manón nodded. Adam and Clides were indignant.

The entirety of the crew continued murmurs of confusion and anger and fear. Captain Tran shouted over all of it. “This was a painfully unlucky navigational mistake. I took us toward the light and too far into the bay. We won’t be able to turn the Valentine around and avoid the incoming hurricane. Which means we are all going to have to hunker down and try to live through a likely unlivable storm.



“However, even if we all die here, we’ve already won in our venture to connect humanity. I’m disappointed that we weren’t able to narrow down our search for the Clear Zones until the sky blasted down a path for us, but each and every one of you, minus the new folks—though, your time to help approaches—has spent months if not years cultivating and perfecting humanity’s new era. Homes are safer. Power is possible. Advancement is finally happening after hundreds of years of devastation. Normally, we’d avoid the incoming hurricane and come back to this spot months or years in the future, but with the light having hit so near us, this is an opportunity we can’t afford to pass on. We’ve lost crew members, friends, and loved ones so often that even our own inevitable death is as worrisome as a new storm or wave. We’ve all long since accepted death, but we’ve also been determined to wrest as much meaning and joy from this life as our fists and heads would allow us. So, as with all our adventures and trials and dances with devastation, I ask you one final time to have some fun and push toward the end.” Captain Tran smiled and hopped down from the table. “Volunteers, join me in the barracks to grab gear. We need to get into positions to give the Valentine the best chance of survival. The other fifty or so of you, go with Ondrea. Take anything you need or want with you because you may not ever be able to get back here.”

The murmurs and the steps of the crew blended in Adam’s ears. Never making it back. If he could no longer travel, he would be back to where he started except with people he barely knew. The longer-tenured crew members were already grabbing bags and boxes and stuffing them with seeds, vegetables and produce from the kitchen. Adam saw Charles walking gingerly towards Clides and Tonya, but Charles was apparently surprised by what the other two said because he shoved Clides then embraced both, one

around each arm. Old man Ross followed Captain Tran around the mess hall, picking at his own ears then tapping on the shoulders of those he knew before nodding at them with a blank stare and continuing.

“What should we do about the imprisoned folks?”

Adam only half heard Manón speak.

“Hey, idiot,” she said again. “Blain, Harry, and Pearl. Let’s go get them.”

Adam smiled without his eyes and followed Manón. They walked with a sense of authority, and no one questioned them. “Is this a bad idea?” Adam asked. Crew members flowed around them, rushing through tight spaces with crates under their arms and linens and hammocks wound and tied around their shoulders. “Is it even possible to sneak them to shore with the rest of the crew?”

“If it’s not,” Manón said, “They’ll want the opportunity to swim.”

When they arrived at the cells, the three prisoners stood upright next to their doors speaking to Captain Tran and Ross. For all the bluster and rush throughout the Valentine, the five individuals stood still like mountains amongst waves. Adam and Manón’s pace slowed once they saw others in the room, but Manón continued with Adam close behind.

“Captain,” Ross said, “We have no choice but to leave them here. Whether they stay with us or go to shore, if we let them out, innocents will die.”

Blain, the scarred prisoner, and Harry, the balding prisoner both nodded. Pearl, who had removed the hammock from the wall and had wrapped that around their midsection, said, “He makes a good point. Now is too good of an opportunity for Blain to pass up. Harry and I will be fine to free, though.”

“Not fucking likely,” Ross said.

“I’d just go for a swim,” Blain said. “It’s possible I might drag Pearl with me just to prove I can swim to shore. But that’s all anyone need worry about.”

Manón put herself in front of Pearl’s and Blain’s cells and stared down Ross. “You’ll free them.”

Captain Tran crossed his arms and tapped his fingers on the backs of his elbows. “Unfortunately, I can’t let them out,” he said. “I’m not smart enough.”

Adam looked at the plastic door of Blain’s cell. It appeared to only need a key to open it. “With enough people on the outside,” Adam said, “We can probably break the door open even if you lost the key.”

“An open door with no way to shut it again is a solid metaphor for this dilemma,” Tran said. Tran clapped Ross on the back and nudged him toward the exit. “But that’s not what I meant. You two need to get prepared to leave,” he said to Adam and Manón. “I’m sorry we couldn’t outrun this storm and keep you here longer. The devil’s luck, you know?”

Manón stepped in front of Tran and Ross, and Adam did the same.

Tran paused, then crouched down and tightened his shoelaces. For a moment, Adam wondered if the captain was about to try to touch his head to the ceiling, but then Tran shrugged and stood upright. “The way I see it, I can’t trust these three on the Valentine. They don’t follow directions, and each of them has caused extensive harm in their lifetimes. This one,” Tran said, pointing to Pearl, “breaks everything within reach. The one time we opened this door, Pearl tried to set fire to our food storage.”

Pearl nodded, “The food was going bad.”

Tran pointed to Blain and said, “This one is actually the biggest softie you’d ever meet, and I would love to let him out.”

“You shut your damn mouth,” Blain said.

“Except,” Tran said, “We haven’t been able to help him see his own value, and he keeps trying to hurt himself. It was months before we could safely let him loose in his own cell because he would slam his head against the wall.” Tran pointed to Harry. “And this one can never be let out of his cell unless we have another cell set up somewhere else. And why is that, Harry?”

Harry held his hands up to his waist, palms facing out, and said, “I’m better than everyone, and if you’ve ever made me feel otherwise, I’ll have to destroy you. It’s a whole thing. Bad parents, you know?” He winked at Adam and Manón. “You two would be safe in a different context, but you’ve seen me incarcerated, so even if it’s outside of your awareness, you kids probably still think you’re better than me, so I’d have to kill you too.”

“Thank you,” Tran said, “Therefore, releasing them on the Valentine would certainly doom the ship, and as far as I can tell—”

“Bringing them to a shore where we have zero control of the situation would be even worse,” Adam said.

Manón backed away from Adam. Adam had spoken without thinking and inadvertently taken a side. Tran could just be justifying inaction.

Manón said, “All of that is an excuse to let them die. If you can’t protect your prisoners, you have zero right to imprison them in the first place. Don’t play at being cult-y gods if you can’t maintain basic humanity.”

Adam tried to whisper an apology to Manón, but she stepped further from him and continued glaring at Tran.

“You’re exactly correct,” Tran said. “That’s what I meant by saying ‘I’m not smart enough.’ I don’t have a better solution. You have my apologies.” Tran started to leave, then gestured for Adam and Manón to move ahead of him. “I’ll need the two of you to leave first. Ross and I will force you out of this room and off the Valentine if you want or feel the need for us to do so, but I’d rather you just agree that it’s too late for us to invent a morally responsible decision for this on the fly and depart. You’ll be assets if the Valentine sinks and you survive on the shore.”

Adam said, “Manón, what do you want to do?”

Manón slammed a hand against Blain’s cell door. Adam thought she might make a speech or attack Ross or even plead with the imprisoned to fight for themselves. “I don’t know it right now, but I’ll find a better way,” she said. She left and Adam followed her.

Manón gathered a few items wrapped in a bundle near her bunk, and Adam found the bag he had brought when he arrived. He had not opened it since boarding. There had been no time. Adam wanted to stay on the ship. He wanted to hide away until everyone else had disembarked, but he also wanted to go to land to see the bright light. Whether it was an explosion or an alien landing, or just some blinking but perfectly natural weather event, he needed to see it. Picking up his bag, he must have been lost in thought because Manón dragged him by his arm out of the barracks.

“Let’s go, idiot,” she said. “You better be thinking of a way to solve the prisoner problem too and not just drifting.

“Sorry, you’re right,” he said.

They boarded one of the larger capsules alongside other members of the crew Adam had seen but never spoken to. Most of them seemed nervous. One or two were excitedly talking about gaining immortality “because only God could bend the clouds with light, so we must be close to His touch.” The capsule was jettisoned along a steel cable that propelled them toward the shore. Adam tried to imagine what his parents would do if they were in his place.

## Lyta

The branches on Lyta's head sounded creaked and crackled. So did the grass beneath her and the sky above her. Vibrating taps and creaks crunched in on every inch of her skin to the point where she was certain the planet had broken. The small bits of sand pelted at the side of her face, somehow less painfully than the barrage of larger debris, a mix of yellowish ice and gray pebbles.

Lyta never lost consciousness entirely, but each of her senses felt like they had been one of the colorful blocks the Elders spun around on their monitors, except even now, her senses had yet to fall into place. She feared opening her eyes as the winds and pieces of nature continually beat down upon her.

She pressed her hands over her face and tried to glimpse through the cracks in her fingers any semblance of the world she might recognize. She inched her way toward a nearby tree that was thicker by far than she was, and yet it seemed only slightly more stable in the torrent of winds. Gerald was nowhere within sight, and Lyta began to shout out to him. In all the frenzy of nature, Lyta could not hear her own voice, but she continued shouting. The outsiders were also gone, and for a moment she held hope that her brother might at least be protected by them. At least then, if she were to die, whether by the sky collapsing upon her or starvation, Gerald might still find a long life.

And yet, they couldn't have gotten far from her. Her daze made time hard to track. They had left the enclave and ventured out into the soft sounds of the surrounding

forest. Sal and Nella stopped once or twice to make quick sketches of plants or birds along the way. At the edge of a dense group of trees that Lyta once thought marked the edge of the world, Sal told Lyta that she could not be prepared for the outside. He said that it's a constant life of rain, slick footing and fear.

The change was subtle, at first. The hundred feet or so past the initial tree line included rain, something Lyta had never experienced, but it was not much thicker than the misting fans of the Enclave. The next few hundred feet brought increased winds, and some of the tree's branches were broken or hanging by a few last splinters of wood. Fewer birds chirped as they continued, but Lyta had prepared for that eventuality, as ominous as it was. The Enclave had several features that kept out the larger wildlife, though the occasional fox might slip through, but blue birds and sparrows were normal--if not by sight, then at least by sound. Lyta even started to grow confident in her and her brother's ability to survive in the new world as they got to a series of rocks, and rather than growing darker from the thickening of the clouds overhead, seemed to become more visible. The rocks were a natural wall, a full body length taller than Sal, minus a small waist-high path that the outsiders found as if the preceding distance and fog of trees in no way blocked their knowledge of it.

Lyta had laughed, "Gerald, once we get through here, we'll be the outsiders." Nella crawled through the path first to make sure no one waited for them on the other side--though that seemed to both Lyta and Gerald incredibly unlikely. Sal agreed but said that was standard procedure for them. He then went next with Gerald, leaving Lyta to push through the wall last.



Just as Lyta had almost cleared the rocks, a light crashed down from both sides of the rock way with a boom that left her seeing splotchy patches of yellow and brown. Slamming vibrations pelted through her as if from an orchestra composed of every running faucet, shattering window, and piercing shriek she had ever heard. Lyta rushed after Gerald in fear that the rocks would collapse upon her, but as she reached the opening, she became overwhelmed by unidentifiable bits and pieces of nature blasting in at her.

Amid the gravelly sounds and wind something large hit the side of Lyta's head, just over her ear. It might have been a branch or a stone, but Lyta's mind lost its ability to concentrate, and her body moved like water without a container. When she willed her feet to move, her knees wobbled. Her fingers, wrists, and elbows might as well have been jointless. She tried to focus on one word: "Forward." The flash of yellow light had dissipated, leaving small gray gaps between branches. Water dripped from between the rocks above her. She felt liquid in her ears, but she was not sure if it was the rain or blood. Her arms would not reach to check.

Lyta felt the urge to say out loud that she was fine. That she could move. She heard the words pass her lips, and she regained a small amount of control over her feet, kicking behind her, inching herself forward. If she could push through the rubble, she could stand and find Gerald. He would be fine, too. No one ever was seriously hurt by weather. Even if flashes of light and deluges from the sky were new to her, her body would recover, and at worst, she might have to take a day or two to herself and recover in the sunlight once it returned. There was nothing to do now but push through. To find the others and decide from there once the weather calmed.

Lyta slowly regained control of her arms. Her head steadied itself. She drove her forearms into the thickest of the brambles, even as wind and sand whipped at her uncovered skin. Every push was a battle, but she persisted. A tree with a trunk thicker than her torso slammed in front of her, but rather than block her path, it settled just in front of the opening in the rocks, mitigating the harsher winds. Once Lyta cleared the entrance, she leaned back against the fallen trunk and gasped for air but choked on the circulating dust. She covered her mouth with her clothing and breathed deep. Even as she brought in air, her lungs ejected the faint bits of dust she had taken in, and while she could not hear herself cough, she felt her body convulse with each expulsion. She pictured her body as a mirror to her grandparents during their coughing fits. Would her first trip beyond the Enclave cause her to age like them? For the first time in her life, she imagined plugging herself into the longevity machines. No one ever had an issue breathing there since the machines did it for them.

Lyta looked through small gaps between her outstretched fingers to see if she could see Gerald. Even if Sal carried him, he would have to be close. The surrounding trees that still stood barely held to the ground, and all of their remaining branches were bare of leaves. Each step Lyta took felt like kicking through a sandy pudding. In the enclave, Lyta occasionally got her feet stuck in thinner dirt, usually when she carried Gerald since the weight would be different from what she was used to, and she would accidentally snag her foot on a root or a piece of protruding technology or plumbing that would have otherwise never noticed. She would set Gerald down then clear some of the soil or grass away from her feet to make sure she did not break anything as she removed her foot. Once Lyta felt her foot stuck in this new nature, she instinctively drove her

hand towards the ground to remove it and into a grayish white paste that smelled like moldy and curdled milk.

Lyta wandered, head still spinning through the muck and the remnants of the forest. She called out for Gerald, but even through shouting until her throat nearly closed, she could not hear herself for all the wind. Amidst the flying sand and water, she moved towards the loudest hissing coming from between the trees and saw more gray than she had ever imagined existed in the world. Heaping waves of sludge and water belched onto the rocks by the shoreline. Fumes of dead birds and refuse barreled into her nose and eyes. She lost herself in the ocean hellscape, and she wished that if Gerald had been swept into the currents, he at least did not have the misfortune of seeing where he was going.

Lyta continued shouting for her brother. She was sure she still listened for a response. Not for an instant could she look away from the overwhelming blanket of filth constantly creeping toward the shore.

Adam

Adam was glad to be on shore. Shelter from the elements provided more safety than a stable footing, but if he only had access to one, he was sure to enjoy it. The wind, rain, and danger were no different wherever this new land was, but the ground felt stronger.

Adam wandered with Manón who was still irritated with him and worried about the left-behind crew and prisoners. They paired off in search for safe clearings. Shouts came from behind them that a girl had been found.

“Should we go back?” Adam asked.

“Does a girl mean safety to you?”

Adam kicked through soggy dirt and said, “This would be a good place to murder me if you wanted to.”

Manón ignored him. “I think I see light coming through a small stone enclosure up ahead.”

By the time Adam saw where she was looking, Manón was already crawling inside.

“Don’t follow me yet,” she said.

Adam nodded and surveyed the surrounding area. While searching, he came across a tablet far more advanced than anything on the Valentine, and it seemed to still be functional.

“Hey Manón. I found something awesome.”

He sat down by the rock enclosure to make sure he could hear Manón if she needed him. He scrolled through the tablet’s interface, barely sure what to make of the device. The home screen was littered with historical information, games, and odd technical readouts about a place referred to as “The Enclave.” He started to tap into it when he saw a kind of news line streaming across repeating, “Arrived. Arrived. Arrived.”

Adam wondered if the Enclave was somehow expecting the Valentine. He shouted toward Manón about how there might be better options for shelter beyond erecting quick canvas coverings, but instead of responding, Manón shrieked.

Adam tossed the tablet to the side and crawled after her. He dragged himself through for longer than he expected before managing to pull himself from the rocks. Even before clearing them, he heard Manón saying, “It will be okay. My friend will go get help.”

“I don’t need help,” said another voice. “He protected me when the flashing light came. A rock or something heavy hit the back of his neck, and he dropped on top of me. Help him. He’s not moving.”

Adam stepped toward the voice and saw a young boy with legs too thin to support himself lying on next to a tree. On top of the boy, unmoving, was Sal, Adam’s father.

Manón

“You’re Adam?” The young boy had said.

Manón watched Adam cradle his father’s head. She started to say how she felt when her father died from a fall when she was seven but thought better of it. She half expected Adam to jump up and say, “This is terrible, but there’s nothing we can do but move on, right?” He seemed the type to find light in a pit and squeeze love from a boulder. The young boy she had found cried with Adam. Adam had only been on the Valentine for a few weeks, so whatever knowledge the boy had of Adam’s father must have been recent.

“My mother is a shorter version of me with long hair,” Adam said. “At least Grandma Maxine said we look alike.”

He never actually asked Manón to find his mother. He probably feared Manón would find her half buried in a ditch nearby.

The storm’s intensity was increasing. Whether a wave tore them all to pieces or the wind finally overwhelmed them, without shelter soon they would all be facing a similar fate. As Manón left, the young boy said, “There’s a place nearby where the weather can’t reach.”

“Can you lead people there?” Manón asked.

The boy nodded.

Manón left back for the Valentine's crew. Lightning struck a tree nearby, but she barely noticed. She called to everyone she passed to follow her. Eventually, she made it back to camp, told Ondrea the situation, and they all returned to Adam and the boy.

The girl that the crew found earlier rushed toward the boy and jumped on top of him. Then she, too, noticed Adam's father and broke down. Manón thought their reaction seemed excessive for how short a time they must have known each other. Manón imagined her first meeting with Adam where he called himself an idiot. Would she cry if he died? He was a caring oddity, sure, but even good people can betray you.

After only a moment, Ondrea took charge, directing one person to work with Adam to build a stretcher from the tenting canvas and nearby branches to carry Adam's father with them. Ondrea asked the boy for his name, and he seemed to whisper it to her. "Okay, Gerald," Ondrea said, "Would you mind if I carried you from here? I promise I'll keep you steady."

"I'll carry my brother," the girl said. She stood, but her ankle flailed like she was a pony learning to walk.

"I'm tempted to carry you too, Lyta, was it?" Ondrea said.

Lyta gave in quickly and said. "Just let me walk close to you."

As they began to leave, another of the Valentine crew brought a strange rectangle to Ondrea. The device looked like a pane of glass that would shatter in seconds. As soon as Gerald saw it, he shouted, "That's my tablet!"

The crew member first held it out to Ondrea, but she gestured for them to give it to Gerald who grabbed it and started frantically tapping, lights blinking with every movement.

“I’ll have questions about that, young Gerald,” Ondrea said, “But I need you to focus on getting us and your sister to safety. Where are we going from here?”

Gerald held the tablet out to her. “The map isn’t exact since the trees and rocks are constantly blowing around, but it will point us in the right direction.”

“This is perfect.”

Nearly a hundred people crunched tightly behind Ondrea and Gerald as they travelled. Lightning intensified along with the booming destruction of everything else. Every muddy, waterlogged step took more time and effort than any of them had the strength to spend, but they progressed. Manón doubled back to help Adam carry his father, but Adam had yet to say anything to her, though she was unsurprised.

Eventually, the sky shimmered and the sound began to lessen, almost like Manón had stuck her head underwater. The sound was there, but it was somehow muffled. The ground grew firmer, each step sinking less deep than its predecessor. The towering gray and black clouds seemed to lighten into a soft blue. Everything felt like the kind of dream Manón only had when she was certain she had received a light concussion. The transition was impossible, regardless of what her senses told her.

Grass seemed to spring up under her feet that did not appear with a dead plastic-crusted brown but rather a strong, solid green. Nothing in her life had any kind of comparable colors. The Valentine crew had begun to take their helmets off, and many were saying what she was thinking.

“This is incredible.”

“Wind that isn’t trying to kill me! I love it!”

“I can’t wait to tell my Mom about this next time I see her!”



“Hey!” Manón said, kicking the ankle of the man speaking about his mom. “Shut up.”

The man looked at Adam, winced, then sped up his walk to get closer to the front of the crowd.

Both Adam and his father had strong jaw lines but soft faces. They seemed the kind of folks who would punch at lightning if it tried to strike their friends but would then compliment its ferocity. The man had just died, and while the circles under his eyes made him look much older than he was, he still seemed supremely approachable. Manón wondered if he would have protected anyone or if there was something special about that Gerald.

The light and warmth invigorated Manón, but she did not trust it. With all of the Valentine fawning, she felt like thunder crashing through was an inevitability. Still, maybe there would be a stable shelter. Maybe there would be food she could eat without worry about it being rocked off the table in a storm. Grass softened under her feet like she was walking on freshly washed blankets. The absence of smell felt like drinking a clear glass of water after years of only drinking tea. It was like the first gasp of air after nearly drowning. It was nothing, yet it felt sweeter in her lungs than perfectly ripened fruit. Manón was sure that the only person who hated it more walked next to her carrying his father.

“If my dad is here,” Adam said, “My mom is nearby.”

Manón tried not to break stride. “Shouldn’t we tell someone? Should I look for her? I’m sure she is fine but just got separated. What does she look like?”

Adam stayed silent. He was thinking if his father had died, she must have as well.

Manón did not disagree, but she wasn't about to say that.

The change in the air came slowly. The girl named Lyta had mentioned it, and murmurs ran backwards through the train of people about the chemical smell they marched toward. A lingering scent of unrinsed soap that had dried on a person's skin pushed over them.

"It smells like the floors you cleaned when we first met," Adam said.

Manón remembered what she said to him. About the Valentine being cultists. She still believed that, but humanity becoming a cult might have just been a survival inevitably. Unite or perish. "What you're feeling," Manón said, "Is hell. I was wrong before. This feeling you have now isn't going to go away any time soon either. Trust me."

"It isn't fair."

"No," Manón said. "And there's likely more suffering to be had. Keep walking. Stay with me."

The Valentine crew's mirth made the walk feel like Manón and Adam were traveling through a festival to a funeral. The crew was used to death, and this one was not even someone they knew. Even as she glowered at them, the crew continued to joke and laugh. Several embraced each other as they walked. A few sang, ad-libbing entire verses, seemingly thrilled with every rhyme.

Because of the distance between those at the front and Manón, she only heard what happened as it was relayed backwards. Someone had been killed. Apparently they

touched a fence the children said was safe and were immediately electrocuted. They needed to circle east to get to a main gate.

Manón wondered what would happen to the children. The boy, Gerald could not survive far without Ondrea and the crew, so the death was likely an accident, rather than a ploy. Still, after all their excitement, a crew death should at least mitigate their tone.

More fear crept backwards through the crowd. The children were shouting loud enough that even Manón could hear them.

“Where are you? What happened? Anyone!”

Everyone else had gone silent. Those previously laughing and singing readjusted their gear, pulling down the masks of their helmets.

“What are you doing?” Manón asked, mostly to herself. “Are you all expecting aliens? There was a bomb blast, no one answering shouldn’t be a surprise.”

Behind the fence, past the internal wall of trees, towered white-domed structures. Most were without walls, just large bowls shading blankets of grass. A few buildings had glass bases and doors, with beds, chairs and strange pieces of technology that Manón could not identify. More seemed to be happening at the front of the group because they began moving right. A woman had pushed through the crowd, almost like she was sneaking between people but also trying to be seen. Manón guessed it was Ramona long before the woman temporarily lowered her mask.

“Stay close to me,” Ramona whispered back to Manón, “We’re circling. There’s a creepy hissing that sounds like a broken pipe, and we can’t find any of the locals. Ondrea sent a few people ahead to scout while the rest of us move to a safer position.”

Ramona moved next to Manón and took hold of the stretcher. “I can give you a break for a minute.” She looked over to Adam. “I know you still have your end.”

Manón, Adam, and Ramona moved along the outside edges of one of the larger buildings when they heard a sound that shook them like thunder.

“Connect to your transmitter immediately.” The penetrating voice was not human. The depth of sound vibrated through Manón’s chest like a stone piercing a window. She clapped her hands over her ears, and Ramona instinctively did the same, dropping her end of the stretcher to the grass. Adam’s face went deep red, but he held his end upright, slowly setting his father down before covering his own ears. “Cross-planet frequencies detected. Connect to your transmitter immediately.”

“It wants our radio transmitter?” a voice said outside of Manón’s eyeline. Manón tried to nudge Adam forward so they could see, but he shoved her hand away and stayed next to his father. Manón hated to leave him but moved all the same. A silver ovoid slightly shorter than Manón nestled like an egg in the ground in front of several of the Valentine’s crew. After setting the strange enclave child down, Ondrea had removed her helmet and mask and walked slowly towards the craft, her hands held open in front of her.

“What do you want with our radio system?” Ondrea said.

“Connect to your transmitter immediately.”

“Everyone,” Ondrea said, “Take the children and hide in the buildings.”

“What happened?” Manón asked a crew member close to her.

A small opening appeared in the ovoid, and a booming sound projected out.

Manón felt the air in lungs eject out of her mouth like her body thought it was ash. She

barely stayed standing. The others around her were similarly doubled over, except for one person who had collapsed entirely. They lay on the ground, still.

“Connect to your transmitter immediately.”

Ondrea gained her feet and willed oxygen back into her lungs, choking in as much as she could. “Follow me,” she said to the ovoid. “Everyone else, move!”

Manón stumbled backwards to help Adam carry his father indoors, but when she circled behind the building, Adam was gone and the stretcher empty. Many of the crew rushed past Manón, some half-limping while others supported them. Another boom. Shouting followed. Ondrea waved her arms over her head, seemingly trying to keep the ovoid’s attention as the crew ran. Manón could not hear anymore. Sweat dripped down her back, and she craned her head around, trying to find where Adam might have gone. She yelled without hearing her own voice.

Manón was not sure what made her decide to follow the ovoid, but she did. Maybe it was Ondrea’s selflessness. Maybe it was the excitement of seeing this alien monstrosity overpower her best dreams and worse fears. Maybe it was her desire to die. As the Ovoid busted through the thickest of the trees, shrubbery, and stone outcropping, Manón barely managed to follow after it before the barriers crumbled behind her.

Ondrea had raced toward the water, waving and pointing toward the ocean. The ovoid followed like a hunter. Ondrea stepped deeper into the ocean, water battering into her. Manón wondered, what was she doing? Waves smashed into them both, but the Ovoid glided into the through the ocean like it was simply thicker air, without any consequence. Ondrea continued further out, but Manón knew currents would drag her down soon, no matter how strong she was.

Ondrea had made it neck deep when the Ovoid finally stopped. Manón saw the opening in the Ovoid where it would release its sound ray. Why now? Manón rushed toward Ondrea, but the Ovoid, rather than attacking spun around and jetted toward the opposite side of the beach.

Manón trudged into the ocean, shouting after Ondrea, but Manón couldn't even hear herself. Manón lost her footing, but just before slipping under, Ondrea caught her.

“Don't touch me,” Manón said.

Ondrea was ignoring her.

“It's going to take us a while to get back,” Manón said. “Let me go, and I can direct us. At least we're safe from that thing.”

“It's headed toward the Valentine,” Ondrea said. “No one on earth is safe if it finds them.”

Lyta

“Don’t think,” Lyta said. “Just pick Sal up and follow me. I’ll take my brother.”

“Go away,” Adam said.

Lyta had never had reason to do so before, but she’d read stories, so she walked over to Adam and slapped him across the face. “We’re going to keep Sal alive if you’ll just move.”

Adam jumped up and held up his arms to push Lyta away from him, but Gerald caught one of Adam’s ankles first. “I don’t think the machine can keep someone alive if they’re already dead, Lyta.” Gerald dug his head into Adam’s leg. “But I want to try.”

Adam looked down. Lyta could tell he wanted to kick Gerald off. The outsider had dirt on his face with tear lines already dried on his cheeks. “I don’t even know who or what the two of you are,” Adam said, “much less what you’re saying.”

“You can be miserable,” Lyta said, “or you can follow us. Hurry up.”

“Please, trust us,” Gerald said.

Adam pulled his leg from Gerald’s grasp, just short of gently, then picked his father up onto his back.

Nearby, with the rest of the crew running support, Ross had taken charge of work outside the Enclave buildings. “If I hadn’t just seen an alien murder ball,” Ross shouted, “I’d have thought this was all drug-induced nonsense. Everyone keep moving. It could be back any time!”

Lyta picked up her brother. “Focus on the domed building over there,” Lyta yelled to Ross. “It’s out of the way, but that’s where our elders stayed with most of the command equipment. If they’re still alive, they’ll try to get in your way, so please be kind to them. If they’re not alive...”

“We aren’t looking for any more deaths today, little one,” Ross said. “Take Clides and Tonya with you, wherever you’re going, and you two,” he said pointing to a couple moving dead crew members along a wall to soon be buried, “Leave our friends for now, and go check out that building where the girl is pointing. Get moving! We need a way to connect to the global receiving net. If that Ovoid is part of a larger group, we’ll need everyone on earth to stop them.”

Birds picked at the packs left on the ground by Valentine crewmembers. Lights blinked behind the glass of building as the crew attempted to restore power. Lyta couldn’t tell how Adam managed to hold his father and keep up with her, but the outsider didn’t waver. Without speaking, she set Gerald down in the machine room, while Clides helped Adam rest Sal on an empty table. Lyta placed a translucent cover over Sal’s head, and the screen at the foot of the table blinked on. Numbers flashed in light green, and glass appeared from the sides of the table, encapsulating Sal. His hair fluttered as air blew through.

On the screen, words appeared; “Massive head trauma: Choose, diagnostic or hibernation.” Lyta pressed diagnostic.

“Diagnostic, and possible repair, in four days.”

“He’s dead,” Adam said.

“You don’t know that!” Gerald said.



“We need to find your mom,” Lyta said. “Do you have any idea where she is?”

“Ten,” Adam said. “Rule Ten.”

“What does that mean?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

Lyta, Gerald and Tonya watched Adam look through the glass at Sal. Adam eyes sagged but he never blinked. “We’re here for you,” Clides said, pulling Adam in and hugging him. “Death hits different when it’s someone close to you. It’s not fair that you need to worry about anything else right now, but you do.”

Lyta felt like the silence echoed. The whole room was a larger version of Sal’s capsule.

“Adam,” Tonya said, “What’s rule ten?”

Adam had his head buried in Clides’ neck. He said, “It just means she went back to Rabon. If she hasn’t shown up here, either she’s dead or has gone home. She and my dad had separate maps. Hers were always better though.”

Clides’ and Tonya’s heads jerked toward each other. “You have a map back to your home?” Clides asked.

“My dad does in his bag. In his journal.”

“Tonya, go tell Ross we’re leaving soon.”

“I can’t leave my dad.”

Tonya left without a word.

“We’re going with you,” Lyta said.

“I have to stay,” said Gerald.

“You’re both staying,” said Clides.

“This is our chance to get more information, Gerald,” Lyta said. “What do you mean you aren’t coming?”

“I’m the best with our technology. You’ll have to go for me. I need to stay here and help.”

“Lyta should come too, she knows things we don’t, strange as she is,” Adam said. “Do you think Manón will want to join us?”

Clides rubbed the back of his neck. “Manón hasn’t made it back with Ondrea yet, and we won’t have time to wait. I wish we did. Ondrea would have this solved in minutes. If your town has set up the transmitter by now, they’re our best bet at warning the rest of the world of the aliens.”

“They’re humans,” Gerald said.

“They said they’re humans,” Clides said. “But I don’t trust murder-turds.” Clides looked around the room, rolled his eyes, and exhaled. “This is not the day I expected it to be. We probably need to leave in, what, hours? Who knows if that garbage ball is even going to stay away that long? I guess we just need to be decisive. Adam, you may be the only one that can lead us back to your town, map or no map. We need to get there quickly. Can you get us there?”

“I will do it.”

“You’ve got this, bud.”