



TALES OF THE AEONS

Violet

Cameron Michael Gil

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To thrive among the stars above is to evolve beyond the sky below.

The stars fall and a lily sprouts on the Moon.

Reveal the original face, the one before one's birth.

If you meet the Buddha, kill the Buddha.

SEGMENT ONE
Where Rays of Hope Fall

"Your eyes reveal a story,"

CHAPTER ONE

無 | Mu

Dawn on Luna is an occasion marking a cycle of escaping the face of space's eternal void. The south pole of the Moon floods with folk in colorful fabric made of elegant materials. Older folks prepare drinks for a toast. Many people fidget with flags. Throughout the lush parks, public plazas, and broad boulevards made of regolith, everybody gazes at the sky. Across the sun-facing portion of the Moon, the domes dim. The cold artificial sky light dissipates, surrendering to the city lights shrouding these huddled masses. The hum of manufactured air rumbles through the loose regolith as an ever-present constant, bridging the night to day. Luna's domes, maintaining the separation between life and the endless darkness of space, fade to black. In this moment, the void and the cities are inseparable.

From one end of the horizon to the other, a single line of solar rays filters through the transparent dome. The temperate light cracks the emptiness and embraces the masses. The crowds across Luna cheer and break out in song, their festivities extending the collective hand of life to the light and rupturing the stellar emptiness. Over the next few hours, more light percolates through the filters in the dome glass. Along the streets and in the parks matsuri, festivals, roar. Folks revel in costumes of Amaterasu, demons, and many colorful characters reminiscent of those on Earth.

A long stone wall dwarfs a parade of otherwise tower-tall floats and portable shrines carried on the backs of young adults. Looking at the parade outside the walls, set of youths under a torii gate, twice the height of the walls, cheer on participants in the same uniform, their colors mirroring the silver and purple of the gate, which reads 'SAN Academy' etched in English and Japanese. At the center of this walled complex is one pagoda-style tower. On one side of the tower is a central square made of uneven stone where vendors sell trinkets and food. Children run and jump across the

various channels of water littered with lotus and adjacent wooden walkways. Through the crowds slips one young woman in an orange and white jacket – Kibou (きぼう). The speed with which she twists through the crowd flings and twirls her amber pendant depicting a padma flower carried on the back of a sea-turtle. Kibou's eyes bounce, face by face. Stretching above the bobbing heads, Kibou waves her mala bracelet. In her mind, she whistles a three-note hymn. She looks up at the tower's top floor to see the faint outline of a person. A smile sparks on her face. She bounds off. Up the stairwell she leaps and hurls herself single-mindedly. She bumps into the drooping sleeves of a brown-haired man sporting a red haori. At the pinnacle, she flutters into the sole door.

Kibou's eyes wander across the walls covered by books with more letters and characters in their titles than one could see in a lifetime. The 珠英集, the Art of War, the 万葉集. A faded parchment script of the 平家物語. A bundle of books clasped with a ribbon inscribed with the names of five classics. Rows of undecorated books labeled by the names of figures like Mendel, Berg, Curie, Seneca, Roosevelt. Kibou's vision scans the shelves stuffed with tomes labeled by topics, among them the Jupiter Brain and the Modjadji. In the room, aside from the books is an sprawling mahogany desk with a silver block atop holding down the pages in one book. Laying on the desk and looking at the expanse beyond Luna with eyes longing for Earth is a young lady with purple hair.

"Violet, they've got sumo bouts at Collins Park," — without a break in her step the orange Kibou tugs on Violet's silver and purple jacket — "with Yokozuna Suimoide. You can toss him repeatedly, no doubt."

Violet looks at Kibou with a shake and sulking pout, "違う."

"Think of what it'll mean for those looking on. The immovable meets the unstoppable! もう一度!"

"Folks ain't coming out for that. Maybe anti-augmentation zealots. Anyway, the Academy admin wants me to catch up on reading before classes resume."

"The words of dead men won't change between now and tomorrow," Kibou chuckles and pats around her jacket pockets.

"I already ordered lunch; you can join. You'll enjoy my new volume of 'Excerpts of The Doctor' or another account of the last schism in Rome."

"We rarely go out anymore. They even have matsuri treats out there." She takes out two wrapped taiyaki treats and waves them around, "Lotus flavor made for the dawn."

"Every day is a day for SAN—" Violet's focus drifts to the wafting aroma of the treat's crisp coating.

"Ahh see, I know you don't want to believe that. Today is a new start, a new fresh slate. ほし未来を作って," asserts Kibou with pride and vigor.

"Make the future I want? Non-action is safer," Violet attests. "Tension tightens strings yet within non-action strings decay." Violet swipes the treat out of Kibou's hands and pockets it. "Lotus, eggplant, amino. Doesn't matter much. Sweets are sweets."

"Once unto Luna. One sunrise. A day to evolve into the best Violet."

"Let's indulge. Say I go. Win or lose, those fanatics will scoff at it, again. I'd rather not be propaganda, again. Casual spectators will forget about it in a week. And those who can't endeavor to progress on from the Thirty-Year Crisis will continue to ascribe their hate to me as though I am the manifestation of its cruel, insistence at pushing the horizon of augmentation." Violet clasps her palms. "I have no need for this world nor it for me."

Kibou pokes Violet's cheek, reeling up a sly grin. "今、誰が違うか? 象徴を使う。You... the deputy secretary of state is as much a symbol and leader as the constitutionally invested secretary, regardless of customary deference to the president. Most people, regardless of ideology or belief, would give up their world for a position at the nexus of influence and prestige."

Violet's eyes float to the distant metal Earth, far beyond her reach. "Even before Tully's abduction... if it wasn't cutting off my words or dictating where I can wander." Violet's gaze falls to the walls outside the pagoda.

"A seat may constrain, camera may encircle, but a smile flutters on the rays of light." Kibou's lofty eyebrows reel Violet in

closer. "Like those old popes in Rome before the Silent Schism or the leader of America before the continent fell. Symbolism is acting without acting, teaching without demanding, no?"

Violet pauses, hesitant to reply with haste. "象徴か? A symbol? Nothing of myself. Nothing more than a cybernetic mascot. Devoid, like a street side mechanical sign spinner."

"Emptiness is a powerful symbol." Kibou peels back Violet's clasped fingers.

"Empty of being, of my own choices? Am I an empty child?"

"To be empty is liberty of the mind and body." Kibou continues to peel Violet's fingers.

"Odd, this world wants me to be nothingness incarnate yet dance on command. Am I to be a paradox? Am I to create my future in a metal box devoid of meaningful choice?"

"Where is your hope?" Kibou murmurs.

Violet leans in, their faces close enough to still the air between. She takes Kibou's hand and clasps hers around it, close to her heart.

"And when I am not?" says Kibou.

Violet disconnects and slides from the desk, her instinct seizes the silver block resting atop the desk holding the pages of a book open.

"Don't you pain me with that," says Violet watching Kibou's expression.

"I'm just the medic on the Moon." Kibou smiles. "I do not exist."

"If you cease before I do," — Violet looks outside and sighs — "where will the rays of hope fall?"

Kibou tugs on Violet's jacket, a weak resistance pulls back. "It is easier to adjust a god than an individual. Without spirit or belief, you are dead. Your absence from the public only emboldens them to use your name. Is that what you choose?"

"But what if I do not exist?"

"You only cease to exist when you conquer death, not when it controls you." Kibou says, while pulling Violet with a firm hand.

Violet focuses on Kibou's inviting smile refuse to change at her own resistance. "I pray you are on to something."

"You pray, now?" asks Kibou with a cheeky grin.

"Not once, my friend, not even once." Violet straightens her jacket. "Although that 'Om A Ra Pa Ca Na Dhih' carries a nice ring."

As Violet leads the way out, Kibou slips an item onto the lip of a bookshelf and closes the door behind her.

The dome's transition from night to day permits more natural light inside the city below. A brighter city attracts more festival goers and portable floats carried on the backs of participants. Kibou leads Violet by the hand through the dense crowds. The string music of a koto ripples around the crisp leaves falling in the wind.

Kibou grasps Violet's shoulders with excitement and shakes her. Battered by noise and revelry, Kibou slips into her mind and pushes her thoughts to Violet through their shared neural link. "If the president or your father complain, will they sanction the rear admiral too?"

Prompted by Kibou's thoughts, Violet spots an older man with two twins, close to her own age, banging away at a large barrel taiko drum. The man wears a vibrant happi sporting a turtle emblem. The trio meet her gaze and nod back without breaking their performance. As Violet and Kibou continue along, the harmony of the drums shifts while the older man bangs a unique pattern that brings a smirk to Violet's face.

"You see something funny?" Kibou asks.

"The rear admiral is banging away in SAN's self-defense force's code."

"Must have been a bloody good joke to get you going."

"I don't think you're a joke," teases Violet, poking at Kibou's side.

An extensive complex outfitted with dozens of signs for shopping and restaurants lies at the end of the avenue. Most of the text is in Japanese, with a sprinkle of English translation underneath. However, the sounds in the air are a cacophony of Japanese, English, with an occasional Chinese phrase popping up. Balconies on the upper floors are bursting with people gazing out at the

festivities. Some throw beans at folks running around in demon and ogre masks. Kibou leads the duo past a thick cluster of young kids in matching uniforms.

One of the young girls notices Violet's purple hair and stops in her tracks. She bounces up and down, waving a phone to get Violet's attention. "ビオレットさん、写真を取りませんか?"

Kibou hears and turns Violet around. Violet's eyes catch the luster of the girl's half-metal hand.

"You'll take a picture and make her happy," asserts Kibou, under her breath. Violet smiles to meet the girl.

"名前?" Violet queries the girl.

"ケリーと申します," the girl stammers to say as she fumbles her phone.

Violet tilts her head at Keri's use of formal language. "It's a holiday, Keri, let's leave aside the formalities," replies Violet while patting her hand. She notices the sprawl of wires installed in one of the girl's radiant eyes.

"My friends and I are visiting the Academy as part of a prep course for the entrance exams."

Violet pauses, reflecting on what Keri expects from her. With nothing more from Keri, Violet's eyes dart around her outfit's insignia.

"Which school do you belong to?"

"Tientori Deep Space Naval Scout Preparatory."

"That's over on the far side isn't it? How long did it take to get here?"

"The ride was short, considering," Keri rolls her eyes and giggles.

Violet glances towards the expanse beyond the dome above and nods. "I guess anything on Luna is short compared to the outer system."

Violet points to the phone, but Keri jumps in.

"You were a few dozen kilometers away during one of your Academy tours once. I skipped class to come see you inspect the asteroid turrets during live fire training. And you danced around the

missiles with your jet boots." Keri's eyes grow wider as she tells the story.

Meanwhile, Violet nods along, trying to remember what she's talking about.

"And then you struck the pose, pointing out across the horizon as the missiles exploded in the distance. 'Explorers be formidable!' you shouted to the officers and assembly beneath you."

Violet looks down as Keri's clutches crack the phone casing.

"Eh, let's take the picture before you break that."

Keri hands her phone to one of her friends and stands to the side of Violet.

"Please do the pose with me. I'll forward it to my sister serving on the Damokuresu."

"Rear admiral Yikame was mentioning something about that colony ship," Violet says to Kibou as if casting bait and pausing for Kibou to bite.

"By the end of the month the colony ship and all the families from Mercury and Venus will disconnect from the Node King relays' data entanglement and communications go old school," Kibou responds while scrolling through her phone.

"A picture with you will amaze her," Keri says.

Violet glances at Kibou, who flashes the picture on her phone of the pose.

In a flourish, Violet extends her arm and twists around to meet Keri's ecstatic face with the point. "Girls, be formidable!"

Violet takes a tuft of petals from her jacket pocket and hands one to each of the girls. After, the girls and Keri bow as Kibou and Violet walk away towards the train station gates further back in the building.

"You think she's satisfied?" asks Violet as Kibou hands over her phone for Violet to browse.

"Like any imaginative story sparking a kid's thoughts beyond the walls of the past, I'll wager she won't forget that," Kibou responds, taking Violet's hand and feeling soft tremors shake through her hands.

"I have no idea what she was going on about."

"You don't remember accepting the administrations' request to proctor next year's exams," replies Kibou, inspecting Violet's scrunched brow. "しょうがないね. I'll schedule a briefing email before the exams, so Keri-san doesn't catch you off guard again." Kibou glances at Violet whose fixation on the phone inhibits Kibou's words. Kibou shifts to her thoughts and thinks to Violet, "vacations exist, Violet. I know a few resorts you would enjoy." Kibou's thoughts intercept Violet's mind and shakes her away from the phone.

During the temporary shift in focus Violet hears a stray, biting but growling "Auggies belong in the trash bin!" Violet looks around tilted with a flash of contempt. She spots a man in torn clothes with a clean peach-colored arm band berating uninterested passers-by. Her eyes tighten but spot his worn through rubber boots. Violet shakes her head and steps behind Kibou who continues to pierce through the swarm of fish exiting the station gates.

Further along at the tick gate, the station attendant spots Kibou and starts to ask for the fare when Violet steps out from behind the orange girl. The attendant recognizes her and salutes. "Deputy secretary! Please go through, miss. My apologies for not seeing you sooner."

CHAPTER TWO

A Change in Tides

Atop the clay platform, the dohyou, Violet drops her jacket and tosses her belt aside. Two pieces of Luna clothing, imbued by craftsmen with enhanced mass to counteract the lack of lunar gravity and counterbalance the mass-augmented, magnetic boots. Kibou plucks both out of the air and carries them over to Violet's boots. Feet away in front of Violet waits, Yokozuna Suimoide, a sumo wrestler more than double Violet's height and wingspan who blots out the view behind him, prompting the spectators to move. Suimoide slams his weight into the clay ring. Each stomp ripples across the lotus image painted on the clay. The crowd shouts and cheers. The referee, adorned in bright green garb, holds the fan between the two fighters. Suimoide places both knuckles on the ground. Violet's fist lingers just above the clay as the moon to Earth. This is the moment Violet halts her breath, the spectators silence. Violet's arm ignites in an explosive fire, dropping the fist into the clay as the first shot in the bout.

Both fighters carve their heels into the clay. As the veil of Suimoide's size wraps the ring, Violet makes no move to avoid a collision. Choosing to charge into the overwhelming size. Suimoide's extensive reach coils around Violet. As he lifts her into the air she springs her leg off the clay ring. The sudden momentum change slips her through Suimoide's clutches. In the low gravity, Violet bounds above him. His feet pummel the clay to shift momentum. As Suimoide's momentum shifts, Violet grabs his loincloth belt. She twists her spine and hyperextends her back. The struggle disrupts Suimoide's feet. This sudden torque, mixed with the low gravity, compels his collapse.

Suimoide's impact craters the clay, similar to an asteroid colliding from space. A dust cloud obfuscates the spectators' view. The crowd shouts out for the yokozuna, but when the air settles, the referee gestures to Violet, indicating her victory. A band of old men

in the audience mumble and scoff as they leave. Beside the dohyou, a crowd lines up with cameras and phones in hand.

Kibou hands Violet her boots and outfit. As she shakes hands and greets the swarm, Violet slips her feet into her heavy boots which seal around her legs. Violet glances at Suimoide, who is rolls into a yukata with the help of assistants.

"Hey, Suimoide-san, come join me for a couple pictures," Violet calls out.

Kibou smiles as she handles the flood of cameras. As the daylight grows brighter and the line dies out, the two fighters shake hands.

"One day I'll get you. No one beats me forever," says Suimoide, slapping his belly.

"Yeah, yeah, keep saying that."

"I promise you, little one, at the end of the next tournament we will have a traditional match. Official and indisputable."

Violet lets out a sigh. "The sumo association will never let me in an official match."

"That lot is old and irrelevant." Suimoide gestures to the now-empty stands and dissipating crowd. "The fans have no need for traditions that impede a good fight," — he slaps his belly several times — "a yokozuna and an auggie face to face, 素晴らしい! I gladly wait for the day I can prove myself against the first auggie yokozuna."

Violet recoils for a brief moment before shaking her head. "These folks prefer to burn it all."

"Look at us. Here, over two-hundred thousand miles from the birthplace of sumo on a barren world. If sumo can survive this, then it will thrive with you. A new era is upon us, little one. Just as we laughed at farming eggplants, but now use it as a symbol of Luna's faith and fortitude." With that, he turns and bows to the ring one last time before setting off with his attendants.

With gentle grace, Kibou takes Violet's arms and slips Violet's jacket on over her combat shirt. "Tired?"

She turns Violet towards a group of young folks wearing the Academy uniform. Each one has four gold stripes sewn on their cuffs

and a metal baton attached to a belt. Violet glares at their fake bands. Violet pats her jacket and shakes out her legs and arms.

Kibou holds Violet's shoulders and whispers, "If you must. Please be kind and limit injuries. I don't want our day to get bungled."

Violet steps into the sumo ring. Her purple eyes pierce the air, looking at these five grunts.

One grunt with ragged hair steps forward, waving his metal baton.

"Your existence is a shame. Do you know that? You're an entitled auggie princess. You think you can get on a dohyou and fight a yokozuna?"

"Flaunting your batons outside the Academy grounds and waving them around, wearing a captain's rank," Violet shouts, "do you want the Academy to kick you out?"

Another grunt shouts at Kibou, "Medic girl, are you gonna be a lapdog for this auggie forever? Do you know what her kind did to us normal people?" He flicks his hand at Kibou, to shoo her away.

"I have one lesson to teach you that our professors do not share until year five. Do you want to know?"

The group laughs but the lead grunt waves his hand, motioning her to continue.

"I thought you might." Violet smirks. "See, by the time you hit fifth year, the Academy has sorted you into those who have potential and those who, well, I'll be blunt." — Kibou reaches up and grabs the metal block on Violet's belt before tossing it into the air between Violet and the grunts. Several small rockets on Violet's boots burst and launch Violet into the air. She grabs the metal block and spins her legs. One set of rockets ceases. The other set rams her boot into the jaw of the lead grunt. The force knocks out a couple of teeth. He tumbles into the dirt, unconscious. Violet lands to the group's side as they freeze.

The two gals are the first to break out of the stunned group. They charge at Violet from both sides. A cloud of dust and smoke conceals Violet's feet. The two wind up their batons to strike. Violet chambers her leg in the air. The burst of her leg up to her waist

tosses the dust at the gal on the right. Blinded by the dust the gal swings early and hits the lingering cloud. Violet's leg snaps into a sidekick, square into the left gal's chest. As she falls back, Violet tilts over her and sweeps the blinded gal's legs.

Violet hears the air ripple. A baton flies toward her. She swings the silver block up at the baton. The block dissolves and reforms into a sword. The baton's two halves tumble down as Violet walks forward to the grunt. She smirks at his clattering legs.

"They gave you the batons as a consolation. When a student does not display the potential to take on higher responsibilities, or any understanding of when to use force, the Academy gives you these paperweights as a reminder of your lost potential. Then they sort you into jobs fit for grunts. Augmented or not."

Violet looks back at the three behind her. Kibou is looking over their wounds and applying medical packets to roughed up areas. Kibou nods at Violet.

"As a dear friend of mine says" — Violet disengages the sword, and it returns to the shape of a block — "'create the future you want.'"

Violet steps over to the ring and sits on the edge. The last grunt puts the baton on the ground and bows. The two left standing rip out the gold bands denoting a false military rank from their clothes.

"You may doubt me—the gods know I doubt myself, too. But I know the stomach churning when the Academy thrives on giving you false choices, dictates your options, or offers platitudes for finding your purpose. But please, this fanaticism only brings suffering. It may take many failures and engage with a vase array of responsibilities, but maybe you will find or create another opportunity. It's never too late."

CHAPTER THREE

思い出 | Memories

During the final night before dawn and celebrations, Violet lays a spoon in a near empty bowl lined with five rings of broth powder, the broth itself settled into a small pool at the bottom. She lets out a hefty sigh into the cloudy air of the small, wood-clad restaurant, lit in a dim amber veil, with no room to stretch out. The windows are cracked open to waft the smell out into the night. A weathered wood board shows the menu. Behind the counter, in the kitchen dusted with grease and vegetable clippings, a lady rests. Her face and arms are wrapped in wrinkles. Her eyes are shut underneath puffy eyelids. Beside her, on the stovetop, sits a cast-iron pot full of vegetables and meat, set to a low, rolling boil. A small altar with burning incense sticks and a long-faded picture rests high above the stove. The blur of one taller figure and one shorter figure is all that remains. In the dining area, Violet picks up her bowl, revealing a deep-set indent in the table matching the shape and size of the bowl. The clink of the spoon and wafting of Violet's sigh stirs the lady to reach for a cane.

"Agh, nah. Sit," her low voice cries out from behind the counter.

Violet responds by placing the bowl back on the table and sips her tea.

"Narantsetseg, was this a new recipe?"

Narantsetseg stops in a groove beside Violet. Her voice rises in pitch.

"What are you saying? Was my Guriltai Shul stale?"

Violet brushes Narantsetseg's frail hands with deliberate, gentle strokes.

"Of course not. The flavors you bring out are the delight of my week. 必ずに, deep and layered. The eggplant's fragrance was radiant."

"What was wrong with it, child? Та надад итгэхгүй байна уу?" She wails.

"Би итгэдэг," Violet says, in a bumbling Mongolian accent. "It's just an unexpected vibrancy. The meat was unmatched. Did you get a new supplier?"

"A drone dropped off a large package of meats from Mars with a message 'No more amino filler needed. Enjoy the harvest.' Child, that jubilation when the first meat after rationing ended back home is something I will never forget. It's miraculous. Opening this package reeled up those same squeals and memories of the liveliest cham dance. Similar to tomorrow's dawn light matsuri."

"Impossible. Martian farms don't toil like Mercury and Venus do for mining and manufacturing. Not near enough, not yet."

"Child, where other than Mars could I get marbled meats?"

"Home?"

Narantsetseg lets go and steps back. Her ears turn towards the windows and front door. "Ridiculous," — she drops into a whisper — "you know better."

"Good to know me then," says Violet, with a reflexive wink that Narantsetseg can't see.

"Don't use your dad's position to get me out of trouble, young child. Heaven knows the Primarch would never let a terrestrial go unpunished."

"How about when I become the secretary?"

"Oh, you'll be too busy flying around SAN to visit me, if you don't smuggle away to Earth first."

She brings the bowl into the kitchen with slow and deliberate steps. Her shoulders pass between the door frame without risk of collision. Violet gets up and bounces over to the counter. She leans over, watching Narantsetseg go through her routine of cleaning and putting away the dishes.

"It'll be my chance to leave," Violet's voice raises and bubbles. "We could fly past the sphere. Get to feel the breeze again. We could visit the ocean. I've never swum in moving water or even a deep pool."

"Nonsense."

"Swimming? Or me becoming secretary to get us out of here?"

"You would never bring me to Earth."

"Says who?"

Narantsetseg rotates in place and bows at the altar. "I left a note for my granddaughter. Told her to follow the Guriltai. Always follow the Guriltai Shul. If she chooses to follow me, then it's my responsibility to guide her. The spirits know I can't find her. Then again, she likely has one of her techy algorithms to find my old face."

She faces Violet. Her cloudy copper eyes are deep-set and surrounded by red. She grabs a nearby spatula and bangs on the counter. "There it is, child. You think this was from Earth? Find my granddaughter, send her to me. Grab your little girlfriend and go beyond the metal cocoon."

Violet's face tints red as she stammers for words.

Narantsetseg jiggles in place, "I hear the way you two speak."

Violet reaches over the counter to slap at her. "Nara!" Violet rushes around the corner and grabs the spatula out of her hand. "That's it! It's late, and you're going to sleep."

Narantsetseg laughs and dances, "I hear when you smile, child. Rare as it is. You can't hide it from me. The Guriltai cannot lie, you know. It draws out our heart."

"Says the lady without one," says Violet, while prodding Narantsetseg to the back room.

Narantsetseg continues to dance, her smile cracking wide as she jibes Violet, "The sun comes up tomorrow; are you going on a da—"

"Enough of your jokes or I'll tell the primarch you smuggled meat from Earth."

"Agh—hush, child! Can't take a tease, can we?" She takes Violet's hands in hers and bows her head. "Hold tight to your dearest lovelies, Violet. We don't get many. Time gives us the vast blue sky and rolling green plains, but takes it all back in the dark of night. The smell of spring flowers gone into the dust. Ashes in time."

As Narantsetseg enters her room, Violet bounds through the restaurant, shutting off the stove and plucking the glow off incense sticks. She closes the windows and clicks off the light before spinning out the door and into the nighttime street. Violet fumbles in her pocket for a key to lock up. The silent street rings in her ears as the cold and stagnant air drapes over her skin. She leans back and faces the black sky. She closes her eyes, the unending expanse of the black night plucking at her fingertips.

CHAPTER FOUR

Storge Agape

Violet's eyes open. Against the backdrop of the black sky and blazing star, the metal orb that veils Earth lingers far beyond her fingertips. She slumps up against one pillar of the Academy's clock-tower peak. Inside the clock tower is empty save for the twinkling light through glass shards, a hanging bronze bell (梵鐘), and the hatch to the chamber below. Violet shakes red trickles from her right arm, wiping it across the few panes of glass still joined to the pillars. Through the shattered glass walls, a light breeze carries a voice up from below. Violet ignores the calls and focuses her gaze on the red puddles in her hands, canyons sliced through her right palm, and the splotches covering her jacket. Deliberately, so as not to agitate the glass shards in her arm, Violet tosses the jacket across the floor, onto the hatch. She flicks at the silver puddle vibrating underneath a pile of glass shards. This puddle trickles around the pile and collects in her hand, shaping itself into a solid block. Violet lets her head fall back onto the pillar. She slides onto her uninjured left arm and fixes her gaze on the metal orb in space.

Kibou pops up through the hatch and spies Violet drifting off to sleep, straddling the terminus between consciousness and slumber. Kibou steps into the room and under the skirt of the bell. She shifts the bell towards Violet and shouts, "Madame Deputy Secretary of State Violet purple girl, the first of her kind!"

The amplified reverberations shatter the terminus and catapult Violet over the walls of alertness. She seizes a large glass shard and jumps to her feet. She sees Kibou's feet scampering in the bell and hears the cackling bounding around the bell. Violet creeps over to the distracted Kibou and snatches her by the legs. She pulls the duo to the ledge and wraps her arm around Kibou.

"Bloody great, now I'm a polka dot," Kibou chastises.

"Jackets are optional up here," Violet says, stretching around Kibou.

"So is restraint." Kibou takes Violet's damaged arm and plucks out the shards with grace, saying, "What possessed you this time? A circuit block? And did you punch the walls?"

"Unintentionally," — Violet peeks at Kibou's disbelieving pout — "at first."

Kibou pulls at one shard that snags on Violet's skin, eliciting a jolt and yelp. Kibou pulls out a set of medical tools to extract the shard. She peers at a metal implant in Violet's arm.

"Show a bit of restraint, I don't let just anyone ins—"

"Care to finish that?" Kibou grins and bats her eyes.

"Inspect my augments." Violet clears her throat and points to the sky. "I think I saw, no, sensed the Earth shield open the other day, the last night before the sunrise. And Nara received a package of fresh meats, supposedly from Mars."

Kibou moves on to applying cleaner and bandages to Violet's arm. "Did your father send it?"

"He barely knows the tea I drink, let alone my regulars."

"Your regulars? Do I have competition?" Kibou says.

"Girl," Violet retorts. "Regular dives, restaurants."

"Alright. So, either you have neural link ghosts in your head or the governor failed to report a transit through the shell."

"She's at a governors' assembly."

"So someone paid off the self-defense forces there? Look at Nara, it's not rare to smuggle through. Unless you have more doubts?"

"Endless doubts. Compounded by Kowa summoning me to the capitol."

"An official summons? As the deputy secretary? Why?"

"Come along."

"I'm not brave enough for politics," Kibou retorts.

"Well. Nara did order me to take you to Earth."

"You hardly need another reason than escaping here. With or without me keeping you company."

"Please," Violet opens her eyes wide and round.

"You just want someone to cover your butt when, inevitably, you call the president 'Kowa' to his face or prick Jue's ego."

"Covering my butt is the loving thing to do."

"None of my tea for a week."

"Then it's a deal. I can get through a week, deprived, surviving only on sencha," Violet pulls Kibou in close. "On a related note, why did you come find me?"

"I heard you crying."

"I was not."

"In your head," asserts Kibou.

"Are you snooping in my memories?"

"No, you were just deafening. But mainly, I couldn't hear myself think." Kibou inspects Violet's bloody palms. "You can push it off, but your body and mind are rejecting your augmentation. If you're not vigilant, something's going to—"

"The Thirty Year is long past. Tech doesn't backfire from a few uncontrolled emotions."

"I don't care if you have a few genetic quirks. Your mind is still human. If you let that doubt get the run on you and you'll lose this arm next time. More, if you let it possess you."

Violet presses her hand atop Kibou's.

"Go ahead and peek inside my head. You're right, I am an empty child. I no longer... You'll hear the echo of silence. I'm void. Void of will. Void of thoughts. Of my abilities." Violet's voice cracks. "There are times when I do not believe."

Kibou wipes a tear from Violet's cheek "Let's see what we can do for that."

"I don't know. This doubt. It overwhelms me and undermines me." Violet turns away from Kibou.

"It sounds as if you need a purpose. Something more than just going to Earth and fleeing SAN." Kibou wraps her arms around Violet and pats her head. "You are wise, but you do not know it. In time you will hear the world."

Violet remains silent with words on her lips as she drifts into her mind.

"Promise me you will hear," Kibou's voice soothes Violet into a rest.

CHAPTER FIVE

Man on the Moon

Uninhibited rays of light cascade onto the exterior shell of a small spaceship, emblazoned with the words 'Capitol Self-Defense Force.'

Inside the ship, Kibou looks through the dome at the myriad people, dots in a sea of metal. The sunlight drapes a boiling warmth on the exposed surface of the Moon. Light warps around the undeveloped craters. Kibou's gaze bounces across the landscape, gravitating toward a prominent mountain chain. The terminus of light drapes across half of the mountain range's peaks. These peaks, watch the domes and settlements, their faces lit by the sun, their backs dark under the shadow of the abyss.

The engine's hum ceases, leaving the direction of the ship to momentum and gravity. Kibou and Violet attach, seal helmets to their compact suits, built for short transit across the vacuum face of Luna. The ship drifts onto a pad at the end of a thin walkway. The landing pad leads up to a tall stone slab polished to reflect the image of those who approach.

The duo leaps out of the ship into the vacuum of space. Violet examines the thin bank separating the two sides of Luna. One side lit by the sun from where they came and on the other side, dominated by a two-thousand-kilometer-wide dome complex affixed to the Aitken basin, blazes as a beacon to those further in the abyss.

The duo steps up to the grand slab. Across the face of the slab is a golden dharma chakra wheel with a single, closed, lotus flower in the middle. Atop the images are silver etched letters in an unrecognizable flowing script.

A moment passes, and the slab begin to relax into the ground below.

Through her helmet's speaker, Kibou points to the letters, "言語? Old hiragana script?"

"I've searched through the Executive archives and no record or explanation exists. Well, other than the one-page saying we know

nothing. If you're interested, that near-blank page is titled 'Lingua Ignota of the Abbess.' The unwritten legend goes that the architect of Luna chiseled it by hand." Violet pauses, casting into Kibou's mind for a firm hold. "But I recognize it."

"You can read it?" Kibou thinks back to Violet.

Violet shakes her head. "I can hear the memory. From very early on. But it could be from when my father brought me here for work."

The interior opens wide to a chamber, the lights rise as the slab does.

Violet points at the lights which trim the walls. "UV and then a disinfectant spray. Then the air exchange. Takes a few minutes for two people."

When the opposing doors open, attendants in formal wear help the duo exit their space suits. Violet pats down her clothes to remove wrinkles and readjust. Kibou follows her lead as attendants and staff step out of the way.

Violet watches Kibou's face beam at the glittering stone and asteroid-inlays decorating the atrium. "Parliamentarians and assembly members convene behind those columns but up above these stairs is the Executive's floor with father's office in the rear as the de jure head." Violet leads Kibou up a broad metal staircase designed to appear floating in mid-air. "When the first primarch forced his way into the Executive they carved out that office similar to the president's over here," proclaims Violet while motioning to the two adjacent offices.

Kibou spies a young woman with hair as black as space, carrying herself high and fixed, wade into the room labeled 'Primarch' as nearby staff wearing peach-colored ties salute.

Kibou points to the office, "Jue is here?"

Violet scowls and says, "I hope not. Nevertheless, I don't degrade my memory with the calendar of a fanatic. Not that the president does much more these days but at least Kowa's technically a governor and constitutional." Violet pauses, ushering Kibou to gaze below and take in the scenery.

"Question. The primarch took the self-defense force and created a pseudo-admiral, minister role out of thin air, but the parliament doesn't try to assert supremacy?" Kibou queries Violet's amused expression.

"Even the most junior members know better than to put an institution built from short-term incentives above the horizon-focused Secretary of SAN. Well, a few generations ago before we endured a president who decided, with the parliament's egging on, that boiler-plate mass augmentation, neural implants, and cybernetic prosthetics were evolution's next best thing. Regardless," Violet says and taps on the door labeled 'President,' "today's porcelain madman."

Inside the office, the duo steps up to the desk filled with stacks of papers. A bland man toils away on paperwork. His prosthetic ears articulate at each of them before he lifts his eyes. Violet motions for Kibou to sit as she steps around the desk and taps her knuckles on the glass wall. Several inches outside, she can see the vacuum, the mountain chain, the domes, and missile turrets unable to accumulate dust or cobwebs.

"President Konoe, I told you about Kibou before, and of you to her. A trusted set of ears is all I request."

The rough scribbling of President Konoe's pen ceases. "はい、言葉をたくさん言う女性." Konoe looks up at Kibou without a smile. "Kibou-san, did you vote for me?"

"Irrelevant, lest I talk too much," Kibou grins.

"President Konoe-Mitsu is acceptable. 日本語を使えられませんか?"

"English please," Kibou says and pauses as Konoe taps a button on his ears. Kibou peeks at Violet who studies the room and wall encompassing window. "At the request of Violet, I am here to ascertain your intentions, and it is much harder to deceive in a second language, ね."

"Second language?" Konoe's ears turn. "Are you saying this in the same way as those people who vote against me do solely because my predecessor Presidents Konoe restored Japanese on Luna? Which they restored, rightfully so, to thunderous applause."

"Please accept my appreciation for the diligent constituent service," replies Kibou.

"Kowa here might suggest working in medicine particularly for our Mercurian and Venusian workforce and the remaining non-augmented communities was a linguistic detriment," interjects Violet.

"Please accept my apologies for the trouble," says Kibou, to President Konoe.

Konoe motions to the plaques lining the walls. Each plaque is etched with the names of prior leaders, service dates, and their stylized name. Konoe's finger bounces between two plaques, both sharing his Konoe surname, with service dates in the 22nd century. "Remember these names. History is built by great men, singular heroes sprinkled across time. For SAN, they were true nation builders who once locked retrograde notions comfortably in the past. The ascendancy and revitalization of our people through technology is a benefit even for those who choose otherwise." Konoe turns to Violet, "Remember their willful ignorance when you encoun—"

Violet interjects, "Kowa, Kibou grew up in the GCW not too far from the Webb district and, in spite of retrograde assumptions, graduated from your university with a distinction in medicine."

Konoe sets aside his workload and leans over to Kibou, "そうですね. How did you escape?"

"Choose as you will. Some say luck or tenacity. Others say fortitude. But this meeting is not about me," Kibou says, while bowing.

"Yes, the genuine spirit of an Apollo!" Konoe reaches his hand out to Kibou. With vigor, he shakes her hand. "I am very pleased to meet you, Kibou-san. We must find a spot for you in the administration. Tell me your augmentation specialization and I will fit you in."

"Didn't you listen to her?" asks Violet.

"I heard all I needed."

Violet rolls her eyes.

"And you endure this one by choice or punishment?" Konoe asks Kibou.

Kibou laughs and wafts the air around Violet. "Sir, not to misspeak, but misinformation circulates about her."

"I could get rid of the air in here easily," Violet says in her mind to Kibou.

"With all due respect to the secretary of state and his underling here: I absolutely admire her tech and her journey, but she was practically born kilometers ahead of those of us, Kibou-san, that Sol didn't make a quirk of nature."

Kibou speaks up. "Sir, if I may speak out of line, thanks to your namesake, the people chose you for—"

"正確のに。Precisely." Kowa looks back at Violet.

Violet vigorously taps on the glass. She catches Kibou's reflection, raising an eyebrow at her.

"Mister president, as much as I enjoy Violet jumping into the sea to land in a puddle," Kibou says without partiality in her voice.

"Kibou-san, I requested Deputy Secretary Violet here to discuss a sensitive matter. A personal and governmental matter."

Violet flicks the glass where Konoe's head reflects. "She stays."

"The matter concerns your dad and the Executive. I recognize your trust in Kibou-san. But—"

Violet strikes her hand out, "Need she write a prescription to upgrade your ears?"

Konoe tightens a fist and says, "Very well. Recently, our parliamentary leaders, Primarch Jue, and myself sat down with my cabinet and the rancorously empty air of the secretary of state's chair. Although Primarch Jue had an extensive tenure as governor of Mercury, the parliamentarians directly stated their concerns regarding the lack of even a year's tenure in the Executive. An inexperienced leg of the Executive and a concurrent sede vacante—"

"Why are you presuming the seat is vacant?"

"Miss Violet, please know that I am firmly against gross speculation over your dad's status. I did not extend a note of this meeting's concerns to the governors. Not yet. That is why I requested you. Per the findings provided from the primarch's

intelligence research unit, there is a widespread network of revisionist dogmatic—"

"Militant?"

"agitators. According to Primarch Jue's reports, they are steadfast in their views. Probably did not vote for me, if at all. Blame all the problems in the solar system on events decades old and—"

"I may be a quirk, but I still age."

"Opportunism is a sweet scent. A scent that attracts wolves. If the parliament or governors or, worse yet, my own voters insisted on replacing your da—"

"You want me to self-promote to acting secretary. You fear the governors will vote for a new governor you don't know or, worse yet, won't toe your line, more than the chance I won't?"

"You are a smart girl. I am proud the Academy sculpted you."

Violet observes Konoe's face scrunch. "That would give fresh meat to the wolves and those who think I'm a quirk of nature. Proclaiming my ascendancy without proof of the secretary's convalescence, or worse—"

"The parliament and governors will accept you, even those with a penchant for meritorious deeds and exemplary civil service results. Leave the politics to me. You are the only sense of continuity on the official roster of diplomats. The representative with a background fit for knowing when to hit someone with words or a foot. Please, for the sake of a stable continuation of a fully functioning Executive. Please. You are no leader, perhaps a silhouette that Governor Ito and I can use. Even so, surely you learned something in the Academy relevant to stabilizing this mess."

Violet pauses, listening to Konoe's clattering teeth. "Respectfully sir, President Konoe," Kibou intercedes. "What are you not telling her? You went from agitators to a mess oddly fast."

President Konoe frowns as Kibou sits back. Violet clutches the edge of his desk with her eyes on the myriad papers on his desk.

"As your president, the democratically elected pillar of the Executive, I have a responsibility to engage with the parliament

faithfully," — he hesitates — "but the absence of the secretary, for two months now, is not acceptable when we have evidence of missing cargo freighters and raids on improvised weaponry caches on Mercury and Venus. Deputy Secretary Violet, I encourage you to heed this call and accept your responsibility as a contingent member of this Executive. On behalf of our institutions and the spirit of SAN, I ask you to stare into the abyss with steely eyes. I need you to contribute the skills I am neither trained nor augmented with. The people's admiration for you, extends beyond policy support or political symbolism. These agitators will see you not as a political hurdle but as a symbol of the state."

Violet smirks at Konoe's pleading face and retorts, saying, "No one even knows me. Maybe a few on Luna, tied to the Academy, but how do I know the survivors of SAN's mandated—"

"正確に。Precisely. For those few off Luna, you are an unknown entity. You stand for nothing. A symbol of nothing. Not a person to hate or love. To fear or jubilee. I can fill the few months' journey to Mars with making you into a star. We can organize remote press conferences and media appearances."

Violet glances at Kibou. "Does Jue share your view? He's never been kind to you. To say nothing of myself," Violet holds up her augmented right arm.

"I shared a vague outline of the plan. The Primarch insisted that we pursue a thoroughly diplomatic and deliberate process to bring these agitators around, back into stability. Particularly for the supply chain's security. For the sake of SAN, we need a competent secretary of state to bring these quarrelsome souls back to their senses so that they will accept the majesty of our nation, our augmentations, and our achievements. And with your indifference or lack of allegiance to any view, wow. 完璧."

"Is Jue mobilizing self-defense forces? Rear Admiral Yikame?" Violet asks, careful to track Konoe's feigned emotions ebb and flow across his face cheeks but not his eyes.

"Only on the margins—a small but firm footprint of troops, to keep infrastructure secure. I should note, the rear admiral is unusually eager to challenge Primarch Jue. Can we chalk that up to

the primarch's lack of tenure? I can accept that. However, he has a loyal following."

"I need to think."

"Certainly," — Konoe gets up to leave the room — "I will be nearby if you need."

When he leaves, Violet taps her knuckles on the desk.

"I know what you want," says Kibou.

"I do," asserts Violet, locking eyes with Kibou. "But it's not this. I can't meddle in this, can I?"

"In peace and war, death comes all the same. You accepted this possibility by agreeing to the deputy position. Even if you did under protest."

"I would never accept yours, so why bother with this? Why risk it all for them?"

"Violet," Kibou whispers.

"I just don't want to be without."

"Do not exist."

"Tell me something I understand."

"Think about a game of Go on a fresh board. Very few pieces set, nothing definitive. Before Fate moves her hand and traps you, what do you need? To find your spirit, that faith in you. See the logical possibilities and natural spontaneity. Embrace the security and control you have over yourself so you can believe in the choices visible and imaginative."

"Closer, but—"

Kibou pats on the empty chair next to her. Violet slinks into the seat.

"You have exactly what you want. Right now."

"Round trip is at least six months. We would have up to three months on Mars making a show of it—We could use it as an excuse to open the door to Earth nations. Gone by which season? Next genbu?" Violet rests her feet on the desk. "Get out of the tower. Isn't that the future you want to create?"

"You don't believe in this choice," says Kibou with disappointment.

"Of course not. How genuine is it? Serve the nation or let wolves eat my father, my ticket out of here, our future." Violet sighs. She gazes between the canyons of paper out through the window. "Sacrifice today to save tomorrow? I doubt I could leave Luna with a mess like a militia. And something about food? Those Martian farms better not be at risk, Nara would kill me for cutting her supply of good, real meats." She chuckles as Kibou brushes her hair. "Maybe I'll just track down my father and punt him back into the arena. Forcing him to face his responsibilities is the least but still penance. Then we make a run for it?"

Kibou squeezes Violet's shoulder. Her warmth radiates through Violet, relaxing her into Kibou's side.

CHAPTER SIX

The Weight of Silence

Outside the ship, space spins in silence. To Violet's eye, Luna is but a receding dot in the blackness. The solar system and expanse beyond dwindle into transient points of light. Within the spaceship's office, Violet breaks away from the window. On the central desk's tabletop, a blue light bursts. A hologram of this ship, en route from Luna to Mars, accompanies digital papers strewn across the screen. The buzz of the room's machines and computers reverberate with the intensity of the displays. She turns her attention to the digital documents on the screen and shields her eyes from stray beams of light. She rubs her eyes and the lights dim in response. Violet engrosses in the digital pile of paperwork and briefings. She yawns. With a snap of her fingers streaming her thoughts through her right hand into the digital world around her, Violet manipulates the hologram. The loose strands of light from the table form a hologram of her right hand's augmentation and a gray amoeba morphing forms of her sword, a gauntlet, short war scythes, a set of claws, a swarm of shurikens, and a metal shinobue flute. Violet unlatches the metal block from her belt.

The silver metal melts into a liquid. Violet's head twitches to the side as a sharp pain and high-pitched tone shoot together through the center of her mind. Her arm whips itself at the window. The liquid metal mass flings off her fingers. Violet relaxes her shoulders and neck, readying for a brawl. Her fingers stretch wide as she raises her arm out to the metal block.

Her thoughts flicker through images of combat and chaotic battle. Violet steadies herself. The dust clouds linger. Through a clearing in the air, a flute melody gallops her way. The clouds part as the sun's rays extend across the rolling green field. On the ship, Violet throws her eyes open. A gray flute flies towards her from across the room.

A strand of the blue light ricochets off the flute and pierces her eye. She blinks. The featureless face of a young boy with purple hair flashes in her mind. The green field shatters into points of light engulfed by a black veil. The black abyss drapes over the surface of Luna. A young Violet lies motionless in the emptiness of the Moon's surface. Violet's heart quivers. A long dragon emerges from the black horizon. Stray light flickers off the dragon's razor edge teeth. Violet shouts at her younger self. The air in her lungs dissipates into the void. The dragon encases the young Violet in its teeth.

The thin blade slices through her palm and forearm. Her thoughts scatter. A firestorm sears through each nerve, tracing through each cell from fingertip to her brain. Her mind cries out for Kibou. The metal sword dissolves and Violet collapses onto her arm. Drips of silver squirm through the red puddle. Violet's mind rages, breaking apart every thought and image into a pile of dust. She claws at the silver metal still reforming until it hardens into a block that she can toss across the room. A faint melody slips through the storm. Violet slips off her jacket to examine the damage. Before her eyes can stay open enough to discern the wound, her hand clamps with urgency.

Kibou torpedoes into the room with a medical bag and a loaded syringe. Feeling Kibou's thoughts peels the edges of Violet's mental storm. The blaze across Violet's nerves recedes. Kibou lobs a squeeze ball to Violet's free hand. Kibou jumps over Violet, clutching at her bucking body, and applies a set of treatments to stall bleeding. After she finishes cleaning, and suturing, Violet rolls aside. Kibou's eyes refuse to move away from Violet's sorrowful purple rings. Kibou sighs.

"I'm sorry," Violet mumbles.

Kibou pats Violet's head and brushes the bridge of her nose.

"Aren't you going to cheer me up?" Violet says.

"Do you need or want me to say something?"

"Your silence pains me."

Kibou pauses and looks around the room. "Evolution is uncomfortable, but neither a destination nor a purpose. Look at this ship. Anyone can use it, but few learn how to fly it, yet they act

disappointed when they don't know where to land. Many more let, or believe they cannot stop, another establish direct control. Violet, where will you land? Where will you stand on your last day? Will that be your own choice, of your own will?"

Violet relaxes, "What if I trust you to take control?"

"I will cry. Because you surrender yourself to the sorrow of impermanence. Attaching to me is attaching your boat to a turtle at sea. When I am gone will waves of a sea that you never endured alone drag you underneath? If you drown under the tempest waves, will you cling to my silence, or will you set your eyes to the stars so that the world around you reaches out with a kind hand?"

As Violet closes her eyes, Kibou applies more medicine to her arm. The duo then move over to the wall and rest. The intermittent waves of pain compel Kibou to dig into her bag for a remedy or distraction. Amid one bout of pain, Kibou recognizes Violet's concentration focus on stymying it as not to show on her face. Kibou reaches for the bag but stops. She gets up and presses on several buttons on the console. Kibou whistles her hymn, a three note melody.

On various screens and in hologram, Violet's eyes fixate on the scene of a small lake encased with ice, touched at the terminus by a barren clearing underneath the tree canopy holding the snow flurries at bay. The computers clip Kibou's hymn and replicate it with the simulated wind through the twisted branches. The ice patches reflecting the image of the enduring growth. Violet looks on with longing eyes.

"I'll build you a cabin," Violet says. "Trees. Everywhere. Your eyes will bathe in a sky kissed by lush green from horizon to horizon. The crinkle of snow under your feet will tickle your ears."

Kibou sits and lulls Violet's head onto her shoulder.

Violet continues, "The snowflakes, gentle drops of the heavens. People on that island live in harmony with bears..."

Kibou's feels the stillness of Violet's slumber. Assured of Violet's quelled mind, Kibou glides her arms around her companion, careful to support Violet's wounded arm. She carries Violet through the corridor of the ship, the music fading, leaving only her whistling.

She strolls along the spartan-efficient and white corridor, unhurried. The small ship assures a quick hop to their room. While they are alone in the ship, the only area with personal decoration is this area.

Kibou lowers Violet onto the disheveled side of the bed next to a shelf displaying small wooden figurines and a cup of green tea. Kibou raises the sheets over Violet, careful not to wake her. Kibou's whistle fades, merging with the silence as she looks off into the abyss.

Isolated from the universe and suspended in time, the two sail through the star ocean.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Weight of Ignorance

The dark veil of night permeates the small bedroom of a young Violet. Pictures of her family adorn the walls. In the pictures, the four family members smile, but only the two with purple hair and eyes resemble one another. One window, abutting the ground outside, accesses the view of dome and metal Earth beyond. A wood dresser, chiseled with the image of a lotus breaching muddy waters, hoists a wood statuette. The statuette's horned water buffalo head stares at the young Violet with three eyes carved deep. It raises a flaming sword with its right hand and caresses a lotus with its left.

The wall beside her rumbles. The wall muffles the cries and shouts that assail her sleep. A thud rocks her bed. Violet wakes, looks at the statuette, and wraps a pillow over her ears. The shaking of the bed rattles the water from her eyes. She clenches her teeth. She looks askance, up through the window at the uniformed passers-by strolling in the night paying no heed to the verbal tsunami beneath their metal entombed feet. Returning to the statuette, her blood churns with the ferocity of a buffalo stampede. Her heart drums the beat of a typhoon whacking at the shores. Violet slams her feet against the wall, as if to prevent it from buckling. The intermittent cracks of punches interrupt the dull sobbing through the wall. Violet's jaws do not cease their compression determined to mold diamond. She cracks a tooth and yells. The pain inflames her blood. Her eyes lock on the statuette. She throws herself up, legs primed against the crashing verbal waves, and catapults off the tsunami beaten wall. Bounding between the walls, she grabs the statuette and blasts through her door.

On the ship, Kibou tosses a soaked towel onto a pile of them. She pulls Violet, shaking and flailing, back from the edge of the bed. Beads of sweat snap away into the room. Kibou pats her dry and swaps pillows. Violet strikes at the empty air, and Kibou dodges. One of Violet's wrathful strikes craters in the mattress underneath Kibou.

Through their neural link, Kibou watches Violet's night terror memory unfold. Kibou deflects Violet's punches and kicks with one hand and brushes Violet's cheeks and hair with the other.

Young Violet's eyes open to a room lined with books, illuminated by a dim amber light. The young Violet touches her face and snaps back from the pain of her bruises. She twists around to gaze at a mirror. Her face is purple and swollen. A bandage covers her right arm. She disconnects from the pulsating waves of pain by contemplating the room's decor. This unknown room is full of as many maroon wood fixtures as books. She stretches out across the long lounge chair, and lets out a breath as she slinks back down. Her fingers pluck at the heavy blanket resting on her. Her toes wiggle free. Peering down past her legs, Violet sees an open door and a darker hallway beyond. Voices from beyond the door rattle the hollow candle flames in this unknown room.

"That is exactly why," one man's voice says, exasperated.

"無理. I won't hear of it," replies another voice.

"Enough!"

"Bloody foolish you are," retorts the first voice.

"I am not a politician or an empty mind confined in a concrete box," replies the second man with defiance.

"Then bloody why did he put you in charge?" the second man says.

"I am a garden caretaker. I can cultivate the research and guarantee project continuity."

"Is that all we do now?"

"We work in silence until the right moment comes. Whereas meddling in politics makes us targets and risks exposure."

"We're not bloody dormant. It is our responsibility to build our future."

"Non-action—"

"Is a choice. An immoral choice."

Violet's ears tune in to the shuffling of feet outside her door. The amber light illuminates a young girl outside sheepishly peering in at Violet. When they make eye contact, the amber-lit girl ducks out of sight. The floorboards creak.

"聞こえます。あの声はお父さんがかもしれない。"

The girl pokes her eye around the door and places an x-symbol over her mouth.

"Is this your home? It's warm and soft. Can I stay here longer?" Violet says, switching languages in response to the girl's hand sign.

The girl wraps herself around the door frame.

"Have you seen my brother? Hair like mine."

The girl nods her head.

"Is he in this house too?"

The girl shakes her head.

"Did my dad bring me here?"

The amber girl nods and reveals more of herself.

Violet looks around the room again, and points to a shelf stuffed with medical books. Are you a doctor? Or are your parents?"

The girl holds up one finger.

"Is your mom helping my brother?"

The girl nods and slips behind the door again.

"Did I hurt the teacher?"

The floorboard creaks once.

"Are you scared of me?"

The floorboard creaks twice.

"良かった。I'm glad you came to check up on me. It's okay to be shy. You don't know me." Violet says with a smile.

The girl peeks out, and Violet draws in her legs to make space on the lounge. Hesitant, the girl walks over and joins Violet on the lounge.

"My name is Kibou," she says. "よろしく願いたします," she continues with unnatural pronunciation.

"Thank you for having me stay here today, Kibou, and for your mom helping my brother. But he's tough. It wasn't the first time."

The young Kibou's eyes squeeze shut.

"I can protect him," declares Violet.

"You can?"

"ずっと。兄弟の絆よ。" Violet holds a thumb up, "I'm responsible for my brother. Always will be."

"What if you're not around?"

"違う。I have to be. Mom and dad went to the Ebisu shrine when I was born, and the white crane priest said I was born to protect all the worlds, from the core through the belt and into the expanse. It's why the spirits blessed me with these eyes."

Kibou's eyes widen as she listens to Violet and takes the purple pools.

"That's why they sent me to the Academy's junior school. And it's super fun. I get to run around on buildings, fly in spaceships around Luna—and there's this tower where you can see so far out, like, all the stars."

"All the stars?"

"So many. It's impossible to count all of them."

"Can you see Earth?"

"Not through the shell. But I can in pictures and VR. It's so green and blue. And there are a lot of animals. Not just for food, but everywhere, in the forests and trees. Oh, and these cute little bundles of red fur."

"Fur?"

"Like arm hair, but enormous. It's soft, like a pillow."

"Can I see it?"

"I can take you there one day. Dad says he has old friends who live on Earth now."

"My daddy has Earth friends too!"

On the spaceship, the bedroom lights strobe a soft white light alerting the occupants to rise. Violet digs her head into a pillow. The wall speakers radiate the sound of footsteps on regolith, imitating a bustling morning street on Luna. Violet groans but submits. Eyes half closed, she shuffles towards a wall panel but trips on the pile of towels and pillows. In haste, she wipes her face clear and tosses a towel at one of the strobing lights.

Time passes. Dressed in her gear, Violet walks through an airlock into a cramped shuttle. Smoothly and delicately, she slips

around the plethora of switches and screens, squeezes herself into a chair next to Kibou, and straps in.

"Did you record an arrival piece?" Kibou asks.

"I did each week's media piece as Kowa requested. If folks in Gendai don't know that I am arriving, the blame is on him." Violet throws her arms up in protest. "I'll think of something during descent and do it live from here."

One of the primary screens displays the image of a massive structure and their flight path towards Mars.

Kibou flips a switch and speaks. "Orbital shuttle one departing from the Kanzeon Arc Loop. Proceeding to Tianlu Eight. Inbound to Gendai Spaceport. I have the deputy secretary aboard. Requesting immediate transit from the terminal to the Gendai capitol building. Please confirm the receipt code." Kibou flows through a series of commands and controls.

"O S one from KAL to GSS. Deputy secretary confirmed for the Gendai capitol building. Tianlu Eight is active for velocity suppression," a voice from the speaker replies. "Hold," the voice commands. Silence lingers before the voice returns. "Oddly, the computer updated your route. You will proceed to Tianlu Four."

"Four? Isn't that for excess capacity because of it cuts through the orbit of Deimos?" Violet cuts in.

"You are correct, ma'am. Oddly, the computer decided it was best for you. You may know more than me, but I guess it's a last-minute change for dignitaries. I am uploading access to your shuttle now. Tianlu Four will shoot you right across the bow of Deimos. Take in the view while you can; you are in luck to see it up close."

"Understood. How are we doing on the ground?" Kibou says.

"Our horizon is clear and our tarmac defrosted. The sky is yours. Welcome to Mars."

The red orb, splattered with a hue of green and streaks of blue, turns in place. Two asteroids suspended in orbit, ferry the red orb through the dark expanse like horses before a chariot. In the distance, a spoked wheel rotates. Exploding out of one spoke flies a metal chimera. The gold light of Tianlu Four (天路四) illuminates its

wings for landing in atmosphere, body of a claw to merge with the inbound shuttle, and tail replacing the detached shuttle.

Inside the shuttle cockpit, the screens repeat warnings and depictions of the shuttle separating. The ship shakes and jostles the duo in their seats. As the warnings subside, the sudden pull of Tianlu Four's claw attaching almost sends the two out of their seats. The twists and turns of the juncture rock to a calm.

Kibou glances over at Violet's arm. "Any spillage?"

Violet pulls her jacket arm down to show the lack of damage.

"See, I told you. That'll be fine before we hit separation,"

Kibou says before returning to the controls.

The cockpit window retracts, and Violet lets out a breath in awe. Deimos is unveiled right in the center of their vision. Its proximity blots out the red planet. The smooth appearance softens the edges of the wide craters. The landscape of empty desolation washed by the cosmic abyss holds firm against the scars of cosmic collisions. The silence of Deimos percolates through the shuttle.

Violet leans back in calm until a sharp cut digs at her chest. She pounds her chest to contend with a sudden burst of palpitations.

The duo sails beyond the tail of Deimos dotted with metal-lined craters and fields. Tendrils of metal wriggle out from the metal craters across the tail. Charred metal and black stains scar paint the metal craters.

Violet peers into the sea of metal craters. As the tail passes from view, she shifts in her chair to get another glimpse. The image of something small but irregular near the craters lingers in her mind. Until the red orb of Mars ascends into view.

The red patina of ages long past peels away as green fields pop up around streaks of blue. Thin white wisps levitating above the ground push at the great titan of Olympus Mons. Dense pockets of gray metal scatter across the face of the planet, further pushing back the patina.

Violet unlatches from her seat and drifts against the window, staring at the menagerie of color.

"Deputy secretary." Kibou's voice rolls through Violet's mind.

Violet jolts out of her trance, and pulls herself back into her seat. Watching a live video of herself, Violet pulls down her floating hair strands, smooths out her jacket, and sits up tall. Kibou reaches over and presses on a dial.

"The rising red gem. The natural essence of soft grasses and delicate trees, life as we can know it. This aspiration serenades our people to stability and prosperity. A gem is fragile. Under a thin veil of air, we look across the rusted expanses of our second Earth, dreading the day when Fate might turn on our settlements, on our aspiration, and cackle at the spirit of SAN.

"This beacon in the veil of night is a testament of the fortitude atop which our decision to forge a home in the abyss endures. A gem is unbreakable. Our time now is one of unity through liberties. Prosperity through faith in our fellow aspirant's potential.

"With a secretary of state's spirit, I will engage with you, feel your concerns, and tackle your fears, as we restore life to Mars. Gendai is a beacon of our collective endeavor to strive. Gendai is a destination for those who embrace this striving. Gendai is a place of peace for those who suffer Venus' natural oppression, Mercury's burning duality, or the lonely silence permeating the asteroid belt.

"Upon landing on Mars for the first time, I will meet you with open arms as myself and in the role of our people's chief diplomat. These messages to you during my travels are what I remember fondly about this journey and how it is the seed of a lively future. An immense change is inbound and I will promise all of you on Mars, I will leave no one out. I will hear all of your joys and cries. Yet, I cannot create our future alone."

Violet ends her speech and caresses Kibou's hand.

The shuttle skids across the upper atmosphere. Kibou and Violet take the helm and tame the wild bucking of the shuttle. They break through, and the white clouds give way to sprawling grassland and pastures. Babbling brooks snake into wide rivers.

The Gendai Spaceport is a dense block of buildings surrounded by a web of enormous tarmacs prepared to catch the humans flying through the night. One road stretches between the

spaceport and dense city in the distance. One tarmac shimmers, as a signal to the shuttle. Over the radio, a burst of static and muddled voices shoots into the cockpit.

"—bor—"

"Flight control repeat," says Violet.

"—rt. Atta—"

Inside the mental tunnel that is their neural link, Kibou and Violet share a thought. Violet unbuckles from the seat and grabs the metal holds as she makes her way into the back of the shuttle, where she opens the bay doors. As the aborted landing passes the spaceport, she examines the terminal hub engulfed in a shootout.

A ragtag bundle of trucks encircles a dozen armored security vehicles. Uniformed troops take aim at the insurgent guerilla forces. The guerillas lob flaming bottles at the vehicles. Several crawl across the field under the cover of guerillas inside the terminal, in vehicles, and atop the building. One set of the guerilla forces spots the shuttle and turns their guns towards the ship, but the bullets cannot match the agility and speed of Kibou's piloting.

Violet spots a tall flagpole on the roof and connects her thoughts to Kibou. In the light breeze, the SAN, Mars, and Gendai flags labor to wave. Violet stretches out her hand. She remembers training sessions each against dozens of enemies. The strain on her muscles. Hard landings and collisions with stone walls. The grunting exasperation of her fallen foes. The tension she felt, staring down the next enemy through a cloud of dust. The silver block trickles apart and streams to her arm. Her mind draws up the image of her wielding the wood statuette, bloodied, standing over a cowering man as a bruised younger boy with purple hair stares. The thin halo of purple surrounds the black hole of her expanded pupils, engulfing the whites of her eyes.

The shuttle returns towards the terminal hub at speed bucking against the thin atmosphere's drag. Violet peers from the oncoming rooftop to a small pursuit truck carrying a guerilla shooting at them. In her right hand, the silver swarm materializes as a short war scythe. Violet clutches it tight and steps back. In her mind, Kibou shares the sight of the flagpole through the cockpit.

Violet catapults off the interior wall, diving out of the shuttle. The air rolls across her face and arms, inciting the hairs to stand on end. Embraced by the wind, her thoughts separated from those of wrath that created the scythe. Violet twists in the air, launching the scythe at one of the attacking guerillas. Descending towards the roof, Violet reaches out. The scythe slams into her palm and the sudden change in velocity throws Violet toward the pole. She holds the scythe out and the metal collides. Like a tornado, she spins around the pole. Sparks from the metal cutting into the pole ignite a blaze. The flames torch the flags and spread out.

As Violet spins, Kibou moves the shuttle back out of proximity to the firefight. Her vision spots a wide shot of Violet's fire and the stunned combatants below. Kibou pushes the image to Violet, causing her to detach and fling at the tarmac.

The enflamed Violet flings herself down into the guerilla forces, toppling them with ease. The halo of flames and embers blot out the sky around Violet as she towers above the cowering militants. Flames scorch her hands, bellow out of her arms, burn her shoulders—and her boots add to the image, burning with pulsating waves of fire.

As if seeing a fire dragon shatter the heavens and deliver a raging storm, the combatants on both sides drop their weapons. For the few holdouts shaking in their boots, Violet extends the scythe. In it, they see a flame licked reflection on themselves. These remaining militants submit.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Planet on Fire

A convoy of wide, low-to-the-ground cars stretch across the lone road between the spaceport and the skyline of Gendai. The convoy rolls past the scattering of dust fences and the periodic underground rest stops.

The interior of one car is wide enough for both Kibou and Violet to sprawl out on the plush bench seats. Violet uses with her singed jacket as a pillow. Upright beside Violet, Kibou engages in a back and forth with an elderly man with his deep black hair tied back in a bun, scalp stained by black dye, sporting a suit with a pin of the Martian flag.

"Traditional thought regards tenmei as harmony. With reservations, I work with this sub-optimal categorization. You will see tenmei implemented firsthand be it at the ranches, the height of our buildings in Gendai, and lack of those problematic dust storms. Each design element springs out of merit," the old man speaks faster with each sentence.

"And you believe that harmony will ensue from ordered terms?" Kibou asks.

"Where there is order in terms, there will be order in actions. It is innate."

"Hoping the problem will shrink because of a few rightly ordered words on your reports," Violet cuts in. "We can't control ideas or thought by erasing a few words that make us uncomfortable. You understand this, Governor Ito, no?"

"Our people do not use the same words. Let alone the same language. What chaos comes of that? Ask yourself. If we ask fifty people they will yield fifty answers. A government cannot thrive on this chaos. Do I need to articulate the Analects to you?" Governor Ito says.

"You would mandate what we think, and punish us for saying the uncomfortable words? Maybe I underestimate why people want

to rebel."

"This Kimomo group, did not start on Mars nor during my tenure miss deputy secretary. Or is it acting secretary of state? How can anyone pay you the proper respect without clarity? Kimomo refuses to use words that acknowledge the bounty we give workers. Complacency and compromise to sub-optimal ide—"

Violet sits upright and stretches out. "It's natural for a river's stream to bend and flow. No mountain stands forever. A government that does not adapt is a mountain weathered away by the people," Violet presses. "Your, our responsibility as a government is to see through that evolution unfolds without conflict or sorrow and for SAN."

"You should not lecture me on evolution. You are the beneficiary of tireless nights and years of our submission to your existence," Ito says and turns to Kibou. "How is that neural link you two share?"

Kibou hesitates. "How much have my parents told you?"

"I was there at the inception, Kibou. Your parents deliver updates. Same with your dad, Violet. I know you two have made a success of the neural link and that you kicked out your dad after the terminus run. Precisely, how did you? To unite minds was a dream of a dream, made possible by right order and structure. But to isolate your mind is another feat entirely," Ito says.

"Without want," Kibou states.

"You let others in and too often they have a plan or goal." Violet pauses. "How can you open your mind, memories, past, and future to another? Your soul to another?"

"Which parts of her mind, what she has," — Ito leans in and whispers — "does it bleed through into you?"

"Full images need sustained concentration. We've been able to manage data latency across Luna. Local transmission is best, and the Node King system keeps communication instant across the expanse," says Kibou.

"We could transmit images between brains since the millennium began. This is intimately feeling another person's existence."

Kibou takes Violet's hand and clasps her fingers between hers. "Have you ever encountered the depths of silence in a person? When she gazes at the infinite possibilities of the night's sky. Searching through time and one's mind on a bridge of light. The light of stars long ago ending their journey in her eyes. All that could be."

"You shouldn't need a neural link to understand another person, governor. By the gods and myriad spirits, I'm not letting you use this as a tool to impose your corroded ideas on our people," Violet asserts and pulls Kibou over to the window.

The convoy rolls past fields of green and the outer fencing of ranches.

"How much food do we have?" Violet asks.

"At the end of last suzaku, SAN's stockpile of natural food surpassed amino since Earth closed generations ago. Some indoor farms continue to operate. All the amino factories are in the retrofitting process. I spoke with President Konoe about this recently, and we agreed to announce this accomplishment once you resolve the corrupting instability Kimomo incites," Ito says.

"Does that include the colony ships and belt?" Kibou asks.

"Ask Governors Tsuchimo and Meio. I sent the Damokuresu a supply."

"Governor. What happens if Kimomo burns your farms?" Violet asks.

"無理だよ。Impossible. Our security for—"

"Heed your advice and choose your words with care. Who here is the one person pierced by a million needles, an entire body's worth of accelerated cell regrowth? Do you know that intensity of pain? But why might I be in pain, now? Because your security forces failed to intercept and suppress one of the first insurgencies since the Thirty Year Crisis, and one of the most prominent assassination attempts."

"I too am confused. The Kimomo are known to be peaceful, albeit with a troubling zeal for world renewal rhetoric. Read over the primarch's reports."

"Now I'm thinking he twisted his words, just like you did."

"You may be an acting member of the Executive, but you are not immune from treason. Why the Kimomo are now using weapons, I do not know. They were peaceful. A headache, but peaceful. And now they appear to know your schedule well enough in advance to organize an ambush from within and without the spaceport, with munitions. Yes, this troubles me."

"Think long and hard on the implications of your words, Governor."

CHAPTER NINE

Peach Blossoms Scatter in the Spring Breeze

The first waves of an inbound gale rake the leaves off several thin trees lining a cobblestone plaza. As the waves of wind ensue, the temperature drops. When the capitol tower's shadow wafts over the plaza, those assembled and squeezed together by security forces and barricades huddle closer by choice. The mass of people mingles in clothes and scarves of vibrant colors and chaotic patterns, and miniature bells. Their skin and complexions are vibrant and unweathered.

The security line opens a barricade for Violet to enter the plaza. The cold air, fresh and unfiltered, tingles Violet's skin. She removes her jacket and wraps it around her waist. She inhales the aroma of flowers and scents plucked out of the world by the wind. That same wind animates a halo of purple strands above her head. She enters the crowd, shaking hands and listening to the people's greetings. Violet trips over an extended foot. She collides the crowd, setting off a cacophony of bells. An old lady reaches out to Violet, but she makes eye contact with a short girl with pig-tails slipping between the crowd. Violet crouches down and smiles.

"ビオレットと申します," Violet introduces herself.

"Why did you steal my daddy?" the girl says without blinking.

"I don't know what you mean."

"You won't let my daddy come home."

The girl retreats into the crowd, and Violet squeezes through the mass of people calling out to her, asking of her, and shouting at her. The little girl leads Violet to a bulky man with scruffy hair sitting on a stone wall, scraping his knuckles on the stone. With a hop, the little girl floats onto the wall as the man hands her a box of snacks.

"I'm here to help you create a future," Violet says to the two. "And that starts with children. How can I help?"

"If you expect me to understand any of that, you're more of a selfish, ignorant, entitled child than your propaganda wants me to

believe," the man says.

"She wants me to bring her dad home from Mercury? Venus?"

"Your president promised reform for miners in the core. What we got is a blind eye from Luna. Increased pressure to install augments, you lot know we squish and break, right? Pressure doesn't make us diamonds. Did your government forget the last generation? Oh, and more lies for why we're still mining next to robots. Lies about what we're doing out there when our local production and the asteroids are enough for construction."

"Are they forced to work?"

"No, but that's rumor of what comes next. Luna removes ships from the core and forces them to work forever."

"I may be from Luna, but we're all in this together—"

"I've heard your government's shi—" — the man's baggy eyes glance at the girl — "fting propaganda." His voice softens, "Don't raise her hopes just for it to come back crashing."

"Mister, I may be ignorant of the experience inside Venus and Mercury. Reports and video only reveal so much, right? I can concede that. But I am not this government. I have my own issues with Konoe, Jue, and—"

"The primarch is the only one on our side. He's the first to know what it's like out there, and he does more than offer hush money to the families while spreading useless government mottoes." He grinds his fist into the rock to which Violet shifts backward. "Do you know the pain of being over fifty-five million miles away from my family? Her dad? My partner?"

Violet sits next to the girl. "I try not to. No matter how instantaneous the Node King relay internet is, it's no substitute for feeling the warmth of another's hand in yours."

"Your dad is the secretary of state and appointed you as his deputy. With him gone, you are in charge, right?"

"A decision made for me, not a choice made by me," Violet mumbles.

"That doesn't matter. You're the secretary now. You can override interplanetary agreements. You could snap your fingers to

set it right."

"I doubt I can." The words slip out of Violet.

The man takes the girl's hand to help her down, "Let's go, chippie. She's just another good for nothing auggie politician." As Violet starts to call out he turns to her again and laments, "Are there real humans on Luna anymore? Does SAN want us?"

Violet holds in place as the two depart. Her arm creaks like a branch in the wind before dropping. Violet concentrates and connects with Kibou, "Please order Governor Ito's team to follow that guy. I want to talk with him outside this environment. He might be more open at home. Also find out his name and the details of his husband's case." Violet conveys in her mind. She returns to the crowd to take pictures and shake hands. As the city lights flicker on and the sun lowers, she leaves the crowd and enters the capitol tower.

In a spartan conference room, Violet stands at the window. The crowd of people outside is larger. She listens to the footsteps and introductions of many suits, as they filter into the room. When they settle into their chairs around the conference table, she looks back at Governor Ito. Beside Ito is a lady with hair as black as space. The young lady carries herself high and prances to the seat beside Ito. A staff member delivers a cup of tea for each person.

"I appreciate if you understand my need to remain standing, endure gravity again. Please, you need to discuss. Go ahead?" Violet says to the group.

The man opposing Ito speaks up, "Deputy secretary, I appreciate your attention to this matter in the secretary of state's absence. Governor Ito here assured my brothers and I that a member of the Executive will be here."

"Marion! Acting Secretary Violet is here with the Executive's trust and expressed authority," says Ito.

The room is reflected in the window. With her back turned to the meeting, Violet narrows in on the lady beside Ito. Her smooth motions and dark veil of hair draws in Violet's curiosity.

"Acting! You mean pretending. Fake. A lie! Another bald-faced lie from Luna and you. The word of this government is nothing

at worst and imperfect at best," says Marion.

"You are the one with no grasp on what words mean. My administration, elected by the people of Mars, fulfills its end of remuneration packages. Why do you refuse to admit our generosity? Money, housing, furniture, front of the line healthcare, family stipends, family education. Do you want me to spend an hour detailing everything? I have the proof; the interplanetary compact provisions are explicitly and detailed."

"Actress Violet, are you listening? This is the disparaging treatment we are fighting."

"Fighting? You admit that your conduct intends to incite conflict. Is that what you want?" Ito slaps his hand against the table.

"That is a turn of phrase," Marion says through a scowl.

"Phrases? What else does Kimomo do? You only spit out phrases that incite conflict, with no mind for harmony," Ito says with a finger poking at Marion.

The room falls silent, neither side looking each other in the eyes. The young lady whispers to Ito. After a long pause, Violet turns around and leans on the table.

"Hello, Marion."

"Hello," Marion says with curiosity.

"Why don't you speak Japanese?"

"It is Luna-centrism."

"That doesn't mean a thing," Violet asserts.

"Easy for you to say."

"Why do you make everything into a battle? Does it send a self-important tingle through your bones? I hoped that you wanted to speak in multiple languages, to let us freely express ourselves, to declare that it's not up to politicians to dictate what we say. Anything with intent or meaning."

"Go back to Luna, you machine."

"Would you say that to the daughter of one of your members if she needed a new heart, or an autonomous circulatory system?" Violet asks with a measured tone.

"I don't deal in hypothetical questions."

"You choose hate so single-mindedly that you cannot accept modern medicine. Really?" Violet takes a sip of tea and glances at the young woman's smirk.

"That's not why we are here. Yours is the government that is single-minded in wiping out natural humans with your zealous fanaticism, fetishism of augment—"

"So, the issue is government?"

"This government. The one that routinely kicks our back into the dirt."

"The government that doesn't force anyone to work in the mines or factories of Mercury and Venus? The government that rewards those workers and families far beyond what administrators in this building will ever earn? Or the government that 'rumors say' will come for them?"

"You cannot understand. What are we without our hands? Without our humanity?"

"Then tell me. We have never spoken, and you can't find a word in either language to explain yourself. So, either I believe everything the government says—"

"It is a waste of time to speak to a machine."

"Says the man acting like a program designed to output meaningless hate with no higher-level processing power to at least pretend at a purpose."

Marion's eyes catch Violet's unflinching, unblinking glare. Her purple eyes brighten against the blackness outside the window. He turns away and rubs his brow.

"This is getting out of hand. You are not listening," Marion mumbles. "We will reconvene when the real secretary is here. Not with this child who does nothing to pay respects to those mutilated by the government during the Thirty Years." Marion leads his group to the door.

Violet shakes her head and scuffs the floor. "The building is closed. We will reconvene in one hour, Marion. That is a directive from me, under the authority as acting secretary. Return with words reflecting your intent. Or at least something Kimomo wants."

The young lady whispers to Ito and leads the rest of the room away. Ito remains sitting in his chair, picking at the table's edge.

"There is no distinction between a circus," — Ito sighs — "and Kimomo leadership. This group of leaders we sit down with is hell bent on causing a problem for you, me, and the Executive. If they return with articulated requests, that will be the most notable breakthrough yet."

Violet recedes, opening her ears to the sounds outside while examining the old man's labored breathing. "Ito. The young lady is your new chief of staff?"

"Correct."

"Tell me why your prior chief of staff left."

"She received a retirement package from Luna. Everything is proper and proceeding forthright," Ito says with a gruff bark.

"I get that part. But from which bureau?"

"I assumed that the secretary of state's bureau sent it. Her background is relevant."

"And this new young lady's name is?"

"I asked my team to send the briefings. Did you receive the briefings?" Ito asks.

"I got them, but they included nothing on her."

Ito rolls his eyes and scoffs. "Wu Lysylia. Young, yet she rapidly gained rank through merit and competence. The primarch's office gave her glowing reviews and testimonials. Lysylia worked with Governor Jue before his promotion. But what impressed me most during my interview with her was a story. I believe it was a story of the first woman emperor of China. Emperor in her own name. She cultivated an expansive bureaucracy capable of revitalizing the Mandate of Heaven and bringing prosperous harmony. That is the ideal we need to strive for today, ever more so."

"A chief of staff has access to Mars' systems. Including the Kanzeon Arc Loop and spaceport, right?"

"Your verbal implications are deft." Ito takes a sip of tea.

"I am concerned," Violet says.

"Do you believe your paranoia? Do you accuse Primarch Jue as well? Consider the implausibility of that."

"I saw Lysylia in the capitol before Kibou and I left. The same day, the moment before Konoe caught me up and turned over the primarch's flawed intelligence reports," Violet says and pauses, staring at a nervous Ito. "Someone with access to Executive-level intelligence and spaceport security. Oddly, the Kanzeon computers rerouted on my descent."

"Since your arrival, you have spoken with paranoia and trauma. Treason in my administration? On my watch?"

Violet leans against the window and peers at the assembly. Several people on the fringe pass out handmade signs with the image of a muddy catfish squashing Governor Ito, saying 'end of remuneration packages.' Violet flicks the window and shakes her head, "Predictability is red meat for wolves. And you are a predictable old man."

CHAPTER TEN

The Peach Blossom Spring

Violet, with sharp eyes and a firm gait, hastens through the glass maze of offices inside the capitol. Bystanders peak through the walls and over desks. At the end of one hallway she spots Lysylia sporting a grin under frigid eyes, leaning up against a window looking down on the assembly. Violet yanks the door open, ripping off the handle.

"Miss acting secretary of state Violet, I apologize for the lack of a proper introduction." Lysylia extends a deep bow. "The circumstances ripple into this pond. Unfortunately protocol ever so lightly scatters. Please forgive me."

"I've never been one for formalities."

"Governor Ito insists upon them, and as his faithful deputy I abide."

Violet notes the sharp angles and red complexion of Lysylia's face. The rare but familiar-feeling shape of her eyes. She steps over to the window to see people filling in the side streets.

"Miss Violet, if I may speak without propriety, you look uneasy and paranoid."

"Your name is atypical, if I may be casual."

"You remind me of my mother. She too upends tradition and expectation. However, her field of battle is the mind of the masses, politics. Your people know the story of Lord Kiso, right? Loyal yet envious. Achieving the highest rank with thanks to his fortitude and grit, yet, for a moment no longer than it takes a petal to drift on the winds. An estimable warrior who knows nothing beyond the field of fist and blade. Considerably uncivilized and brute instruments of conflict, don't you think?"

"Assassination is not civilized and, to many people, considerably brute."

"Please. Look at how a few meaningless lies expose your fragile civilization. How eager these people are for a firm and

dominant hand to rescue them from this abyss," Lysylia says. She slams Violet's hand on the window. "Have you ever heard the tragedy of the Peach Blossom Spring?" Lysylia's tone hardens.

"Momotarou is—"

"I see not. Your ignorance is understandable. The Peace Blossom Spring is not a story often told." Lysylia reaches out toward Violet's jacket collar. Violet flinches back, but Lysylia straightens her collar and pats off the red dust. "Ages ago, when the Earth was young, on a spring day not too unlike this, a fisherman—let's call him Ryoushi—ignorant of the greater world and passive to its whims, let the waves of Fate usher his small vessel through babbling creeks. Fate caught Ryoushi and she drug him across still ponds, through water long veiled from the natural sun by thick cherry blossoms." Lysylia tugs on Violet's jacket, close enough that Violet can feel her breath. "Do you appreciate the aroma of flowers, Miss Violet? Or do you jump at the taste of cherries?"

Violet sees the faint image of herself in Lysylia's vibrant copper eyes. "I have never had the urge to pick fruits."

"You and Ryoushi are not dissimilar. Neither of you stop for the aroma of cherry blossoms. Lulled into sweet slumber by the currents below, you miss the chance to pluck at the blossoming flowers above, and so you miss the sweet nectar at a fingertip's reach. As for Ryoushi, little did he expect to bathe in the sight of an unending forest of tender peaches."

Violet twists out of Lysylia's grip, causing her to tweak the hand holding Violet on the window. Violet steps back and places a hand on the silver block.

Lysylia shakes off the tweaked wrist and leans on the window. "The villagers along the riverbank were ghostly pale, surprised but friendly. Welcoming. They had joined for a bountiful feast under the peach blossoms, coexisting and sharing without hinderance. Their natural authenticity shocked Ryoushi. 'Ah! Your village has not encountered the outside world since the Qin dynasty?' Ryoushi excited in amazement said after the villagers showed no sign of

plagues, political strife, material desires, and the facetious promises of progress.

"Needless to say, the villagers reacted in dismay at his tools of metal and fire used to kill the masses, compel the natural man to break his hands and back for the self-proclaimed rulers under heaven. They asked, 'What heavenly mother replaces her bountiful earth with metal men?' The naturalistic villagers resisted hearing more, for it physically pained them. Their pain withered the trees and bled them into an early winter, their leaves falling, their fruit rotting. Fearful, the villagers begged Ryoushi to leave. He did, but he demanded saplings, trimmings of these trees, and help in creating a new boat capable of carrying an emperor's ransom." Lysylia knocks on the window and waves.

Violet's ears tune in to the shrieking of wind and eruptions of chants outside the capitol building.

"Tell me, Violet. Will you demand a ransom? Offer payment? I will permit you to leave now without repercussions. Go away quietly, live out a calm life. Lord Kiso never received the mercy I extend to you. If you want order and peace, then do that. Fate wants this of me. You need not get in the way. Do what Lord Kiso did not so many centuries ago. Do what Ryoushi could not."

"Call them off, now! There is no reason to riot."

"If only it was that easy. See Violet, I knew that no one likes to think their own life is their responsibility. So, I spent years affirming that. Casting blame for their unhappiness on an organization that you, stupidly, gave your face to over these past months. And I, too, will give them a savior. Only Ito and those foolish few who oppose Fate need to suffer. You can leave. Do it now, before you get hurt."

"This has nothing to do with me."

"It does now. You inserted yourself into my plans. You asserted yourself over those who I made believe fight for liberation. Liberation against machines that cannot understand natural humans and thus are destined to oppress humans. But nature always kicks back. Incidentally, that is another lie they were so eager to devour. The first bite into a ripe peach, its juices wet their lips." Lysylia's

eyes drop and her voice drifts off, "We're just dying to submit our minds, aren't we? So pitiful."

Violet snaps her left fist up at Lysylia's dangling chin.

"Violet!" Kibou's voice tunneling through their mind's link freezes Violet's fist.

Lysylia looks at the lingering impact gravitating off her horizon. She clutches Violet's jacket with both hands and slams Violet against the window. Violet's head cracks the glass.

"You, Kiso, Ryoushi, the masses, are headless chickens eager to be the meal for greater women and men. When Fate writes history in eternal stone, you will be nothing. You are nothing. I am the daughter of Fate. The heavens mandate my ascendancy to the celestial throne. As the great khagans once raised the flag of peace across the sky, so too shall we raise the flag across the sky and heavens. One throne, one voice, one law. It is the only way to rid the world of sorrow."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Fisher of Men

Violet storms into the conference room, jarring those assembled on each side of this old, rooted table. Governor Ito spills his tea over his suit. Marion chokes on his tea. Violet takes Lysylia's empty chair to the end of the table and taps a lever to lift the seat. Violet sits and leans over the table at Marion.

"Where is Lysylia?" Governor Ito asks.

"Marion, please answer truthfully," Violet says while ignoring Ito. "Do you oppose my participation because I have even one circuit of tech augmentation?"

Marion continues to choke on the tea. The person beside Marion slaps his back.

"Marion, look at the powder keg outside and realize the immutable fact that you can either throw the match or snuff it out. Peace will come from your honesty, right here and right now. Would you..." Violet trails off and freezes.

Marion clears his throat. "Yes, Miss Violet."

"Would you feel better if I chopped off my arm?"

Everyone around the table reacts in surprise and with quizzical faces.

"ビオレットさん何にいついて—" says Governor Ito before Violet chops at him.

Violet takes off her jacket and places her right arm on the table. "Would. It. Help?"

"Your having the arm implants does not exactly," — Marion stumbles through his words — "see it is about the principle. Implants inherently dehumanize and open the door to unknown horrors. Many of us remember the phantom screams, neuron storms, incurable comas, loss of senses, and the atrocities that pained our families so that your government could continue its zealous, dogmatic crusade of expansion into the abyss. Is SAN going to repeat that folly? Did

you see the leaked communications implying another megaproject exists?"

"I don't know what megaproject this is or why that should matter to us in here," replies Violet with dismissal.

"It hides in the light of Sol and is insatiable. The demands on our mines and factories are unparalleled. Shifts extended without warning. Sleep cut short. And for what? For what? The last time you people hid the truth, thousands laid petrified with incurable comas. The fact that I know more than you two do is troubling. It proves to me another fact, that you are the wrong people to meet with."

"Do you have any proof of this? Wouldn't those in the core broadcast this across SAN?" Violet retorts.

"See, that is the problem. Why is the burden of proof on us? You rule on our behalf, you are ours. It's on you to prove that these aren't lies. But you won't, because you still treat us like pitiful underclass—"

"Please Marion, stop with the self-pity," Ito interjects.

"You send our families into these hells to mine resources for your implants, ships, communication nodes, artificial air, amino acid factories. These are all the bounties you use every day without even thinking about the toil. When was the last time you thought about the humans digging out the metals for your machines?"

"With exceptional treatment on return," Ito proclaims.

"You see us as tools that money or metal limbs can replace—"

"We reward your sacrifice. Rewarded!" Ito interjects.

"Can you not hear yourself?" Marion retorts.

"Would you like to carve out autonomous territory on your own worlds? Would that help on Mercury and Venus? On the asteroids, too?" Violet says trying to cut in.

"These jobs are honorable! A fact you refuse to accept!" Ito slams the table.

"Then you burn your skin in those pits," bellows one of those on Marion's side.

"うそ! The robots are there to prevent that exposure. You know better!" Ito volleys back.

Violet stabs the window with her sword, inciting cracks through which the assembly's chanting crashes as a verbal tide against the two sides. "Marion! Ito!" Violet continues, "Please put your egos aside. I ordered you to return with goals, articulated desires. What is it that Kimomo sees at the end of these talks? Progress? A blossoming utopia set aside from SAN?"

"No, no, no. That's your government's desire. Project Pure Land, is it? Your dad was right to hide from us. We know SAN is planning to remove us. Throw us into the sun?" — Marion's face burns red as he bangs on the table — "Your pure land. To keep it such a secret even from you, Violet—it's another impending calamity. Konoe, the secretary, even Ito here, they all put you here to take the fall. Why else would they choose an empty girl whose only merit is being a quirk of nature?" Marion shuffles back into his chair.

Violet's piercing eyes flip between Ito's delegation and the Kimomo delegation.

Marion clears his throat and straightens his suit before addressing Violet. "Acting Secretary Violet. Kimomo humbly and firmly requests the following concessions. A retreat from the asteroid belt and outer system, as promised after the Thirty Years Crisis. Recall colony ships and outposts beyond the asteroid belt. Needless to say, we demand an end to the practice and consideration of using human labor on the inner planets. Last, an end to further human augmentation."

"Put the burden of development squarely on Mars? Forcing our settlers to breathe a polluted atmosphere so thin we would blot out the sun! SAN policy prohibits replicating the folly of Earth," Ito interjects.

"Earth is clean and stable by now, right? They can pollute again. They can keep the shell and use it to purify the air and water. Meanwhile, we live in peace." Marion and Violet lock eyes.

"I can recall the Damokuresu colony ship," Violet says with a nod.

"How do we validate this promise?"

"Governor Tsuchimo will reassure you with—"

"We want access to the systems."

"You can have remote tracking, and when it gets close to Mars, I'll let you put a couple of observers on board."

Violet locks eyes with Marion. They nod in unison.

"We will discuss your other whims. Those demands go well above a single member of the Executive," Ito decrees.

"We will return tomorrow only if you send out an order to recall the Damokuresu today. And you express your willingness, to President Konoe, that labor ceases in the core," Marion says.

"And as an act of reciprocity, you must call off the assembly," Violet replies.

"Honestly, we did not organize that assembly. However, I will tell them of your promises."

Both sides pack up and depart, leaving Violet and Ito alone. Violet looks at the assembly and dissolves her sword. Ito rolls his knuckles on the table and grunts.

"Miss Violet, governing is akin to cooking a small fish. Do not be too desirous to have things done quickly. Without the proper, soft and sustained heat, the fish will burn and char. The chef, our government, cannot compromise proper conduct for the customer's untrained palate or impatience. If you char the fish, regardless of the customer's demands, the chef is at fault for delivering a failed dish."

"Governor," — Violet chuckles — "you're starting to sound like a Taoist. If I didn't know your record, I'd say Marion infected you."

"Are you accusing me of degrading the Analects? Never!"

"Twice the pride," Violet whispers, noting Ito's inability to hear this. She wrinkles her nose and addresses Ito. "What would a wise man, such as yourself, or the master, say about this situation?"

"Look at Marion and Kimomo. Their mind is consistent; it creates actions desirous solely for their own comfort. This bias pollutes their eyes and thus they think they have no place. A man concerned that he has no place does the world a disservice by refusing to look for a place in which to fit. Maybe their status in society is too high? Such a height inhibits virtue. You see this mirrored in the sub-optimal nature of the heavenly deva realm."

"I am concerned that you are so quick to condemn these men because they have faults? Who doesn't have faults? You think little of the potential to change, or even the merit of the spirit within. Did the master not extol the validity of observing a man's faults to know his virtues?" Violet replies.

"Let's examine Marion's character to identify virtues. His verbal actions incite conflict through impropriety. With this chaos, Marion obfuscates his motivations and attempts to inhibit our discernment. But I am much wiser. I can see through the veil. There is no ignorance in my eyes, only truth."

"Double the fall," Violet whispers to herself. She picks up the teaspoon from Lysylia's cup of milky tea. "A wise official is not a utensil. The virtuous government introspects and inspects. I wish to do the latter now, hopefully, to ascertain the truth about Kimomo. If Marion is truthful, this is not a protest. It is a powder keg, and we don't know who will be the match."

"Do you believe in what you are saying? Do you, Miss Violet? You act like you know what we are trying to achieve. Your father would be ashamed to listen in on this. You, of all people, spouting propriety, reciprocity, and justice. I am not weak or pliable. I am righteous and filial to SAN. And if they do not disperse, I will assert control."

"Ito. Is this where you choose to stand? Behind the trigger of an execution while excusing it by corrupting the very ideas you profess to hold?" — Violet storms off to the door and pauses — "Do not burn this home, please. Recompense with justice and kindness. Compassion is without want, without desire." Violet looks back at Ito's stale expression. "Confucius' lament was not over the lack of propriety, not entirely. Rather, it was over man's persistent inability to look inward at his own faults. Can you accuse yourself, Ito? Can you take responsibility for life?"

Ito thrusts back his chair and bowls through Violet, pushing her back into the room. The lights in the office and the entire floor dim in Ito's wake. Violet sits on the floor by the window. The wind whistles through the crack. The empty chairs loom as tall peaks of

an empty abyss. Erupting rancor now turned to sustained quaking upending the capitol building disorients Violet.

"What do I do now?" Violet thinks in her mind to Kibou.

Deep in her mind, Violet opens the door to an empty room that links her mind to Kibou. The room swirls and flickers into existence. The dim amber-lit study from their childhood manifests. In their mind, Violet lies on a lounge, looking up at the ceiling's undulating wood-carvings. Kibou walks in with a steaming cup and a black teapot decorated with lotus flowers. An end table forms from orange wisps. Kibou rests the teapot and cup on the table by her side. Kibou leans over the Violet's eyes, their faces inches apart.

"What is it you want?" Kibou asks.

"A quiet home with you. Lysylia gave us an out."

"Can you smile while on that path?"

"No. By the time we reach the sphere, SAN will fall. Kimomo is abusing that fragility. But I don't know who's in charge. If Lysylia is right, this is where SAN falls and we're seeing the tail end. Like walking in on Ceaser's assassination midway. We could leave. My new authority can open the shell."

Kibou massage's Violet's neck, getting her to relax. Kibou says, "Detach from me, SAN, Kimomo, your family, and your death. Everything that pulls at you or rings in your ears. Detach from it and listen to the wind."

"How can I detach from myself? What if I do not believe in myself, in my choices, in my spirit?"

"Hear the doubt. Feel it arise, and deconstruct." Kibou raises Violet. Kibou wraps herself around Violet while handing her the cup of tea. "Where it once was, now it is not. It becomes anew. Doubt too is impermanent. In the boundless state of equanimity, so too are love, compassion, and joy. In a gentle mind, these are immeasurable yet not infinite. If you seek to cease doubt, cease the aggregates, and cease existence."

Violet gazes into the rippling tea. "How can I change billions of minds, all of humanity, in a moment?" Violet takes a sip of the tea.

"The house is burning, but the family inside cannot hear the cracking flames, the roof tiles burnt loose and breaking on the ground. To them it's rain, peaceful at worst. Being inside and expecting them to wake up to the emergency is dangerous, improbable," Kibou says.

"How do I pull them out?"

"Not how. Who?" — Kibou pours Violet more tea — "From the who arises the how."

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Testimony of Shadows

Jousting the veil of night shines the bright skyline of Gendai in the distance. Along the road, catfish windsocks wriggle in heavy winds. Red dust veils the stars. A convoy rolls up to a modest house and Violet steps out, alongside armed security. She waves at the man and girl inside and motions for the security to remain outside.

"Don't let up now. She will follow us, looking for an opening," thinks Violet to Kibou.

Atop the porch, the little girl from the assembly and her dad step out. The man moves his body for the security to see his empty hands against the house, lit in the night. His daughter leads Violet through the house to the back porch. She shows Violet a small garden of eggplant and vegetables, then has Violet push her on a swing. Her father brings water over to the bar connecting the inside to the enclosed backyard.

Violet leans on the bar and chugs the water as the man continues to shuffle his hands behind the bar. She takes in the clean air of this backyard bubble, defended against the dust storm by a thin layer of glass. Over the bar, she looks at the inside of the home. Ornaments, family pictures, and mirrors line the walls. Violet relaxes until her eyes spy the repetitive fidgets of this man's hands concealed behind the bar. She jolts up and clutches the empty cup.

The man says, "She asked what it meant that you recalled the Damokuresu and 'is the purple girl a new friend?'"

"I trust you said 'no'." Violet says with a puff of dismay.

"Can we cut the small talk?"

"I'm not one for forced hospitality. I'm here to learn more about you, and about what's going on between people shooting at me and protesting Ito."

"A buddy told me those suits you met with left content. Not that their smile is reason to trust you."

"I want to land this ship without a fire. Please tell me your side of the story. What do I need to know about you, your husband, those people outside the capitol ready to riot and burn SAN?" Violet requests.

"Did you get him transferred out of hell?"

"Leon is on his way home. I took the liberty and arranged a shuttle for you two to reunite with him on Luna. Your choice of resort. When I was her age, I enjoyed visiting the gravity parks atop the magma dikes with my friend and her family."

"I appreciate the gesture. And I'm glad you recalled the colony ship. I'll rest better when every settler returns. Man isn't born to be in space, Violet. The further we go... No one understands this abyss until half your world vanishes." The man's face gets taught, and he stops fidgeting behind the bar.

"Daoshi, respectfully, I want to hear your view of the larger issues Kimomo brings up in meetings out of SAN's view. Labor disputes, augmentation, this feeling of alienation."

"How could you understand my view? A machine cannot embrace the wind or shed a tear at the somber grace of a sunset. What did they really put in your arm? Do you know? Do you even suffer pain? Emotion? We can't disturb the body without disturbing the mind. The further we go, the more SAN tampers with us. Cyborg eyes is one thing, I can see the help they offer. But they linked your mind with those nanobots, right? That ain't right. How do you know SAN ain't uploading fake memories and thoughts into you?"

"You keep separating me from you based on your perception that my tech makes me non-human," Violet insists. "Why can't you see me as human? Sure, I have purple hair and eyes, a robot arm, and other tech, but I still have doubts and feelings. I came here with the desire to talk. Without the air of government or riot. Just as two humans trying to survive in a fragile solar system."

"That is the trouble. You try. You force. Your efforts diminish any natural spontaneity. That is why you cannot understand our turmoil."

Violet plants her face in her hands and spews a frustrated breath.

"So, rather than use the elections, you're planning a system-wide shutdown, a revolution? For what tangible purpose? Someone's gotta pick up the trash, filter the water, operate the Node King communications relay, build the underground cities, supply radiation treatment. You think Kimomo can handle that?" Violet wails. "What world does that leave for your daughter? Rubble? Dust?"

"Liberty to live."

Violet sees his lip trembling and grits her teeth. "Live in what? You're right, this world is not a natural home. We live in a bubble, thin and precariously perched in a void of nothingness. In spite of the void, we choose, every day, to build a home. You may disagree with Governor Ito's government organization here or the entire SAN government, but please, find it within yourself to reject this zeal devoid of substance, possessed by platitudes. Don't make an empty child of her." Violet leans, splitting the suspended air, and the man's brow hardens. She squints and halts her breathing to hear the resonance of metal scraping metal.

"The daughter of heaven will usher in a new sky. Under the peace blossom sky, there will be no fear or dictation. She will liberate us from control and doubts. This is the will of heaven. Fate mandates it."

"You focus on utopia but refuse to acknowledge the blood spilt through history for the same. Utopia isn't coming. There is no mandate. That is an antiquated notion. We can't force millions from SAN to Earth just because a few of you have this notion stuck in your head. I'll work with you to relocate. I'll open the shell on Earth. If you are so eager to leave that you would burn this world, I will intercede."

Daoshi shakes. His eyes lower, and ears pick up on the girl playing. He glances up to see Violet's passion crests across her eyes. Daoshi rocks in place and drops the gun he was fidgeting with behind the bar. The gun clangs on the floor and a deafening boom rips through the house. Daoshi slips. His daughter looks over to see Violet soaring over the bar top to stop the fall of her dad.

Violet lands beside him. She hears the stampede of security guards. She removes all the bullets and pockets the gun. A shriek

from the front door's wall slam, erupting in more shattering of glass, stings her ears. She tries to steady the man, who continues to tremble. The security guards blot out the light above him and Violet. Violet waves her hands at them to disperse.

"I think an electrical box blew out," Violet directs the security away.

The man clutches at Violet's arm and pulls Violet in closer. "Kimomo is the Way. It is neither spoken nor heard. When the senses are undivided, you live the spirit of Kimomo. Those in the capitol are not leaders. Kimomo is spirit through the undefined. Kimomo is security through the uncarved. Only when dust settles on the modern age will nature restore itself. In nature exists only being." His hand grips Violet's jacket with a ferocity that forces Violet to twist his arm down. She sees the veins on his forehead balloon and releases the pressure. "Violet, you seek to apply justice in the vacuum of kindness and kindness in the vacuum of nature. Nature begets justice begets fairness. Where there is nature, there is equanimity."

Violet stares at the man and pushes him away. She gets up and pours water into an amber cup. "I showed you mercy once. I will not again. Kimomo is a threat to the existence SAN achieved without Earth. 'Liberated from the cradle. Aspire for the stars.' The SAN ideal brought us peace. Yes, issues pop up but nothing we can't fix."

"Life cannot grow under a cage of metal. Not until we return to the Way."

"What good is pontificating under the dangling blade that is the vacuum of space?" Violet's eyes carve into him. She looks off at the child. "Now go get on that shuttle. Be a dad and fulfill your promise to her."

"What promise?" He says recoiling.

"The promise of love. Your commitment as a parent! To provide her something to appreciate, rather than hate." Violet waits for a response and in its absence, she continues. "Right now there is a shuttle to the Moon. Luna. The one place in SAN where you can spend every waking hour gazing at Earth. Do me a favor, Daoshi, call

up everyone you know in Kimomo. Tell them, tell them this one message. If Gendai falls, atop the ashes of millions, is where they will stand."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Must the Moon Fall?

Violet lies on the dusty Mars roadside, observing the dust storm rolling towards Gendai. The crisp blades of grass sprout between her fingers. She rolls the dirt and dust between her fingers, plucking out the rough patches only to dissolve. Violet's mind stills. Silence bangs away on her eardrums. The sparse lights of homesteads ignite the dark. Violet looks to the dance of satellites against the backdrop of stars twinkling in the fouled atmosphere. The ruckus in her ears quells, and she listens to the drumming of her heartbeat. One arc of one light, not too distant, ceases. The shimmer of this light ripples the purple ponds of Violet's eyes. Violet dives into her own mind.

Violet slides a translucent, paper-screen door to the puff of chilling air. After the first brush shocks her skin, she sits on a cushion and inhales the aroma of a thick green tea. Her ears pick up at the crinkle of snowfall on the icy pond and the caw of a crow taking flight, stirring the last leave of a tree.

The scratching of a heavy door opening breaks Violet's tranquility. The wood walls of the home creak as if shrinking away.

"Deimos," Violet utters.

The pounding of footsteps crack open the wood beams of Violet's room. Hot air billows in and presses against Violet, stirring her to scoot forward. Strands sprouting through the straw mats surround her.

"Polite guests wait for an invitation."

"Tides wait. Evolution cannot," says a tired and ailing man's voice.

"You need a medic," Violet replies, scooting forward up against the terminus of the door.

"You—"

"Kibou, her mom and colleagues—they know how to diagnose and treat you."

"received an investment in education unmatched for decades. You studied the classics with the wisest teachers. Every lesson was medicine for the mind and spirit."

"You will dread invading my space. I kicked you out of my head once, if that not enough? Now you come here and give me a tunnel into you mind. Your eyes are mine, your memories are mine. I know where you are and I will direct SAN, or Kimomo, to your bedside."

"Gendai doesn't need me," — he lets out an avalanche of deep coughs — "Violet, you are fit to lead and teach them. Please listen."

"Authorize a one-way trip to Earth. Ideally before—"

"You can't find peace on," — he struggles to breathe in — "Earth. Zetian is a moment with no challenger. She embodies retribution without end."

Violet bites her tongue and collects her thoughts. "If you won't work with me, then I'll drag you from Deimos myself."

"I fled here to give you time and opportunity. Please, take up the charge and lead—"

"No. Nothing about me is fit for this."

"You do not believe that you have a choice. That Fate decided you must fail?"

"I gave up more than SAN ever wants to surrender, but they're still furious."

"It is not anger. It's corrupted ideas and polluted passions, Zetian, Lysylia, they orchestrated the polluting of," — his coughing and struggle to breathe strikes and lasts for minutes — "decent people's thoughts. She tainted their views and plucked on fear of more intolerable acts against our people. SAN's failure to prevent and repent for the Thirty Years was fertile soil."

"I represent everything they dread about SAN. If you want me to lead, then tell me how to rip out every one of my augmentations. Starting with this link you forced into me and get out of my head."

"A leader cannot bend as a reed in the river or fall as a blossom in the summer wind. To lead is to rally the belief and spirit

in one another." He laughs. "I desired an auspicious name for you, Himiko, hoping you'd grow into the role, but he thought Violet evoked sprouting on one's own while reaching for Sol."

Violet catches the dismissive tone drown out her name. She clenches her eyes tight and pauses before remarking, "You can live in the past alongside the rest of them."

"Fate wants to unravel the progress and aspiration," — he fights to breathe as his lungs seize — "I dread it. I cannot let Gendai fall to her. If I leave now, she will take you away from us. I dread that more. You are the symbol of evolution, we—"

Violet hurls her teacup at the voice's source, into the oven of fire pressing at her from behind. It flies through emptiness and shatters on a wall.

"Fine, I'll bring you down myself," Violet says with tense eyes.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Fate's Move: 手筋 | Tetsuji

In Gendai, Violet sits on a bench near where the assembly and protesters rallied before the dust storm. She gazes in contemplation at the people strolling from buildings to stairwells leading into the ground. The martians parade in gowns and long coats splotted with irregular patterns and shapes - turquoise, mint, walnut, creamy white. A group of kids wearing school uniforms and identical backpacks cross through the assembly. Violet smiles at them and they wave back.

Kibou hops from the capitol with two steaming drinks in hand. Violet smiles and scoots across the bench for Kibou.

"It's warm," Kibou says, handing one cup to Violet. "Have you decided?"

"Ito's team is prepping a hopper behind the capitol. I can offer my father up to Marion, then call for an emergency election for governors and the parliament."

"Retribution and modest representation. What of those with endless hunger?"

"I don't know. Part of me thinks ostracizing the fringe is more risky."

"Pulling at a loose string often unravels the shirt. An alternative option is to sew a cut string back into the shirt."

"That's a path fraught with even more peril. I don't want everyone to hate me."

"Embrace them as sisters, as brothers. Without want."

"I cannot," Violet asserts.

"Do you remember the tales of Guanyin?"

"Even if I say yes, you're gonna remind me," Violet says, and wiggles her nose at Kibou.

Kibou pokes Violet's side. "When Sol graced this park earlier, it was a welcome relief from Luna, and a pit of fire. A fire rolling

over old logs that, if the tenants knew better, would later collapse and ignite once air from the world outside rushed inside the home."

"A pit of fire with a blade above my head."

"Compassion soothes old rot and gives quarter as we build a new home," Kibou says while yawning. "I need to rest soon, Violet."

"No," Violet says back, with a trembling hand on Kibou's shoulder.

"Not right away. But soon, tonight." Kibou pulls Violet's arm around her. The lights of the surface soon extinguish and the stars gleam. They enjoy the starry night.

Kibou lays across the bench. "Before I go, did you get to see the girl?"

Violet glances at Kibou's knowing face and scoots closer. "He was ready to shoot me," — Violet's grip collapses the cup — "right in front of his daughter."

"And he did not?"

"He wanted to, was ready to shoot. But when he fell, why did I vault over without thinking? I even hid the gun from security."

"An open hand has more potential than the power of a gun."

"Can you take my place then? You care for these planets. People are more fond of you too."

"Only you know how fragile humanity is, how close the terminus is to us."

Violet takes in Kibou's eyes and sees the silhouette of herself. Violet retracts and says, "I have no way. I'm nothing."

"Nothingness is everything. Your lacking is their gain. Yet, in truth, their gain is part of you. Nothingness is ubiquitous."

"And if I use their bullets against them, then what? Is their loss mine too?"

"Absolutely. Wrath is a precarious form to take. It breeds unending negative pollution in you and this world. Such a form requires immense strife and realization for you to manifest the mind capable of withstanding the sorrow."

"You doubt me," Violet whispers.

"I will never doubt you. The proper form always viable because it's inside each star, plant, cricket, catfish, human, and

violet. Ever since the Big Bang, right? If you believe in that choice's existence, you can become the benevolent wrath. But to harness the consequences that pollute the world, to reshape them into wisdom, understands emptiness within and without," Kibou says, brushing Violet's hair.

"That's what everyone wants." Violet's legs and arms shake. "I'm their empty child. A book without words for a story another writes. A machine with an input and an output, with no individual will to see for miles."

"If anger stirs your blood, act with a mind steeped in compassion. I believe you will be kind." Kibou's eyes lock with Violet.

"Compassion requires cooperation. Not a bullet to an empty hand."

"Let it resonate inside their mind. It is universal. Imagine the water on Earth, it flows through all life. It fells mountains and breathes life into deserts," Kibou says.

"We don't have time to erode mountains," Violet's voice wobbles in her throat.

"A padma does not bloom before it rises above muddy waters."

"I'll be alone in mud," — as Violet speaks, Kibou wipes a droplet of water from Violet's eye. — "and usually that's when you —"

Kibou cranes up and pulls Violet, leaving no space between them, eliciting a light blush. "If Fate dictates that, or by the invocation of a wrathful form, I cannot remain at your side," — Kibou takes off her padma pendant and slides it onto Violet — "I am with you, forever." Kibou embraces Violet. "There is more to emptiness than absence." Violet's arms pull Kibou closer.

Time passes.

Kibou lifts Violet off the bench. "Go enter this world for the evening. Hear it, feel it. As when night turns to day, nothing is still, not even death. Rage or wrath, let it yield to compassion and kindness shooting across the heavens. In the change, a padma blossoms. ほし未来を作って."

Violet watches Kibou stride into the capitol. When Kibou vanishes, she weeps, wipes her eyes, and struts towards one stairwell.

Descending into the light, Violet sees packs of people, few elderly individuals among them, streaming past one another without order. She notices people collide only to bow their heads and smile. Outside one establishment, a humanoid robot passes desserts to a family. Several izakayas, small bars packed with women and men sharing drinks. A child, sitting on his dad's shoulders, waves to Violet. In the corner of her eye, a group of young adults showcase their textbooks to a merchant. An older woman, with exposed wires pinned to her skin, receives a coat from a seamstress.

Violet locks on to the railing. Her boot lingers in the air, ready to step through the terminus of the stairwell, when she notices a floating black box. She swipes at this unfamiliar box while it extends a lens. The box zooms over a band of gamelan and woodwinds instigating the central player to change pace. The pace ripples out in a moment to surrounding ears.

Violet wrinkles her face in reaction to the chaotic melodies and ambient crowd. She leaps into the crowd, out of pace with the mass of people. She skids between a jumble of people and collides into shoulders. Violet bounces through the river of colors, unable to latch onto any voice or sound. She grins at people taking pictures of her. Her head spins, trying to locate the source of those calling out to her. Violet ducks into a dim corridor with one establishment at the end. The wooden facade and incandescent copper light catches Violet's eyes.

Violet brushes her hand across the facade, feeling her fingers glide through the valleys and slopes. The pulsing drumbeat of life around the corner dulls as she opens the door. Inside, Violet scans the bar and tables. Other than with her breath, the air inside does not move. Dozens of large men in dull, monotone tunics fill the sparse interior. Several rattle near empty glass bottles at the bartender. Above the bar is a loft more spartan and empty than the rest of the room. Violet's ears perk at the incoming ripples of air.

Violet twists her body around an incoming glass bottle. It shatters on the door behind Violet.

"Die. 死ぬ. 死ぬ! Die!" an old man bellows from the bar. His girth slouched across the bar top. "You don't belong here girl."

"I came here for some quiet," — Violet gestures to the outside tunnels but hits her hand on the black box — "ow, ah cha. It's deafening out there."

"Who asked for your opinion? Freak of nature can't shut off her ears?" Another man yells from the corner.

"Funny." Violet walks further into the room. "If you knew me —" More waves of air collide with her ears, prompting Violet to swing and bat away another bottle. The shards veil Violet. Within the glass veil, a thousand points of light reveal the numerous solemn faces cowering, the brutes burning red stomp the ground, and the box fixated on Violet. One shard shimmers with a copper tint.

"Marion's boys told us you trying to patch things up," says a man at a nearby table.

Violet opens her palms and replies, "A good faith—"

"Liar!" The man shatters the bottom of his glass on the table's edge. He waves the jagged bottle at Violet. "全部. All. Everyone."

"Moving thousands of workers without a plan could crack our stability."

"Then force one of you auggies get to go in our stead. Fair is fair. Get it done," another man wails.

"Anything her kind says is a lie," says an old man. "SAN took my brothers away in its desire for more asteroid mines. Thanks for the putting their lives and family's love to a shallow bank transfer. I got over a thousand drinks left before I hit that number, you know that?"

That man's tipsy and slurring words rock Violet's determination. "There's no difference between us!" Violet bats away more glass bottles. "I just want to live my life in peace, too!"

"At our expense."

"No. I don't want to be here."

"That makes two of us," moans an old man with a caved in skull and metal-fiber patches sprinkled across his exposed skin.

"I keep listening, wanting to hear a solution, but since the moment I landed on Mars, Kimomo shot at me—"

"Peach blossoms under a yellow sky," the old man says.

"Repeat that?" asks Violet.

A large man steps to Violet. He bends over to face her. The entire room follows, encircling the two.

"Imagine the bouquet of blossoms in seiryu as we shed the chains of this frail order built on our back for the sake of your survival." The man says. "Peace from ashes."

"Our mighty Empress Wu wields the Mandate of Heaven, and we will be her hands, she will be our eyes. World renewal, Violet, is splendid," a younger man proclaims.

Violet drops her head and stifles her voice with a meditative hum. "I offered my hand more times than anyone else in this government. Kimomo meet me with contempt. You talk of peace and renewal, but your actions are chaos and fire."

"SAN deserves nothing less," says the old man with a caved in head.

His words crack Violet's ear, shattering her concentration. "Oh," — Violet tightens her fists — "and here I thought I had to beat you lot senseless. Good to know you already are." Violet's boots ignite. Her crescent kick whacks the man's jawline square in the center. He collapses on the table as Violet spies the others jumping at her.

Violet bursts into the air, hovering for a moment in the light gravity. With a flick of her ankle, the boots' jets launch her into a part of the group. The impact tosses this group onto the floor and cracks reverberate through the floor. A bottle whirls, shattering on Violet's back. She turns. Several men charge at her, one swinging a chair at her face. Violet weaves under the chair, stabilizes, and flings her leg into a man. She hears the snap of a bone, followed by his shriek. Another assailant throws a punch at Violet. His fist pummels her shoulder blade. Violet darts back to regroup.

A fist flings at her. Violet bobs out of the way but intercepts the fist. Violet bangs her heel on the ground and snaps her arms back into a defensive position. She stares at the man's glazed and watery

eyes tilt down. Violet backflips away, revealing the man's now distorted arm. Violet's eyes scan the brutes, their eyes glued to the contorted arm, and their voices hurling out slurs.

A gunshot rings out, and Violet falls back.

Violet clutches at her thigh. The red trickles over her fingers. Her teeth flash wide like predatory tusks and fangs. Her purple eyes darken and grow large. Rising to her feet, Violet's war scythe materializes. Several men bolt out of the room. The clearing reveals Lysylia sauntering towards Violet, grinning behind a rifle scope. Her copper eye shines through the scope.

"This may be hard to believe in Violet but I don't want to kill you, Ito, or Kibou. Honestly, you're in the way. But no one rises alone, right? Sometimes you step higher when you put others down," Lysylia smiles and winks.

A bullet plows through Violet's abdomen. She endures it and stares at Lysylia's furrow. Violet grinds her teeth.

"You're mad," Lysylia gasps.

Violet grins at Lysylia's furrow and shock. Using her scythe, Violet excavates the impact site for the metal bullet. Violet continues to stare at Lysylia, who squirms away. The black box recording Violet flies closer.

"Aim better," Violet grunts, holding out the blood-reddened bullet. She flings the scythe at Lysylia. The scythe cuts through the rifle scope and flies over Lysylia.

"You're mad," Lysylia says again but with a hefty declaration and for the black box. "You pushed out months of propaganda, negotiated with Kimomo in bad faith, and attacked these frail old men in cold blood. Well, that is what I'll make you appear as in their pliable, puddy brains. See Violet, my battlefield too is the mind. Not these uncivilized weapons." The black box swings over to Lysylia, who places the rifle scope inside a hatch. "You can't find the truth. Because I create it. The truth is whatever I want it to be."

Violet trembles at the enduring pressure of the copper woman's persistence before recollecting and humming. "Lysylia, queen of the peach tree bandits. On behalf of the Sol Alliance Nexus, with the powers of secretary of state invested in me by

Article One of the Constitution, I decree you traitor to the peace and future of humanity."

"You," — Lysylia lifts the rifle — "are cute. But cute cannot live in this cruel world."

Violet ignites her boots and closes the distance between them. Lysylia volleys shot after shot at her, but Violet circles around them. Violet slams a fist into Lysylia's gut and kicks the rifle away. Lysylia lays out a sweeping kick. Violet flips over Lysylia and springs into a back kick. Lysylia tumbles forward. She shifts her momentum around to face Violet, who connects a meaty left hook to her ear. Lysylia plummets onto a table and bounces off the other side, dazed. Violet hovers in the air.

Lysylia shakes and cracks her neck, sitting among bottles, mugs, and debris from the previous patrons. Lysylia grabs mugs off the ground and chucks them at Violet. Violet breaks most and weaves around the rest. Lysylia throws an uppercut at Violet, who meets it with her boot. The flames torch Lysylia's hand, and she tumbles back. Violet lowers to the ground and steps closer. Lysylia jumps up and tosses her fist. Violet sees it and matches. The two fists collide. Lysylia grunts through the pain and opens her grip. She flicks her hand and catches Violet's wrist.

"And for what? To rule as queen even if you'd force families to forsake their children?"

"You have me all wrong. I will not be a lowly queen," Lysylia stops resisting and flings herself up into Violet's arms. "Heaven's will and desire will adorn my reign as the a celestial empress. I ascend so others may rise. Heaven's will is not to subjugate and forsake; you have it wrong—we will uplift and liberate. No one left to fend for themselves. No one in the cold of night. Who needs a balance of power among states when you strip away that choice? Warmongers will fear our might."

Lysylia knees Violet. She throws a hook to her first bullet wound, while slamming her heel into the other. Violet staggers back. Lysylia follows through with another flurry of kicks. Violet's right hand rises between the them. Lysylia sees this as cowering and laughs.

"I come from a country that knows what it's like to be the punching bag, but do you know who changed that by force of will and seizing the Manda—" her face freezes in pain.

Violet's gray sword slices through Lysylia's leg, sticking out close enough to capture the clear reflection of Violet's eyes. The sword dissolves and puddles around Violet's hand. The blade rises from the amorphous silver amoeba.

Lysylia holds her wound closed with both hands. Her head tilts up at Violet. Their eyes lock. The coppery shine of her eyes reflects off the deep purple ring of Violet's iris.

"So uncivilized, Violet. How does it feel, Violet? To know that every choice you make is a failure?"

Violet slashes at Lysylia's face.

As red drips, Lysylia clutches her face and leg. She drops, sobbing through the pain.

"Why didn't you just leave? You're not supposed to stand up for them. You hate them! I gave you a way out!"

Violet shakes her head in disagreement before leaving Lysylia.

Violet runs up the stairs and towards the backside of the capitol building. Dozens of armed guards push back a steady stream of protestors carrying signs and torches, shouting at the capitol, and at Violet.

Violet halts in silence, gazing at the faces of ordinary people lit by the flames. Scowls and sharp eyes glare back at her.

Violet turns the corner to see the road lit up as a runway. A fixed wing, small hopper jet rests on a platform. Violet runs over and several security guards usher her into the cockpit. The platform pushes the jet vertical. Violet flicks a few switches, and the engine flames roar. The flames ignite the streets in a veil of orange light.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Deimos

Violet's jet pierces the thin veil of Mars. She rises above the clouds and into the abyss, aiming straight for the motionless moon of Deimos. The ocean of stars beyond Deimos freeze. Violet grips the controls tighter as the jet's rocking slows and the ship steadies course. She slows the ship as a pulse of fire encircles the moon. Violet maneuvers the ship into orbit. Small propulsion jets flare up on the nose of the jet, slowing it to a crawl. Violet scans the surface of Deimos, looking for the anomaly she saw when descending to Mars. One navigation screen lights up with the labyrinth inside Deimos. She lowers the ship to the edge of a metal crater. The first descent ricochets the jet. Throttling her engines, Violet brings the jet to a hover feet above the surface of Deimos, away from the metal crater. Violet ceases the engines and in their absence, she takes notice of the creaking metal. Floating through the ship, she taps on various walls, against the latent momentum, to rock the ship into still.

Violet enters the airlock and pockets three small respirators as the air drains. Violet looks out across the barren landscape, focusing in on one metal hatch at the edge of the nearby crater. She lowers her eyes. Her breathing pauses. The airlock drains. Her knuckles turn a reddish purple. Violet breathes out and opens her eyes. The airlock doors open.

One second.

Violet's boots pulse. She leaps onto the dust of Deimos. The crater door opens.

Two seconds.

Violet's nose forces out the remaining air in her lungs.

Three seconds.

Violet pulls the jet onto the surface of Deimos.

Four seconds.

Violet's eyes blink without pause. She bounds up into the vacuum above Deimos, with her eyes swimming the in the ocean of stars.

Five seconds.

The rays of light fall on her neck, tingling her. Violet focuses and points her legs up and head towards the hatch.

Six seconds.

Violet's vision blurs. Her hands shake and blood burns. Her boots expel a torrent of fire.

Seven seconds.

Violet rockets through the open hatch. She slams and ragdolls around the interior airlock. The exterior door closes and her ears sense the pull of silence. Violet's vision fades. She pats slaps the walls to find a vent. As the crisp air billows around her fingers, she heaves forward. She activates the magnetic locks on her boots to stabilize as she breathes in the air. The silence parts for the ambient humming of lights, machines, and the vents flooding the room with air.

"To return to me? You are desperate," the voice of her mind's intruder echoes.

Violet laments hearing her father cast judgement. "So are they. Beg for forgiveness and their mercy so we may survive," Violet says as her vision returns. She sits up on the door. Through it stretches a hallway of metal. White walls and soft light blend the distance into one smear.

"I am entrusted to elevate the needs of the future above the present. I failed."

"If you don't confront them, everything will fall into ruin." Violet says as she steps into the passage.

"We are part of a project spanning generations, unknown to us, that we will never have the privilege of meeting. We are more than a world on life support. More than a sprawling alliance. We will become a complete," — he coughs and chokes on his breath — "solar system of life. Vibrant and unbound by the past and trivial passions. Free to enjoy existence without succumbing to its

sufferings. That is the Trust. And I failed, but you and he can right sails and endure the storm of Fate."

Violet moves through the corridor with caution. A dull humming permeates through the air and walls. The sound of her boots bounce along the corridors until it dissipates from Violet's ears entirely. Violet steadies her emotions and recedes into her mind.

"Why did you retreat here?" Violet calls out through the passages. Her voice ripples through without returning.

"My symptoms progressed when no one else felt a chill. Once the Trust identified an echo in the records of a former candidate, my gut failed. Jue and Lysylia outplayed me," — he coughs again — "until. I demanded his return. In silence, I chose to invoke his return at any cost."

Violet places a hand on the wall and feels the rumble of the moon. Her eyes open wide and she shakes. "You demon." She unclasps her boots from the passage and sprints through, using the jets to boost her speed. "You are precisely what they fear. You deserve everything they will inflict."

"Violet. It was too late hours ago."

"I will drag you out of your cave and throw you into the fire. I will make sure you burn so that the worlds do not."

"I cannot leave Deimos. I will die here."

"That's why I brought respirators for our return trip. Even if you die, they'll have your corpse to burn and no one will cry for you, you demon."

"You aren't listening," he coughs and loses his breath.

"You can come by will or by force. But you will return to Mars and face them. This is your fight to endure, not mine!"

"It is imperative that he intervenes. It is for the future of humanity, Violet, we cannot endure the toil of the empress. You know that it is too late. On Mars and here. The fire burns. You must extinguish the fire of Kimomo and rise."

"This is a suicidal plan."

"Not for you."

Violet continues her charge through the web of passages. The lights flicker and the walls shake. Violet attempts to push her father's

voice out of her head to no avail.

"You don't realize it, Violet. The city is burning already, and no ritual sacrifice can control the mob. Ritual will only inflame their legions on Mercury and Venus to take up arms. Capitulation validates their atrocities."

"I'm glad mother and Tully ran away. Any life away from you is," — Violet explodes through the floor of one passage and into the one below — "a gift from heaven. You don't care for anyone, do you?"

"I have a purpose. My greatest misfortune is your reluctance to accept a purpose, or responsibility for the world. That is why you cannot understand me." He pauses and lets out a sigh. "Today you will."

Violet breaks her mental connection with him. Her boots burn hotter, melting the metal underneath with each bound. The corridors shake and panels collapse, through which she stampedes. At the end of this metal labyrinth, she finds a rocky cave.

Violet peers inside to see a gurney bed, rigged with fluids and attached by cords to walls of computers and screens. The light of the screens illuminates the otherwise black room. A pale hand, withered to the bone, stretches into the light.

"Dearest daughter," a ghostly voice calls out.

Violet's stomach heaves. Shivering, Violet pains herself to move one foot closer as her body contorts to flee. She musters the mind to push her legs of cement forward. She strains to breathe and feels for her pulse.

The humming and shaking of the moon fades into Kibou's three-note hymn. One by one the white lights of the passage snap into an orange glow. The black abyss follows close behind to envelop the light.

To Violet, the light takes eons to reach her eyes. The moment suspends, holding on to the orange lights, as if to hold back the abyss.

Violet's silver block vacillates between its resting state, the scythe, and sword. The nerves along her spine pulse with a searing ripple through each vertebra. The pull of the abyss squeezes out a

teardrop from Violet's eye. Her purple iris fades as the orange envelops it whole. Violet reaches the terminus between the corridors and the rocky cave. The orange light crests at Violet, radiating a halo around her.

Violet falls to her knees at the terminus, her mind, and body collapse. Her hand clasps Kibou's departing pendant. Tears flood and bubble out of her eyes. Her eyes stare at the last line of orange light, radiating through the tears, fearing the oncoming abyss and void of separation from Kibou. She lets out a silent word as the last rays of light fall on her eyes.

"is that story your own?"