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Rebel
A Legend Novel

Marie Lu

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REBEL

A LEGEND NOVEL

M A R I E L U



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Let us never forget the pain that our ancestors have suffered and are still suffering all around the world. Let us never forget the struggle between global tyranny and democracy that led us to found this free nation of Antarctica, where every person has the chance to work their way up from nothing, and where technology, not human ego and error, governs how successful you can become. Our Level system may seem like a game, but it is far more than that. It is a tool used to help us each live the life we deserve. And it will become the reason why Antarctica is the greatest nation on earth.

STATE OF THE UNION
THE NATION OF ANTARCTICA
2050 AD

ROSS CITY

ANTARCTICA

2142 AD

EDEN

IF YOU ASKED ME TO TELL YOU ABOUT MYSELF, I'D say first that I like to understand things.

I always have. Ever since I was a kid, I've been a tinkerer—prying apart old gadgets and laying out the innards of a broken radio or clock or toaster, delighting in the puzzle of making something new out of something old. It doesn't have to be a man-made machine, either. I love watching ants march in a line to a bit of food, take it apart, and carry it single file back to their hill. I love the way flowers bloom and then wilt, how you can preserve them forever just by pressing them between the pages of a book.

I like figuring things out, the how and the why.

My mother once called me her little alchemist, told me she believed I could turn rust into gold, and that I would ramble on about every little detail that makes up something until I ran out of breath. I skipped the last few semesters at my high school to become one of the best students at Ross University of the Sciences, the top-ranked college in the world, and I'm about to graduate with an advanced degree after seven years, which should have taken ten. I've already got an internship lined

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up back in the Republic, and in a couple of months, I'll be headed there for an orientation session.

But most people don't know me like this. Instead, they'll say:

This is Eden Bataar Wing, Daniel's younger brother.

That's who I am to others.

I understand why, of course. I may be a star student, good at figuring things out . . . but my brother is Daniel Altan Wing.

Ten years ago, he was known as Day, the boy from the streets who led a revolution that saved the Republic of America. His name was spray-painted on buildings, his profile drawn on both rebel pamphlets and wanted posters. He went from being a notorious criminal to a national hero in the span of a year. There are documentaries about what he did during the war between the Republic and the Colonies, about all he had sacrificed. For his country, for me, he had nearly died.

Yeah. It's kind of hard to top that.

After the war ended, we moved here to Ross City, Antarctica, and during that time, I finished school and Daniel became an agent in the Antarctic Intelligence Service. Daniel, at least, is eager to leave our past behind. But that doesn't mean anyone has forgotten his name or his face. There are still times when we'll get stopped in the streets, or when I'll overhear people murmuring as we pass by.

That's Day, Daniel Altan Wing, a legend. And that's his little brother, Eden.

Over the years, I've let this become the version of myself that everyone knows. Eden, the little brother. Not Eden the tinkerer, the inventor. They don't know how I'm drawn to understand things, or how I've had nightmares almost every night since the Republic's war

ended. No, my identity is permanently tied to my brother's, regardless of what I do or think.

I don't tell most people who I am. I don't talk about the questions that run through my mind or the nightmares that keep me awake at night. People instinctually know to avoid someone who carries a weight on his chest as heavy as mine. So most who know me just see the quick smile and the earnest face and hear the breathless, rapid-fire chatter about the inner workings of a machine. They don't see the boy who startles awake at the sound of fireworks popping outside, convinced that it's the thunder of gunfire as soldiers break into our home. They don't see the boy who forces himself to stay up one more hour just so it means one less hour of calling for his mother in his dreams. So it means not feeling embarrassed for still not being over her death.

I like to show my bright side because it puts people at ease. *Eden, who's going to be just like his brother when he grows up.* Not even Daniel seems to get who I really am. When I pretend I'm okay, it makes my brother happy. And when he's happy, I can believe that I am too.

But at night, my dreams are filled with scenes of the Republic. They seep into every corner of my vision, all the good memories and the horrific ones, blending together so thoroughly that sometimes I can no longer tell one apart from the other.

Does Daniel have nightmares? If he does, he's never mentioned them to me.

The Republic, my past . . . these are things I haven't been able to figure out. To understand. Maybe that's why I ended up applying for an internship back in Los Angeles. Because I want to make it better by turning the Trial stadiums into hospitals, universities, and museums.

But also because it haunts my dreams, those old streets and faded

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memories. Because I can't stop thinking about it in the quiet and the dark. The brother that Daniel and I lost. The mother we will never see again. The father I never knew. Their ghosts walk my sleeping world, calling me back home.

I think about the Republic all the time. I wonder what it was like when I was small. I mull over and over the few broken memories I have. I read every article about the Republic that I can find. It's the hole in my past, the part that makes no sense to me, and I'm obsessed with understanding it. I need to comprehend what happened in my childhood. How I managed to survive one of the darkest moments in our history.

But maybe that's stupid, you know? Because, sometimes, it's impossible to understand something. Sometimes, things don't happen for a reason.

The family we lost. The war that engulfed our lives. There is nothing to figure out, there is no how or why.

Sometimes, things just *happen*.

* * *

To understand Ross City, my home, you need to tour it in two separate halves. Let's start with the Sky Floors, where Daniel and I live.

Ross City is the capital of Antarctica, one of the most advanced nations in the world. Compared with the Republic of America, it's an absolute utopia. Its towering skyscrapers are stacked to the heavens, sealed securely inside a biodome that keeps temperatures comfortable and simulates a regular day-night cycle during the long summer and winter months. Don't ask me how it works. I've searched online for

years and worn my brother down with questions about it, but it's still a fascinating and somewhat frustrating mystery to me.

Daniel and I live in one of the wealthiest sectors—the Sky Floors, the top half of the skyscrapers where there is sunlight and stars and fresh air, where the buildings are interconnected like a web with long walkways covered in green ivy. Up here, each floor is made up of luxury homes, shops, fancy restaurants, schools . . . not a single crack in the pavement, not a flower or shrub out of place. A kaleidoscope of massive virtual commercials and murals lights up each side of every skyscraper, all of the images in a constant state of rotation. Looking out across the city from up here is like staring out into a rainbow sea. In the winter, the skies light up with the aurora australis—the southern lights—and paint the nights with brilliant bands of turquoise and gold. In the summers, the biodome simulates the night for us, and we get the same effect with virtual displays.

To people who have lived here all their lives, this is a completely normal neighborhood perched high in the sky. To me, it's a multicolored wonderland—as alien a place as the Colonies of America.

And it's where I am now—at Ross University, on the top floor of Building 23 in downtown Ross City, where I'm currently trying to figure out the best way to sneak out of the complex before everyone else gets dismissed from class.

I peek my head out from my lecture room and into the empty halls. The university is a neoclassical wonder of a place. Antarctica likes to pay homage to grand civilizations of the past, like the Romans and the Egyptians. I never learned about those societies back in the Republic. I didn't even know what *neoclassical* meant until recently—it's not something my old homeland ever showed anyone, what buildings

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used to look like in the days before the Republic existed. So the university is full of geometric, light-filled spaces and straight columns currently adorned with moving, virtual murals designed by students in the Art majors, and when the halls are as quiet as they are right now, you can hear the fountains outside the front entrance. Beyond that, walkways link this floor to the same floor of nearby buildings, so that it all looks like a honeycomb of interconnected bridges.

A few other students wander the school's halls, but otherwise, I'm alone.

Perfect.

I wait a second longer, then lower my eyes, hoist my backpack higher on my shoulders, and walk in the direction of the main entrance as quickly as possible. If I'm lucky, I won't bump into anyone I know until I make it outside, where my friend Pressa should be waiting for me.

Virtual images and text hover over parts of my view, changing as I go. There are titles like ORGANIC CHEMISTRY and THEORETICAL PHYSICS above the classrooms. A virtual Level hangs over the head of every person in the hall. Level 64. Level 78. Level 52. Interactive virtual buttons drift above the potted plants lining the halls. They say:

WATER | +1 POINTS

Other buttons hover over the classrooms.

ORGANIC CHEMISTRY FINAL

A | +100 POINTS

B | +50 POINTS

C | +10 POINTS

D | -50 POINTS

F | -100 POINTS

All of this—the labels on the classrooms, the points you can earn for watering plants or taking tests, the Level that each of us belongs to—is part of Antarctica’s Level system. Everyone in Antarctica has a chip embedded under their skin, right behind their left ear. Through that chip runs a technology that overlays virtual images over your vision.

It tracks what actions you make throughout the day. It assigns you a Level based on those actions. And then that Level floats over your head, so that everyone can see what it is.

Everything you do here earns you points that go to your Level. The more good things you do—score well on a test, help someone cross the street, and so on—the more points you earn toward your Level. The more bad things you do—cheat, steal, pick a fight—the more points you lose.

The higher your Level, the more privileges you’re allotted. At Level 7, you earn the right to use the city’s public bus, train, and elevator stations. You’re allowed to rent a home.

At Level 10, you’re permitted to shop for fresher produce, as well as eat certain types of foods and walk into certain restaurants.

To even set foot up here, in the Sky Floors where Daniel and I live, you need a Level of at least 50.

This is how Ross City uses their Level system as an incentive. It’s meant to encourage people to do good and discourage them from being bad. Apparently, it’s the fairest government ever designed, created after Antarctica realized that the rest of the world was stuck suffering in the same cycles of tyranny and dictatorships over and over again.

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I mean, I'm from the Republic. I get what Antarctica's going for.

But as I hurry down the halls toward the entrance, all I can think about is that, no matter how virtuous the system is, some people just don't care to be good.

Sure enough, a familiar voice behind me makes me cringe.

"Hey, it's Wing. *Hey!*"

Damn it. I swear under my breath, shrug my shoulders, and pick up my pace. My glasses slide down my nose as I hurry. I push them up nervously, accidentally smudging one eyepiece a little with my finger. Despite Antarctica's advanced technology, the chip in my head can't fix my eyes—which had been damaged by the Republic's plagues so long ago—so glasses are still a part of my life.

Behind me, the voice only gets closer. Now I can hear the beat of other footsteps accompanying it.

"Hey, Wing, slow down. Where are you going in such a rush?"

Alan. Emerson. And Jenna. It's too late to avoid them. So instead, I take a deep breath and try to look calm as they come up on either side of me.

We're all the same age, except they're undergraduate seniors whereas I'm in the graduate program. Emerson grins as he slows down to match my stroll.

"You're always heading out in such a rush," he says, putting a casual hand on my backpack and grabbing the top strap of it. He pulls me back.

I shrug, keeping my eyes straight. "Just meeting a friend," I reply. To my relief, my voice stays even and lighthearted.

"Your friend?" Jenna says on my other side. "Pressa, right? The assistant janitor?"

My friend Pressa doesn't attend the university. She doesn't have a high enough Level. Instead, she manages all the floor bots that sweep around our halls, cleaning them every morning and afternoon.

I hear the sound of my backpack unzipping behind me before I can respond. "You're amazing, Wing," Alan marvels in false admiration. "All our books are downloaded into our virtual systems, but you still carry physical science books around?"

Emerson takes one of the books out of my bag. "That's because he doesn't use them for studying," he says, flipping the book open.

I snatch my backpack away. "Be careful with that."

But he's already shaking the book. Out fall delicately pressed flowers—goldenrods, bluebonnets, fragile winter lilies—that I'd carefully placed between the pages.

I suck in my breath at the sight, then drop into a hurried crouch to pick them up. Already, several of them have come apart from the fall, leaving their ruined petals strewn on the marble floor. My cheeks redden as I hear a couple of snickers above me. The light sheen of sweat on my nose makes my glasses slide down again, and I push them back up, hating the awkward gesture.

"I didn't know you were such a talented florist," Jenna says.

I try to ignore her and pick up the rest of the dried plants, then place them back into their pages. Now other people in the halls are looking at me as I work. I love flowers—their colors, their fragility, the way they grow, the way they smell. I was going to dry these out and put them into frames. But I'm too embarrassed to say it.

Pressing flowers isn't the kind of hobby that boys are allowed to take up. It's not the kind of interest that gets you friends. My brother would probably never be caught dead doing this.

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“Need some help?” Emerson asks me, stooping down to my level. As he bends down, he intentionally steps on the flowers still on the floor.

A surge of anger pierces through my calm, and I shove him backward. “Get off those,” I snap at him. But the flowers are already ruined.

ACCOSTING CLASSMATE | -10 POINTS

The text pops up over my view before I can stop myself, and the negative points glow red in my account.

Emerson gives me a mock look of shock. “Oh! Sorry—I didn’t see where they were.” He holds his hands up. “It was an accident. Don’t get too rough.”

This is how they treat me every day. It’s a careful kind of bullying, one that doesn’t trip the Level system. They’re not saying anything obviously cruel to me. They’re not pushing or shoving me. So the Level system doesn’t catch it, doesn’t deduct points for harassment.

Emerson hands my book back to me, then pats me twice on the shoulder. “Well, hope you have a fun time with the janitor.” His voice stays friendly and warm. Yet another way he tricks the Level system. “If you see your brother, tell him I said hi.”

Jenna brightens at the mention of Daniel. “Tell him I said hi too.”

The last time Daniel came to see me at the university, Jenna had blushed bright red and giggled all around him. Emerson and Alan had peppered him with questions about what it was like being the champion for a nation. Daniel, as usual, kept his answers polite and distant, but it didn’t change how I felt standing there on the sidelines.

I stare at the dried flowers in my hand, feeling like an idiot. How

would Daniel do here, at Ross University? He was never the studious type, because he never had to be. Daniel is *Day*. He can run up the sides of buildings. Evade the police. Jump through a fourth-story window.

Me? I'm the nerd with bad eyesight who likes building things and framing flowers. When I speak, my voice is higher and softer than my brother's. He is the hero who never has nightmares anymore. I am the odd, quiet one that he still treats like a kid.

I shove the crumpled flowers back in my backpack, then crush them further by dropping my book into the bag on top of them. Anger simmers beneath my skin, along with embarrassment.

"Hey!"

Pressa's at the front of the entrance, leaning against a tree and waiting for me. Her face is round and smooth and light brown, the shape of her eyes slender, and when she gives me that easy smile, one of her teeth is endearingly crooked.

Her smile vanishes immediately at the look on my face. "What happened to you?" she asks as I approach her.

I got to know Pressa when I started showing up early at school every morning to work on my inventions. I helped her speed up her work by installing additional code into the cleaning bots. We've been hanging out ever since. In a university full of hostility, she's been a lone comfort.

I think about telling her everything that just happened. If anyone understands what it's like to deal with some of these seniors, it's Pressa. But the words lodge in my throat, refusing to come out. Real men don't press flowers into their books. They don't spill their insecurities to their friends. Daniel certainly doesn't tell me about all the

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things that happened to him in his past. Real men suck it up and change the subject until their hearts wither into dust inside them.

So, I fold the words back into my mind and smile instead. “Nothing,” I reply. “Just glad to be out of class.”

She gives me a sidelong glance, as if she doesn’t really believe me, but she doesn’t push me further. Her arm loops through mine. “Still want to head to the Undercity?” she asks me.

I nod as we head toward the elevators. “I’ve been ready all day,” I reply.

She grins and gives me a wink that she knows always improves my mood. “Good. Because there’s a drone race happening later this week, and at least a hundred thousand corras waiting to be won. I figured we should go enter our bets.”

Drone racing. Gambling. These are dangerous activities in the seediest part of Ross City, but it’s the one place where I feel good about myself. I grin back at her, admiring the way her bobbed hair forms a straight line with her jaw. Then I unhook my backpack from one shoulder and reach into it. I pull out a small, circular tube.

Pressa’s mouth forms an O as she studies it. “Is that what I think it is?” she whispers.

I smile a little. “If you’re thinking it’s a drone engine, then you’d be right,” I reply. “I’ve been working on it for weeks.” Good thing Emerson didn’t dig any farther than my dried flowers. “This time, we don’t have to just place a bet. We can enter the race.”

Pressa shakes her head and grins. “Sometimes I wonder if you belong up here in the Sky Floors,” she says. “You have way more in common with the rest of us down below.”

I don’t answer her as we head into the nearest elevator and start

making our way down. Maybe she's right. I don't fit in up here, in the Sky Floors where everything's perfect until it isn't. My heart belongs to the lower floors, the part of this place that hosts things like drone races and gambling. The part that Ross City doesn't advertise.

The Undercity.

DANIEL

EDEN'S NOT PICKING UP HIS PHONE AGAIN.

I tap off the virtual ringing icon in my view, swear under my breath, and try calling him one more time.

Maybe the connection's bad. I *am* currently in the pockmarked streets of the Undercity, after all, perched in the shadows on top of a crumbling neon sign overlooking a crowded street. This is the lowest rung of Ross City, the ground floor, where sunlight never reaches and where neon signs advertise the rusty jumble of cheap storefronts lining either side of the road.

It's not like this is the best place to make a call to the Sky Floors.

No answer again.

I take a deep breath and try not to be annoyed. When we first moved here to Antarctica, I promised myself that I'd never lose my temper with Eden. He survived a goddy revolution. He lost our parents and nearly his life.

He's my little brother. And nothing would ever be worth getting angry with him about, as long as he is alive and healthy.

Still. You'd think a kid could get around to calling his brother back now and then. Maybe he's hanging out with classmates. I don't know much about who he talks to these days. Last time I visited him at school, he seemed friendly with some seniors named Jenna and Emerson—but they're headed into their finals for the year. That means he's going to be out more, doesn't it?

The concept of a university, of taking exams without real consequences, is so foreign to me that trying to figure out Eden's life nowadays gets me nowhere. June would probably understand him better. I wonder for a moment if I could use this as an excuse to call her, get her opinion on how Eden might be feeling.

My thoughts always wander to June. I fiddle idly with a paper clip ring on my left hand, try to force her out of my head, and call my brother one last time.

He doesn't answer.

I sigh, give up, and turn on the geolocation tracking on him. That's another feature of Antarctica's Level system. You can at least find out where someone is.

"Any sign of her?" a voice comes on in my earpiece. It's from my AIS co-agent, Jessan.

I let Eden's geolocator keep searching and instead focus back on my job. My eyes scan the bustling marketplace below me. "Not yet," I mutter.

Jessan sighs over the line. "She's late. Maybe she's not heading out today."

"Give her a few more minutes, yeah?"

"Fine." Jessan hangs up, and I go back to my watch.

It's a good thing I'm crouched in the shadows here. People always

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recognize me, for one reason or another. My face is the one they've seen before on the news, on the wanted posters that used to plaster every goddy JumboTron back in the Republic of America.

Now it's the one that appears whenever you've committed a crime against Ross City. It's the one you see right before I arrest you.

My name used to be Day, the boy from the streets of the Republic. The fugitive who unwittingly started a revolution.

Now, though, I'm Daniel Altan Wing, of the Antarctica Intelligence Service. My job is to hunt down the worst criminals in Ross City. Here, apparently, I'm the law.

Pretty ironic for me, yeah?

Unlike other AIS agents, I'm kind of a fluke. I grew up in the grungy, broken streets of Lake. I stole and fought and scraped by with the worst of them. I used to be the most-wanted criminal in the Republic, a street rat that somehow got the credit for making a government crumble and rebuild itself. I know what it's like to live in the worst places in the world.

Most of the others I work with didn't grow up like that. Certainly not my co-agents, Jessan and Lara. They're Antarciticans, born and raised here in the glitzy, hyper-advanced, technological wonderland of Ross City. So they tend to treat me with a sense of curiosity and awe.

What's it like, they ask me with wide eyes, to live in a world like the Republic?

I usually shrug off the question. Life in the Republic is a nightmare that I'd prefer to leave in the past.

If anyone from my Republic days saw me now, they'd probably laugh. I don't look anything like how I used to—my hair long and tied back into a knot, my cap secured tightly to obscure my features, my clothes worn and grungy from the streets. Now I'm wearing a sharp black suit and sleek black collar shirt and polished shoes, and my hair's cut short and wild. I still can't get used to it, so I run my hands through my hair all the time. By the end of the day, it looks like a goddy disaster zone.

I wonder what June would think of me. Then again, I wonder what she'd think of a lot of things.

My leg's starting to fall asleep, so I shift my crouch and keep waiting. Today, we're down here tracking a woman who works for Dominic Hann, one of the most dangerous criminals in the Undercity.

Me, Daniel Altan Wing, tracking a criminal. Sometimes the thought makes me want to crack up.

But Dominic Hann isn't anything like me. He isn't some kind of vigilante fighting for justice or for his family. He's a killer, cold and merciless.

In the past two years, Hann has become the most notorious name in the Undercity's crime circles. He's left bodies hanging in the middle of intersections, gutted and mutilated. He runs illegal racing rings down here. He gives out loans to anyone not living in the Sky Floors, to people with low Levels who are desperate and hungry, and then comes for them and their families if they can't pay him back with double the amount.

No one who's crossed paths with Hann seems to want to talk about him. It's been hard to gather info.

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Some people ask me why I chose to work in such a dangerous job after everything that's happened to me. I'm not sure, actually. Maybe it's because the thought of someone terrorizing the poor down here reminds me too much of my past. Maybe it's because this is the world I know, and crossing paths with danger is something I'm good at. Not that I like being familiar with all this.

The Undercity is a far cry from the gleaming luxury of the Sky Floors. This is where the poorest people in Ross City are. Spilled garbage and rusted scooters stripped of parts litter the intersections down here. Crowds of people stream by underneath me like a tide of ants.

Through my vision, I can see their virtual Levels hovering over their heads. Level 6. Level 10. Level 14.

My gaze settles on a few homeless people crouched against the walls, begging idly for spare change. Level 0 hovers over their heads. People with Level 0 have no rights at all. They can't rent housing. They can't take the trains. They barely have the right to rest in the streets.

You can work your Level up, of course. That's the whole point of this system. Over time, some people in the lowest floors have been able to level up into the Mid Floors and get access to better food, housing, and transportation. But pulling yourself up that way takes an overwhelming amount of work. Most never make it out.

Ross City is still a better place than the Republic's ever been. What advanced nation doesn't have some poverty? At least these people have never been subjected to the Republic's Trials or the Colonies' stifling corporations.

But as far as I've seen, no place in the world treats their lowest rungs well. That's why I hate being in the Undercity. It's too much like life in Lake, going hungry and sleeping in alleys. Every time I come down here, I end up having nightmares.

People may think of me as some kind of shining hero. But honestly? All I really wanted in the first place was to protect my family.

Suddenly, I tense. My posture straightens. My gaze fixates on a woman who has just emerged from the bodega underneath my neon sign. She glances furtively behind her, then merges into the crowd with a shrug.

I tap my ear once. "Time to go," I say to Jessan, then hang up and rise.

I shrink farther back into the shadows of the building, slide off the neon sign, and start inching along the second-story ledge. Down below, the woman's moving surprisingly fast. If I wasn't specifically tracking her, I would have lost her in the crowds.

My feet move with the assurance of someone who's done this a thousand times before. I hop between ledges to another building, then another, my figure never emerging from the shadows. My fingers search instinctively for the next crevice in the walls to grip.

Up ahead, the woman turns down a narrow side street and makes her way through a food market. I stop short of the turn and cut instead through the back side of the buildings, then shimmy down from the second-story ledge to land in an alley leading out to the market.

Smoke from open grills lingers in the air, layering the street here in haze. I keep the woman's light-brown hair in sight as I hurry from one alleyway to the next. At least the people here are so

preoccupied with hawking food that none of them notice a ghost slipping behind the stalls, a shadow moving among them.

Gradually, I edge closer. The woman looks back every few minutes, like clockwork. After a while, I kick off against the wall in an alley and move up to the third floor. My speed picks up. A series of laundry lines connect the next building with the one I'm currently on—I step onto the line, crouch to grab it with my hands, then use my momentum to swing down to the second floor.

Now I'm just a few paces behind her. Her movements are quick and nervous now, as if she's sensed that someone may be watching her. My eyes flash briefly to the buildings around me. Jessan and Lara should be on their way, too, closing the trap around her.

The woman abruptly darts into what looks like a dead end. I hop into a second-floor balcony and swerve around the corner of the block after her. When I reach the alley, I see her about to slide through a narrow corridor at the end of it—but Jessan's already there at the other side. She steps out of the shadows, wearing the exact same black outfit as me, and points a gun at the woman.

The woman whirls around to try and run back the way she came, but I'm already there. In one move, I leap from the second-story balcony, grab the edge of a sign, and swing myself down.

I land right in front of her and pop up onto my feet, my hands in my pockets. "I don't think so," I say.

She throws a punch at me, but I step to one side and easily dodge her. Cuffs are already in my hands—as she stumbles past me, carried forward by her own momentum, I seize one of her arms and pull it behind her back. I snap one handcuff against her wrist, then the other.

“Alexandra Amin?” I say through gritted teeth as she struggles against my grip.

She doesn’t answer, but there’s a desperation to her moves that betrays who she is.

I allow myself a small smile as Jessan and Lara both approach me now. Jessan sighs and claps her hands together, while Lara runs a hand across the smooth, tight bun knotted high on her head.

“About time,” Jessan mutters as she places a call to the AIS’s headquarters. “This one was elusive.”

“Keeps our jobs interesting, yeah?” I reply to her with a lift of my eyebrow.

Lara barks out a laugh at that.

We’ve been tracking this woman for a month. She’d reportedly been Dominic Hann’s personal assistant, gathering info for him and helping him run messages down here in the Undercity. Our intel on her told us she grew up with him and was about his age.

She’s a lot younger than I thought she’d be. I remember the rumors about Dominic Hann himself, supposedly the youngest crime lord in Ross City, and wonder what other gossip about him might be true.

This will bring us one step closer to hunting him down. I start to recite the woman’s rights to her.

“You have the right to be judged before a court of Antarctic residents in addition to the Antarctic Level system. Before you stand trial, you have the right to—”

She twists around in my hands and gives me a wild, terrified look. “I have a daughter,” she whispers to me. “Her name is Ashley Amin. Don’t let Hann punish her because I’ve been caught. Please.”

I blink, taken off guard. “Nothing will happen to your family,” I tell her. My voice turns low and steady. I can hear the fear in her words. “I promise you. We just need your help.”

That’s when I notice a light foam building at the edges of her lips. Her skin has turned ashen and sweaty, and I realize the trembling of her limbs isn’t just from fear. She turns those wide eyes back on me again. Her gaze sears straight through me.

“Don’t let him hurt my daughter,” she gasps, foamy spittle flying. “Don’t let him.” She keeps repeating the words deliriously.

I curse and glance at Jessan. “Call for help,” I say. “She’s poisoned herself.” Jessan taps on something in her view without hesitation.

My stare whips back to the woman. I shake her once as her eyes start to glaze over. “I’ll protect your daughter. Where can we find Hann?” I demand. “What’s his next project?”

The woman’s head lolls to one side. Nearby, Jessan is calling for an ambulance.

“Drone races,” the woman finally whispers, her voice so quiet now that I barely catch it.

“Drone races?” I say. “Where?”

But her eyes roll back, and she goes limp in my arms. I shake her again, but her body has stopped trembling. When I touch my fingers to her throat, I can’t find a pulse.

I’m no stranger to dead bodies, of course. I’d seen my fair share ever since I was a kid—after all, I’d been left for dead myself by the Republic and had to crawl my way out of a lab’s mortuary when I was ten years old. I’d played dead for years on the streets of Lake, had seen my own mother and brother slaughtered, had witnessed

plenty more deaths when the war broke out in earnest between the Republic and the Colonies.

But that has never numbed me. Every time I come face-to-face with death on this job, I feel the same sickening despair settle deep in my stomach. The same sense of repulsion and grief.

This is my fault. I shouldn't have questioned her so severely. I should have checked to make sure she wasn't swallowing some kind of poison. I should have stopped her.

Now she's dead, and we're left with barely a thread of info about Hann. I lay the woman on the ground and slowly push myself back onto my feet as Jessan and Lara pat down her lifeless body.

What kind of man is Hann, to inflict such deep fear in his assistants that they'd rather kill themselves than be captured? What would Hann have done to this woman if she'd lived?

The blare of the ambulance arrives at the alley's intersection, and in a daze, I look on as two people clad in white rush to the body. Lara walks up to me and folds her arms.

"Drone races, eh?" she asks.

I nod. "If anyone finds out when the next one is," I reply, "don't let them shut it down yet. We'll be there, if Hann's going to show his face."

Lara nods. "Too bad about this one," she says, shaking her head. "I felt a little sorry for her."

"We wouldn't have to feel sorry for her if the Level system was fair," I mutter.

She sighs in exasperation. "Not this again."

"People like this work for Hann because they don't have a choice."

“Hey, you want to argue about it, take it up with Min.”

Min Gheren, the AIS’s director. I’ve brought it up before—not that anyone wants to hear it. So I just shrug and give Lara a side-long look. “If you actually think that’ll do any good, I’ll talk to her. I’ll even dress in a costume and do a skit.”

We watch as hospital workers cover the woman with a cloth. At least bodies here are treated with some semblance of respect. A spark of a memory flashes through my mind, the old trauma of waking up in a sea of bodies, of dragging myself out while clutching my bleeding, ruined knee that had been experimented on.

“Are you all right, Daniel?” Jessan asks me as she peers at my face. I hadn’t even noticed her come up to me.

“I’m fine,” I reply, shaking the memory off. Already, I know what my dreams tonight will be about. The sooner we can get out of the Undercity and back to the Sky Floors, the better. I can’t stand this goddy place anymore.

As we turn around and start to head back to the main street, a virtual alert pings in my view. It’s a floating icon of Eden, with a glowing green circle around it. When I tap on it, a map pops up with a location dot.

Guess the system’s finally tracked my brother down.

I stop short, then narrow my eyes to study it more closely. “Oh, hell no,” I mutter to myself.

Beside me, Jessan frowns. “Hell no what?” she says.

The location dot’s blinking not far from where we currently are. Eden’s not hanging out up in the Sky Floors at all. He’s here in the Undercity.

EDEN

DRONE RACES ARE ILLEGAL, TECHNICALLY.

If you've ever been to one, you know why. Basically how it works is that a total of a dozen racers, who each brings their own flying machine, compete in races that take place all over the Undercity. The drones zip through the air and along the narrow, crowded streets down here, going fast enough to kill a person or destroy the side of a building. They have no permits to fly. They don't get permission to set up a trail through the streets. The gambling that happens over them is all cash, so the government can't tax or trace it. Still, it's an exciting sight. People will gather to watch them shoot by until the Level system catches on—*promoting disruptive behavior!*—and the police come to break it up. Even then, it can be hard to pinpoint exactly where the race's starting point was and catch those responsible for organizing the whole thing.

Pressa's been gambling on the races for years. Several months ago, she told me about them, and I went with her to watch a race without telling my brother about it.

I loved them immediately—the homemade ingenuity, the way the drones are usually pieced together haphazardly out of spare parts,

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some of them sleek and small and fast, others large and heavy and menacing. They tear down the streets at a hundred miles an hour, and when I watch them, I can't help but be impressed that something so fast and dangerous can be made just by putting together metal scraps from the Undercity's junkyards.

Now Pressa and I emerge from the elevator onto the grungy ground floor of the Undercity and head toward where she lives, a tiny, ramshackle apartment above her father's apothecary.

"How's your dad feeling today?" I ask Pressa as we pass through a food market on our way there. "We're not bothering him, are we?" We move in and out of the smoke from open grills. Over each food stand hovers virtual text telling me what they're serving. My system automatically translates some of the foreign text into English. KEBABS. SUGAR CANE JUICE. CORN SOUP. FRIED DOUGH.

Pressa shrugs, trying not to look concerned. "Don't worry about it," she replies. "He's having a pretty good day today. He's probably downstairs in the apothecary right now."

Technically, her father's apothecary is as illegal as the drone races, although Ross City's too lazy to do anything about it. If your Level is below a 7, you're not allowed access to regular health care. Antarctica claims it's because if your Level is that low, you can't be trusted not to use the drugs for illicit purposes.

So Pressa's dad runs an apothecary where he sells all kinds of dried herbs and natural medicines that are unapproved by the authorities. It's not really the best option for the poor, but it's better than nothing.

Pressa stops on a smaller street branching away from the marketplace, then guides us through the maze of graffiti walls and cracked ground before we finally emerge on a different street.

Her father's apothecary sits on the corner of this intersection, its window barred with rusted iron and its door ajar. It's a dingy and dirty place, the kind of shop you'd never see in the Sky Floors, where you can have things like toothpaste and shampoo and medicine delivered right to your doorstep just by saying the items out loud.

But the sight of the apothecary still makes me smile. The lights on inside give it a warm glow. As I step in, the familiar, medicinally sweet smell of licorice fills the air. Next to a potted bamboo plant, a lucky porcelain cat sits on the checkout counter, its painted face bobbing back and forth. The aisles are crowded with shelves of cardboard boxes, each with something scribbled on them in Chinese—raw aconite for treating arthritis, ginseng, ephedra stems, rhubarb roots. On and on.

We make our way to the front counter, where an old man's chatting with several customers. Beside him is his assistant, a lanky boy named Marren, who's helping to fill a paper bag with various herbs. The customers pat the man on the back, then wish him well before they leave.

Marren sees us first. He waves, then gently taps the old man on his shoulder. The man's head jerks up—he peers around the store before his eyes settle on us. He breaks into a smile.

"Well," he says, giving me a wink as Pressa slides over the counter to give him a kiss on his cheek. "It's the skyboy. How are you, Eden?"

I smile. "Good, Mr. Yu," I reply. "Pressa says you're feeling good today."

"Did she, now?" The man raises a graying eyebrow at his daughter. "You don't think I always feel good?"

She just rolls her eyes at her father. "Never seen such a sickly guy in so much denial."

Mr. Yu gives me a mock-pitiful look. “My daughter wounds me every day,” he laments. Pressa gently punches his arm.

He does seem stronger than usual today. His back is less hunched, and his skin looks like it’s got some color in it. Pressa says he has a disease that has been slowly eating away at his muscles, but it’s the kind of thing that you need a Level of at least 25 for in order to treat properly at a hospital.

The herbs Mr. Yu sells don’t do his condition any good. That’s why Pressa gambles. The amount of money she needs in order to get illegal doses of the medicine that’ll actually save her father is so exorbitant that even Daniel doesn’t make enough to afford it.

“What brings the skyboy down to the Undercity this time?” Mr. Yu says to me.

“Eden’s going to show me how he put together his latest gadget for his Robotics class,” Pressa tells him as she takes my hand and drags me away from the counter.

Mr. Yu brightens at that. “Oh! Great!” He gives me an approving nod as two more customers come into the store. “You know I always appreciate you sharing your Ross University classwork with Pressa. Keeps her out of trouble down here.”

I’m not the best liar, so instead I just give Mr. Yu as toothy a smile as I can manage before Pressa drags me through the apothecary’s back door. By the counter, her father turns his attention to his new customers as they all greet one another enthusiastically.

“Mrs. Abesman!” he exclaims, giving her an affectionate hug. “It looks like my aconite tonic is working wonders for your arthritis. No, don’t worry about paying me back right away. Take your time. How’s your son?”

His voice fades away as we exit out into a back alley.

“Are you ever going to tell your dad how you’re getting some of his medicine?” I ask Pressa as we walk.

“Are you out of your mind?” Pressa replies over her shoulder. “You know how he’d react if he knew about the races?” She turns briefly around to make a mock face of horror. *“I’ve spent my entire life trying to protect you from the dangers of the Undercity! You don’t understand how dark it can get. They’ll bleed your wallet dry. They’ll kill you!”*

“I mean, he’s not all wrong.”

Pressa shrugs and keeps walking. “Listen, if you don’t learn to take your chances down here in the Undercity, you’ll get walked all over. Besides, it’s not like we have much of a choice. Dad’s Level isn’t gonna get any higher.”

Her voice turns harder at this. She knows there’s nothing I can say in response to that, so I don’t. What right does a privileged sky-boy have to tell Pressa about what they should be doing in the Undercity? Besides, I know what it’s like. The rules are different when you’re poor.

“What are the details of the drone race?” I ask instead as the street we walk through narrows. Here, the graffiti gets denser, paint layered over paint until the walls are blanketed with it.

Pressa pulls out a wrinkled, folded piece of paper from her pocket and shoves it at me. I shake it open and read it.

DRONE RACE

SEMIFINALS AT MIDNIGHT

8 RACERS, 8 DRONES

CASH ONLY, 100 CORRAS BET TO ENTER

Pressa glances quickly back at me. One side of her lips tilts up in a smirk. “You still thinking about entering your own drone in this?” she asks.

Races like this are never strict. If you show up with a drone last minute and impress the organizers, they’ll add you into the heat. I nod, then pull the circular engine out of my backpack again and hold it between us. “I want to test the efficiency of this engine, anyway,” I say as I hand it to her. She turns it curiously over in her hands.

“What’s it do?” she asks.

My words turn eager. “I’m trying to get it as close to a perpetual energy machine as possible. See this battery? It’s double the efficiency of the battery that runs my Sky Floor home and ten times as powerful, so I’m going to retrofit it onto a drone, and it’ll shoot the whole thing forward up to two hundred miles per hour—”

She looks at me skeptically. “Get outta here.”

“Numbers don’t lie. If it works like I think it will, I’ll design a bigger version to help power buildings in the Republic.”

“Already getting ahead of your internship, aren’t you?” She raises an eyebrow and shakes her head at me. “You and that bleeding heart of yours.”

“You’re the one willing to risk your life for your dad.”

She shoves me, and I laugh at her. Then she gives me a questioning look. “Won’t you risk losing your internship. If you’re caught racing down here?” She says. “Your brother’s gonna kill you if he finds out what you’re planning, you know.”

Daniel. The mention of him clouds my temporary good mood. “He’s not going to know,” I say with a shrug. “Even if he did, he’s not going to be able to stop me.”

Pressa and I stop in front of a tiny shop crowded with people. She raises an eyebrow at me. "Listen, I'm serious. Your brother's an AIS agent. That's not nothing. If he tracks you down at a race, he might bring other agents with him and arrest people left and right. I can't afford that kind of hit."

"He's not going to stop us," I reply firmly. "Now, stop worrying about him, and start fantasizing about what you'll do with a hundred thousand corras when we win."

Pressa searches my gaze, then decides against arguing. "*If* we win," she says.

"*When*," I insist again.

She grins at me, then looks back at the crowd as everyone pushes toward the front of the shop. Here, there are no virtual overlays. It's too dangerous to run drone races on the Level system. So at the front of the shop stands a tall man so lanky that he looks like a moving skeleton. He's taking cash bets from people and writing them down on paper.

Pressa has no qualms about waiting around patiently in line. She shoves her way forward just like everyone else, snapping at people who are putting in their bets too slowly. Finally, she gets to the front and takes out a wad of cash from her jacket.

She shoves it at the tall man. "A thousand corras," she says to him, then nods at me. "On this guy."

The man eyes me skeptically. "Who the hell are you?" he grunts.

I swallow, then raise my voice to match Pressa's confidence. "I'd like to enter as a racer," I say.

A look of amusement crosses the man's face. He somehow has the grace not to laugh at me. Instead, he just shrugs and jots down a note in his book. "You got a drone ready?" he says.

“It’ll be ready by the time the race happens.” I take a deep breath.

He doesn’t ask for more info. If I can’t follow through, we’ll be the only ones who lose money, anyway. He pockets Pressa’s wad of cash and nods at me. “You’re in,” he says. Then he loses interest in us and waves at the crowd behind us. “Next.”

We both step out of line as the people behind us push forward. Judging by how many bettors there are, this is going to be a big race.

When we manage to get out of the throngs near the shop and head back the way we came, Pressa nods at me. “I’ll be at the race tonight about half an hour before it starts,” she says. “You can’t be late, all right? My money’s on you, and if you’re late, they’ll start without—”

“Have I ever been late to a hangout with you?” I reply.

She smiles a little at that, then steps closer to me. Her hand brushes my arm. “No,” she replies. “And I expect you to keep it that way.”

I put both hands over my heart and flutter my lashes once at her. “You know I love you,” I reply.

She rolls her eyes, but her smile doesn’t waver. “I gotta go help my dad at the shop. See you later, skyboy.”

I watch Pressa go. The hairs on my arm where her hand touched me stand on end, making my skin tingle. Somehow, it’s easy to lose track of time when I’m with her.

It’s late afternoon already, and with the heavier foot traffic down the narrow street, I can tell that workers here are on a break between shifts. The food markets are crammed with people, all busy wolfing down a bite of burger or pastry or sandwich before rushing off to their next jobs. I shove my hands in my pockets, already lonely without Pressa’s company, and start heading back toward the nearest station, where an elevator will take me back up to the higher floors.

Wandering around the Undercity as a skyboy would be a scandal if word of it got out beyond Pressa and Daniel. The university could expel me and strip me of my degree. The government might even confiscate my passport, making me lose my internship in the Republic.

Still, I can't help myself. If only I could feel this comfortable up in the Sky Floors.

I make my way through the throngs until I decide to take a short-cut through an alley. The instant I turn into the alley, though, I know I've made a mistake.

Someone is standing at the opposite end of the narrow path. When he sees me coming, he straightens and starts walking in my direction.

Behind me echo footsteps. I keep my head down and continue walking, but a sixth sense tells me that someone has noticed me. Maybe it's because I don't walk like everyone else down here. Maybe it's something in the clothes I'm wearing.

As the man reaches me, he casts me a quick glance. Then his eyes dart to the space right over my shoulder.

It's all I need to see.

Thieves.

I suddenly break into a run. The man beside me stiffens in surprise, then whistles to his partner to go after me. His footsteps pound the pavement behind me. I don't look back. I just keep going.

But he's too fast for me. One second, I'm nearly to the end of the alley. The next, a rough hand grabs me by the collar and sends me flying backward. My back slams hard against the wall, and then there's a hard blade pressed against the skin of my throat. I find myself staring into a pair of hard eyes.

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“Well,” he says, smiling as his friend saunters up beside him. “Got us a skyboy.”

I try to struggle, but the man’s got at least fifty pounds on me. A buzzing sound of panic seeps into my thoughts. I have to get out of here.

That’s when I hear his voice.

“One more time. I dare you.”

It comes, as it usually does, from somewhere up high, echoing against the alley walls. I turn my head up. He’s perched on a second floor balcony. One of his legs is dangling idly over the edge, and the crisp black shirt he’s wearing under his black suit is lazily buttoned, the collar half up and half down. His blond hair is short and disorderly.

It’s my brother. Daniel. His eyes are trained on my attackers. And right now, the smirk on his lips is the dangerous kind.

I groan and hang my head. *Oh, hell.*

DANIEL

THE WOULD-BE THIEVES DON'T WAIT AROUND.

I see their eyes dart to me—not even to my face, but to the tell-tale black suit I'm wearing—and instantly, fear washes over them. They know exactly who I work for.

“Let him go,” one of the thieves snaps to the other.

The man holding Eden's collar releases him, then sheathes the knife he was carrying. The two of them start sprinting down the alley. One of them chances a glance back at me, then shudders and speeds up.

For a second, I think about chasing them down. Jessan and Lara are still here—I could call them and tell them to track those two men with the Level system's geolocator and have them arrested the instant they're cornered.

But I've already had a woman die in my arms today. My strength for dealing with the Undercity's crimes is pretty exhausted.

Instead, I turn my glare down at my little brother. My smile feels like a line drawn in stone against my face. “Well,” I call down at him as I shift my footing against the balcony. “You told me you were

going to stay late at the university, yeah? Fancy running into you down here instead.”

Eden doesn't look relieved that I've saved his ass. He shoots an irritated glance up at me and crosses his arms over his chest. “You followed me?” he says incredulously.

I'm not about to tell him that I tracked his location. “Don't flatter yourself,” I reply. “I had real work to do down here.”

Even though he's a lanky young man now, his wavy blond curls darker than they used to be, his eyes slender and pale, his glasses perched against the same kind of angular nose that I have—all I can see is the version of him that's still a small boy. The boy I once thought I'd lost to the Republic. The boy who had stumbled out of a hospital room, blind, calling my name. The boy who had sat with me on a cool tile floor and held my hand as I fought through an illness that almost killed me.

The boy I'd bled to protect.

He doesn't say a word as he pushes away from the wall. I pull my shades back over my eyes, swing down to the first floor, and fall into step beside him.

“Are you going to tell me anything? Or do I have to start?” I say to him.

He doesn't even look at me. “Why? Are you going to tell me what job brought you down here?”

I shake my head. “You know I can't talk about what I'm doing.”

“Then I guess I don't have much to say.”

I sigh as we fall into an uncomfortable silence. When we'd first moved to Ross City from the Republic, Eden had still been small, and he'd been happy to follow me everywhere I went. But over the

past few years, our conversations have turned into this, in which neither one of us really knows what to say to the other.

“Have it your way,” I say, at last, as we cut through the main food market. People make a wide berth for us when they see my black suit. “What were you doing down here?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing,” I repeat, shooting him a sidelong glance. “I mean, that’s why people come to the Undercity, of course. To do nothing.”

Eden glares at me. “Are you extra sarcastic today because you haven’t been on a date in a few days? Have you finally seen every girl in the city?”

“I’m being serious here.”

His expression darkens. He looks away from me and picks up his pace. I try to ignore the whispers that follow us.

Look at his suit.

It’s the AIS.

Don’t stare.

“You were here to see that girl, yeah?” I say, after another long silence. “What was her name? Pressa?” We’ve left behind the worst part of the Undercity, and up ahead, I can see the station with the elevators leading back up to the Sky Floors.

Eden shrugs, but I can tell from his reaction that I’m right.

“Her father’s running an illegal apothecary, you know,” I go on. “I’ve actually told the AIS not to intervene because it would shake up their community too much. But—”

At that, Eden’s eyes flash at me. “Is that a threat? Are you trying to tell me to stay away from her because she’s a dangerous influence? Are you using her against me or something?”

“No, I’m trying to warn you so that you and your friend don’t end up crossing the AIS. I only have so much influence in the agency.”

“Thanks. But I don’t need your help with Pressa. Isn’t June coming to town tomorrow? Why don’t you worry about that instead?”

His casual mention of June stings, and he knows it. June—the person who changed my entire life, the one who lingers so strongly in my mind that I can’t bring myself to stay in a relationship with any other girl for longer than six months—will be in Ross City tomorrow, accompanying the Elector Primo as he visits us to discuss a trade deal between the Republic and Antarctica.

Suddenly, I’m very aware of the paper clip ring around my finger.

I try not to let him see how vulnerable her name makes me feel and shift the topic back to him. “I’m not mad at you,” I say in a level voice. “You know that, right?”

I look for a reaction on his face, but all I get from him is more stony silence. We reach the elevator station. As we walk under its entryway, a pleasant *ding* sounds, the indication that our Levels—me, Level 87; Eden, Level 54—are high enough to allow us to use this transit station. Behind us, a man at Level 26 tries to sneak in behind us. An alarm beeps, and he’s stopped by an invisible force field.

I halt in front of a private elevator made specifically for AIS agents to use. It approves my account, and I scan Eden in as my guest.

Finally, as we step into the elevator and it seals us inside its cool, glass interiors, I turn to face my brother.

“You gotta give me something here, Eden,” I say. “Or do you seriously not trust me with anything anymore?”

Eden studies me. “Why aren’t you mad at me?” he asks.

I blink. "What?"

"Why aren't you mad at me?" he says again. There's an edge to his voice. "You caught me wandering around the Undercity, the most dangerous place in Antarctica. I lied to you. And now I'm not talking to you. You should be furious."

"You want me to be angry with you?" I narrow my eyes at him. "What good does that do?"

"It would be something," he snaps. "An emotion, at least."

I take a deep breath. "Listen, I know it's been rough. You don't talk to me about what's happening at the university, so I don't know what it's like—but I've been able to read you since you were a baby. You've seen happier days."

"I'm fine," he replies, in a way that tells me he's obviously not. "And I'd be a lot happier if you didn't chaperone me all the time."

"I don't chaperone you all the time."

"You tried to call me nineteen times in one hour. Was that just for casual chitchat?"

"All you have to do is answer the phone once, you know."

"It's not your business where I go during the day."

"Everything you do is my business. I'm in charge of you."

"You indulge in your life. Let me indulge in mine."

"Is that why you come down here? To pretend you're something you're not?"

"That's what you think?" Eden snaps. "I go to the Undercity to play at being poor?"

"I'm saying I hate it when you put yourself in danger when you don't ever have to."

"Maybe our definitions of danger are different."

“Excuse me if I thought you looked like you needed some help back there.”

Eden’s gaze pierces me. “You tracked me with the geolocator, didn’t you?”

I hesitate for just a fraction of a second, but it’s long enough to give him the answer. He makes a disgusted sound and turns away. “I thought I disabled it,” he mutters.

I swallow my rising annoyance. Disabling a geolocator should be impossible, so of course Eden was figuring out some way to hack it.

“The city’ll fine you for that, if they find out,” I tell him. “How many times are you gonna make me cover for you?”

“Like you’ve always been a law-abiding citizen.”

Behind his glasses, Eden’s irises have their faint purple tint in the light, the color that never entirely faded since he recovered from the plague. It’s my constant reminder of what it was like to almost lose him, what it could be like again if I’m not careful.

“I used to break the law because *I had to*,” I say coldly. “What are you breaking it for?”

Eden turns to face me fully. “You want to know the real reason I was in the Undercity today?” he says. “Because it reminds me of Lake. When I walk down there, I’m home. All that smoke and grease and grime, the rags and barred windows . . . I feel safer down there than I do anywhere else in this city. When I’m there, I think of John and Mom.”

I can tell there’s more he’s not telling me, but my temper sharpens at his mention of our mother and brother. “How about you don’t bring them into this?”

But Eden doesn’t stop. “Sometimes, I think you’ve forgotten

where you come from. When you're in the Undercity, it's like you can't wait to leave it behind."

He has no idea how wrong he is. How often I used to do exactly what he's been doing. I try to remind myself that Eden never saw the way I used to wander aimlessly down the streets of Lake. Back when I'd first been accepted into the Republic's inner circles, when I was working with June but still felt like an outsider at all of the Republic's goddy balls and banquets . . . I'd walk the quiet streets of my old neighborhood and take in the rust and the grime. The humble homes and dirty coasts.

But Eden doesn't remember that. He was too young. He doesn't understand what it's like to crawl your way out of that kind of life, to want to keep your younger brother from ever having to see what you've seen, endure what you've endured. I took him here to get him away from Lake. But he keeps ending up down there anyway.

And I get it. The corner of my heart that's still Day, the boy from the streets, begs me to explain that to him.

Instead, I say, "It's because I don't ever want to walk those streets again. That's our past, not our future. We didn't move all the way here just to go back to that. And yet you're in the Undercity every other week."

Eden crosses his arms over his chest. "I can't spend an hour away from home before you ask where I am. I can't stay out a second past midnight before you come searching for me. Soon I'll be working for the Republic. Remember? I have a life that's completely separate from yours."

“Forgive me if our past has made me a little paranoid about your safety.”

“Daniel.” For an instant, Eden’s voice softens. “I know. Believe me. But it’s not up to you to watch my back every second of my life. You can’t always know where I am. I’m not twelve years old anymore.”

“Well, to me, you always will be.”

Eden flinches as if I’ve hit him. I suddenly notice that he’s been arguing eye to eye with me. When did Eden get so tall? Has it really taken me this long to notice? Then the initial sting leaves his expression. He looks away from me and out through the glass, back down at the Undercity far below us.

The elevator finally reaches our floor. Eden steps out first and doesn’t look back. “No need to follow me,” he calls over his shoulder. “I know the way home. Or did you want to supervise me through the front door?”

And before I can protest, he’s left without me, his figure fading down the hall.

EDEN

DANIEL DOESN'T COME HOME UNTIL LATE THAT night. I'm in my room, working by lamplight on my perpetual engine machine, when I hear the alarm ding over our front door, followed by a pleasant, automated voice over the speakers installed into our walls.

"Welcome home, Daniel Wing."

Out in the living room, I hear my brother take off his shoes, then the sound of the refrigerator door opening and the pouring of a glass of water. Instinctively, I breathe a sigh of relief and relax my shoulders. Then I turn off my own tracking of his geolocator. My brother may be overly paranoid about me, but he's the one with the dangerous job that he never talks to me about. How many hours has he worked today? What kind of mission is requiring him to pull these late nights?

I don't leave my room to greet him. Our argument from earlier still rings fresh in my mind, and I'm not about to be the first one to cave. Instead, I hunch lower over my machine and keep working, half listening to Daniel in the kitchen. He seems to drink his water, then sets the glass down with a clink and opens the fridge door again. I'd

pulled his dinner out of the freezer and into the fridge to thaw. He wouldn't have remembered to do it earlier, and he won't remember now that he never did it.

It's one of those small things left over from our Republic days: his spotty memory. He remembers things that had happened when we were kids, or from decades ago. But sometimes he can't recall a place he was just at several minutes earlier. Or a name. A face. A task.

Physical reminders can sometimes help trigger a lost memory for him, and occasionally I'll catch him just standing there with a thoughtful frown on his face, struggling to place his feeling of déjà vu that a familiar street sign or narrow alley has just awakened in him.

He takes daily medication for it and runs several programs on his Level system that pop up constant reminders for him. I try to make up for the rest, but it makes his job doubly precarious. I have enough nightmares about him never coming home. So, I keep a constant eye on his location and his daily habits.

Well, to me, you'll always be twelve.

The words make my temper flare again, and I go back to working on my perpetual energy machine with a vengeance.

It's a smooth, elegant design, a small ring of a battery that I now fit with a coil of wire around it. Beside it sits my drone that I'll soon attach to the engine. The race notice from Pressa sits folded in my pocket. In one corner of my view, the time says it's nine o'clock. Just a couple of hours left before I head off to see her.

A light knock sounds against my door.

I don't respond. Daniel knocks again, and I half expect him to call through the door for me to open it. But he doesn't. I can almost

picture him standing there, leaning casually against the frame with his rumpled shirt and a plate of food in his hand.

When I was little, we'd leave our doors open and I'd go back and forth all the time, peppering him with questions until he'd tell me to leave him alone. But that was back when I felt like I knew him. Then he took this AIS job, and now spends all his time keeping his secrets. So I keep mine.

The knock comes a third time, but I still don't answer. Finally, his footsteps turn away and he heads off into his own room.

I try to concentrate on attaching the new engine to my drone. When had we stopped really talking to each other? Why is it so hard for him to understand me now? How can he possibly go to the Undercity for so many missions, and yet not feel the same pull to it that I do? Hadn't he grown up in Lake too?

It just reminds me of why I don't tell him about my nightmares, the way I cringe at loud noises or tremble over little things that remind me of the past. My brother had gone through worse than I had, and somehow he seems to have come out of it relatively unscathed. Functioning. Practical.

But things linger in my head. They don't go away.

Maybe he's right. Maybe I really am still a kid who doesn't know how to move on.

An hour ticks by slowly. Finally, I finish attaching the engine and test the drone by hovering it quietly over my desk. It's a sleek design inspired by a Colonies jet that had once been flown by a girl named Kaede, who carried my brother and June Iparis across country lines during the heat of the Republic's war. The wings are swept and

REBEL

narrow, the shape of the drone so sleek that it resembles a needle. The engine underneath it glows a faint blue, humming serenely.

From the other room, I don't hear anything. Daniel must have gone to bed by now. After a while, I get up and leave my room without a sound. Then I peer over at his door and give the handle a try.

It's locked.

He's probably fast asleep already, in a perfectly made bed. Where my room is a mess, his is always tidy. Something about Daniel's years on the streets has made him more careful with his stuff than I am. Everything is always in its place: computers and devices arranged neatly on his desk, his bed made without a single wrinkle in the blankets. He has few mementos from our life back in the Republic on his shelves. A dangling pendant from our father, always polished. Medals and badges from the Republic are all put carefully away into a box. He doesn't display them openly.

I turn away from his door and head back into my room. With any luck, he won't hear me leave and he won't notice when I come back. I turn off the lights in my own room, then put the drone away in my backpack and start throwing on my jacket. The patterns from the city lights outside stretch against my ceiling. Everything's silent and dark. All I can hear is the crowd of thoughts in my head.

Finally, I'm ready to go.

As I turn to head out the door, a motion outside stops me.

I pause in the darkness, then grab my glasses from my dresser and walk over on silent feet to the sliding glass door that leads out to the long balcony that wraps around our home.

My vision at night has never quite recovered from the Republic's experiments, and there is a faint halo around the lights glimmering

outside from windows. But I can still make out my brother crouched precariously on the ledge, his face turned out toward the massive city.

This would be a terrifying sight to anyone else. The way he's sitting, Daniel looks like he could plummet to his death at any moment. But instead, he is perfectly balanced and at ease, one elbow propped up against a raised knee, his other leg hanging down over the side of the balcony, the foot pressed flat against the railings. With my blurred vision, a glow of light from the skyscrapers behind him outlines his figure in blue-white.

Guess he's not asleep after all.

I wonder what he's thinking. Whether or not he still has nightmares like I do. What he sees when he gazes out at Ross City. Surely, he can't walk through the Undercity on his sweeps and not think about where we came from. He can't possibly pass those ramshackle vendors, the people who huddle in the alleys, and not think of his days struggling to survive.

Maybe he's thinking about seeing June tomorrow. A needle of guilt pricks me as I remember how I'd brought her up to him earlier in the day. He'd switched the topic back to me so quickly. But that's the thing about him now. He'll spend all his time digging into my life without ever telling me anything about what's going on with him. I don't even know if he's still in love with her.

There used to be a time when all I wanted to do was talk to Daniel. Now, I don't know what I want. For him to understand me, I guess, except that seems impossible.

I watch him until he stands up on the ledge, turns, and hops back down. He disappears back inside his room.

REBEL

A call from Pressa comes in. I accept it, then answer in a hushed voice, “Hey.”

“Hey.” She sounds breathless and excited. “Looks like you’re officially on the racing roster. You still in for tonight?”

For just a second, I hesitate.

I’d made a promise to Pressa, had said it right to her face. But Daniel is still an AIS agent.

If the AIS ever gets a whiff of how Pressa really makes her money, how she’s been paying her father’s medical bills by betting on illegal drone races, she’ll be jailed and her Level flattened before I can take a breath to speak for her. Even Daniel doesn’t have the kind of power to save her.

I fold the drone notice back into my pocket and hide it away. The Undercity. The danger and noise and chaos. The need for it to fill my mind and push everything else out.

“I’m heading down now,” I confirm. “Meet you at midnight.”

DANIEL

IT'S A COLD NIGHT, BUT I DON'T MIND THE STING of the air against my skin. There's something familiar about the wind against my face at a place high above the city, where I can see everything—the pulse of the hundreds of floors below me, the menagerie of bright lights lining the walkways that connect each high-rise, the flickering of virtual notations over people shuffling by below. Tonight, the skyscrapers nearest ours have a set of virtual murals of the ocean overlaid against their walls, of bright corals and rainbow-hued fish swimming between each building. As I look on through the augmented reality system installed in my chip, a virtual whale colored neon turquoise and pink glides lazily in the air between two skyscrapers, its massive body materializing out through one wall and into another like a ghost.

I admire the moving art in silence.

Back in the Republic, I would climb to the top of a building and look down at a scene of haze and dirt, concrete and steel and red banners and metal waterwheels. At night, there would be patches of the city that were completely dark, areas where they cut the power

to conserve it for military use. I have fragments of memories about those rolling blackouts, nights when Tess and I would light a roll of trash as a torch to navigate the pitch-dark alleys. It was a place that always seemed broken.

All I see here is a sea of eternal lights and colors. Yet, somehow, everything still has a feeling of precarious balance—like this whole goddy city's sitting on a neglected, crumbling foundation, teetering on the brink of something sinister.

Dominic Hann.

The AIS has been tracking him for so long, and yet we still have no good leads. Not even a public sighting of him. The only thing I know for sure is that he's got some powerful friends and a lot of spies. No doubt he knows that we're after him, and he's found a way to keep out of our sights.

I check my messages again in my view. No new updates from Jessan or Lara. No luck hunting down where the next drone race might be happening in the Undercity.

I run a hand through my hair and try not to remember the feeling of that woman's body going limp in my arms, her head lolling to one side as the life left her. Every time I close my eyes, I picture the foam flecks at her mouth and feel the weight of her. The memory makes me shudder. I'm too afraid to see her in my dreams.

It was easier when I had an enemy I could face: the old Republic, the military jeeps and the airfields and the plague patrols, those shining epaulettes and black boots. Not that I'm itching to go back to living on the streets anytime soon.

The thought reminds me of Eden, and I look instinctively over my shoulder toward the darkness of his room. At least he can get

some sleep. Maybe in the morning I'll be able to catch him before he heads off to the university and get a few words in with him. A part of me itches to check his location again, just to make sure he's where he should be—but Eden's outburst from this afternoon makes me pause. I force myself to leave him alone.

Instead, I look up to the few floors above our apartment. Tomorrow, the Republic's Elector and his entourage are going to land on the Sky Floor of a nearby building. June will be with him. It'll be the first time I've seen her since I bumped into her on the street in Batalla a month ago.

A knot of excitement and fear tightens in my chest. I look to my side and imagine our meeting, picture her standing here beside me and leaning against the railing. My memories have been so shattered since I left the Republic, and for years I couldn't even remember who June was at all. I'd only see a nameless girl in my dreams, her long, dark ponytail swinging behind her, and wonder how I could never seem to catch up. I'd study the paper clip ring around my finger, something I've always worn ever since I left the Republic, and try to remember why it mattered so much to me.

It wasn't until I saw her in the Republic a month ago, purely by accident, that fragments of her in my memories came rushing back to me. That I remembered June was the one who'd give me that paper clip ring.

That time, we'd shaken hands, and there had been tears in my eyes. We smiled over dinner with Tess and made awkward conversation. I walked her back home. I made jokes and she eased into them. Every gesture, every question, and every laugh from her triggered old memories that I thought I'd lost. She was the flint lighting

sparks in my darkness, illuminating a history that I can just barely see.

That was the last time we spoke. She hasn't contacted me in the month since then, and I haven't reached out either. I don't know why I'm terrified to call her again. Maybe it's the fear of those sparks of memory returning to me.

But tomorrow, I'll see her again. So every idle moment I have, I find my thoughts drifting to her.

I clear my throat, then pretend to look over at her and smile. Even this practice session makes me nervous. What the hell do I say to her?

"Fancy running into you again, yeah?" I murmur to myself, feigning the casual, flirtatious tone I try to have around her. I shake my head. I don't want her to think I'm an idiot. "Seems like we're always bumping into each other on the street," I rephrase, but grimace. I try out a few other phrases.

"Welcome to my new neighborhood."

"If you need a guide around the city, I'm pretty free today."

"Any plans with your Elector tonight, or can I steal you for dinner?"

I scowl, embarrassed and grateful that no one else is around to see me talking to myself. I've never had trouble talking to a girl before. Why am I working myself up into such a panic?

I shift my footing against the ledge and start reciting things I've been working on telling her all week, memories of us that I've been working hard to recollect.

"Remember the time when you taught me how to fight?" I murmur

to an imaginary June beside me, a sly grin on my face. “You had a fever from being Patient Zero for a plague, and you still beat me up.”

Honestly, the memory is vague for me. Most of them are. I remember the fight, recall June teaching me how to space my footing and how to protect my chin. But I don’t quite remember where we were, or why. I don’t remember what happened after she tripped me. There was a long, dark tunnel. Sweat beaded her brow.

If I mention it to her, she might help me fill in the gaps of that memory.

“Or the time when you wore that scarlet dress? You were the most beautiful person I’d ever seen in my life. Still are.”

That memory, too, is like a blurred photo. There were glasses of champagne and glittering chandeliers. There was the vision of June in that stunning red gown, her hair clipped high and thick on her head. We stood in a room lit only by moonlight, and for some reason, I’d walked away from her. Why would I ever do that?

I recite other fragments of memories. Her face, wet and glistening, as we crouched in a raging storm. Us, huddled together under a burlap sack in a rolling train car. Me, kissing her, pulling her to me, brushing strands of hair away from her face. Me, painstakingly twisting a pair of paper clips together and giving the ring to her. Her, doing the same for me in return.

There are a million pieces of us scattered through my memory, moments tiny and insignificant to everyone else in the world except for me.

I fall into silence and go back to staring out at the city. Suddenly

REBEL

I'm aware of how small I am against this city's backdrop, nothing more than a shadow in the night, lost in the sea of lights.

Maybe she doesn't remember any of this, either. Maybe it wasn't worth remembering. I look down, gathering my courage, taking in deep breaths to undo the knot coiled tight in my chest.

It doesn't matter. If anything, it'll have been worth it to tell her that I know we had something special.



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NAME: EDEN BATAAR WING

OCCUPATION: Graduate Student at Ross University of the Sciences

HOMETOWN: Lake Sector, Los Angeles, California, Republic of America

RESIDENCE: Sky Floors, Ross City, Antarctica

LAST SEEN: At age ten, Eden was suffering from a plague genetically engineered by the Republic of America; he was also mourning the deaths of his mother and his oldest brother, John. During the war between the Republic and the Colonies of America, Eden submitted himself to help find a cure for the mutant plague that was causing panic across the populations of both countries. At the end of the war, Eden moves to Antarctica with Daniel, his brother and now guardian. He is currently a top engineering student at Ross University.



NAME: DANIEL ALTAN WING

ALIAS: “Day”

OCCUPATION: Agent for the Antarctica Intelligence Service (AIS)

HOMETOWN: Lake Sector, Los Angeles, California, Republic of America

RESIDENCE: Sky Floors, Ross City, Antarctica

LAST SEEN: A decade ago Daniel Wing was known as “Day,” the rogue vigilante who worked to improve the lives of people in the poor sectors of the Republic. He was wanted for assault, arson, theft, and destruction of military property. While living on the streets of Los Angeles, Day met June Iparis when he rescued her from a street fight. During the war between the Republic and the Colonies, Day aligned himself with June and the Republic and served as an aide between the government and the Patriots. As the war waged on, Day learned he had severe brain damage and needed aggressive treatment and surgery to survive. Though this saved his life, Daniel now continues to suffer short-term retrograde amnesia, causing him to forget much of the time between his meeting June and working with the Republic and his surgery.



NAME: **JUNE IPARIS**

OCCUPATION: Military Commander for the Republic of America

HOMETOWN AND

RESIDENCE: Ruby Sector, Los Angeles, California, Republic of America

LAST SEEN: After the death of her brother, Captain Metias Iparis, June was assigned as an agent to track down the infamous Day, falsely accused of Metias's murder. Through Day, June learned about threats to the Republic's government and ultimately allied herself with him to restore order and to support the young, new Elector Primo of the Republic, Anden Stavropoulos. During the war between the Republic and the Colonies, June rose among the ranks of the military, earning the respect and trust of the Elector, who appointed her as a Commander based in Los Angeles at the end of the war. Ten years after breaking ties with Day, June runs into him and Eden in the Batalla Sector of Los Angeles.



NAME: PRESSA YU

OCCUPATION: Assistant Janitor at Ross University of the Sciences

HOMETOWN AND

RESIDENCE: Undercity, Ross City, Antarctica

LAST SEEN: Pressa and Eden met at Ross University, when Eden helped her optimize the robots she uses for her janitorial job at the university. Her father, Mr. Yu, an apothecary and owner of an unsanctioned shop from the Undercity, has fallen ill and requires expensive medication. Pressa introduces Eden to the Undercity and underground drone racing, where they enter illegal bets to earn money Pressa can use to buy contraband medication for her father.

