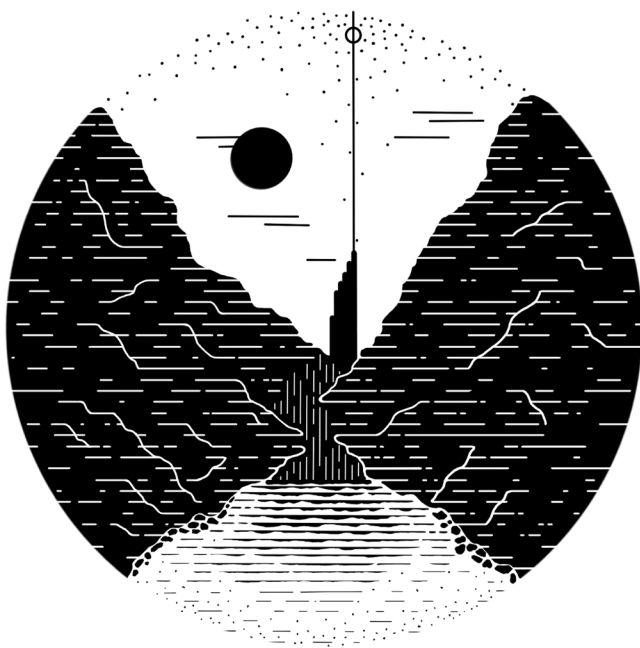


JONATHAN ALDER



— AND NOW WE —

H A R N E S S
T H E S U N

And Now We Harness the Sun

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*To all the people I've killed.
In books, calm down.
I regret nothing.*

REVIVALS

Revivals have offered a second chance at life to all. The human consciousness is immortal and can be reclaimed from death. A revived body will synchronize to its owner's mind and manifest the original consciousness. But beware. If a person is revived in duplicate, the consciousness will suspend between the two bodies and loop until the weaker of the bodies inevitably dies.

DECEIT BEGINS HIS JOURNEY.

Clew entered the observation room, knowing full well that every outcome of the following conversation would lead to someone's life being ruined.

Just not Clew's.

"How is our guest behaving?" Clew asked, closing the door behind himself.

Clew's secretary sat at a small workstation, eyes scanning a holographic display. "He's complained about security three times, but he's cooperating."

"Brilliant." Clew forced an unconcerned smile. He stepped towards the massive observation window to watch his guests before entering to speak with them. The one-way glass was an intimidation tactic from another time and world. It put visitors on the defensive.

Through the glass, Stanley Yarborough sat at a table, anger and boredom competing in his eyes. Clew had made him wait for two hours before arriving. Destabilizing a person beforehand worked wonders to inhibit their ability to articulate an argument.

Stanley's four children surrounded him at the table. Each was a different age, but they all shared the same anxious boredom.

The oldest son leaned against the back wall on two chair legs, his own legs bouncing in the air to a rhythm only he heard.

Clew closed his eyes. "Today will be an important victory. Wish me luck."

"Good luck, sir," Clew's secretary said.

Clew approached the door to the holding room, hand hovering over the handle. After all these years, he would have thought that this part of the job would get easier, but it never did. Each family was unique, requiring a fresh path forward every time.

But Clew hadn't come this far by shying away from a hard conversation. He grasped the handle and entered the small room beyond.

Wordless, he strode towards Stanley and sat across from him and his offspring.

"Who the hell are you?" Stanley asked. He was bald, with a pale white face that still showed no signs of aging. In fact, his revived body looked just a few years older than his oldest son.

"The name's Clew," Clew said, knowing well the perfect intonation and volume needed to project aloof confidence.

Stanley leveled a glare at Clew through eyes that seemed not to have slept in a lifetime. "I came to see Hannah, not some tweaker in a pillowcase that's trying to look pious."

Clew lowered his gaze and adjusted his sleeve. He projected disappointment to raise Stanley's confidence before delivering the first blow. "I'd love to accommodate your desire to see your . . . ex-wife, I suppose she is in this new life. But Stanley, she doesn't want to see you." Clew's gaze locked with the man's.

Stanley looked away, expression darkening. “Bring her to me and let her say that to my face.”

Clew allowed his eyes to darken. “That is not going to happen. I’m sorry.” Sincere regret was the best way forward—useless placating with the excuse that such requests were hard to fulfill under such circumstances.

Clew had seen this so many times before. A family in an unhappy marriage. Before they could get divorced, they died. Then came revivals, offering a second chance at life for everyone. Both spouses switched out into new bodies, but for one of them, things had changed. One wanted to move on, but the other spouse refused, believing they had some sort of claim on the other’s future.

Stanley grunted, leaning forward. “You a lawyer?”

Clew gave a blank and unreadable expression. “She’s asked me to represent her.” He looked away from Stanley to watch each of his children. “You switched your kids out as adolescents—strange choice.”

Stanley appeared unfazed by the observation. “They died as kids.”

Clew cleared his throat, adjusting in his seat and feigning disinterest. “Car crash, wasn’t it?”

Stanley tensed. “I don’t have to tell you shit. We died. End of story.”

Clew tilted his head as if Stanley’s words weren’t entirely true. Of course, they were, but Clew doubted that a construction worker would know enough of the law to dispute. “Hannah thinks you revived them at that age to manipulate her into returning to you.”

Stanley returned instant hostility. “That’s not true!”

Clew held his expression. Stanley was on the defensive already. That didn’t take long. “Truth is often subjective to

the person experiencing it.” He finished with a frustrating smile.

Panic blossomed in Stanley’s eyes. He would play his gambit soon. “Hannah belongs with us.”

Clew suppressed his satisfaction. There it was. All Stanley’s cards were on the table. “She is not your property, Stanley. That’s what you never understood.”

“Is that what you’re telling her?” Stanley asked, relinquishing even more control over the conversation. “You’re feeding her delusions.”

Clew looked down. It was time to assume the moral high ground. “You hit her.”

Stanley looked away. “So you say.”

Clew shook his head, projecting despondence. “Unfortunately for you, the truth, whatever it is, doesn’t much matter. She doesn’t want to be with you, and you will not force her.”

Stanley’s breathing accelerated. His fists were clenching in a repeating fidget. “Why are we here, then? My own wife hasn’t talked to me since my switch out. And when I finally get a response, she sends you in her stead.”

“She . . . never intended to speak to you herself,” Clew said. He was approaching his final move.

“Then why bring me out?” Stanley asked. Hope had been removed. It was almost too easy, but Stanley needed to lose control if Hannah’s wishes were to be fulfilled. Only then would she get her oldest son back.

Clew cleared his throat and glanced at the kids. “This will be a difficult conversation.”

“So many words and nothing to say,” Stanley said, his obtrusive condescension resurfacing.

Okay, it was time to act before Stanley regained any control in the conversation. Clew cleared his throat. “On Hannah’s

behalf, I'm here to extend an invitation to the kids." He made eye contact with each of the kids, lingering on the oldest, who sat up straighter. "She wants you back. Every day, she misses you."

Stanley's chair scraped against the floor. "Oh, no." He stood. "No. Kids, we're leaving."

"Your oldest is eighteen," Clew said, cutting the tension in the air. "He can make that decision on his own." Clew focused on the boy. He had wavy black hair and seemed to have never lost that baby fat. Yes, Hannah was right about him. He would come. "What do you think, lad? Your mother wants nothing more than to be with you. I just spoke with her before coming to talk to you. Do you want to be with your mother again?"

Stanley wasted no time in extracting himself from the situation. He picked up his youngest daughter, who was little more than five. "Come on, Finley. We're leaving," he said in a breathy voice to his oldest son.

"He'll leave when and how he chooses," Clew said with finality, eyes never leaving the young boy. "What do you say, Finley? You all have this second chance at life. Do you want to be with your mum again?"

Finley looked very much like a cornered animal on Earth. An impossible choice was before him. The weight of decision rested on his back.

"Don't leave your sisters, Fin," Stanley said, still trying to drag his other three children out the door.

Finley turned with slow dread to his father, eyes downcast. "I want to see Mom again. Maybe I can talk to her."

Well, that was a slight complication. "Your mum and dad aren't getting back together, lad. Know that before coming to see her." He gazed at Finley with sympathy. This was the situa-

tion, and the only way forward was for Finley to respect his parents' wishes.

Finley nodded, placing a hand on the table. "I understand, I think. I'd like to be with her."

A sob escaped Stanley. "Fin." Smothering dread poured over his face. That sadness smoldered before turning to rage that focused on Clew. "You're doing this to her!"

Clew knew better than to back away. Stanley hurting him in any way would only strengthen Clew's position. "Blame me if it helps you heal. But she is happy and whole. Don't be angry that she has chosen to better herself in this new life without you."

Stanley growled. His animal instinct overtook him. He raged forward and swung his arm at Clew.

The shock of the punch was predictable and unfortunate. Clew fell back, not bothering to protect himself. Bodies were temporal, after all.

He landed on the floor, relieved that the breath had not been knocked out of him. His lip was bleeding—inconvenient, but unavoidable.

The door behind Clew opened, and in poured his secretary with two security guards.

The guards wasted no time in detaining Stanley. His daughters cried in abject terror, and even Finley looked disturbed at the turn of events.

No. This was a bad look.

"Stop," Clew said, still on the ground and nursing his face. "Let him go. He can't hurt us outside these walls."

The guards detaining Stanley eyed one another but released the man with the obedience of practiced officers.

Stanley's daughters rushed for him, crying into his legs and shooting fearful looks at Clew.

Clew softened. "Leave now, whilst you can without recrimination."

Stanley gathered his youngest into his arms. "Fin?"

Silence pressed in on the room from every angle. Finley stood with stunned fear, displaying an unfortunate amount of uncertainty.

Clew sighed. "He has made his decision."

Stanley backed against the door like a man broken by two lifetimes of disappointment. His daughters crowded him with fearful, tear-stained faces.

"It's time to leave," Clew said with eyes only for Stanley.

One of the officers in the room opened the door.

Stanley, mercifully, stepped through backwards, betrayed eyes never leaving his son.

The door closed. A knot of anxiety released in Clew's chest at Stanley's departure.

Clew gave Finley an appreciative smile. "Help me up, would you?" He held up a hand for the boy.

Finley rushed forward, extending his hand to pull Clew off the ground.

"Thank you," Clew said, straightening his robes. "Come on, lad. Let's get you out of here."

Finley, still seeming to wonder if he had made the correct choice in staying, followed.

They exited to an expansive white granite hall. The door to the holding room locked behind them, causing Finley to jump.

Clew's feet landed on the red carpet of the formal entryway. The casual display of wealth provided a certain level of longing for visitors. Allowing Finley to enter here was the obvious choice to instill total confidence from the outset.

Clew turned to Finley, dabbing his bloodied lip with casual fingers.

Finley returned a somber look to Clew. He walked with hunched shoulders and darting eyes.

With his clean hand, Clew reached out to grab Finley's shoulder. "You just made an incredibly brave decision. I want you to know that."

"What about my sisters?" Finley asked.

"When they're old enough like you, they will also be given a chance to join your mother," Clew said. "They will follow. Believe me."

Finley nodded, saying nothing.

Clew broke his face into sympathy. "Your mother will be proud of you."

Tears forbidden to surface reddened Finley's eyes. "Can you take me to see her?"

"Of course." Clew gave an understanding smile. "Follow me."

Finley allowed Clew to lead him through the formal entryway, pure white sunlight shining through the halls.

At the end was a double set of doors with gold leaf gleaming along the framework.

Clew paused, turning once more to the boy. "Welcome to your new life, Finley. We've all been very excited to meet you."

Clew opened the doors to a massive room and motioned Finley inside.

Surprise consumed Finley's face as he stepped through the doors.

The room beyond was wide and tall, composed of the same white stone, red carpet, and white sunlight. They stood on a balcony with a grand staircase descending into the room. On the carpeted floor below, well over five hundred people lay prone on the ground, their foreheads pressed against the carpet.

Tendrils of incense rose from small braziers scattered across the floor.

Clew stepped into the room beside Finley. He gave Finley a kind smile before clearing his throat to address those in attendance. "My children, may I introduce to you Finley, Hannah's prodigal son, our newest initiate. Welcome."

The five hundred people, arranged in a grid, all sat upright on their knees. "Welcome, Finley," they said in unison.

Finley's mother, Hannah, was at the front of the congregation in tears.

Clew motioned her to approach. This reunion was essential to strengthening them both.

She stood, rushing up the stairs to embrace her son. Finley reciprocated as any good boy who missed his mother would.

They broke apart, and Hannah bowed to Clew. "Thank you, Elder. Thank you."

On the floor, the five hundred onlookers were in tears as well.

Ten others ascended the stairs. They adorned Finley with flowers and necklaces, each welcoming him in their own right. They expressed their warm feelings of acceptance, drowning out any possible hint of fear.

The display had gone perfectly on all fronts. All who witnessed had been strengthened. Hannah's devotion was now absolute.

Even so, Finley displayed an alarming level of concern at the turn of events. "I don't understand," he said. "Who are you?"

Clew placed a comforting hand on Finley's shoulder. "Call me Elder, child. Here you will have no wants. Everything will be provided. You're home. At last."

THE OUTSIDE PROWLs HIS HALLS,

Clew lit a rope of incense over the dancing flame of a yellow candle. He dropped it into the brazier where it gushed tendrils of smoke into the air. Woody embers permeated the conclave, the healing smell of a thousand past ceremonies.

He pressed two fingers into the brazier, coating them in ash.

Finley, still unsure of his actions, followed Clew's lead in the ceremony by kneeling. Two months had passed since Finley joined with the Transients. Today, he became one of them.

Clew pressed his ashen fingers up against Finley's forehead, smearing an arch across his skin.

"I awaken you to your Intermediary Journey, Finley," Clew said, voice low. "From this day until the Hereafter, you are reborn on this path."

"To this journey, I pledge my purpose," Finley spoke in practiced words that still shook.

"Rise, Finley, and see your fellow Transients," Clew said.

Finley stood and turned towards the other Transients. The conclave rose in welcome. Almost double the congregation had come today as had the day of his arrival.

Clew cleared his throat. “I declare this a day of celebration.” He rarely allowed days of rest, but over a year had passed since the last Initiation. “We have a new brother. Toil not today with your chores. Let us give thanks and meditate on our perfected lives in the Hereafter.”

The faces before Clew broke into joy, and he knew he had made the right move. The people bowed to the ground. “In the Hereafter,” they said in unison.

Immediately, they began to disperse, many rushing forward to congratulate Finley. Hannah wrapped him in a hug.

Clew gave Finley an encouraging smile before excusing himself. He could not bring himself to partake in the celebrations. Instead, he would find a quiet place to meditate outside.

He exited the conclave into the grand hall. A short walk along the red carpet allowed him to emerge outside into a walled garden. Grass, trees, and even a river decorated the grounds, contributing to a tranquil sense of spirituality. A breeze blew over him, carrying sour air across his nose. Air on Avalonia hadn’t always been breathable. But a carefully crafted ecosystem had allowed humans to make a proper home on this planet.

Still, the air had never quite felt right by Earth standards.

The sky was ablaze with nebulous colors. Baltica hung low in the air, a brown planet speckled with human buildings. Rodinia was little more than a pinprick on the horizon. It would grow larger this month before once again becoming indistinguishable from a star.

Other Transients were also out in the garden, some in meditation, others carrying out their Initiatives. Still, others were emerging from the ceremony.

Most were revived from Earth. All were Transients, on an Intermediary Journey to the Hereafter. In helping one another

achieve that perfected state, they all were bettered and found meaning in this Transitional Life.

Clew walked along the garden path. He would cross the river and meditate under a tree on the far side of the grounds.

He neared the bridge over the stream and paused. A woman was standing on the bridge, watching the rippling water dance over stones. She wasn't a Transient, evident in her dark, manufactured clothes. She was impossible to miss.

Clew stopped walking just before the bridge.

The woman looked at Clew. "Clew Collins?"

Panic flooded Clew. No one here knew that name. He looked about himself to see if he could summon security or some form of help.

Clew cleared his throat to lower his voice back to its normal level. "How did you get in here?"

"Right," the woman said, clicking her tongue and pointing at Clew. "My name is Jolene. I'm with the Murphy Corporation."

"I see," Clew said. "Why are you here, exactly?"

"No small talk?" Jolene remarked. "Very well. We both know you're a manipulative little diva-cultist, so we'll skip the part where I judge the crap out of you and get down to the part where I offer you a job."

Clew felt himself take an involuntary step backwards. "I never applied for a job. I think you should leave."

Jolene pouted and danced closer to Clew. "This isn't the type of job you apply for. However, we've reviewed your qualifications, peculiar as they are, and believe you would be an ideal fit for our newest opening."

Clew stretched out his arms and adorned his inclusive smile. "We have no jobs here, no money or desires. Those are things of the Prior Life."

“Uh, hello?” Jolene tried to tap at Clew’s head, but he backed away. “How the hell did you create this place without jobs?”

“Our Initiatives dictate the tasks we perform here,” Clew said, maintaining his serene voice. Any of the Transients could be listening in. Besides, this . . . *Jolene* might be convinced to join them.

Jolene puffed her lips and angled her chin into her neck. “Super cool. Sounds like a job.”

Clew’s insides drained out. He needed to get this woman out of here. “I prefer to think I gathered the pieces. That something grew from it merely confirms that my people needed a refuge during this Intermediary Life.”

“Whatever, man.” Jolene tapped the ground with her toe and rolled her eyes. “I’m not the one with twenty-thousand devotees. So, who am I to say you’re using the wrong words?”

“Would you join me in my office?” Clew asked.

“Ew. No,” Jolene said. “I’m just here to offer you the job. And yes, you’re going to accept because, unfortunately, what you’re doing *here* is illegal.”

Clew scanned the grounds. No one was in earshot, but someone could be listening from under the bridge. “We are good people, trying to find our path in the universe. Nothing dodgy.” He began to walk. If Jolene wished to continue, she would have to follow him away from the bridge.

She did, catching up a moment later. “Lying to your devotees to keep them here could be construed as . . . well, malpractice. So, I’m very sorry to say we’ll have to shut you down.”

Clew turned on her, pausing in his step. “Who did you say you’re with?”

“Murphy.” Jolene met his frustration with stubborn satisfaction.

“Murphy,” Clew said, the implication clear in his voice. “Not the government?”

Jolene waved as if to head Clew off. “No, but we have a vested interest in your doctrine. That’s why we’re here *first*.” She ended with a patronizing squint.

Clew paused, refusing to allow the woman to get under his skin. “To do what?”

“I already said. We have a job for you.”

Clew straightened his posture to reassert his position. “Employment is a very terrestrial concept. I prefer to remain unsullied by such a pursuit.”

Jolene mocked Clew with a talking hand motion. “Nice. You’re super holy and all that. We’re offering you a new ministry, with a new congregation, on a new planet.”

“What planet?” Clew asked before he had a chance to quash his curiosity.

Jolene gave that same knowing squint and shook her head. “I’m afraid I can’t say any more. Once you’re in agreeance, I’ll take you on location and give a full briefing.”

“I am needed here,” Clew said, adding a slight bow for good measure. “I’m sorry.” He began to walk again towards a sizable Japanese Maple tree whose branches hung just over his head.

“The alternative is prison, dummy,” Jolene called after Clew. She was slouching and had a peeved expression.

Clew turned, finding himself glaring at the woman.

Jolene took several deliberate steps in Clew’s direction. “Laurasian governments don’t often tolerate your brand of spiritual manipulation.”

“There is no manipulation,” Clew said, shaking his head and raising his eyebrows.

Jolene stopped, a playful smirk overtaking her face. She

raised a finger. "Detainment of civilians." She raised another. "Abduction. Defrauding your followers to pay for this compound. Having your followers defraud their families. A surprising amount of hush money, which is actually how we discovered you. I must say, you've made a very profitable business. Oh, and there's those teenagers."

Clew paused, a spike of fear shooting through him. "What?"

Jolene pumped her fist. "Heck yeah, man. We got everything on you. Twenty-three of your followers are underage, which adds kidnapping to your list of crimes. This may be the Wild West so far as Laurasia goes, but it turns out taking people's kids ain't cool. Crazy, right?"

Clew knew he should leave. Throw this woman out and immediately contact his lawyer. "No one is here by force," he said against his better judgment.

"You aren't listening," Jolene tapped her temple. "Judgment is already passed, but *you* get to make a decision. You can dissolve your little group here and come with me today, or armed officers will arrive tomorrow and set your followers free."

"Those with spiritual inclinations are accustomed to persecution," Clew said.

"You don't qualify to decry persecution," Jolene said. "This is happening, like it or not."

Clew's breathing deepened. "I can verify if what you're saying is true with a single call."

"Please do. I'll wait here."

Clew cursed internally. He would call, but her confidence was starting to annoy him. He pointed at the ground. "I created a home for those on their Intermediary Journey to the Hereafter."

Jolene bobbed her head. “Ah, so you did create this place. That confession will speed your conviction after your arrest tomorrow.”

Clew stilled his breathing and kept himself from fidgeting. Displays of stress were something he’d abandoned long ago. Pure confidence helped build trust among the Transients. “Okay,” he said, failing at projecting confidence. “Okay. Just . . . give me some time to pick my successor.”

Jolene gave Clew a look of patronizing sympathy. “This place isn’t going to survive you. There is no successor. From where I stand, I’m your only option to continue your ministry. You should probably do what I say.”

Clew huffed, unable to see Jolene as anything but an outsider trying to destroy a community he had nurtured since the settlement of Laurasia. “What exactly do you want from me?”

Jolene shrugged, displaying a frustrating level of indifference and irreverence. “Personally, I don’t want anything from you. Never been into monks with fake accents. But Murphy wants you to replicate what you’ve done here for us. You still get to be a spiritual leader and help people on their *Intermediary Journey*, as you like to call it.” She gave mocking air quotes.

Clew watched her for any possible subtext that could testify to hidden intent. He had always felt a keen understanding of people, but those who played their own game were always worthy of distrust. “I see,” he said at last.

Jolene examined her nails, painted a dark, glittery blue. “You’ll have funding since your new followers won’t have the financial means to support you.”

Clew never stopped watching her. She was either telling the truth or very good at manipulating. “I’ll need some time at least to verify your story from every angle.”

Jolene gave a pouting face. “Don’t you trust me, holiness?”

“Not for a second,” Clew said. “If I find a whisper of a lie from you, I’m not going anywhere.”

“Fine,” Jolene said, righting her posture and giving a head bob. “I’d start your investigation with law enforcement, as they’re the most neutral party involved. But for now, I’ll give you this.” She withdrew a digital clipboard from her pocket that she unfolded and handed to Clew.

Clew took the device, examining it. “What’s this for?”

“You don’t have lens implants, so this will be your Murphy portal,” Jolene said. “Oh, and it has your ticket.”

“My ticket?”

“Just follow the instructions,” Jolene said. “Try to arrive a few hours early. I recommend saying goodbye to your followers tonight. We’ll be on a schedule.”

Dread pooled in Clew’s stomach at the thought of saying goodbye to the Transients. Being truthful, opening up in that way was not something he knew how to do. Not since his Prior Life. It was better to maintain a wall between him and others.

He really could make all his calls in transit.

Clew closed the clipboard and pocketed it. “No need. Let’s go.”

AFTER A FITFUL NIGHT’S sleep in the only hotel Murphy would pay for, Clew arrived with Jolene at the spaceport’s terminal. While Earth was prohibitively far for any meaningful travel between Sol and Laurasia, travel between planets within the system had become common.

The terminal buzzed with people. A massive glass wall stretched the length of the terminal. Out on the launch pad, an

explosion of fuel lifted a rocket from the ground. It rose into the air with a guttural roar.

Clew paused to watch the takeoff. That would be him in an hour. He placed his hand on the glass wall.

Jolene appeared beside Clew, watching the rocket ascend into the hazy sky. This early in the morning, the angle of the sun turned the air a thick pure orange.

“Sleep okay?” Jolene asked.

“That bed could have been a little more comfortable,” Clew replied, too groggy and ornery to put up with her personality. He never left his living quarters in the morning without an hour of meditation and burning incense.

“Not everyone can afford a *cotton mattress*,” Jolene said in her teasing tone.

“You work for *Murphy*,” Clew said.

Jolene hedged her feet. “Yeah, but they aren’t exactly into paying for shit.”

“I see. Please inform your superiors I expect them to spare no expense if they want my ministry,” Clew said.

“Okay, *John Hammond*.”

“Will you tell me where we’re going now?” Clew asked.

“It says on your ticket, dummy,” Jolene said. “We’re headed to Rodinia. Our gate is right over there.”

Clew’s insides plummeted. Rodinia was just about the least habitable planet in the Laurasian system. Not that he knew much about such things. “That’s a bad environment for a spiritual being seeking enlightenment.”

Jolene’s glare lost its playfulness. “The poor don’t get to choose their environment, oh enlightened one.”

Clew shrugged, as if unable to help the situation. “I’ve never had an interest in ministering to the poor.”

Jolene tilted her head, face aghast in confusion. “I’m pretty sure that idea is against the union rules of ‘assholes who create cults.’ Besides, don’t the downtrodden most easily achieve spirituality?”

Clew turned from her to look out over the spaceport tarmac. Flight crews were rushing in to reset the launchpad for the next rocket that was already rolling backwards into place. He twisted his lips. “People seek spirituality for many reasons. The poor do so to align themselves with the powerful. It’s a means of stability for them, not a spiritual journey.”

Jolene fidgeted; her first action that Clew considered unintentional. “Spirituality grounds the weary mind. Don’t judge the poor because their needs differ from yours, Clew.”

Clew smiled, believing her words to be the most honest she had ever been with him. “How uncharacteristically wise of you.”

Jolene returned her own smile with squinted eyes that hid a patronizing glint. “You don’t know me. You haven’t seen anything yet, bitch.”

She walked away, leaving a stunned Clew behind.

The next rocket’s base had reached the launchpad and was now tilting into an upright position.

“Come on, holiness,” Jolene called back at Clew as she approached their flight gate.

Clew and Jolene gathered with the other patrons in preparation for the boarding process.

Never having flown in space before, Clew followed Jolene’s example. The process differed significantly from the aeroplanes on Earth that Clew had ridden in the twenty-first century.

For starters, there was no walkway to enter the cabin. Instead, boarding happened right there in the terminal. Rows of

seats, stacked three levels high, waited for their passengers to sit. The wall behind the seating had a massive circular hole, which opened right into the rocket's cabin. The seating would back into the cabin on tracks that lined the floor.

"Up here," Jolene said, climbing stairs to the second level of seating. She led him to a row near the middle and sat him down.

The seat belt was a monstrosity of complexity, requiring a steward to rescue Clew from all the straps and buckles. The preflight check consisted of ensuring no loose items would fly about the cabin during takeoff or when gravity ceased pulling down.

When all was finished, a buzzer sounded. The stacked seating backed from the spaceport into the rocket waiting behind. They locked into place, trapped in the metal cylinder yet looking forward into the spaceport.

The rocket backed up, and the massive nose swung down, locking into place.

The entire apparatus taxied backwards.

At last, it stopped, and they were rotating upright. Clew shifted from a regular sitting position to lying on his back.

"Prepare for liftoff," a voice said over the speakers.

Clew waited.

And waited.

Nerves fidgeted in his stomach. He glanced at Jolene, who waited with closed eyes for the launch.

"What will my new congregation look like?" Clew asked to distract himself. "I know little of Rodinia."

Jolene kept her eyes closed. "Let's just get there first. You'll have plenty of time to figure it all out."

"I'm just trying to find something to talk about," Clew said,

trying not to panic over the fact that a rocket would ignite under him at any moment. "I've never flown in space."

Jolene groaned. "The takeoff is bumpy, and we'll lose gravity. As a passenger, that's all you need to worry about."

Clew opened his mouth to respond, but found his tongue had retreated to his stomach. The whole cabin lurched, and his back pressed into his seat. They were in the air, hurtling for the stars.

The shaking stopped after a few minutes. The rocket had cleared the densest layers of the atmosphere, the rumbling replaced by an ominous quiet. The rocket's forward momentum matched Avalonia's gravitational pull, resulting in a total loss of gravity within the cabin.

Clew closed his eyes, wishing this experience to be over.

Unfortunately, the feeling of weightlessness lasted for five hours. Jolene had not told Clew the duration of the flight until hour three.

"You are a very frustrating person, you know?" Clew said.

"I get that," Jolene said. "I just don't care enough to do anything about it."

To make matters more unbearable, the five-hour flight ended with a two-hour docking procedure.

"I suppose I should have just killed you and revived you on Rodinia," Jolene mused in response to Clew's face.

"That might have been more merciful," Clew said, counting down the seconds to when he would be allowed to undo his seatbelt.

AFTER EXITING to the space station, Clew followed Jolene along a low gravity corridor to a freight ship traveling to

Rodinia. The rocket had taken them out of the Avalonian atmosphere and into orbit. Now, they needed to actually travel from Avalonia to Rodinia, which Jolene claimed took a long time because of the distance and differing orbital speeds. The journey would take four months, but with two notable improvements over their prior vessel.

First, they would have gravity, thanks to a rotating section of the ship. Second, Clew had a bed that wasn't altogether horrible. Now, he just had to figure out how he was going to spend four months with Jolene.

Clew was preparing for sleep when Jolene approached, carrying a water bottle. The cramped quarters had several bunk beds and a table. The ground had a perceptible curve to it that always managed to stay pointed down.

"Think fast, dummy," Jolene said, dumping the water out over Clew's head.

Clew flinched, but the water curved away from his head and right into Jolene's open mouth.

"Behold: the Coriolis effect," Jolene said, lips wet and clearly proud of herself. "I messed that up on several unfortunate souls before you."

"Thank you for practicing beforehand," Clew said. "This rotation is disorienting."

"I'd like to say you get used to the wonky gravity, but you probably won't, so why bother?"

Clew shook his head. "You're really not going to tell me any more about this new ministry?"

Jolene shrugged, climbing past Clew into the very bunk that he was preparing to sleep in. She sprawled out and yawned. "I didn't come to explain the situation to you."

"You just came to blackmail me and call me names," Clew said, unable to hide the resentment in his voice.

“Yeah, that pretty much sums it up,” Jolene said, looking upwards at the underside of her stolen bunk. “Try to make the best of the trip, shit-for-brains. And remember, we own you.” She gave Clew a too-eager smile before rolling over to sleep.

WHERE DANGER AND BEAUTY DANCE.

Clew had first hoped to spend the journey to Rodinia in meditation and self-reflection. Now was an excellent time to focus on himself and consider ways to make improvements to his ministry.

The next morning, he gave that up as a waste of time.

He was embarking on a new journey, and he needed versatility above all other qualities.

Several years had elapsed since he last built a congregation from scratch, so he decided to practice by proselytizing the crew.

The crew spent their working days in zero-gravity sections of the ship. But they ate, slept, and spent their free time in the rotating sections where Clew and Jolene stayed. Clew had nothing to lose with this crew, so the situation provided a unique opportunity for growth.

He began by learning the names of every crew member—fifty in total—with various positions. Clew was friendly, but not needy. He put no expectations on them, but made himself known.

Later, in casual conversation with two of the crew, he invited them to meditate with him in the morning. Both agreed and showed before their shifts the next day.

Clew led them through a cleansing meditation in a variety of positions. At the end, both had been strengthened, and Clew encouraged them to invite their friends to future meditations.

The following day, three people came, two new attendees and just one repeat. Again, he encouraged all present to bring friends the next day.

Six people came on day three, four repeats and two new.
Progress.

ONE MONTH into the journey to Rodinia, over half of the crew was regularly attending meditations. He had a rotating timetable, so all would be able to participate during the week. Clew began to establish doctrines surrounding the Intermediary Journey to remind himself how the concepts fell on new ears.

“Revivals allowed us to live again,” Clew told them. “But we have not achieved perfection. We have returned to life early and must look forward to the Hereafter when we will be perfected.”

Naturally, some fell away after Clew began establishing the doctrine, but they were in the minority by then. They would return, if just for the social aspect.

“What are you doing with these people?” Jolene asked with exasperation at the start of month two. “You realize this trip only lasts a few months, right?”

“They participate in the meditations of their own accord,” Clew said. “Besides, it’s a unique opportunity to experiment. Everyone benefits.”

“I don’t like it,” Jolene said.

Clew gave her a helpless smile, knowing he really shouldn't enjoy her discomfort. "That sounds like a reason to continue."

Jolene fell silent from then on and observed Clew from a distance, a perplexed expression on her face.

The time had come for Clew to establish leadership among them. With such a small congregation, Clew selected six Anointed Ones from the crew. He could have chosen from the ship's command structure, but instead chose based on his own observations of who would serve with the most devotion. He declared them before the crew, and soon they fell into place as leaders.

The six Anointed Ones were responsible for nine crew members each. They led the daily meditations, taught of the Intermediary Journey, and pointed the way to perfection in the Hereafter. Clew even implemented a simplified version of Initiatives, a Transient's role in building the community.

The first real surprise in the experiment came halfway through month three, five weeks before they were to arrive at Rodinia.

The captain of the freight ship wanted to speak with Clew. Normally, Clew would have referred the captain to his Anointed One. But given the man's position, Clew condescended to meet in person.

Clew left the centrifuge for the first time, venturing into other sections. Ship operations were in zero-gravity. There were no windows, just screens and instruments for navigation.

Upon seeing Clew, the captain wasted no time in explaining the situation.

"What?" Clew asked when the captain had said his piece.

"I just don't think it's appropriate that I remain in command," the captain said. "I would feel better if my Anointed One stepped in, or even you." He motioned at Clew.

Clew gawked at the man, trying not to look dumbfounded. “You have knowledge crucial to running this ship.” Clew eyed all the sensors and instruments.

“I will continue to serve, Elder,” the captain said. “However, my Anointed One pointed out that knowledge does not necessarily qualify one for leadership. Therefore, I will accept a different Initiative. We all must serve where we are best suited, and I believe I would be more beneficial in an advisory role.”

The discussion was over. The captain stepped down as commander of the ship, and his Anointed One, Iris, stepped in to fill his place at Clew’s request.

“YOU HAVE TO STOP THIS,” Jolene said later that night before bed.

“Captain Gareth is still overseeing navigation and everything,” Clew said. “He’s just not formally in charge.”

“These are *Murphy* employees,” Jolene said. “What happens when we get to Rodinia, and their whole command structure has inverted?”

“Nothing is official,” Clew said. “Besides, this is a one-off.”

But at the start of the final month of transit, both the first and second officers resigned in favor of two other Anointed Ones, Lee and Dana.

The Anointed Ones proceeded to make changes to the ship’s command structure over the next week as they saw fit to rebalance the crew’s Initiatives.

Everything came to a head three days before they were to arrive at Rodinia. Clew had been cooped up with the crew for four months. He itched to once again be on natural, solid ground. Not this rotating monstrosity.

He was observing a service overseen by Lee when Iris tapped him on the shoulder.

“Forgive me, Elder,” she said. “There’s been an issue with Jolene.”

“What happened?” Clew said, standing and slipping out into the hall with her.

“She seems to believe Gareth is still the captain,” Iris said. “When I informed her that I had assumed the position, she grew angry.”

Clew groaned, wondering just how much of a problem Jolene would cause. “Let’s go.”

Clew followed Iris to the crew quarters, where Jolene sat at a table with her hands buried in her hair.

“Clew, you have to stop this,” Jolene said.

Iris leaned into Jolene with hostility. “Address him as Elder.”

“It’s okay,” Clew said, focusing on Jolene. “What do I have to stop?”

“We’re off course, as in, we’re going to miss Rodinia by a hundred thousand miles,” Jolene said. “We have less than two hours to correct the issue before we have to loop around and add another two months onto the journey. But Captain Gareth doesn’t feel ‘qualified’ to implement a course correction, and no one else is qualified, regardless of their *feeling* on the matter.” She ended with a meaningful glare at Iris.

Alarm overtook Clew’s face. Two more months? That could not happen. He looked at Iris. “Is this true?”

“Gareth isn’t Captain anymore,” Iris said.

“I mean about our course, Iris!” Clew said.

“Yeah, that’s true, but we’re all doing the best we can within our Initiatives,” Iris said.

Clew stopped listening to her. “Where’s Gareth?”

Jolene pointed to a bunk where a man lay covered by a sheet.

Clew crossed over to where Gareth lay. “What are you doing here?”

“I failed you, Elder,” the former captain said. Days must have passed since he last shaved. “I’m sorry.”

“You didn’t fail me,” Clew said. “In fact, I was just thinking about how well you had excelled at navigating. I think it’s time we added a seventh Anointed One. I’m keen on that being you. And your new Initiative can be to resume your duty as captain.”

“Are you serious?” Captain Gareth asked, eyes lighting.

“This ship would be lucky to have your service,” Clew said.

“Thank you, Elder,” Captain Gareth said. “I . . . I won’t disappoint you.”

“Just get us back on track for Rodinia.”

“Right away, Elder,” Captain Gareth said and sprinted off to resume his post.

Clew turned back to Iris and Jolene.

Iris looked smug, eying Jolene. “Well, perhaps you’ll think twice about meddling with command in the future. Elder resolved the issue without you.”

“He literally did what I just told him to do,” Jolene said. “That’s basically an admission that he was wrong to remove the captain.”

“We all make mistakes, even him,” Iris said. “If anything, that strengthens my trust in him.”

Clew began to back away.

Jolene huffed. “Maybe he shouldn’t have allowed an *inventory specialist*, literally the least technical position on the ship, to assume the role of captain!”

They continued arguing, but Clew departed, vowing to

spend the rest of the trip in isolation, as he had initially intended.

And so it was that upon arriving at the Rodinian space station, Clew became the hero of the journey for having the foresight to install a new captain during such a critical moment. Moreover, the receiving bay was shocked to realize that most of the crew of the freight ship had reorganized themselves of their own free will.

Clew left the crew, entirely unsure if he should encourage the rest to switch back to their original positions. But he wouldn't see any of them again. Best just to let them work that out amongst themselves.

"Glad we got out of there alive," Jolene said when at last they had docked with the Rodinian space station. "Warn me next time you set up a cult in a confined area. I'll clear out."

Clew left the freight ship with her, happy to be in a new location.

The Rodinian space station was one of the most advanced structures in all of Laurasia. Clew understood little of how it worked. Apparently, it rested at something called a geostationary orbit, and a space elevator connected it to the equator of Rodinia. Some kind of asteroid counterweight kept the entire thing afloat.

Jolene explained everything to Clew as they travelled through the station. Clew didn't understand until their feet returned to solid ground in a rotating section of the station. A window provided context to the situation.

Rotating below was Rodinia, a black planet with a yellow atmosphere. Extending from the space station down to the surface was what looked like a chain. Ascending that tether on one side was the climber. The precarious tether dragged in the atmosphere, but was mostly taught.

A window along the other wall showed the cable extending into space and out of sight. A massive asteroid floated beyond.

“That’s our ride down,” Jolene said, eyes locked on the elevator climbing the chain.

THE RIDE DOWN to the planet was a weightless experience until the very end, when the descent slowed and gravity exerted itself.

“You know if this tether broke, it’s actually long enough to wrap around the planet’s equator several times,” Jolene said to Clew in a loud voice to drown out the hum of the descender.

“Why would you tell me that now?” Clew asked.

“Just making conversation,” Jolene said with exasperation.

When at last they came to a stop, the elevator attendant rushed to undo Clew’s harness and open the door.

Clew stepped out to Rodinia for the first time.

He was in a massive entryway that seemed to be made of a dark blue metal. The ceiling was glass, framing the space elevator extending up forever.

“We’re actually on the top floor of a skyscraper,” Jolene said. “The tallest building on Rodinia. It merges with the space elevator here.”

“What is this place?” Clew asked.

“The center of operations on Rodinia,” Jolene said. “Travis likes to call it the Citadel. And for future reference, it’s shaped like a penis because Travis’ is small. Just don’t ask how I know.”

Clew groaned. “Do you have to speak like that?”

Jolene smirked at Clew, walking beside him through the blue metallic room. “Like what? We got boob-shaped buildings

too. I just assumed, what with you being a celibate monk and all, that you'd be more inclined toward the—"

"What operations take place on this planet?" Clew said. He had been patient for long enough. It was time for answers.

Jolene bumped into Clew with purposeful clumsiness. "That information hasn't been released yet, oh chaste one. It's up to Travis to tell you. He used to be Murphy's Chief Research Officer until people started calling him the crow, so now he goes by his name. But none of that affects your ministry. I've seen you in action now, unfortunately."

"I still don't know who I'm ministering to," Clew said.

Jolene pressed a finger against Clew's lips. "No more questions—at least not for me. Over here, holiness."

She led Clew to a door that was three times taller than Clew. She grasped the long, vertical handle, pulled, and motioned Clew to enter.

Inside was an office with a black and blacker color pallet. A desk with a black and gold lamp waited at the center. Framing everything was a window overlooking the black landscape with a yellow atmosphere. Blue lightning lit the land in frequent bursts.

A man stood with his back to Clew, watching the icy electricity sweep the sky.

"It's beautiful, Rodinia, don't you think?" he asked, peering back at Clew. He had a face that was close to being attractive but ruined in obvious ways. His stubble, while thick, was patchy. Scars from past acne marked his jawline. He slouched, resulting in a slight gut.

Clew cleared his throat. "It's terrifying, like one misplaced step will end your existence."

The man turned to Clew in full, expression amused. "Most people just agree, too in shock to form a proper opinion."

“Most people have narrow minds,” Clew said, pausing just long enough to make the man consider if he was included in that assessment. “They never consider the relationship between themselves and the cosmos.”

“I see,” the man said, giving a deliberate lack of reaction. “And are you this blunt with your congregation?”

Clew played his game, showing no emotion. “Only to those who require bluntness to achieve a more enlightened state.”

The man stared at Clew for a protracted minute. Finally, he looked at Jolene and smiled, an unnatural expression for his face. “Ooh. I like him.” He bounced his finger in Clew’s direction while walking to Jolene.

“Clew,” Jolene said. “This is Travis.” She kissed him on the cheek when he drew close. Then, she withdrew, looking at Travis. “I told you he’d be perfect.”

Travis pursed his lips, disguising his impatience in a mask of contentment. “Run along, sweetheart. I have much to discuss with our new . . . revelation.”

Jolene gave Travis’ shoulder a pat, winked at Clew, and left them alone in the room.

Travis gave Clew a knowing smirk, motioning after Jolene. “One of the first revived on Rodinia. She’s been with me almost since the beginning of this operation. She never disappoints.”

Clew didn’t know how to respond to this statement. He had few rules for himself, but he never got romantically involved with a person in his ministry. Travis did not seem to share in that sentiment. Of course he had to be a git. “What about the landscape do you find beautiful?” Clew asked to start on a different foot.

Travis tipped his head to the window, lightning seeming to punctuate his words. “Perhaps it’s because of the danger you pointed out. No one wanted this task, but I saw the

potential. Rodinia's dense atmosphere and proximity to the sun has always posed a particular challenge to Laurasian colonization."

"Until now, it seems," Clew said. Men like Travis wanted to feel important. How transparent they wished their subordinates to be in their admiration was always a mystery, though.

"Even now, which is why you are here," Travis said, eating the implied compliment with all the humility of a politician pretending to understand their constituents.

Clew suppressed an involuntary grin. This was his new employer? "To be a light to a people in darkness, I presume."

"Of course." Travis gave a mock bow.

Clew made a show of considering the situation. "You are to be commended. Recognizing the need for spiritual connection is an important first step to true enlightenment."

Travis gave a slight chuckle. "This isn't for me, but my subjects."

"I see," Clew said. He had wondered about Travis. He was obviously the type who considered religion to be a great idea . . . for everyone else.

Travis poured himself a drink at a bar along the edge of the room. "Do you believe what you teach? About this being an Intermediary State. That we're somehow trapped between lives, and the Hereafter will be some kind of paradisiacal glory?" He sipped his drink.

"Why would you assume I believe otherwise?" Clew asked.

Travis shrugged with a lazy wave of his glass. "It's okay if you don't. You've got the job, obviously."

Clew pretended to consider. "I want it to be true."

"Why?" Travis asked, eyes suddenly fierce.

Clew took a breath, making no rush to answer as a play to maintain control in the conversation. "Because if not, then this

is all we have to aspire to. This one existence, universe, society. And we seem to have screwed up.”

“Interesting,” Travis said, distant eyes looking past the glass in his hand. “That makes you more of a liability than I had hoped.”

“How?” Clew asked, adopting inquisition and understanding.

Travis finished his drink and set the glass down. “Because, if your actions are motivated by the pursuit of faith, what happens when the belief dries up?” He stared at Clew.

Clew did not back down. This was a power move. Travis seemed to want to intimidate Clew. Perhaps it was to assess his ability to deal with scrutiny. “I believe in spirituality as a means to achieve peace in the human mind,” Clew spoke, even and controlled. He sounded like an infomercial, but that’s what Travis wanted. “The specifics of my doctrine don’t change the need for spirituality.”

Travis held Clew’s gaze in silence before breaking into a fake-bliss smile. “Good. Walk with me. I’ll give you a tour.”

Travis exited the office, not bothering to check if Clew would follow.

Lagging behind, Clew glanced around the top floor of the Citadel. Only now did he realize how empty everything was. No people crowded the walkways, and no furniture gave personality to the barren metal halls.

“It’s empty,” Clew said in an observing tone.

“The building is new.” Travis strolled through the building towards a lift and pressed the down button. “We’re starting from scratch on this planet. So far, less than ten thousand people live here, the bare minimum to start building basic infrastructure.”

The lift arrived, and they descended to the ground.

A massive room waited for them at the bottom. Clew stepped from the lift, looking around. The room was unfinished, with an exposed ceiling and concrete walls. It was also completely empty. This is not what Clew would have pictured as the ground floor of the Citadel. “A future assembly hall?”

“This is a warehouse,” Travis said in bemusement. “We’ll have a lot of exports after a few years. The Citadel will coordinate that by funneling our finished product up the elevator and out of the atmosphere.”

“I see,” Clew said.

“Don’t worry,” Travis said. “We’ll build you a religious facility somewhere nearby. What do you want? A synagogue? Church? Temple?” He spoke as if installing buildings was a trivial matter.

“I’ll assess my needs here and let you know,” Clew said. “How many will be in my congregation?”

“A million,” Travis said without hesitation. “Give or take depending on the year. Everyone on the planet. Drop the details for now. First, I have a moral litmus test for you. Let’s see if you really believe in removing human suffering through spirituality.”

“How?” Clew asked, pretending to believe that Travis had any ability to assess such a thing.

Travis turned towards Clew, having wandered to the center of the warehouse floor, and clasped his hands. “What do you know about this planet? Aside from it being a shithole we’re forced to have a good attitude about.”

Clew made a show of considering the issue to satisfy Travis’ need to feel like an effective leader. He scratched the back of his neck and squinted. “Been empty for years, hasn’t it? It’s hot; close to the sun. Not the sort of place any bloke right in the head would want to live.”

Travis laughed, seeming gratified by Clew's comment. "Right enough. Murphy bought it a decade back. It may be hostile to life compared to other Laurasian planets, but it has resources. And that's what we're after."

"To what end?" Clew asked.

Travis pointed upwards to the windows in a row along the tall wall. The outside light mixed with the bulbs overhead. "We're about to revolutionize energy production. Outpace Sol forever. With the resources of this planet, we're going to build a Dyson Sphere."

"You'll need to clarify what that means," Clew said in apology. "I'm a religious leader. Not a science wiz."

"It's a solar megastructure, something long theorized but never tried." Travis made a cage with his curved fingers around an imaginary ball. "An array of satellites, hundreds of thousands strong, will soon orbit our sun. They'll collect energy and send it back to the planets. Within a decade, we will be producing more energy than anyone, not just in Laurasia, but the galaxy." Travis seemed to want to impress Clew with the project's scope, but he had already implied it would come at a cost.

"I see no moral dilemma so far," Clew said.

Travis lowered his hands. "We're reviving our own workers for the project. Such a structure requires massive amounts of raw materials. An entire planet's worth of raw materials, in fact. When we're done, this planet will be a husk. We'll have to strip everything away to send a finished product in parts to the sun."

Clew shrugged. He was far less interested in the project than Travis seemed to think he should be. "It's your closest neighbor, at least."

"Indeed," Travis said, examining Clew. "Anyway, this all requires physical labor until our robotics capacity is sufficient to take over. But that would depend on additional funding."

Travis kept hinting at the moral compromise he would make to create his Dyson Sphere. Clew cleared his throat, determined to make Travis stop implying and start explaining. “Okay . . .”

“We’ll be targeting individuals we think are unlikely to switch out from a family request. We also want people who will accept their lot here on Rodinia.”

“You want slaves,” Clew said. Best to state the obvious from the outset.

“They’ll be paid,” Travis said. “We’re in the process of creating a currency for this planet.”

“A currency that feeds your economy,” Clew said. “Granting them spending power doesn’t change your control over them.”

Travis slumped, seeming to believe the discussion was going south. “Look, everyone has to switch out somewhere. Is it really so bad that some land on a manufacturing planet?”

Clew pretended to consider. “I s’pose not.”

The relief on Travis’ face was unmistakable. “Besides, you are going to make their lives so much better. Teach them to make the best of an unfortunate situation. We’re in an intermediary stage of life, after all. Isn’t that right?”

“You don’t believe in the Intermediary Journey,” Clew said.

“No,” Travis said in admission. “But it’s irrelevant. The spiritual pursuit is what improves their lives, as you said.”

“Why do you need me?” Clew asked. “You’ve got the funding. You’re building the facilities. So why bring me in?”

“You were born on Earth, right?”

“Yes.”

Travis nodded, beginning to pace with steepled fingers. “Think back thousands of years ago. When the Roman Empire was expanding, the cultural clash between the Romans and the Jews threatened to fracture the entire empire. The god of the

Jews was incompatible with the idolatrous state of the Romans. War between the peoples did not resolve the issue, so the Romans embraced a new paradigm. Jesus of Nazareth preached tolerance of the Roman occupation, removed the militant aspects of Judaism, and installed pacifism as a virtue. He was perfect for the Romans. He either fulfilled or destroyed the law, depending on your perspective. In short, they embraced the power of religion to subdue the people.”

“You want to use my doctrine as a means to control your people,” Clew said.

Travis tilted his hand back and forth. “They’ll be revived here whether you agree to help or not. By participating, you improve their lives and avoid the legal consequences of defrauding your last congregation. You benefit. They benefit. And so do the people of Laurasia.”

Clew felt both uneasy and intrigued. “What happens when it falls apart? Outsiders won’t go along with this.”

Travis gave a deviant smile. “Look into the sky, Clew.” He gestured up to the high windows. “Across Laurasia are six planets and thrice as many moons, all brimming with people. They go about their lives, seeking food and entertainment, and not much else. The situation here on Rodinia is no secret. The people condone it. Their lives are comfortable, and doing nothing will not change that. But solving this inequality would require action, and action is hard. They don’t want to give up their nice lives, especially when the problem is a planet removed from them. They will do nothing. But you can. You can make the world a better place for the lowest in our society.”

Clew gave a begrudging nod. He had a point. A planet removed from society at large was likely the best way to mitigate this venture’s risk. “When do you start reviving people?”

“It’s already begun, but we’ll ramp up in the coming years.”

Travis motioned to Clew in welcome. “Shall I introduce them to Clew, their spiritual guide into the Hereafter?”

“My followers call me Elder,” Clew said.

“Why is that?”

“In living years, I’m one of the oldest humans alive,” Clew said. “I was ninety-three when the Last War broke out and was one of the first revived afterward. Then I was one of the first to transplant to Laurasia.” Most people in Laurasia were revived from Earth. New generations only started cropping up in the last year.

Travis bowed to Clew, eyes never leaving his face. “I can think of no one better to impart the wisdom of the cosmos. In the coming years, we will populate this planet. People from all eras will switch out here and take place in the greatest construction project humanity has ever performed. The road will be long. They will need spiritual guidance, Clew. I’d like that to come from you.”

Clew pretended to consider the proposal. He bit his lip and dipped his head. “I can offer spiritual guidance,” he said at last.

Travis grasped Clew’s shoulder, and the two shared an intimate gaze, one of forced trust and understanding. “Come, Elder,” Travis responded. “Let’s meet your people.”

Clew motioned Travis first out the door, prepared to do the man’s bidding for a season. Murphy would be a unique chapter in this life, but it *would* come to an end. The trouble with Travis’ plan was in his reasoning. He was shortsighted, as most businesses were. But Clew understood people in the long term. Catholicism outlived the Roman Empire by a thousand years. And Clew would survive both Travis and Murphy on Rodinia.

Now this was a prospect to give meaning to a life that had already stretched so long; Clew had never owned a planet before.

POWER CANNOT SEE THAT

20 years later

Clew awoke to a well-rested body on the morning that began the end of his current ministry.

He rose from bed and walked with bleary eyes to wash his body. Warm water encompassed his arms, his legs, his chest. Eucalyptus fragrance rose from the murky surface. When finished, he dried himself with warmed towels and dressed in rough-woven cotton robes to achieve that perfect paradox of comfort and restraint.

He resided in a modest home within the House of One. He had three rooms to himself. A bedroom, a loo, and a living room. Here, he was Clew. Beyond, he was Elder.

Clew lit incense, which he dropped into a brazier, and then he sat on a woven mat at the center of his living room floor.

He closed his eyes, musty air pressing in on him.

This hour at the beginning of his day was his only form of privacy. Over one million people now lived on Rodinia. Clew's congregation encompassed the world, from the mines to the

refineries, all the way to manufacturing and assembly. This planet had but one purpose, and Clew was the oil that made its gears turn.

Many of his duties were ceremonial by now, though the occasional issue warranted his direct input. The Anointed Ones handled many of the specific problems that cropped up across the world.

A recent tour of the sectors had strengthened the people. Attendance was up.

The people were content, if not entirely happy. The Doctrine of Transition helped them understand that this state was temporary.

It helped them.

It had to help.

A chime sounded throughout his home. The day was beginning, and he had a meeting with the Anointed Ones in ten minutes.

Clew rose from his mat and exited his quarters into the House of One.

It was a gargantuan building, far larger than was necessary, yet still smaller and shorter than the Citadel. Golden carpet lined gilded walls. White light permeated the air from chandeliers, floating ceilings, and breakaways in the walls.

All was perfect, and had been perfect for quite a long time. Travis provided the means for a grandiose display, so long as Clew provided him with a worldwide ministry in return. Funding rose with performance, and so Clew garnered near perfection from his Transients.

Of course, that was decided in the early days. Back then Travis had been more engaged. He even wanted more specific lore behind the doctrine.

Clew had always understood that with a perfect balance of

information and mystery, a believer's doubts and skepticism canceled out like opposites. "That's where lies the faith," he told Travis.

Travis needed many years to recognize the brilliance of Clew's ministry. Eventually, he backed off, and let Clew manage all spiritual affairs.

Still, something was missing, though Clew struggled to identify what.

Clew descended a wide set of stairs into the Garden Room. A trickling waterfall lined one wall of rough white stone. A koi pond pooled at the wall's base, ripples lapping up against a grassy floor.

On this world so devoid of life, Clew had long ago decided that the most spiritual encounter a person could have was with the natural aspects of their original world.

Only in religious buildings and rooms could such natural elements be found on Rodinia.

Clew removed his shoes and dipped his feet in the water one after the other.

Cleansed, he stepped across the koi pond along a narrow bridge through the only opening in the waterfall. Beyond was a private room with eight seats on the floor. The inner sanctum was ground only for the feet of the Anointed Ones. And Clew's Anointed Ones had already arrived.

Clew sat in the remaining seat, forming a circle with the others.

His anxiety towards these meetings had long passed. The fear that someone might see through the act and call him a liar. But it hadn't happened during his Avalonian ministry, and it hadn't happened in this current one.

"Are you well, Elder?" Iris, the first Anointed One, asked.

"Very. Thank you," Clew said in tranquility. The decision to

recruit his Anointed Ones from the ship that brought Clew to this planet had caused contention with Travis. But when the crew had threatened to quit, Travis admitted that their participation was unavoidable. And to think Clew had thought them merely an experimental group. Clew cleared his throat. “What news do you have of your congregations?”

“All is well among my congregation,” Iris said, matching Clew’s tranquility. She had her usual perfect posture and spoke as if she were born to the position of Anointed One. “Conditions have been steady since last we spoke.”

“That is well to hear,” Clew said, nodding his head in her direction.

Lee spoke next, never to be outdone by Iris. “Sector Two has experienced an increase in activity since your visit, Elder. Meditation services are being attended and our positivity ratings have increased by two percent.”

“Continue to send my love and encouragement,” Clew said.

Dana cleared her throat, shifting before she spoke. “I’ve encountered small hiccups in my congregations on the topic of the Intermediary Life. Some have experienced confusion about exactly how many Intermediary Lives they may experience before arriving at the Hereafter.”

“I see.” Clew bit his lip. These doctrinal issues cropped up every now and again. They were usually a simple fix, but still needed to be addressed before turning into real issues. “The Hereafter is a state that we achieve together. That is why unity becomes ever more important as we approach that state. It does not matter how many times the individual switches out if we have not achieved enlightenment together. I will speak on this. Thank you for bringing it to my attention.”

Dana bowed her head, indicating she had finished speaking.

Three other Anointed Ones reported on their congregations and sectors before it became Gareth's turn to address them.

"I am afraid that sector seven has fallen in these past weeks," Gareth said in a shaky voice that barely escaped a stutter.

"Even further?" Clew asked. "What has happened?"

Gareth swallowed, eyes cast downward. Silence seemed to compress the room around his next words. "Some of the children have set aside their Initiatives. They are refusing to work."

Clew leaned back. Another reoccurring problem. This was best solved by diverting the issue. "Setting aside their Initiative? That gives purpose to their lives. Without their work, how will they prepare for the Hereafter?"

"My thoughts exactly, Elder," Iris said.

Clew ignored her. She was always looking for ways to score cheap points in her favor. She was invaluable for it, but sometimes overbearing. Clew spoke. "Gareth, how will the people in your sector progress independently of their Initiatives?"

"My apologies, Elder and Anointed Ones." Gareth allowed panic to pinch his face. His fears for the meeting were being realized. "The Transients in my sector are saying that the Intermediary Life is a lie. They seem to believe they are slaves."

Iris gave an indignant snort. "Why does this preposterous nonsense always come from sector seven? Keep your Transients away from mine, lest they infect us all with their destabilizing ideas."

"No," Clew said, growing short. She had always been too quick to derision towards Gareth. Still, this failure could not go unpunished. "We cannot allow these false beliefs to fester. We must perform a reassimilation. I will disperse those affected into neighboring sectors and surround them with our strongest children. Replace them with others up to the task of rehabilitating a depressed sector."

Relief transformed Gareth's face. "Thank you, Elder. I will not allow this to happen again."

"See that you don't, or a new Initiative may lie in your future. One better suited to your . . . qualifications," Clew said. Perhaps he was in a cruel mood, but he needed them to be better.

"I will not disappoint you," Gareth insisted with a vigorous head nod.

Clew ignored him. "Any other items to discuss before the House of One?"

Silence passed between Clew and the Anointed Ones.

"No?" Clew asked. "Let us dismiss, then."

Clew rushed from the room, leaving his confused Anointed Ones behind. He passed through the garden room, trying to figure out why he was angry. Angry enough to lash out at Gareth in that way. His duties had become a chore. Years of success had tainted the dream he built. And minor hiccups became roadblocks worthy of rage.

He slipped his shoes back on and began up the stairs back to his quarters. He needed time on his own today.

"Clew."

Clew paused at the voice, but also the use of his name. He almost turned in a rage, but no. He took a breath, plastering on a smile and actually feeling marginally better. "Jolene."

She approached on legs lengthened by high heels. Usually, such frivolities weren't allowed on Rodinia, but this was Jolene. Upper levels of the House of One were also off limits to most Transients, but rules did not apply to the right-hand of Travis. "I see you're doing the same as always," Jolene said, matching Clew's curtness in a mocking way.

Clew took a breath and smiled. "Many days have passed since you graced these halls."

Jolene offered an obligatory nod. “Three years, honey. But don’t pretend like you haven’t savored my absence.”

Clew compressed his eyebrows in disapproval. “You disservice yourself with such talk.”

Jolene yawned and stretched right there in the House of One, dressed in casual clothes from the Prior Life. “So formal, like you believe the roles we’re playing in this ridiculous theater. And why are you still faking being British after all these years?”

“I am British, and I’ve always had an accent.” Clew lowered his gaze, glancing about. “Besides, I’ve noticed the accent makes those of American origin trust me more easily.”

Jolene looked Clew up and down.

“Yeah, I’ll say. Also, strangely attractive. Too bad you’re celibate.”

“You are the one with an accent, from my perspective,” Clew said, growing icy. She had this way of getting under his skin. “Have you any idea how ridiculous you sound?”

“Ooo hoo hoo.” Jolene’s reaction echoed through the House of One. “Feisty Clew.” She screwed up her face in imitation of Clew. “Good sir, I do believe I struck a nerve.”

“Why are you here, Jolene?” Clew asked, losing patience. “Surely you have more in mind than to pester me.”

“Surely I do,” Jolene said, still in mockery of his accent.

“Stop taking a piss on me.”

“Why?” Jolene’s voice transformed into a new accent. “You more into Southern gals?”

“Jolene!”

“Alright, alright,” Jolene said. “You just make it so damn easy. It’s so satisfying to see you lose that calm, crusty exterior. So, anyway. Bad news. You’re needed in Sector Seven, and it’s an emergency.”

Clew sighed, skeptical of just how dire the situation was.

“What kind of emergency?” He was not prepared to handle another false alarm this morning.

Jolene tipped her head back and forth, seeming to know that Clew was not taking the issue seriously. “It’s a looping case.”

Clew straightened his back at that. “Looping?” He looked around, wondering if they should discuss this somewhere more private. Looping was a rare condition that, unfortunately, was a risk for every Transient. It happened when a person got revived twice simultaneously, and the consciousness stretched between the two bodies. “We haven’t had one of those in years. How did this happen?”

“Yeah, I know,” Jolene said with frustration. “I spoke to the revival labs, and they don’t know. They’ve been careful to bring people here with minimal chances of having their families revive them. For good measure, they either faked DNRs or deleted the genome altogether. Somehow she slipped through.”

Clew closed his eyes. Today was supposed to be just a normal day. “That’s what I thought. Have we been able to tell where she’s looping from? I know that can be hard to pinpoint.”

“This time, it was easy,” Jolene said. “Her son is a reviver on Earth.”

Clew took a breath. A measured response in all things was best. Still, something this big happening without Murphy’s knowledge was unacceptable. “How could they miss that? Sounds like we never should have revived this person.”

“Yeah, I know,” Jolene said, letting her guard down a bit in sympathy. “But it’s done, and now we have to fix it.”

“Who is it?” Clew said. His anger eased with Jolene taking his side.

“Oh, you don’t know 21584H3?” Jolene asked.

The smile escaped Clew unbidden. How did she do that,

turn a crisis into something manageable? Clew gave her a suffering look. “We go by names in my ministry.”

Jolene displayed exaggerated understanding by rolling her head with an open mouth. “In that case, she goes by Luna Hawthorn.”

“I see,” Clew said, but then the name triggered recognition in his memory. “Wait, I know that name. She’s had issues before.”

Jolene appeared surprised, but happy to see that Clew knew the woman. “Are you sure?”

Clew grimaced. It was not a particularly flattering story. “Yeah, a few years after Murphy revived her, we received a notice that the family was looking for her. So, we had her record a video message and everything to get them to stop.”

Jolene puffed out her lip. “You’d think they’d get a *clue*.”

Clew rolled his eyes. “Get serious.”

Jolene snapped her posture into a vertical line and looked at Clew with a militant level of discipline. “Let’s go then. We got livestock to save—I mean people. *Totally* meant people.”

Clew let out an involuntary laugh. Jolene was annoying and disrespectful to the institutions that provided for her. Yet somehow, she lightened the world. “Yes, so obvious. Lead the way. Sector Seven has needed a visit for some time, anyway.”

Jolene frilled her hand and gave a deep mocking bow. “After you, holiness.”

UNDER NORMAL CIRCUMSTANCES, Clew was always happy to leave the House of One.

When he wasn’t touring the sectors and strengthening the Transients, he didn’t often have the time for travel. Today would

have been a welcome reprieve if not for the severity of the current problem.

A Transient was looping, and in a far-off sector at that.

Clew departed with Jolene, emerging from the House of One into an underground terminal. Trains connected every building of any import on Rodinia. The only other option for transport was an all-terrain vehicle.

The manufacturing front had a separate transport system, and most of the Transients had little reason for travel to begin with.

Clew and Jolene boarded the train, and soon they were off to Sector Seven.

The Rodinian landscape slid past the windows. The House of One stood, majestic and white against the black Rodinian stone and yellow atmosphere. Blue shafts of lightning added to the brilliance of the moment.

The Citadel towered into the atmosphere beside the House of One. It seemed to stretch upwards forever because, in a way, it did. The transition into the space elevator was almost imperceptible.

Exports climbed up the elevator to space. The Dyson Sphere satellites hovered over the planet in thousands. They were headed for Rodinia L1, where they would spend one month in diagnostics before heading off to the sun.

Soon the sight was obscured by a blocky metal refinery, and Clew turned in his seat to wait out the trip in peace.

Jolene, never to let a quiet moment go unspoken, spoke. "I might have thought a big-wig like yourself would use private transportation?"

Clew considered ignoring her. They might be together for a few days, and maintaining social boundaries might do them both well. "I gave up the luxury of privacy long ago."

An hour later, the train rolled to a stop in Sector Seven. Clew had been here on multiple occasions for tours and other religious duties. The main terminal here was outfitted as a hub for people traveling from their residences to their Initiatives. By mid-morning, the station was all but empty.

Clew appreciated the chance to slip through the terminal unnoticed.

All primary services in the sector were within a five-minute walk. Luna Hawthorn had been hospitalized to treat the symptoms of her looping. Clew had been there once, several years back, when the facility was built.

Jolene opened the door for Clew to enter the hospital, and he stepped inside.

LIFE IS NOT ALWAYS WELCOME.

Jolene followed Clew into the hospital. “Dr. Patel will be your point of contact for Luna’s Case.”

Dr. Patel, conveniently enough, entered the waiting room from the other side at that moment. He was a short man with dark skin. “Elder. Thank you for coming.” Not convenient then. Clew was expected.

Clew put on his face of serenity, chiding himself for having dropped it in public. “I hear we have a daughter in need.”

Dr. Patel nodded, striding forward and falling into a bow. “We do. Luna collapsed while performing her Initiative last night.”

“What are her symptoms?”

Dr. Patel cleared his throat. “Weak and trembling muscles. Clammy skin. Nausea and headache. We kept her overnight. I diagnosed her symptoms as looping this morning when we learned she had been revived on Earth, at weLive, no less. Come. Let’s talk further in private.” He motioned Clew and Jolene back into a hall, where he rounded into an office. When all were inside, he closed the door.

“Has she been on any meds?” Clew asked, glancing at Jolene, who wasted no time sitting on the conference table.

“Just the daily vitamin,” Dr. Patel said.

“Let’s get her off that,” Clew said.

“Already done,” Dr. Patel said, tapping his clipboard screen. “She’s about to have enough issues without the vitamin.”

“Oh, I knew the daily vitamin was bullshit,” Jolene said, examining her nails. “So, what’s it do? Make them docile? Reduce critical thinking?”

“No,” Dr. Patel said when Clew froze. “It dampens their proprioception.”

“Okay,” Jolene said in a drawn-out voice. “What’s that?”

Dr. Patel tapped his head. “That’s the sense that grounds you in your body. That feeling that your center of being is just behind your forehead. It allows you to move and navigate with confidence because you understand how your body is oriented to other objects.”

Silence. Jolene looked from the clueless Dr. Patel to the ashamed Clew. “Well, that’s super messed up. Why does the vitamin do that?”

Clew opened his mouth and closed it. “. . . Travis and I agreed that impaired bodily awareness would help emphasize the Intermediary State.”

“That’s even worse than I assumed,” Jolene said. “You’re drugging people so their lives more closely fit your doctrine?”

Dr. Patel opened his mouth to speak, likely in Clew’s defense, but Clew talked over him. “I’m sorry, Jolene, but if you’re going to be involved here, you have to let me work.”

Jolene glared at Clew, but slumped.

Clew gave a wary glance to Dr. Patel. “If Luna is already showing symptoms of looping, how much time do we have?”

“She’s stable for the time being,” Dr. Patel spoke, giving no

indication that all was not normal. “We won’t know how long we have until her condition starts deteriorating.”

“Her son is trying to revive her,” Clew said. “Is she with him on Earth?” He needed to know how much he would be up against in this case.

“That’s a reasonable assumption, but we just don’t know enough to say,” Dr. Patel said.

“Does she have any memories?” Clew asked. “How long does it take memories to transfer between two functioning bodies?”

“It takes time to be any more specific than an impression,” Dr. Patel said. “The far more concerning risk at the moment is the cognitive degradation she will soon experience in both bodies.”

“But we do have time to mitigate the situation here before it’s a problem on Earth, right?” Clew examined Dr. Patel’s reaction.

He was about to speak when Jolene interjected. “You have time, dummy. That’s why you’re here. Now stop stalling. You get in there, and you explain to Luna Hawthorn exactly why she needs to tell her son on Earth that she doesn’t want to be with him. Getting her to revoke consent is the fastest way for her to die there. Otherwise, we’ve got to kill her Earthside before she exposes us, and that’s probably going to start a war. No pressure.”

Clew shook his head, overwhelmed by this bombshell of a morning. “Why am I not surprised you already have a contingency?”

“We don’t mess around,” Jolene said in a merciless tone that felt like more of an act than an honest expression of her feelings. “Not with so much on the line.”

“Does Travis know about this?” Clew asked.

“Travis only needs to know if it affects him,” Jolene said, eyes locked on Clew as if daring him to question her. “Let’s stop that from happening.”

Clew rolled his eyes, throwing his hands up and snapping at Dr. Patel. “Prepare a meditation room for us to spend the next few days in.”

THE HOSPITAL HAD a small meditation room, the standard for most buildings not devoted to spirituality. It was two-by-two meters. Six rolled-up mats lined one wall, and a waist-high altar stood at the front. Plants and a trickling water fountain lined the other wall.

Clew unrolled two mats, lit a rope of incense, and sat cross-legged with his back facing the altar.

Luna would arrive soon, but at present, he needed a strategy for addressing the looping.

So many years had passed since the last case, and each was unique. Looping was often unpredictable, and the exact path forward for Luna would depend on her. She’d already had family issues before and acted in compliance. That was lucky, but anything could still happen.

The door to the meditation room opened. A woman with brown hair and surprisingly little height walked inside. She was wearing hospital scrubs and had a hollow expression that she seemed to be actively trying to hide with a tranquil smile.

Clew spoke first. “Luna, child, enter.”

Luna complied, closing the door behind herself and sitting across from Clew on the floor with a suppressed wince.

“Meditate with me for a while, will you?” Clew asked, not knowing what else to do at the moment.

“I will, Elder,” Luna said. She smiled, seeming only a little terrified to be in the same room as Clew. “I am honored you are here.”

Clew gave her a meaningful nod to imbue comfort and closed his eyes. He sucked in a breath, paused, and exhaled five seconds later.

Though he couldn't see her, Clew heard Luna following his lead.

“Concentrate on your breathing, Luna,” Clew said, opening his eyes to observe her.

She did exactly as he said, sitting perfectly still and tuning in to her spiritual nature by reacquainting herself with her body.

“Inhale the strength of your fellow Transients. Exhale the weakness you perceive in yourself, acknowledging that only strength resides in your heart,” Clew said. He followed her breathing for thirty seconds to build a sense of unity between them.

“Picture your position in time and space,” Clew said, reducing his volume to increase Luna's attentiveness.

She leaned forward, brow straining on the task of meditation.

“Look forward with renewed purpose in your role on the stage of existence. Recognize how fleeting will be the heartache of this life when at last comes the Hereafter.”

Minutes slipped away. Clew examined Luna at various points of the meditation. She was honest in the expression of her faith. That was good to know before beginning.

“Open your eyes, child,” Clew said.

Luna obeyed, pupils constricting within irises, rich brown, even in the dimly lit room.

“How are you feeling?” Clew asked.

Luna gave a subdued smile. “The meditation helps, Elder, and I thank you for this chance to refocus on the Hereafter. Almost a day has passed since I began feeling unwell. I am ashamed to admit I have not overcome this adversity.”

“Do not feel shame.” Clew’s face broke into sympathy. He felt surprised by the fact that he actually felt the emotion.

“Do you remember your life on Earth?”

Luna’s expression widened in surprise. “Of course, Elder. Though the Anointed Ones discourage discussion of the Prior Life.”

Clew nodded in understanding. “We will make an exception between us. The Intermediary State is a time of trial. Sometimes we recall our first lives with affection, thinking it was a better time. But not all was better. There was suffering in that time too, and sickness. Do you remember sickness?”

“Yes, Elder,” Luna said.

“I also remember sickness,” Clew said, recounting the idea with reverence. “It came upon you, often through no fault of your own, and did not leave until it had worked its course. We have no sickness in this Intermediary Life. But some people still have trials that come upon them through no fault of their own. This is not a punishment, Luna, but a trial.”

“How many trials must I have?” Luna asked.

“I . . . do not know,” Clew said. “The time of trials has not yet passed.”

“My family waits for me in the Hereafter,” Luna said. “They call out to me, waiting for me to join them. But because I was insufficient in my Prior Life, I am here, while they are there.”

“I understand, Luna,” Clew said, silent panic rising within him. That was a complication. “I cannot tell you when your trials will end, but I can offer reassurance that our trials and

suffering have meaning. We will be so much better off in the Hereafter with the wisdom we are obtaining in this life.”

“I understand, Elder,” Luna said, tone suffering. She fidgeted on the mat. “I will bear this trial as I have others, and await the Hereafter with eager anticipation.”

“My child. Your strength inspires me. I am personally here to help you bear this burden,” Clew said. Supporting Luna was all well and good, but Clew needed to address the issue. “Can you help me understand what happened? How did this start?”

“It began last night,” Luna said. “I was finishing my Initiative when I began to feel unwell.”

“What is your Initiative?” Clew asked. Luna still did not understand that she was looping. Clew hoped to provide her with an explanation that skirted the truth of her duplicate body on Earth.

Luna hesitated, displaying a moment of embarrassment. “I sit in a room and watch panels of black glass emerge from one end. I place a device on one end of the panel, and if it lights up, I send it one way. If it does not light up, I send it another.”

Clew nodded. She was a solar panel inspector, ensuring the panels were viable before they were soldered to electrical and navigation components and launched off to the sun. Given her body language, she took no pleasure in her Initiative and was even a bit ashamed of it.

“So, your Initiative is not labor intensive?”

“No.”

“This sickness is likely not the product of overtaxing yourself then,” Clew said. How could he explain this away within the confines of his doctrine? If he couldn’t blame it on her being overworked, the explanation he gave her may look dangerously close to the truth.

Luna dipped her head. “Perhaps it is because I am

unworthy to carry out my Initiative. For some years, I have felt discontent when performing my labors. Perhaps if I were better at enjoying my tasks, my mind would not long for other things.”

Clew leaned back. Luna had presented an explanation here, but it wouldn't work. No one actually enjoyed their Initiative. The only way to get reassigned was to be physically unable. If Clew entertained the idea that a discontented life could lead to sickness, the whole planet would soon fall sick. He had to swat this idea before it took traction in her mind.

“Oh, daughter.” Clew broke into sympathy. “You are not so unworthy. A person's Initiative is the task best suited to them. And each person is best suited to the task they are assigned. Perhaps if you feel disengaged from your Initiative, you should consider the idea in your meditations. What lessons can you gain from your labor, and what good can you perform?”

Luna gave a slow nod, trying to hide her disappointment but accepting the idea. “I will meditate on these things. But, Elder, what else could be happening to me?”

“We will find out,” Clew said in reassurance. “I'm sure the doctor already asked you similar questions, but is feeling unwell like this common for you?”

Luna considered the question. “Sometimes, when I fail to drink enough water, I get headaches. But this is different. It's like a headache, but like my eyes are being pulled out of my head through my ears. Just sitting here causes me pain.”

Clew nodded in consideration. Her description was consistent with the symptoms of looping. As the second body booted up, the sync on the current body would destabilize.

Clew needed more.

“Any other symptoms? What about today?”

Luna grew uncomfortable. “I haven't told anyone.”

“It’s okay,” Clew said. “I’m here to do anything possible to help you get better.”

Luna fidgeted but straightened her back and looked at Clew. “I have flashes of sight that enter my thoughts. Images of a room that I’ve never seen. My son’s face. He’s happy to see me.”

“I see,” Clew said when she fell silent.

“But I know I am wrong to desire to be with him,” Luna said quickly. “Not until I have passed the Intermediary State.”

Nerves pulsed in Clew’s stomach. He had hoped the looping would turn out to be a false alarm, but her every word seemed to attest to her condition.

“How do these visions make you feel?” Clew asked.

“They bring me despair,” Luna said. “I know one day I will be with him again, but to feel his presence and be denied discourages my spirit.”

Clew gave a solemn nod. She could be with them now if not for Murphy. “Your reaction is understandable,” he said with trepidation. “But you must first recognize that these visions are not a promise of things to come. If left unchecked, the visions may even tempt you away from your Initiative and prevent you from reaching the Hereafter.”

“I do understand,” Luna said. “But why is this happening to me?”

“It can happen for many reasons,” Clew said, trying again and again in vain to think up something that might explain the situation without contradicting the doctrine. “You are not the first and will not be the last. You have been tempted to forgo the Hereafter before, haven’t you?”

“Yes,” Luna said in shame. “Ten years ago, my Anointed One, Gareth, recognized I longed to be with my family. So, to help me control my . . . urges, he had me record a video.”

This might be useful. "Saying what?"

Luna looked down at her crossed legs. "I had to tell my husband, Charles, to stop looking for me. I told him I had found my own way."

"Why?" Clew asked.

"It was supposed to help me understand that I would not be with them until I fulfilled my Intermediary Life," Luna said, still seeming to have to convince herself of the benefit. "In telling him, I would tell myself that I needed to stop longing for something outside of my control."

"That's an incredibly brave thing you did, symbolically forgoing your family to complete your Intermediary Journey," Clew said in a voice of perfect understanding and wonder.

"It helped for many years," Luna said, seeming buoyed up by Clew's reaction. "But now, my lower desires seem to be manifesting in a physical way."

That was it. The perfect explanation to lean into. "Such a difficult trial has been placed upon you," Clew said. "Perhaps because of your past transgression of longing for that which is out of your control, you now are given an opportunity to prove you will not be swayed from arriving at the Hereafter."

Luna dipped her head, a single tear escaping her eyes and dropping to the mat on which she sat. "I suspected that might be."

"You will get through this. Are you prepared, Luna, to deny yourself in the present to arrive at the paradisiacal Hereafter?" Clew asked.

"I am."

Clew's eyes never left her, even as she bowed her head in shame. "Then, should you find yourself in a vision with your son, or your husband, beckoning you to forgo your progress for

instant gratification, you must deny yourself. It is not your time to progress into the Hereafter.”

Luna sniffled. “I understand.”

“What is your son’s name?” Clew asked.

“James.”

“Such a wonderful name,” Clew said. “You must long to see him so deeply. You may likely find yourself confronted by visions where he tempts you to be with him. But if you accept his presence, you will fail this test and threaten your transition into the Hereafter. You must deny him. You must tell him you do not choose this life. In your heart, you will know that the two of you will reunite in the Hereafter. But it is not yet.”

Luna cleared her throat, sitting up straighter and raising her gaze to Clew. “I will try.”

Clew observed Luna. If she failed at this, Murphy would hire an assassin to infiltrate weLive and kill Luna’s body on Earth. That would risk exposure for Murphy. He needed to impress upon her the seriousness of the situation. “You must do more than try, for your own sake. And for your family’s.”

Luna looked at her clasped hands between her folded legs. “Give me strength.”

“I will,” Clew said. “I think you should stay here until you have passed this trial.”

“We don’t know how long that will take,” Luna said, pain crossing her face. “My Initiative—”

“—Can wait,” Clew interrupted. “Your health and well-being are much more important.”

Luna nodded, seeming overwhelmed by the attention and effort. “Thank you.”

Clew averted his gaze in a rare moment of self-consciousness. Luna was genuinely grateful, but the apparent generosity

was really selfishness. Clew was protecting Murphy and himself by preventing this woman from learning the truth.

Clew cleared his throat and returned his gaze to Luna, forcing himself to meet her eye. "I will be here during your recovery. My resources are yours."

"No, please." Luna's face broke into an overwhelmed gratitude. "Do not strain your resources on me. I can't impose more than I have."

"You will accept this help," Clew said. That was the thing about Rodinians that gutted him. Their planet was aiding the biggest venture capital investment in existence, and the people worried about resource scarcity. "We do not let our own suffer. That is the last I will hear about it. Relax. Meditate. And contemplate your perfected state."

"Yes, Elder," Luna said.

"I will return tomorrow," Clew said. "Rest well tonight, Luna."

FOR THE CONSEQUENCE OF WORDS

Clew left the meditation room knowing he had succeeded in every possible way with Luna Hawthorn. She had an explanation for her sickness. She would do all possible to reject her new life on Earth, believing it to be a temptation. With luck, the doctors on Earth would recognize her looping, respect her wish to enact a DNR and allow her second body to die.

So why did Clew feel uneasy about the whole situation?

He returned to the conference room where Jolene and Dr. Patel waited for him.

“What are your thoughts?” Jolene asked, surprising Clew by not immediately jumping to what she was thinking.

Clew bit his lip. “She’s hiding her pain.” He collapsed into a chair, wishing to be alone.

“It’s very possible,” Dr. Patel said. “We’ll watch her for any instability in her vitals.”

“It will only get worse until her body on Earth dies,” Jolene said. She sat on the table across from Clew and demanded his attention. “Of course, you neglected to educate her about the looping. She believes this is a spiritual trial, when she’s actually

at the mercy of two bodies fighting for her soul. I guess that is spiritual in a way . . . Huh . . .”

Clew rolled backwards in his chair to escape her gaze. “Telling her the truth won’t help. She’ll get better and continue life unaware, or she won’t and she’ll die for good, as you said.”

Jolene’s eyes never left Clew. She looked at him with something strangely close to hatred. “Where’d your cult voice go, Elder? It almost sounds as if you don’t have all the answers.”

“I never claimed omnipotence, Jolene,” Clew said, growing frustrated. She had no right being angry with him, pretending to care all of a sudden. “I did exactly what was expected.”

Jolene tilted her head, assessing Clew. “And now the cracks are forming, after two decades of your iron grip.”

“Rodinia is stronger than ever,” a voice behind Clew said.

Clew swiveled in his chair to see the conference room door swing inward. There stood Travis, mouth a thin line of displeasure. Icy fury emanated from him.

Clew stood in a start. He and Travis hadn’t spoken in five years. “Travis, what are you doing here?”

Jolene groaned in annoyance. “Couldn’t just let me handle one thing, could you?”

Travis shot her a disapproving glare. “I heard whispers that a crisis was underway that I had not been informed of.”

“We are handling the issue,” Jolene said. “Get off my ass.”

“You may leave, Jolene,” Travis said, no longer acknowledging her. “Be sure to deduct yourself two weeks’ pay for this insubordination.”

Jolene scoffed, sliding off the table and passing Travis. “Screw you too, boss.” She glared at Clew and left the room.

Clew remained silent, annoyance at Travis’ interruption growing. They had the situation contained.

Travis swatted the air at Dr. Patel. "You as well, Doctor. Leave."

Dr. Patel looked at a loss for words. Clew suspected his desire to help people as a doctor was genuine and wondered how he had landed on a planet such as Rodinia.

The door closed. Clew raised his eyes at Travis.

"21584H3 is looping," was Travis' response.

"Luna Hawthorn. Yes," Clew said. She was, in fact, a person whose problems were manufactured and then disguised by the very organization claiming to help her. "It seems her family has been trying to revive her on Earth for years." He took a breath. It would do him no good to internalize these treasonous thoughts. Not when he had already committed to Murphy.

"What have you told her?" Travis demanded.

"She believes this is a trial," Clew said, perplexed and annoyed at Travis' frustration. "She expects to see visions of her son, and she knows she must reject him if she wants to arrive at the Hereafter."

"I see," Travis said, beginning to pace around the room in an aggressive prowl. "That is too much ambiguity. I need you to get back in there and tell Luna in no uncertain terms that she is to revoke her consent to be revived on Earth."

Clew shrugged. "That's not exactly compatible with the explanation I've gone with here. She believes this is a trial that she can overcome."

"Give her the truth and force her to comply," Travis said. "We're taking on too much risk if you beat around the bush with her."

"I disagree," Clew said, matching Travis' certainty. It was Clew's decision, twenty years ago, to restrict knowledge of anything beyond Rodinia to the Transients. This gave his ministry comfortable operational boundaries. The Transients

did not know of the other Laurasian planets, Earth, or even the actual mechanics of revivals. To them, this life was an anomaly, a sign that they were unworthy of passing on to the next. The idea of the entire human race being revived would sound like a ridiculous fantasy to most of them.

Travis sneered, wiping under his nose with a casual hand. “Okay, Clew, I know you’re in charge of all the spiritual bullshit, but she is looping. Okay? They revived her on Earth, and now her consciousness is being stretched between the bodies. Her body here is already starting to shut down. She needs to die on Earth ASAP. I do not have time to get someone in there to kill her manually.”

“The newer body is usually the one to die in looping cases,” Clew said. “She’ll die before syncing enough to tell them anything.”

Travis was shaking his head before Clew even finished talking. “I’m not willing to take that chance. If you put into her mind that she must revoke consent, she could be dead in a few days when the thought syncs to her on Earth.”

Clew tilted his head. Travis couldn’t really think that was the best response, could he? “That would involve telling the truth, you know. The whole reason I’m here is so you can *not* tell the truth to your workers. Besides, I told you I already did something similar.”

“I understand that this is a unique case,” Travis said. “But I am not willing to accept this level of risk. She needs to understand that she must enforce a DNR.”

“And once she knows, what then?” Clew asked, growing frustrated. This wasn’t a spiritual matter, but one of common sense. “You think she’ll just go back to work knowing about revivals and other worlds?”

“She’s not going back to work,” Travis said in a vow. “I can

tell you that much. We will kill her on Earth to protect our interests here and dispose of her here to prevent her knowledge from spreading to others. Call it a reassignment or something.”

“I’m sorry.” Clew shook his head. “I won’t do that, and neither will any of my Anointed Ones.”

Anger flashed in Travis’ eyes. He stepped closer to Clew. “You think you’re so irreplaceable?”

Clew responded by adorning skepticism. “You’ve held onto me this long, even as your staff comes and goes.” He shrugged and turned to pace in a much more casual way than Travis had done. “I believe Luna will reject her life on earth without ever learning the true context of her looping.”

Travis’ face twitched in annoyance and panic. “Do you have any idea how screwed we are if this gets out? Murphy will be done. Not just the project.”

“I know.” Clew almost stepped back. He rarely dealt with Travis directly, but he had a reputation for violent blowups that left his subordinates in tears and his secretaries out of work. “Nevertheless, I stand by the decision.”

Travis huffed frustration, red blotching his face on either side. “If this goes south, you will be the first to reap the consequences.”

“It won’t,” Clew said, lowering his voice in defiance. “Remember, I actually care about these people.”

Travis sneered in amusement. “You don’t care about them. You use them the same as I.”

“I try to better their lives,” Clew said, digging his feet in. “To you, they are slaves in every way but name.”

“As are you. Don’t forget it.” Travis turned as if to leave before pausing. “After all this time, you still misunderstand this position and your role on Rodinia.”

CLEW AWOKE the next morning in his temporary housing in Sector Seven. He would be staying here until Luna stabilized. Unfortunately, that meant he had to make himself useful for the next few days.

As such, Travis had voluntold Clew to address all of Sector Seven the next morning. Clew's feelings on Travis' interference in his ministry were irrelevant. The Transients were given the morning off and were to gather in the plaza connecting every part of Sector Seven. This included the train terminals that permitted Transients to travel to and from their Initiatives. The Transients could not all fit, of course, and overflows were made of the nearby warehouses and workplaces.

Gareth organized the spectacle—a fact for which Clew was grateful. Clew doubted he had the patience to organize such a large-scale event on short notice.

Being the event host, Gareth opened the meeting and gave an obligatory talk on remaining steadfast amid tribulation. It was a rehashing of Clew's last world address, so a safe bet as a topic today.

Clew stared at his feet for the entirety of the talk, shocked at how disconnected he felt from his body. If he hadn't known better, Clew might have suspected he had accidentally taken the daily vitamin again.

No. Something else was happening to Clew. The world was shifting around him. The place he had occupied suddenly felt like a vacuum that had trapped Clew for the last two decades of his existence. He had bought into Travis' game and been played for a fool. Clew had always been in control of his destiny and ministry.

The controversy surrounding Luna Hawthorn exposed

Clew's life for what it was, a show directed by someone else, who himself was another puppet for Murphy, whose only master was gravity. Perhaps they would claim that too someday.

Clew had known this deep down, but Travis' taunt yesterday exposed a truth that Clew had been ignoring. He was deeply unhappy with the current course of his life and ministry.

"Always remember your purpose, my children," Gareth said, nearing the end of his talk. "With it in mind, you cannot be beaten down. It is now my pleasure and privilege to turn the remaining time over to Elder, the oldest Transient, and the one who has revealed to us the nature of the Intermediary Life."

Clew stirred, pulled from his spiraling thoughts at the mention of his name. He stood from a mat on the stage floor, erected just for today's services. A sea of Transients stretched before him in the long plaza. They lined the train terminals and every branching path as far as he could see. The faces lifted when he stood, many trying to get a proper look at Elder.

Clew's expression and body language was second nature to him after all these years. He knew the exact way to wave and position his eyes to convey humility in the face of thousands. He was overwhelmed by their strength, their presence, and their devotion. They were special, unique, filling a crucial role in their collective effort to pass through the Intermediary Journey.

It was all an act.

Clew stood before them, dressed in his white drooping robes, and felt nothing but fury. Fury that these people were Travis' and not his.

Yes, he would play Travis' game. But now he would play to win.

Clew spoke on the doctrine, explaining that the Hereafter would be something they all reached together. It was a source of confusion in Sector Three, and Clew thought the message

would bear repeating here too. The nature of many Transients' work on Rodinia meant that many died each year and needed to switch out. But switching out into a new body did not mean those revived had reached the Hereafter.

Clew almost felt terrible about addressing this issue with them. Had their faces always looked so downtrodden? They were slaves to Murphy. None of them had any choice in coming to Rodinia, and all of them were misinformed about their situation.

Clew had made that possible.

A sea of faces reflected back at him, knowing in their hearts that they could never achieve their potential in this life. They would never find happiness, because happiness was not for this life, but the next. Now was the time to suffer in diligence, as Clew once again explained to them.

"My children," he said in summary, "I have heard your cries these many years, and my soul shakes in grief over your tribulations. Know that your hardships are not in vain. This Intermediary Life may stretch long, but it will not last forever. That I know with a surety. The greatest satisfaction to be had in this life is in performing your Initiative."

He paused, feeling a strange hesitation about his current path.

"I understand that some of you question," he said, voice unsure of the new territory.

Faces from every angle fixed on him. Nothing such as this had ever been said.

"Questions are not bad, but those with doubts should surround themselves with those who are strong. Unfortunately, there are poisonous rumors spreading through this sector. Destabilizing ideas that threaten the very integrity of this Intermediary Journey. Because of this, Sector Seven will be

redistributed into the other sectors so that all may be strengthened. Other Transients will replace those who are relocated. This is an opportunity for reflection on how we can all be better and work towards the day when we will all be perfected.”

The hope and longing that had greeted Clew’s words remained, but not in every eye. Some shook their heads. Others looked down, unable to look at Clew.

“Lies!” a man in the crowd shouted.

“Liar!” another woman affirmed.

Many people looked around in shock. Nothing like this had ever happened. Not on Rodinia. Not directed at Elder. Elder, beloved by the people. Elder, who taught them about the Intermediary Journey and how to overcome it.

Still, others joined in. They were few, no more than ten, but they had gained momentum. “Lies! Lies! Lies!” they shouted.

The effect on the crowd was immediate and startling, even to Clew.

The Transients turned in on themselves. Those few who dissented were quickly seized upon by angry and offended people.

To protect Elder’s honor, the Transients detained those few delinquents. But, when the protesters tried to break free, the people grew agitated. Clew could only stand and watch, mortified at what had become of his address.

Circles formed around the six offenders. Somehow, Clew knew what would happen. The people perceived no value in the individual. Violence was rare on Rodinia, but life had become such a cheap thing.

In their efforts to neutralize the threat of those who dared speak out, the Transients brought death down upon the dissenters’ heads.

Clew closed his eyes at the brutal show of force. This. This was the fruit of his labors.

“Protect Elder!” a woman near Clew shouted.

Faithful Transients surged onto the platform, and Clew backed away in fear. They formed a barricade around Clew in solidarity.

He stepped down, unable to give the people any more. Gareth put his arm around Clew and escorted him into a private room behind the stage. It was an office vacated to host Clew at today’s event.

Clew sank into a chair, breathing hard and shaking.

Gareth faced Clew, apprehension painting his face. “Are you unharmed, Elder?”

“Yes, yes,” Clew said, covering his eyes.

“Good,” Gareth said, sounding relieved. “We will let things calm down outside before joining the feast.”

Clew shot him an outright glare. Food always accompanied religious and meditation services. “Do we really have to include the feast after what just happened?”

“It is an important part of the meditation, Elder,” Gareth said, for once not backing down or apologizing. “You not participating may look poorly on the situation.”

“Six people are dead!” Clew said. “We can make an exception.”

Gareth gave a sympathetic look. “Death is not permanent, Elder. And the Intermediary Life continues.” The argument was over.

Twenty minutes later, Clew was sitting at one of thousands of tables, all dragged out for the communal feast.

This was a recent addition to the faith. Typically, the people subsisted on prefabricated food meant to provide all their nutrients. But now, they received one full meal every time they

attended meditations and religious services. The feasts uplifted their spirits and caused them to associate meditation with reward.

Clew did not eat. He could not eat. He stared past his plate, lost in dangerous thought.

CAN MANGLE A SOUL.

“Are you well, Elder?” Luna asked.

The feast had ended two hours ago. Shock and disbelief still tormented Clew.

The sight of the calloused deaths, juxtaposed against the flagrant feast, startled him.

He returned to the hospital to lead a meditation with Luna. Of course, she instantly sensed his shock.

“Sorry?” Clew said, trying to shake himself back into the present.

“Some time has passed since you last spoke,” Luna said, hesitation restraining her voice. “We were discussing my progression today.”

“Right,” Clew said, clearing his throat and rubbing his eyebrows. “How is that going?”

Guilt crossed Luna’s face. Her eyes lowered to her laced fingers resting in her lap. “My trials have worsened, but I am determined to stay strong.”

Clew watched her, unable to define his own feelings. Why was he suddenly so conflicted? “Very good,” he managed.

Silence passed between Clew and Luna. His meditation mat clung to his exposed calf, and he tucked his robe under to stop the sweat.

Luna's breathing deepened. Her eyes squinted closed as if in pain. "I keep seeing flashes of my son, worried for me. I believe he wants me to join him in the Hereafter." She paused, giving a weary glance at Clew. "But I understand that my time to go there is not yet."

Clew's insides recoiled at her words. She so obviously knew what she wanted, but Clew stood in her way. Did she know that Clew was a fraud, or was she genuinely looking to him for guidance? She was on Earth in another body with her son. Surely she understood. Surely she was looking for a way out, yet years of programming had trained her not to hope for something better. "Do you want to be with him? Would it make you happy . . . if you left here to see your son?"

Luna's eyes flitted up to meet Clew's gaze, a haunted expression that dared not make assumptions in fear of disappointment. "What are you saying?"

Seeing her in this state broke Clew. He was a fraud. His ministry was a comfort to slaves who benefited from remaining ignorant of their circumstances. But Luna had a way out. If she died on Rodinia, she would be free on Earth with her son. Her life would improve, and not just through nice sentiments of a better future. She would experience an immediate quality of life improvement. Clew needed to say something. He opened his mouth.

"Never mind," he said, hating his own cowardice. "Forget I spoke."

Luna looked back down to the ground, unaware of the battle Clew was waging within himself. She took in a deep breath, wincing. The looping was taking a toll on her body. She

looked weaker. Clew might have thought that she had lost weight, but the looping was still too recent to take that toll on her body. She traced her finger along the edge of her mat. “I was able to convince the doctor to allow me to watch you speak earlier. I found your words to be most helpful through this trial.”

“I’m happy to hear my words brought you strength,” Clew said, allowing his standard canned response to spill from his lips. But something about Luna made Clew want to be honest with her. “It seems you were among the few who thought so.”

Luna returned a sad gaze to Clew. “You should not blame yourself if others have not prepared to hear your words.”

Clew’s lip gave an involuntary tremble, and to stop himself from tears he burst into laughter. Something about the situation was so absurd that he could not remain neutral.

“What did I say?” Luna said, not seeming to know if it was appropriate for her to join in with Clew’s mirth.

“It’s nothing,” Clew said, wiping at his eye. “I’m just supposed to be the one helping you. Not the other way around.”

Luna offered a comforting gaze that made Clew believe that the care she displayed for him was genuine. “We’re all here to help one another through this Intermediary Journey.”

Discomfort stirred in Clew. He didn’t deserve Luna’s show of support. He deserved nothing from her. Even now, he was keeping her from her family. He had her training her mind to reject the Hereafter to overcome this supposed trial. And every second she succeeded here reduced her chances of being with her son. He sighed. “It just hasn’t turned out as I thought it would.”

Luna twisted her lips. “I’m not sure it did for anyone.”

“It should be different,” Clew said, inwardly berating

himself. He needed to just tell her. Set her free from what he programmed her to be.

“Sometimes things just are,” Luna said. “*Should* doesn’t change reality.”

Clew shook his head. This was too much. “It might in this case. Your existence would have been better without me in it.”

Luna’s hand reached out across the mat to Clew’s in a sign of support. “Trust yourself, Elder. The people see. You’re the only one who cares about them. This Intermediary Life is so fraught with trials.”

Clew recoiled from her touch, shocked out of his indecision. “I made it up.”

Luna’s hand retracted. She gave a half smile, as if unsure she had heard Clew properly. “What do you mean? Made what up?”

Clew stood, unable to maintain this charade. “The Intermediary Life.” He began to pace. “The Hereafter. Initiatives. I made it up to distract you all from the fact that you’re slaves.”

“No.” Luna’s face of solidarity fell. She looked vulnerable, sitting on her mat with Clew standing over her. “No, that can’t be.”

“Yes,” Clew said, feeling both cruel and merciful for it.

Luna exhaled in disbelief. “None of it was real?”

Clew leaned down to her. “Everyone you knew from your Prior Life is alive.” His anger was irrational, he knew. Luna was his victim. His subject to torment. Yet telling her the truth stirred rage in him. “We revived you the same way as them. But we lied to you. We said you were trapped between lives. We changed your bodies and drugged you to sell the lie. Everyone on this planet is in the same situation.”

Luna’s bottom lip trembled up against her top lip. “Why?” Her voice was breathy.

Clew shook his head. There was no rationale. None that could justify the plight of Rodinia. “We knew we could get away with it. We targeted people with minimal chances of being missed. Except, we made a mistake with you. You have a family who loves you, and they’re trying to get you back right now.”

“No,” Luna said in a tone that sounded like begging. “No.”

“You can leave Rodinia if you want,” Clew said. “I can kill you here, then you can be with your son.”

“No!” Luna said in the same hysterical voice. She stood, hyperventilating. “I did what you told me! I knew I had to reject the Hereafter. I saw my son! He begged me to stay, and I told him I couldn’t.” She turned towards the altar at the head of the room and pounded it, sobbing. “I rejected the Hereafter, like you told me to do! I was going to tell you I passed the test when I started feeling better. And now my body is going to die there. I’m never going to see him again.” She swayed from the exertion.

Clew rushed towards her, worried she might fall. “Luna, I am sorry. But you’re still sick. Take a breath and try to calm down.”

“Don’t you touch me!” Luna jerked away from Clew, rounding on him like prey before a leopard. Her breathing was shallow, air unable to gain purchase in her lungs. She swayed. “Don’t you . . .”

Luna succumbed to her body. Her eyes rolled up into her head, hands trembling, and her spine lost all strength. Her head slumped, and her body fell ungracefully to the floor.

“Bugger,” Clew said, rushing for Luna to check her pulse. He found it with two trembling fingers against her neck. Her heart was racing, and her eyes flitted under closed lids.

Clew stood, panic swelling within him. This was his fault. He turned for the door and burst into the hall. The transition

from the tranquil meditation room to the hospital was a stark reminder of reality.

“Doctor!” he said. “Dr. Patel, get in here. Luna just collapsed.”

The first to respond was a nurse, followed by two other nurses. One carried a stretcher.

“What happened?” the first nurse demanded, wasting no time and taking no nonsense.

“Luna collapsed,” Clew said. “She got worked up and just—”

“Stay here,” the nurse interrupted.

All three rushed into the meditation room. Dr. Patel followed a moment later, running past Clew without acknowledgement. He burst into the meditation room, door bouncing against the wall. The three nurses had positioned Luna on her side to transfer her onto the stretcher. Dr. Patel held the door open for them to exit before joining at the foot of the stretcher to help carry. He was already shouting orders for Luna’s treatment.

Clew followed on slow feet, a sinking feeling in his stomach. He had always had all the answers. In this, he could not help. Dr. Patel and the nurses carried Luna through two swinging doors, and did not return.

Clew knew better than to follow. He had done enough damage for the day. He would burn incense for her and try to set things right if she survived. He turned away from the double doors to a less-than-pleasant sight.

Jolene had just entered the hospital, a skeptical expression on her face. She wore her normal dark worldly clothes and projected annoyance. “Wow, you really screwed that one up, didn’t you?”

Clew froze. It was unfair for her to show up at the worst

moment and gloat about Clew's failure. "The looping is taking a toll on her body. She tried to hide the pain, and it overcame her."

Jolene smirked, taking long, predatory steps towards Clew. "It's amazing how you can explain away colossal failures as if they're perfectly manageable yet unavoidable upsets."

Clew shook his head, starting towards the hospital's exit. "I need some time alone. You hanging over me and poking fun doesn't help."

"How do you do it?" Jolene asked out of the blue, as if she had been dwelling on the question. Her tone and posture refused to acknowledge Clew's desire for solitude.

Clew scrunched his eyebrows. "Do what?"

"Make people believe?" Jolene said.

Clew looked away, chewing on his lip. In truth, his ministry was more intuitive than calculated. Still, he had gained some insights into the psychology over the years. "You identify or create a deficiency, something to establish need. You might focus on a person's flaws, highlight their imperfections, or cause them to fear their natural fate. Perhaps you make them question if they are deserving of love. It doesn't matter the specifics, but ultimately, they must believe that they alone are not enough. Then you come in with the solution to their problem. Tell them they may not be worthy of love, but love can be found here. Reinforce that their lives are imperfect, and will otherwise always be so, but luckily, you know the path. And one day, they will be perfect. One day they will be happy, have a family, and be worthy of love, because, as it turns out, this is all a grand plan of cosmic design."

"That's a nice belief," Jolene said.

"It's a necessary belief," Clew said. "Because, without the belief, all that remains is the lie. That they on their own are not

good enough. And that is almost enough to make life unlivable.”

Jolene looked past Clew at the swinging doors of the hospital. “And I suppose the result of the belief collapsing is what we just witnessed. Pretty awful, don’t you think?”

Anger sparked within Clew. He turned down the hospital hall and began walking towards the exit. “Leave me alone.”

Jolene rotated, making clear she did not intend to let Clew leave. She walked alongside Clew. “Nah, you don’t deserve privacy. It’s certainly not a luxury your followers get. How about a trip instead?”

Clew hung his head, restraining the growl that threatened to escape him. “What do you mean?”

Jolene tipped her head. “Come to the manufacturing front with me.”

“I’ve been there before,” Clew said, letting that growl out just a little.

“But never with me,” Jolene said in a tone designed to deliver bad news. “Besides, it’s as private as you can get on this planet. Come on. Let’s prove miracles exist by you learning something for a change.”

AND ANY ATTEMPT AT REPAIR

“This is where it all comes together,” Jolene said, stopping at the threshold of the warehouse. The floor of the massive building stretched out of sight. Racks holding parts and equipment partitioned the space into sections. Jolene watched the workers at various stations, defeat painting her face. “This is the purpose of this planet. Our only export.”

“The Solar Sink,” Clew said. “Modular pieces for Travis’ Dyson sphere.”

Jolene graced Clew with a smirk that wasn’t entirely judgmental. “Do you think it’s right for a company or government to monetize a sun? That’s essentially what Murphy is doing.”

Clew shook his head at the blunt way she explained it all. “I’ve never really thought about it.”

“Bullshit,” Jolene said, locking Clew into her gaze.

“I think the situation on Rodinia is both more complicated, and simpler than you just stated,” Clew said.

Jolene raised an eyebrow. “That’s either really insightful, or a mouthful of double-talking nonsense.”

“I’m sure you’ll come to a verdict on my potential insight without my input,” Clew said. “Why are we here?”

“We’re here to talk,” Jolene said, voice stiff. She still had not strayed from the doorway to the manufacturing warehouse. “But first, I need to know what’s in that head, and without all the mysticism. Do you see the problems on this planet?”

“I’m aware,” Clew said, throwing up his hands. “But the business is none of my concern. I manage the spiritual affairs of the people.”

“But you don’t believe that,” Jolene said, almost demanding Clew to agree. “Not anymore.”

A yellow pathway stretched out before the entrance, marking safe passage along the manufacturing floor. Outside the path was commotion, forklifts, and pallets of supplies. Two workers walking along the pathway spotted Clew. They paused, momentarily stricken before each giving bows and rushing off.

Other workers from the assembly floors beyond were also noticing Clew, though some seemed to recognize Jolene as well.

Clew shook his head, turning away from the scene. “I don’t know what I believe, Jolene. The world was more simple yesterday.”

“No it wasn’t, dummy,” Jolene said with her trademark unapologetic bluntness. “Just your thoughts were. Walk with me.”

Jolene stepped out into the manufacturing floor, taking special care to walk outside the designated safety pathway.

Clew followed, walking parallel to her within the pathway. They were about to pass a row of shelving and stationary equipment that partitioned off one of the manufacturing stages.

“You know that path doesn’t actually do anything right?” Jolene said.

“You failing to see its purpose does not negate its usefulness,” Clew said. “Now, I’ll ask again. Why are we here?”

Jolene was preparing yet another disrespectful response when a shift manager spotted Clew and almost lost his eyes and gum because of the shock expanding his face. “Elder!” He rushed forward, offering a rushed apologetic bow. “Forgive me. We were unaware that you would be visiting following your address. We can assemble in the meditation room if you like.”

“We’re observing in an unofficial capacity,” Jolene said, using a level of tact Clew hadn’t known she possessed. She followed with a benevolent smile in the same class of Clew’s standard greeting. “Pay us no mind. There’ll be no evaluation from me and no need for services for the Elder.”

“Very well,” the shift manager said, face splitting into the same smile. There was something familiar and expected in that interaction, despite his words. “Please inform me if I can assist your visit in any way.”

“Thank you,” Jolene said.

The shift manager departed, repeatedly checking his clipboard as he rushed to address a congestion of workers on his floor.

Clew watched him go. “Why don’t you tear them down as you do me?”

“None of them need a reminder to take themselves less seriously,” Jolene said with uncharacteristic honesty. She shook her head. “They don’t need that.”

Clew glared at her from the safety pathway. “And you think I do?”

Jolene scoffed. “Please.” She pointed at Clew. “You need to snort about a thousand ground up Xanaxes before I even think about going easy on you.”

A growl escaped Clew. It was a testament to his annoyance

that he did not suppress the reaction in fear of a Transient seeing him project negativity. “*Why* are we here?”

Jolene lit up, as if she had been maneuvering Clew this entire conversation, which she had. “Because that manager you just spoke to? I own him. Same as the workers.”

Clew responded with an unimpressed shrug. “They’re slaves, so yeah.”

“Not like that, dummy,” Jolene said in scorn. “They’re loyal. They can think for themselves, a trait that is in short supply on this gutted rock. We can talk here. No one will know. Not Travis. Not your Anointed Ones.”

Clew turned from her, unsure of what to say. He knew what Jolene wanted from him. A part of him welcomed the idea. Another part of him reviled it. The part Travis had programmed into him. Clew used to have such grand ambitions. That was what men like Travis did. They offered a good life in exchange for loyalty, but the true cost was the great life you could have had.

Clew began to walk along the warehouse, observing workers in various stages of assembly. The Solar Sinks coming together in this final stage was the result of a long supply chain of refineries and manufacturers.

Jolene followed behind.

“Did you know?” Clew asked, not looking back.

“Know what?” Jolene asked in exasperation. She strained to catch up. “Don’t be vague with me like you are in your sermons.”

On the edge of the walkway, Clew stopped in front of a lineup of solar panels. They were all folded up for transport. Luna’s Initiative was to inspect those. She had given everything to that single purpose for twenty years. “They’re slaves. You’re a slave. I’m a slave. Did you know?”

Jolene pulled up beside Clew. “Holy shitballs, exalted one, you’re just barely realizing this?”

“I didn’t see before,” Clew said, eyes locked on the panels. Thousands of parts went into the Solar Sinks. Processors. Telecommunications. Power collection and storage. And all of it had to be rated for use in space whilst in close orbit to a sun.

“Didn’t see, or chose not to?” Jolene asked. Her hard eyes pressed into Clew. “Surely you noticed how underfunded our security is, and on a planet harboring slaves. The obvious truth is that you saved Travis years of work and infrastructure by developing the perfect moral system for this planet. He couldn’t have done this without you.”

Clew closed his eyes, unsure of how to process the damning accusation. Was he mad at the injustice, or that Travis had outmaneuvered him? “Travis ran the operations, but I managed the people. I was just as important to this operation as he. But he still took advantage of me.”

Jolene gave a slow nod. “Now you see.”

Clew turned and ran his hands through his hair. “Bollocks.” He paced a few steps away from Jolene and the solar panels.

“You created this mess,” Jolene’s voice called after Clew.

“Me?” Clew turned on a dime in a fury. “You brought me here!”

Jolene stood her ground, and even took an aggressive step towards Clew. “Yeah, that was twenty years ago, darling. I’m not the same person I was, and neither are you.” She passed Clew, walking through the warehouse into the next partition of flooring.

Clew now followed her. This next section seemed to be storage for completed Solar Sinks. From here, they would travel to the Citadel where the elevator would lift them from the atmosphere. “You disapprove of Travis’ actions on Rodinia.”

Jolene wandered over to the closest completed sink. They were arranged in a grid on pallets, and about the size of a twenty-first century washing machine. A worker across the floor was positioning another with a forklift.

Jolene put her hand on the Solar Sink, looking at the folded-up device with trepidation on her face. She took a trembly breath, and spoke. "I despise everything he has done in building this planet. Every day, I wish I could take back the moment he revived me. It's been so clear to me for the last decade, but you just settled into your role like a good dog."

Clew watched her from the confines of the safety path. "You have no place passing moral judgment on me. He's had you wrapped around his finger for far longer."

Jolene pursed her lips and tilted her head. "The difference is, I eventually saw through the bullshit." She pounded the Solar Sink with the bottom of a clenched fist.

Clew folded his arms, finding her argument flimsy at best. "Then why haven't you done anything?"

"Because you are more powerful than Travis," Jolene snapped, still standing ten feet away from Clew. "At least in the eyes of the people. To help them, I needed you to break first."

Clew lulled his head back. "Why change it? The project has five years left before we scale back to maintenance. The planet is dry. The sphere is almost built. Why stop it?"

"Two thirds of the workers will die at the end. Did you know that?" Jolene stated with a flat voice.

Clew had not known, and only just had the good sense not to allow his face to communicate the fact. He said nothing, not trusting himself to win the next move.

Jolene spoke again. "The Transients that no longer serve a purpose will never live again. Travis can kill them without consequence. Luna Hawthorn may be an outlier, but for the

most part, the people on this planet were forgotten to history. No one will ever find their DNA, or uncover their name. I know because I helped select them, and I'm one of them, forgotten, without love or connection. I have no one, Clew. Travis was my everything for longer than I care to admit. Now I see his game for what it is. Not something someone so exalted would understand."

"I understand, Jolene." Clew raised his hand, unable to hide that tremble in his fingers. It was all too much. "I'm one of the oldest people in existence. I've spent that time surrounded by people, but alone. Misunderstood."

Jolene pouted. "Awe. Poor wee Clew, so sad."

Clew rolled his eyes. "I don't need your input. Why am I here?"

"I want you, Clew," Jolene said with perfect confidence. "I have people all over this planet crying out for reprieve but unable to speak because of how pervasive your doctrine is. I need your loyalty to shift from Travis to them."

Clew shook his head. "There is nothing wrong with my doctrine."

Jolene smirked. "Debatable, but in the spirit of cooperation, fine. The doctrine is good. But change the application. Shift the focus to set them free. Real freedom. Not promises of a paradisiacal future."

They locked eyes across from one another. She wanted something from him. And a way forward was becoming clear. Clew just needed to position himself. "Travis needs to be removed. I agree."

Jolene watched him for ten seconds before spotting something across the floor. A steel rod. She crossed to where it lay and stooped down to retrieve it. She swung it casually about as she returned to the Solar Sink and tapped the device with the

rod. “Prove it. Destroy this thing.” She held out the rod to Clew. He still had not stepped off the safety pathway. She looked almost comical, standing there ten feet away and expecting Clew to come destroy the Solar Sink.

A team of workers passed behind Clew on the path, allowing the commotion of the floor to intrude on his thoughts. They were happy. But that happiness was built on a lie.

Clew watched them pass with downcast eyes. Finally, he stepped off the safety pathway towards Jolene. He approached, but did not accept the steel rod in her hand. She offered it to him expectantly, but Clew ignored her. Instead, Clew placed his hand against the folded up Solar Sink. He dug his fingernails into a crease running along the top. He pried the device apart, unfolding the solar panel from the side. Near the hinge where the panel connected to the sink was a power ribbon. There was just enough space in the gap for Clew to hook the ribbon with his finger and pull, breaking it in two. Finished, he stood upright and closed the panel back into the Solar Sink.

Jolene had an appreciative expression on her face.

Clew raised eyebrows in a similar smirk to the one Jolene so often gave him. “There are other ways of causing destruction. This unit has already passed its final inspection. They would never waste resources lifting it out of the atmosphere if they thought it was broken.”

A smile split Jolene’s face. “I knew I’d get around to liking you, eventually. You’re on board, one hundred percent?”

“Yes,” Clew said. “He was prepared to start something new, though he doubted he and Jolene would end up on the same page.

“Good,” Jolene said, relieved. Her eyes were red, and she seemed to struggle to subdue her smile. “Give me a month to figure some things out. Prepare to adjust your ministry.”

Clew sighed. "I suppose you'll want me to halt the redistribution I planned for Sector Seven."

Jolene paused, seeming to not have considered that possibility. "No, actually, I think you should double down on that. Only, say Sector Seven has been such a great example of dedication that you're redistributing them as a way of strengthening the others."

"That will be a hard lie to sell." Even the idea of saying something so untrue stressed Clew out.

"It won't be," Jolene said with confidence. "The people of Sector Seven will be perfect Transients until this blows up. You have my word."

"Fine," Clew said. Any cooperation between them would require a level of trust. Clew just hoped she knew what she was doing. "I'll put out a statement tonight."

"Good," Jolene said, lighting up in a way she had never done before with Clew. "We can break Travis' control on this planet. We just need to beat him at his own game."

REQUIRES SACRIFICE.

One month had passed since Clew and Jolene planned treason against Travis and Murphy.

Clew had settled back into his normal routine. Luna had stabilized four days after collapsing on Clew. Her health returned to normal, indicating her body on Earth was no longer alive.

All was well on that front.

Travis had wanted to remove Luna from the working floor and her Initiative. Jolene had made a strong case that Luna would not be a risk to Rodinia. She even requested Luna be reassigned as her personal assistant, rather than be killed for her exposure to Earth.

Travis was reluctant, but agreed to appease Jolene. As the only Murphy executive living full-time on Rodinia, he was far too busy to bother with Transients on an individual level.

He often left both Clew and Jolene to their machinations, only interfering when production levels dipped.

So, Clew had continued with Jolene's plan without Travis catching any whiff of espionage.

The Sector Seven redistribution had been a wild success, perplexing many of the Anointed Ones who were eager to see Sector Seven put to shame. Clew hadn't had such a stressful month in many years.

Today was the start of something new. He would be speaking to every Transient today across all sectors. He and Jolene had written the speech together, hoping to strike a proper balance between familiarity and progress.

Clew closed his eyes and inhaled the smokey incense that filled his chamber in the House of One. He held his breath before exhaling. His spirit pressed up against his shoulders, making him feel light. This was the right move. Clew should have done this years ago. So many years had passed since he'd felt hopeful, in control of his destiny.

The door to Clew's meditation room opened. Clew opened his eyes, making no other movement. Iris was poking her head into the meditation room. "Elder? Luna Hawthorn has arrived as requested to speak with you before your public address."

A pause. Clew had wanted to speak with Luna for some time now. But nerves paralyzed him in place.

"Shall I send her in?" Iris asked.

Clew closed his eyes.

Iris had always been eager, perhaps even fanatical. Her religious fervor had always been an asset, but now Clew worried she was a liability. Would she support Clew in the coming days? Clew somehow doubted she would. He hoped she would prove him wrong.

"I'll be out to meet her soon," Clew said.

The door closed, Iris departing.

Clew took several calming breaths. This would be his last moment of what had become normal life for him.

And now, it was over.

Clew stood, straightened his robes, and left his meditation room.

LUNA WAITED for him at the ground floor, one of the few places in the House of One open to the public. She was absorbed in a circular fountain surrounded by foliage. The flagrant display of water and life always so entranced visitors.

Clew descended the grand staircase to the center floor and pulled up beside Luna.

“Elder,” she said with flat intonation.

Clew winced, not having anticipated his sudden discomfort. “Please don’t call me that anymore.”

Luna pulled her gaze from the fountain, allowing dangling tree leaves to brush against the top of her hair. “What do I call you?”

The invasive question sent thrills through Clew’s body. “My name is Clew, technically, though I haven’t gone by that name in a lifetime.”

“Clew.” Luna smiled. “I like it.”

“You’ve recovered?” Clew stepped back and eyed Luna. He had never seen her unencumbered with fatigue and sickness. “You were more than a bit knackered last time I saw you.”

Luna’s countenance darkened. She didn’t seem to know whether to nod or shudder. “During the worst of my symptoms last month, I never quite knew which body I occupied. The version of me on Earth didn’t understand. But here, I did.”

Clew restrained his impulse to wrap her into a hug. He was the cause of her suffering, and they both knew that truth. Furthermore, he had prevented her from being with her son

again. But she was here at least, and willing to talk. “What happened? Did your Earthside body die?”

“Not on its own,” Luna said, voice sick with memory. “I fought hard here to reject my temptations of the Hereafter, as you instructed.”

“And then?” Clew asked, unable to turn away from Luna. He had so many contradicting emotions surrounding her that all he could do was watch and listen.

“I gained memories of myself on Earth in my body here, days and hours after they happened. I meditated on rejecting the Hereafter.” There was no accusation in her voice. Was there?

“But then I told you the truth,” Clew said, needing something from her. She could not exonerate Clew, yet Clew wanted it all the same.

“By the time I understood what was happening, it was too late,” Luna said, eyes downcast and tone depressed. She did not need to blame Clew. The implication was evident. Her pain was the result of more powerful, less careful people. “My body shut down. I witnessed myself on Earth plead with my son to kill me. I could do nothing. It all happened so fast. I was a spectator in my body, out of sync with my thoughts and desires. Unable to affect the present.”

Vertigo froze Clew in place. She knew. Knew about Earth. The Intermediary Journey was a lie. Clew had lied, not just to the Transients, but to Luna. “It sounds as if you pieced everything together, even beyond what I told you.”

Luna turned from Clew and took several steps through the grand hall and away from the fountain. “I have had many discussions with Jolene this past month, yes.”

She paused, still facing away from Clew. The vulnerability was evident in her posture. A contradiction of emotions. She was at home here, perfectly at ease within a culture that had

become hers. Yet now there was something new. A wall had been erected, an inability to be content in Clew's presence.

Luna shook where she stood. "Why did you want to speak with me?"

Panic flooded Clew. Never before had he broken character and been open with any of his followers. Yet somehow, Luna brought that out in him. He cleared his throat. "I wanted to let you know that I'm sorry. I don't know what will happen after today." He hesitated. What good were his promises after all he had done? "But I need you to know that seeing you suffer made me realize the rotten fruit of my own labors."

Luna turned back towards Clew, a reluctant smile patching her broken face. "Maybe some good can come of it then."

Clew grimaced. "I've hurt everyone on this planet, I know. I weaponized your hopes of a better future against you. But you, in particular, I feel badly about."

"Don't feel bad for me," Luna said. Her focus narrowed in on Clew. "I still believe."

"But I made it up," Clew said. She must understand.

"No," Luna said, showing no doubt, "it was true, if you think about it. This was an Intermediary Life. Full of struggle and toil. But the Hereafter, that is when we will be happy. The only difference now is that we will work towards the Hereafter. It is ours to claim."

"I s'pose," Clew muttered, unable to process Luna's words. "I just wanted you to hear it from me, in case your feelings on the matter ever change."

"What you did was wrong," Luna said in a voice that was far too understanding. "But trying to right our own inequities is perhaps the closest any of us can come to absolution."

"You have more wisdom than I," Clew said with as much understanding as he could muster.

Luna turned as if to leave. Then she stopped and looked back at Clew. “Good luck today, Clew. I hope to see you again in the Hereafter. Perhaps things will be different.”

“I hope so too,” Clew said in honesty.

“Be careful,” Luna said. “Some may not look favorably upon your actions.”

“I know,” Clew said. “We will have security. I’ll be safe, I hope.”

She nodded and left.

Clew watched her walk away, conflicting feelings dancing over his body. Luna Hawthorn was the perfect example for why Clew now understood the need for change. He didn’t have all the answers, but he knew he could trust Jolene. She understood Rodinia like nobody else, despite her persistent desire to annoy Clew.

Luna departed from the House of One towards the plaza connecting it to the railways.

Clew turned, hoping to review his speech some before Jolene arrived and demanded the rest of his time. He was starting up the stairs when she emerged out onto the landing, looking directly down at Clew. She was wearing her normal dark shirt and trousers, only now, she was carrying a bag.

Clew continued climbing the stairs. “Ah, I was just thinking about you.”

Jolene gave an understanding nod. “Good thoughts, I assume, considering it’s me.”

Clew landed on the top step, coming level with Jolene. “I’m mostly perplexed about how you maintain such a massive ego.”

Jolene swayed her head in vain admiration of herself. “My ego is so massive precisely because I am me, dummy. But I appreciate your attempt at banter, inexperienced as you are in the practice.”

“I see,” Clew said, not entirely sure how to recover from that. “Well, I’m ready for my speech.”

Jolene hung her head, a defeated huff emanating from her. “You give up so easily.”

“What do you mean?” Clew asked, annoyed.

Jolene hit Clew. “If I give you shit, you should give it right back.”

Clew made a sick face. “I’m not really into fecal matter. But if it gets you going, I won’t judge.”

“Wow,” Jolene said in all seriousness, arms folded. “You would make a very sophisticated teenager. Is that what you call humor?”

“That’s what I call passive aggression,” Clew said, no longer able to put up with her nonsense. “Seriously, get help.”

Jolene scoffed, seeming to no longer enjoy the game she insisted on playing. “You’re terrible at this. Let’s just get going.”

“Fine by me.”

“Right.” Jolene began to walk towards the administrative offices without purpose. “Final checklist, I suppose. Say only what you’ve written during your speech. This is just to prep for things to come. We’ll cause a slight shift today. Those Transients redistributed from Sector Seven will ease the doctrinal shift. We’ll implement a soft break from Travis and Murphy if possible. But if we meet pushback following your words, they’re prepared to rally the others and lay siege to the Citadel.”

“How do you know the other sectors will just join in?” Clew asked, dragging his feet in walking with her.

“Trust me,” Jolene said in something of a command. “The people you redistributed have been at work for three weeks gaining support in secret. The people know you’re on their side. They trust you, even if you don’t deserve their trust.”

Clew looked away. She was right, of course. People did trust

him, a fact he both loved and hated. “Why do I get the feeling I don’t know the full plan?”

“Because you don’t,” Jolene said. “Come on. I need you in your meditation room.”

“Uh, why?” Clew said. He would be making his speech in a half hour. They didn’t have time for meditating.

Jolene ignored Clew. She brazenly opened the door to Clew’s personal meditation room and strolled inside. She turned on Clew, who had followed her in, annoyed at the intrusion on what he considered a private space.

“Hold still,” Jolene said. She dug into her bag and withdrew a kind of headgear that looked like a net with sensors woven into the fabric. “Put this on.” She shoved the apparatus into Clew’s hands and also withdrew a clipboard.

“What are you doing?” Clew asked.

“Talking isn’t holding still, or putting that on,” Jolene said, absorbed into her clipboard.

Clew examined the tangled headgear, trying to figure out exactly how it was supposed to sit on his head. After finding the symmetrical ear parts and assuming the back of the apparatus was longer, Clew pulled it over his hair.

Jolene glanced up just long enough to examine the fit. “Great.” She pressed a few buttons on her clipboard. “Finished. Let’s get you out in front of the crowd.”

CLEW EMERGED WIDE-EYED out into the audience hall. Thousands of faces watched him, waiting, eager to hear whatever Clew had gathered them to say.

Each sat on the floor, some on pads, others on the carpet. All were cross-legged, wearing their tan religious robes. Their

work clothes were more suited to movement and had fewer hanging parts to avoid catching on machinery. But the meditation robes were comfortable, designed to be lost in, to connect with one's body and reflect on the spiritual nature of existence.

Clew walked through the audience hall. It was a stage in the round, the only worship center to use the tactic. It was supposed to make congregating at the House of One feel unique, but really it just gave Clew the perpetual feeling of someone watching his back. Because they were.

Clew ascended a step to the center stage and cleared his throat. Already, his voice was magnified.

"My children," Clew said. He wondered how he would ever get over calling them that, or if he would want to. "Arise, and approach. I would speak with you more personally."

Confused looks crossed the Transients' faces. Nevertheless, they obeyed, rising from their seated position to approach the round stage on which Clew stood.

Hope and strength replaced doubt and confusion. They were the perfect model Transients, looking forward with anticipation. That would ease this transition. Did the people look that way because of his teachings, or did they know something in their lives was about to change?

When all were settled, Clew licked his lips, and spoke. "For two decades, we have made Rodinia our home. We have accepted this Intermediary State as our burden to bear. We understood that this was a test, and the passing of that test would permit us to enter the Hereafter."

This was nothing new, and recognition crossed many of the faces watching Clew speak.

He continued. "The time has stretched long, and many of you wait with bated breath for the Hereafter. You wish for a day when the toil of this life will come to an end."

Jolene was pushing her way through the crowd to watch Clew speak. He couldn't explain why, but seeing her made him happy. She was more obnoxious than anyone he had ever met, but Clew appreciated her all the more for it. Her eyes locked on Clew, expectant. He was about to arrive at the point of this address.

Clew looked away from Jolene, scanning the crowd that hung on his words. "My children, the day rapidly approaches when we will arrive in the Hereafter, as promised. I believe we are close. Very close. What that will look like, I cannot say. Nor do I know exactly when.

"But the change *is* coming. The Hereafter will arrive. And our destiny will once again be in our hands."

BANG!

Something slammed into Clew, knocking him over and stealing his breath. He was on the ground, confused and horrified faces rotating around him.

What was that pain from?

He glanced down at his torso and gasped at the sight of blood contrasting against his white robes. His beautiful, white robes, stained red. He didn't want his children to see him like this. He could not die in front of them.

The horror on their faces painted a picture of despair. The screams rang across Clew's ears, mixing with the ringing of the shot that had dropped Clew to the ground.

And already, that void called him. That void of silence. The death of thought. The suspension of self from which only the mercy of others could rescue him.

Jolene had pushed her way through the crowd of Transients.

Clew felt relief at the sight of her. But rather than rushing to him as he might have expected, she assessed him with cold calculations. She bent down and checked the pulse on his wrist.

Clew could not even speak or move. He was at her mercy, and losing life.

Jolene brought her own wrist to her mouth. "He's down," she said into her wrist. "Response crews, move in."

Clew did not understand, nor did he have the luxury of time to try. His vision was fading, his mind begging to fall asleep.

He gave up his ghost, welcoming death's wonderful embrace. The last thing he saw was the Citadel through a window in the audience hall. It towered over him, and he understood just one thing.

He should have acted smarter and earlier.

BUT AFTER ALL IS GIVEN,

Clew fell back into himself.

There was no other way to put it.

One minute, he was not. The next, he was.

“Adrenaline administered,” a synthetic female voice said.
“Sync initiated via mind scan backup.”

The words made no sense to Clew. He sat up in the hospital bed. He was in a white room, alone.

The last thing he remembered was . . .

Dying.

He dropped his feet to the floor and tried to stand before stumbling over legs unaccustomed to walking.

Something was wrong. Seconds passed before he realized he was naked.

“Good morning, Clew,” the same digital voice said over invisible speakers. “I am here to prepare you to reenter the world following your death. You have been dead for three days.”

Clew looked up at the ceiling, goose pimples rising against his skin. He wished he had something to wear. “Where am I?”

“You are aboard the Rodinian Space Station,” the voice

responded. “Please proceed to the printer, highlighted in blue, and select your desired outfit.”

A panel opened up in the wall, flashing blue. A mannequin waited behind the wall, with a small screen displaying various clothing options.

Clew approached and scrolled through the options. Nothing in the catalogue resembled a robe, so he chose a plain khaki shirt and trousers combination that looked baggy enough not to cause discomfort.

Robotic arms around the mannequin sprang to life, creating the exact garment Clew had chosen before his eyes.

Clew had always hated printed clothes, but they beat the current alternative.

“Very good,” the female voice said when Clew had dressed. “This room will allow you to explore your memories for however long you like. Please take a moment to reacquaint yourself with yourself.”

The white of the room collapsed into squares that ascended upwards. Clew was left behind in a wooded forest on Earth. He scanned the horizon and saw farmland behind himself. The Wellington from his childhood, exactly as he remembered it. Even more detail than that. Fields of various crops consumed his vision. He had never thought as a child to learn what they were, and now he would never know.

There was a lot he would never know.

Wellington dissolved into a wood-paneled office in London. The same office in which he'd collapsed with a stroke during his Prior Life. The event sent him to the hospital and then home with stern warnings about adopting healthier eating habits. His wife's worried face materialized, that perfect hair and makeup. Their lives were just perfect. But the stroke had woken Clew up. None of it mattered. He had almost died, and for what? Had he

left this Earth, his job would have meant nothing. The house they slaved for was a waste. It was all trivial nonsense.

But his wife hadn't understood. She was comfortable with the life they had built together. They had been unable to have children, but that was okay. They had built something great. Together.

But the weeks passed on, and Clew began to resent the world around him. They were slaves. Slaves to their jobs to pay for their lifestyle. Slaves to their relations to fulfill their traditional expectations for family and country. It all meant nothing to Clew. He was tired of this constant pursuit, the upper confines of which was a modest, middle-class lifestyle. And his wife could not understand.

She was the one who ended up leaving him. Or, more accurately, she forced him to leave her, as she got to keep the house.

He left for India in pursuit of something different, something spiritual. His Prior Life had taught him one thing. Walls keep you safe. It's much better to have all the answers. Give people comforting lies and they will follow you forever. Admit ignorance, or express discontent, and they will leave you.

And they did leave him, as they always had. He had prepared to die alone. And then, right at the end of his life, a miracle. The secret to eternal life had been found.

He began life anew, with a new congregation. His first failure had taught him a valuable lesson. True things didn't require the belief of others to still be true. Untrue things, on the other hand, demanded belief in an effort to remain true. All his effort had to be true. His work on Rodinia must have been good and right. The lie held power. If it didn't fight for life within him, it would die.

Clew looked at his feet, tears forming in his eyes. "Can I be done?" he asked the computer.

The Avalonian landscape returned to white, and a door opened to reveal Jolene.

Relief flooded Clew, followed by fear. Something was off about this whole situation. She had known he would die. And how had he only been dead for three days?

“What happened?” Clew asked, speaking first.

“You died,” Jolene said. “Was that not obvious?”

“Travis had me killed?” Clew asked, hoping his ignorance would make the more comfortable possibility true.

“That was us, dummy,” Jolene said, crushing his hope for a reason to trust her. “But it looked like Travis, didn’t it?”

“You killed me?” Clew said, as much to himself as anyone. “But I’m back already. How have I synced so fast?”

“We planned it all,” Jolene said in a calming, reasonable voice. “Had to do something called a mind scan to switch you out instantly with your memories.”

Clew searched her face for any sign of caring. Any indication that he was anything other than a piece in her game. He wasn’t keen on being a piece, no matter how important. He’d already wasted twenty years being a piece for Travis. Now he was the player. “You could have told me the plan.”

Jolene shrugged without sympathy. “I didn’t want to. My way, you never had the chance to screw it up, and I had the pleasure of killing you. Wins all around.”

Clew turned from her, spirit deflating. “Yeah. Big win. What’s Travis doing?”

“He’s obviously furious,” Jolene said, like it was unavoidable, and she just couldn’t be bothered to care. “He had me issue a statement that same hour. The official story is that you became a heretic and your true followers removed you from power.”

Clew tilted his head, feeling a strange urge to smile. “So, the truth?”

“Yeah, I guess so.” Jolene looked at her nails. “Anyway, Travis is currently working on finding your replacement, and considering large purges of the population to quash any uprisings, so we’re going to storm the Citadel after all and kill Travis if all goes according to plan. He’ll be leaving Rodinia soon to finalize your replacement. Anyone who questions will die and be replaced with a new ignorant Transient.”

“You planned to mitigate this outcome, I assume. We obviously can’t let that happen,” Clew said.

“Obviously, dummy,” Jolene said, shaking her head. “We put out the ‘official’ story this morning. Meanwhile, my people on the ground are seeding rumors that you will descend from the sky to usher in the Hereafter.”

Clew froze at the news. “Huh.”

“Huh, what?” Jolene asked. “You got a better plan, oh enlightened one?”

Clew fidgeted. “That just feels quite on the nose. I was always more eastern religion. This goes full savior.”

“These people need a savior. Be that for them. Give them back their agency.” Her voice sounded so reasonable, yet Clew found himself hating this plan.

“Do you have any more surprises up your sleeve for me?” he asked her with a glare.

Jolene gave an innocent smile. “Any future surprises will be news to us both.”

Clew nodded, hoping he could trust her words. “Brilliant.”

Jolene motioned out the door of the white habilitation room. “Let’s get going.”

Clew started in surprise. He had expected to have some

time to adjust to this new body, even if Jolene had used risky methods to expedite his sync. “Now?”

Jolene nodded as if that were obvious. “Travis is leaving soon to find your replacement. He’ll be gone six months. He’s on his way up the elevator right now, which means we need to be on our way down.” She turned to leave.

“He’s on his way up after what just happened?” Clew asked.

Jolene turned back, eyes growing impatient. “Yeah, I told you. He’s looking for Clew 2.0. This time he wants someone with an even weaker spine. It’s ambitious, but never underestimate an executive determined to retain his power.”

“He’ll be gone six months?” Clew asked. She had to understand that Clew was learning a lot of new information, in addition to having just switched out.

“Yes, and that’s our window to set up a new government. But for that to happen, you gotta descend from the sky, remember? Come on. Let’s get going.” Jolene motioned Clew out the door.

CLEW DID NOT SPEAK to Jolene during the descent to Rodinia. He felt as if he hardly knew her. How much had been a lie? How deep was her manipulation to position him for this moment, descending from the sky, savior of Rodinia?

They sat in the low gravity of the space elevator’s descender. The compartment wavered somewhat as the atmosphere thickened, but a sudden lurch ran across the walls and seats. A sideways force exerted on Clew for just a moment as the wave washed over him.

He shared a look with Jolene.

“That was the other climber going up,” Jolene said in a loud

voice to be heard over the noise in the descent compartment. "Travis is leaving Rodinia."

"I hope it makes our job easier, as you seem to think it will," was all Clew could say.

Jolene seesawed her head within her restraints. "With you no longer loyal to him, there is very little keeping this planet in line. I assume that's part of why he wanted to leave. He doesn't want an uprising that gets him killed. He'd never admit that fear, of course."

Clew did not share her enthusiasm. He had assumed that a revolution would look more . . . elegant than what Jolene had in mind. "You make it sound as if the planet is just waiting to be taken."

"It kind of is," Jolene laughed.

Clew scowled at the floor of the descender. "Why revive me on the space station if we were just going back down to the planet?"

"Printing you took a month," Jolene explained. "My contacts in Sector Seven and I have been planning your death since you joined the revolution. Hiding that would have been impossible on the surface. Besides, you descending from the heavens just makes for a better story."

She winked at Clew, and he resolved to spend the rest of the journey in silence.

A NEW TRUTH REVEALS:

Clew and Jolene stepped from the space elevator into the top floor of the Citadel. Stepping from the descender onto solid ground with Jolene reminded him of the first time he'd set foot on Rodinia twenty years ago.

Nothing in the blue metallic walls had changed. They still had that cold, empty feeling, as if the builder once had great plans for this building, but gave it up as a waste of time. Seeing these halls again brought back only a stark, somber emotion.

Everything had gone wrong.

"It feels so . . . hollow," Clew said.

"Yeah, I know," Jolene said, peering up through a sky window, perhaps in an attempt to see the climber lifting Travis from the atmosphere. "Let's get to work. You have a speech to make. We might be able to do everything before Travis realizes he's been duped."

Clew said nothing, wandering behind Jolene in the hall with lazy steps. He glanced into Travis' office on his way past and paused in surprise. "Iris?" Clew stumbled over his feet.

She was sitting on Travis' desk, back to him and facing the thunderous landscape of Rodinia.

Iris turned as Jolene pulled up on Clew's side.

"Jolene! Clew?" Iris said in growing surprise. "You're not supposed to be here." Her posture had grown tense and vulnerable. She reached out for a phone on Travis' desk.

"Don't even think about it," Jolene said, withdrawing a gun and leveling it at Iris. "You've already lost this fight."

Iris met Jolene's gaze for a hard minute, and Clew wondered if something would happen between them.

But then, the massive lift doors to the ground floor opened. Out walked twenty Transients, not corporate workers. Clew could tell because they were in their working clothes. They had laid siege to the Citadel. The twenty Transients walked forward to frame Jolene in the door, all facing Iris.

"See?" Jolene asked in savage triumph. "The building is mine."

Iris slumped. "How cowardly of you, coming here when you know no one will contest you?"

"Why are you here?" Clew demanded of her. She was one of his Anointed Ones. Not some employee of Murphy.

"I came to see Travis off," Iris said, slipping off the desk and walking towards Clew. "He and I have been close for many years."

"Uh, gross," Jolene said. "Definitely don't want to hear any more details about that, but also, you damn well better have milked his sorry ass for all it was worth."

Iris smiled. "Being with him had its perks, as I'm sure you know."

Jolene turned to Clew with raised eyebrows. "Little Miss Pious Bitch has a dark side." She turned back to Iris. "Travis is out. I'm in. Don't expect the same perks. You definitely aren't

my type.” She about-faced and walked out of the office, winking at Clew on her way out. Passing between the observing Transients, she motioned with a lazy hand. “Make sure she doesn’t do anything stupid.”

“Oh, like call Travis on my lenses?” Iris called after Jolene.

Jolene froze. Her eyes widened. She turned, and narrowed in on Iris. “Transients don’t have AR lenses.”

“I had a life before all this, if you recall,” Iris said.

Jolene paced around Iris in a rage. “You called Travis, then? What does he know?”

Iris glared hatred up at Jolene. “He heard our conversation. He knows you planned a coup.”

Jolene shook her head, working lips unable to contain her rage. “That is very disappointing.” A moment passed. She seemed to grapple over the appropriate response. Finally, she took out her gun. “I can’t have you sneaking around being an unsung hero.” She fired the gun.

Iris dropped backwards to the ground.

“Clean this up.” Jolene glared down at the body. “We should expect a call from Travis any moment now.”

Four of the Transients rushed into the office to take care of Iris.

Clew felt nothing at her death. It was a cheap and meaningless thing, death. Something once so permanent and dreadful. Now just a frustrating mess and a bit of extra paperwork.

Clew followed Jolene from the room, trying to catch up with her in the hall. She did not slow her pace for him. He leaned in as they walked so as not to be overheard. “You’re in? Please tell me I’ve misunderstood.”

Jolene stopped, frustration emanating from her. “I told you, we’re setting up a new government. Someone’s got to take control here.” She stared at him, as if daring him to contradict

her. When he did not, she turned, face transforming. “Oh, Luna. You’re here. Good. Clew here needs a new outfit and his Anointed Ones are predisposed at the moment. Can you take care of that? He’s making another speech soon.”

“Sure thing,” Luna said, voice somehow deeper and more certain than Clew was used to. “Here’s your bag.” She offered a backpack to Jolene.

“Thank you.” Jolene accepted the bag and slung it over her back. She once again began to walk.

“What’s that?” Clew asked.

“Insurance,” was Jolene’s only response.

Clew gave a confused glance at Luna before jogging to catch up with Jolene. She was headed back to the space elevator, backpack in hand. “Jolene, I’m just now learning about this plan. I’m not comfortable speaking on this without considering all possible outcomes.”

“It’s fine. It’s no different from our plan for the long term. You just have to declare the Hereafter before the Transients.” Jolene did not stop walking.

“I think you’ve missed my point,” Clew said, grabbing her arm.

She slapped his hand away, glaring before giving a shaky breath. “Travis manipulated us for years to keep this project going. He gaslighted me to keep me in line, and when I pushed back, he moved onto Iris. But Travis is irrelevant. He’s done. I have a lifetime of complicity to make up for, and I *will* set things right. All that matters is Rodinia’s freedom from Murphy. You can fall in line, or get out of my way.”

Clew opened his mouth.

A faint ringing came from the backpack Luna had given Jolene.

“Ah, shit.” A look of dread fell over Jolene’s face. “Hold that

thought. Travis is calling. This could be good or bad.” She dug a clipboard out of the bag and unfolded it to full size. She shooed Clew away from her like a mere inconvenience and not someone with whom she was about to come to blows.

She answered the call, face splitting into a too-deliberate smile. “Travis, darling. What a surprise? How can I help you?”

Travis’ voice sounded through the speakers before Jolene even had a chance to finish. “Jolene, you backstabbing bastard. You better get a ship up here ASAP to rescue me.”

“Oh perfect.” Jolene’s smile contradicted Travis’ words. “I was hoping you’d say something along those lines. You’ve probably realized by now that your ship to Baltica is malfunctioning.”

“Uh, yeah,” Travis said. Clew was just able to see his angry animated head at an angle on the clipboard. “And it’s set course for the sun. You locked me out of the controls!”

Jolene whined, screwing up her face in a mock apology. “I just thought it was a nice touch. You know, since it was a choice between death by eventual suffocation or by extreme heat.”

“I see,” Travis said, actually trying to sound reasonable. “You made your point. Let’s deescalate the situation. Restore balance. We’re almost done with this project. Let’s just finish.”

Jolene shook her head, beginning to pace away from Clew and Luna who had also caught up with them. “Travis. I hold all the pieces. You’ve been outdone.”

“I seriously doubt that,” the clipboard said, “but go ahead. Play your move.”

Jolene smirked. She turned and grabbed Clew by the scruff and pulled him close. She then angled the clipboard to include Clew in the video feed. “I got this guy, bitch.”

Clew very much did not want to get between them and

their fight, but it was too late. There were too many moving parts at the moment, and Clew did not know what to do yet.

Travis leaned into the screen in amused disbelief. “Ah, a very interesting turn of events, no doubt. I admit to having no knowledge of his revival. Very well done. But Clew is my man.”

“What makes you say that?” Clew said in reflex.

“We have a new job for you,” Travis said, tipping his hand towards Clew. “Your doctrine has been so successful here on Rodinia that we want you to expand it to all of Murphy. Help all our employees achieve a more enlightened state by helping them understand the fleeting nature of this Transitional Life. That their problems are temporary, and ultimately meaningless.”

Clew shook his head. He had fallen for this once, twenty years ago. He had harbored such ambitions back then. This planet had reduced him to a shadow of his former self. He would reclaim that old self. “You want me to make passive drones of your employees by compelling them to ignore your coercive and degrading system of employment. I won’t. Not anymore.”

Travis gave Clew a sad look through the clipboard screen. “I guess you’ve become too smart for my own good.”

Before Clew could understand, Jolene pushed him out of the way. He stumbled over his feet before righting himself.

Jolene held the clipboard up to just herself. “Not sure I’d go that far, but he at least sees through your bullshit.”

“You truly believe you’ll win this conflict,” Travis said, amusement evident in his voice. “Do you expect Murphy will just surrender this planet to you?”

Jolene’s face suppressed a snarl. “Murphy has proved at every turn that they don’t care about this planet. I’ve seen your

budget. You pulled off a miracle getting this far in the project, but come on. You were never equipped to handle a revolt.”

“The situation has changed,” Travis said. “I succeeded where everyone else has failed. My progress has convinced Murphy to take the Dyson Sphere project more seriously.”

Jolene’s face before the camera gave no response, but her left toe tapped against the ground in a nervous fidget. “And that means, what?”

“They’re giving me the army you noticed was missing from this planet,” Travis said in casual indifference.

“I thought you were shopping for a new religious leader,” Jolene said, fear rising beneath the surface. She wasn’t in control. Not like she had thought.

“Murphy decided, at my suggestion, that the religious control gambit would only work once,” Travis said in an academic voice. “They’re prepared to secure their hold to see this project through.”

Jolene smirked as if Travis’ plan was inept. “You’re about to die, if you didn’t notice the sun approaching your ship. Your hold is pretty tenuous.”

Clew caught a momentary glimpse of Travis shrugging as Jolene paced with the clipboard in hand. “Infantry will be there in a month. Yes, I will die. But I’ll return in a few months. Ultimately, your coup did nothing but give me what I always wanted.”

“Goddamn you, Travis,” Jolene said, shaking her head and puffing out her lips in unrestrained rage. “Do not underestimate me.”

“Underestimate you?” Travis’ voice yelled. “I made you, girl! I know you with perfect intimacy. Your flaws and weaknesses.”

“Shut up!” Jolene shook her clipboard.

“You don’t have the strength to hold that planet,” Travis

said, voice betraying his sense of growing victory. "You think you can run your own government, maybe even set up a militia, and hold your own against Murphy?"

Jolene gave an outraged smile. "You misunderstand me." She dropped the backpack Luna had given her to the ground. With her free hand, she reached down into the bag and pulled out a small package that could be nothing other than an explosive. She held it up so the camera could see. "I have no intention of leaving this planet accessible to you."

Clew's stomach sank. He thought he knew where this was going.

"What are you doing?" Travis asked, losing that perfect control he had maintained the whole conversation.

"Luna," Jolene said, motioning the woman to her.

Luna approached and Jolene handed her the clipboard.

"Keep the camera on me," Jolene said. "Make sure he sees this. Oh, and hit record. I want to watch his reaction afterward."

Luna nodded, tapping a button on the clipboard screen. She gave Jolene a grim thumbs up.

Jolene began to walk through the dark blue metallic hall, once again towards the space elevator, explosive dangling carelessly from her right hand.

"Jolene, get back here!" Travis yelled.

Clew stood frozen to the spot. This was not the right move. Of that much, Clew had no doubt. But neither could he act. Not yet, at least. Jolene had killed Iris for affiliation with Travis. He had no doubt Jolene would kill him too if he became a nuisance.

Jolene arrived at the space elevator's base, where it connected to the top of the Citadel. The door of the climber automatically opened to permit her. She paused, pressing a

button on the explosive she had brought for this exact purpose.

Done, Jolene tossed the explosive into the climber as the mechanical doors closed.

The climber departed up the tether, taking the explosive with it. Within an hour, the climber would leave the atmosphere and dock with the space station.

But that was not the plan, apparently.

A moment later, an explosion ripped across Clew's vision, dominating the skyward-facing windows. The climber was ripped to pieces, not ten meters over the Citadel.

At least Jolene had calculated her move to avoid causing an air leak in the hall or some other catastrophe in the building, but he still felt sick at the event. The explosion cleared, and Clew gasped. The elevator's tether had broken where the climber blew up. There it hung, suspended in mid-air and extending forever upwards into the sky with nothing connecting it to the ground. It hovered, slowly drifting upwards in the wind, a serpentine chain of interlinking parts. It began to drag in the atmosphere, hanging high in the thick air and bowing up. Side to side, it whipped under its new freedom.

Finally, the stress of freedom caused the tether to break off in several pieces. Smaller lengths floated to the ground. Others seemed ready to land like a rope across a continent. Twenty years ago, Jolene had told Clew that the tether was long enough to wrap around the equator several times. And while disconnecting the tether at the base did seem to help mitigate that danger, what pieces did land in the atmosphere would still cause unprecedented damage across Rodinia.

Even now, it was crashing to the ground, moving away from them thanks to Rodinia's rotation, but showing no signs of stopping.

Clew approached the windows overlooking the yellow Rodinian horizon. A trail of decimated buildings stretched out from the Citadel. It seemed as if every building along the equator would fall prey to the remains of Travis' empire.

The entire charade took place over ten minutes.

Luna had muted Travis' screaming on the clipboard.

Jolene watched the fruit of her labors with a deep satisfaction before turning, finally, back to Travis.

Luna unmuted the clipboard.

"What have you done, you stupid girl?" Travis raged. "I can see the damage of your actions from space!"

Jolene, proud of herself, leaned into the clipboard. "Your death would be meaningless if you returned next year in force. You could land ten thousand troops in a month with that elevator. Without it, you'll now have to build landing shuttles to mount any meaningful offensive campaign against us. I just guaranteed you can't touch us for ten years."

Clew drew closed enough to see Travis on the small clipboard screen. The man was in tears in a cramped ship. Through the window of his ship, the sun was rotating into view. Travis glanced behind himself, frightened of the fate Jolene had chosen for him. "I am going to kill you, Jolene. I promise it. Your final death will be with your neck between my hands."

"Super great idea," Jolene said in that same bored voice she so often used with Clew. "I look forward to working with you in the future. Anyway, I have another meeting after this, so we'll have to table that until you have something a little more concrete. But enjoy the sun. I hear it's lovely this time of year. Bye now!" She waved and smiled.

Luna closed the clipboard. "That went better than expected."

The other Transients were already busying themselves throughout the hall to set up Jolene's new government.

Clew took a helpless step towards Jolene. "Did you plan for it to go this far? You've destroyed so much in just an hour."

Jolene returned a solemn look, as if she hadn't really expected Clew to understand, but still hoped he would. "I only destroyed what you and Travis built as a means of control. Come on. Let's take you downstairs and get you in front of the people."

ON EGO RESTS THE REVOLUTION.

“Jolene,” Clew said, chasing after her.

She was headed down to the surface. Soon she would be in the lift, and Clew would have to follow and give his speech.

“I don’t feel good about any of this,” Clew said when Jolene showed no sign of stopping.

“Thank you for expressing your opinion,” Jolene said, not looking back. “But it’s not needed.”

He closed the distance between them, reaching out for her shoulder. “Jolene, stop.”

“The people are gathering to hear your words, Clew,” Jolene said, refusing to stop or look back at him. “We don’t have time for your indecision. They know you’ve descended from the heavens and intend to usher in the Hereafter.”

“This has gone too far,” Clew tried to say. “Just listen to me!”

Jolene turned on Clew in a fury. “No, you listen to me! We have worked too hard to arrive at this point for you to get cold feet last second and pull out. I have been looking for an

opening like this for years, and Luna sacrificed being with her family to knock some sense into that dense head of yours.”

Clew’s stomach sank. He looked at Luna who shuffled on uncomfortable feet. “The looping? None of it was real?”

“All of it was real,” Luna said. “Some of it was just . . . utilized for a purpose.”

Jolene had downcast eyes. Her wall had lowered, but it was still up. “Luna was looping and there was absolutely nothing we could do about it. Every outcome led to her dying on Earth. She knew that. I knew that. So, we took advantage, crafting an experience to force you to confront what you have done to this planet.”

“Why?” Clew asked, feeling more anger than he should. “Why didn’t you just talk to me?”

“I wouldn’t have gotten through,” Jolene said. “I’ve tried to do this before—force you to confront the fallout of your ministry. None of it worked. I don’t know why this time was different, but we’re running with it.”

“It was Travis’ involvement,” Clew said.

Jolene tilted her head. “Well, I’m glad he could be of use, but I’m still happy he’s dead.”

“Did you have to destroy the elevator?”

“We’re safe for a decade *because* I destroyed the elevator,” Jolene said in determination. “The cost of atmospheric entry for an army is too cost-prohibitive to happen any time soon without that elevator. We don’t have weapons. We would never survive the siege that the elevator would facilitate. Now we have time to prepare.”

“You just destroyed this planet’s main economic resource,” Clew said. She had to understand. This planet had nothing but the Dyson Sphere. Take that away, and what did it have? Its entire economic system just had the foundation ripped out.

“Economic resource?” Jolene seethed in a shaky voice. “It’s an ego project for the elite to exalt themselves.”

“Okay. Fine. Maybe change was necessary,” Clew said, trying to sound reasonable. “But not this way.” He motioned to the sky. “How many people did you just kill with that elevator?”

“I evacuated the equator west of the Citadel,” Jolene stated with a glare. “I highly doubt anyone died. If they did, we will revive them.”

“Good,” Clew said, not willing to let his argument deflate. “But it still didn’t have to come to this.”

“I’ve already explained why the elevator was necessary,” Jolene said.

“But this isn’t better, Jolene!” Clew said. He motioned around them and up at the empty sky through the window.

Jolene gave a slight growl. “Yes it is. For the first time in a century, these people have leverage. They now live in a society that believes they have rights simply because they exist.”

“Rights to what end?” Clew said, motioning around. “I thought we wanted to improve these people’s lives.”

“Uh, yeah,” Jolene said in her most sarcastic and condescending voice. “Obviously. That’s what we’re doing.”

“We are on a desolate planet that has no real economy and is not self-reliant. We need a sustainable path forward, or we will die. We had an obvious economic resource, and you just destroyed it,” Clew said.

Jolene made herself tall, seeming to loom over Clew. “I destroyed the means of their oppression, the elevator that Murphy built to rape this planet and exploit its people.”

“We aren’t self-reliant!”

“Not according to your standards of comfort,” Jolene said. “But we *can* get by. You just don’t want to, because you’re not willing to sacrifice. You’re acting like I haven’t had decades to

think this through, Clew! We cannot have a resource like the elevator—Murphy would take it.”

“Maybe,” Clew said, trying to convey sincerity. “But a million people already call this planet home. They’ve reached a breaking point. I’ve seen it before.”

Jolene hardened against his words. “Oh, with one of your previous cults?”

Clew glared at her. “Yes. So believe me when I say that Rodinians will never again tolerate slavery. Building this planet was easy compared to the subduing of a people that has already tasted freedom.”

“Which is why Murphy will destroy us if they can, and why we need to protect ourselves,” Jolene said.

“Protect ourselves, yes. And our best path forward is returning to full operations. Rebuild the elevator, take the Dyson Sphere for Rodinia, and control the power production throughout Laurasia,” Clew said. “Rodinia would be the richest planet in Laurasia within a decade.”

Jolene’s eyes darkened. “There’s always a part of a person you can never really see. That dark side that drives their ambition. But I see who you really are. You didn’t just want to kill Travis, you wanted to *be* Travis.”

Indignation swelled within Clew. Given a chance at control, he would have done better than Travis. “That’s not true.”

“I think it is,” Jolene said. “Why else would you choose to run right back to the status quo? You want to be Travis!”

“And to prevent that from happening, you become Travis instead?” Clew asked.

“Clew, I get it,” Jolene said, seeming barely in control of her emotions while trying to stamp them down. “You’re asking good questions. I don’t have all the answers, but that isn’t a

prerequisite to inciting a revolution. I need you right now. We'll work through it. We have time."

Clew stayed silent. He had idolized this woman. Her visions of the future threatened to destabilize a world he loved. One he had helped craft. It wasn't perfect, but no system was. "How can I trust you?"

"That will have to come over time," Jolene sighed. "I see that from your expression. Right now, all I need to know is if you're on board. If so, we go down and you declare the Hereafter. If not, I figure something else out."

"But either way it's on your terms," Clew said.

"Yes. I'm sorry." Regret crossed Jolene's face.

Clew relaxed his stance. He could still fix this. "Fine. I'm in."

"Let's get down to the ground," Jolene said. She called the lift, and the doors opened instantly.

Clew followed Jolene and Luna into the cramped compartment. It lurched downward, and minutes later, the doors reopened to the ground floor.

Clew had first seen the base of the Citadel twenty years ago. He had assumed it was an unfinished assembly hall at the time. Travis had informed Clew that it was in fact a warehouse where goods would wait to leave the planet up the space elevator.

So much had changed in that time. Travis was dead. The space elevator was no more, and the warehouse was full of people.

Clew paused in shock. Thousands of Transients were here, all gathered in anticipation, but for what?

"Why are they here?" Clew asked.

"To witness your triumphant descent," Jolene said, motioning at Clew. "Why else?"

Clew stood on the edge of the room, frozen at the sight before him. It was all too much.

Jolene expected Clew to end the Intermediary Journey by declaring the Hereafter before the Transients. But this was his life's work, his doctrine, his promise that all would still be made right in a future life.

And it would!

Given enough time, all would be made right.

A spark of anger ignited within Clew for Jolene forcing him to destroy what he had built. For seeing the fruit of his labors and declaring it unfit for the world as she thought it should be. And who was she anyway to say what should be? Why would her ideas be any better than Clew's?

They wouldn't!

Jolene passed Clew, walking towards the people. Clew found himself glaring a hole into the back of her head. Meanwhile, the crowds had noticed Clew and Jolene and had fallen silent.

Their eyes fixed on Clew in adoration.

Clew froze.

They were happy he was alive. Happy to see him walking around and coherent after having died in their midst just three days prior.

Jolene approached them.

A podium had been erected along the edge of the massive warehouse.

Jolene motioned Clew forward. "Say your piece."

Clew stepped forward, nervous for the first time in his life to address a crowd. No. Not the first time. He had left a congregation once before, twenty years ago, the day he'd first met Jolene. He'd had the opportunity to set that congregation free as well. And rather than admit fault, rather than be honest, he had

fled. He could do nothing for that last congregation. The chance had passed. But he could still set this congregation free.

The first row of Transients stood an arm's width away. Gareth waited with adoration in his eyes for Clew to begin. He used to be a captain, albeit for Murphy, but a captain, nonetheless. He had walked away without reservations, all to build Clew's dream.

It was still a good dream. Travis had just corrupted its purpose.

Jolene wanted him to apologize. To back down, as if he were somehow wrong for playing his part on Rodinia. Rage swirled within him. He wasn't wrong to set up his ministry. Perhaps Murphy was wrong for reviving slaves, but Clew had just made the best of a bad situation. Besides, with Murphy now blocked off from the planet, Clew was very close to gaining everything he'd wanted. The ability to build his ministry, free of corporate or government interference.

Clew stumbled the rest of the way to the microphone, his new muscles still clumsy. "Good afternoon," he said, having no idea what to say next. He knew what he wanted. He also knew what he suspected was right and moral. They were not the same. "My children. Fellow Transients. For many weeks now, whispers have floated around Rodinia that the Intermediary Journey would soon come to an end." He paused, heart pounding.

"Those rumors were true," Clew said, stealing a glimpse behind himself at Jolene. The sight of her only fanned the anger he felt. Who was she to take from him what he had worked so hard to build? She was nothing. In that moment, Clew knew his decision. "Many Transients, in their excitement to usher in the Hereafter, forgot central tenants of the Transitional Doctrine. Patience, and long suffering. You may notice when

looking into the sky that we no longer have an elevator. This is due to the actions of a few overeager Transients. They destroyed because they believed they knew better. Unfortunately, it means the rest of you can no longer perform your Initiatives. I regret to say that the actions of a few have forestalled our arrival in the Hereafter. I cannot say for how long. We were so close, and a dissatisfied few have taken that away. I am sorry.”

Clew’s microphone cut off, but he had said his piece, as Jolene had commanded.

A sea of worried and concerned faces filled Clew’s sight.

Jolene stepped up beside Clew, a crease of anger dividing her face. “I thought you were on board,” she whispered to Clew in a hiss.

“With taking Travis down?” Clew asked under his breath. “Yes. We’ve accomplished that.”

Jolene grabbed Clew’s microphone. It worked for her. “My fellow Rodinians. The Transitionary Journey is a lie. Elder here created a doctrine and gave you Initiatives as a way of making slaves out of you. Many of you know this to be true.”

“That’s not true,” Clew yelled at the crowd. He could barely speak loud enough for the first few rows of people to hear. “Jolene was the one to destroy the elevator. She has postponed the Hereafter for all of us!”

“Elder has lied to you!” Jolene said, speaking into the microphone. “He would keep you here, on this planet, ignorant to the worlds beyond, and your potential.”

The crowd fell silent at her words. Stunned expressions watched Clew and Jolene compete for their loyalty.

“Liar!” a man shouted from the crowd.

A murmur of ascent came from the crowd, and Clew’s stomach sank. They recognized him for what he was. A liar.

They surged forward, voices angry and turning into the

mob they'd always had the potential to be. Shouts of indignation assaulted Clew. They hated him. They would cast him out. He prepared for their angry hands to land on him and tear him apart as they had done with those six people in Sector Seven last month.

They surged forward. But it was not Clew they laid their hands on.

"Why are you doing this?" Jolene shouted, struggling against their hands. "He's the one who did this to you. He's the one who lied! Not me!"

People in the masses, all led by Gareth and other prominent Transients, laid their hands on Jolene, pulling her into their midst. Clew knew what would follow, and considered closing his eyes. Instead, he held up his hand. "Stop."

To Clew's satisfaction, and perhaps relief, they did.

"But Elder," Gareth said. "She is guilty of crimes against you. She has always envied your position. It is well known amongst the Transients. Had she not held your return to life hostage, we would have removed her days ago."

Unable to believe his luck, Clew nodded. Never had the events of his life so perfectly aligned in a way that made even him believe that he occupied a divine purpose in the cosmos. Sure, that was the doctrine. But now he had seen. He was destined to lead these people to the Hereafter.

Clew watched Jolene struggle under the many hands of her captors. She had tried to dethrone him, yet still, he felt compassion. After all, this Transitional Life could be so fraught with trial. Did not everyone require mercy on occasion? "Do not harm her," Clew said at last. "She will be given a new Initiative. One that better allows her to work towards the Hereafter. But she will not be allowed to corrupt as she has done now."

Gareth bowed to Clew, still holding onto Jolene. “A wise and merciful decision, Elder.”

Clew locked eyes with Jolene, adorning the perfect blend of compassion and pity on his face. “We could have built something beautiful together.”

Jolene shook her head, able to stand upright now that so many people weren’t restraining her. “You may control his planet, but it’s because of me. Don’t forget that.”

“I do hope you find your way again, Jolene,” Clew said. “You were always among the best of us.”

“You are despicable!” Jolene shouted as several Transients dragged her away. She raised her head above the crowd to be heard. “You are not their salvation, Clew!”

The crowd jeered at Jolene and shamed her through their midst, rejoicing in the liberation from Murphy that Clew had bestowed upon them.

Gareth turned slowly back to Clew, emotion painting his face. “Such anger.”

“We cannot always understand those who turn from the Transitional Journey,” Clew said. “We can only hope that they will once again find themselves on the path of progress.”

With a light heart, Clew stood once again to address the people. Not just any people. His people.

LATER, Clew sat in a circle with the six remaining Anointed Ones in the inner sanctum. Events at the Citadel had subsided. A proclamation had been sent across the land. Murphy was no longer on this planet to oppress them. Their Initiatives would be restructured to rebuild the planet. In a few years’ time, they

would venture from Rodinia to deliver electricity and the Doctrine of Transition to the rest of Laurasia. Perhaps one day, they would even spread to Earth. But that was still a long way off.

Clew faced his Anointed Ones.

“Where is Iris, Elder?” Gareth asked.

“She died with Travis,” Clew said. “I do not know the details, but they were involved, somehow.”

Six somber faces surrounded Clew. The circular pad on the floor that Iris used to fill sat empty.

Gareth bowed his head. “How do we go on after all that has happened?”

“We rebuild,” Clew said. “We are a strong people, capable of surmounting any trial.”

“I’m happy to hear that,” Gareth said. “With your permission, I would like to oversee the rebuilding of the space elevator. Now that Murphy is gone, we must gain access to the stars if we are to spread the Transitionary Doctrine.”

“I agree,” Clew said. “Do this for me.”

“I will not fail you, Elder.”

Clew nodded in appreciation. Gareth would encounter difficulties, but he was the most qualified person for the job.

“Who will take Iris’ place among us?” Lee asked.

“I have someone in mind,” Clew said. “Do you mind if I invite them in?”

The Anointed Ones bowed their heads in agreeance.

Clew stood, crossing the room on bare feet to the door to the Garden Room. Just outside the inner sanctum was the waterfall and koi pond. Beyond that stood a woman, waiting to be invited. “Luna?”

She looked up, eyes lighting.

“We’re ready for you now,” Clew said.

Luna crossed the bridge on bare feet and entered the inner sanctum.

Clew returned to his place and sat cross-legged on the ground. “Thank you for joining us, Luna.”

Luna, furtive and guarded, stepped forward to the center of the room. She wore the standard light tan religious robes allotted to every Transient. The way she hugged herself and hid her hands made her seem small. “Thank you for inviting me, Elder.”

Clew paused at her use of his title. Last time they had met, Clew had invited her to use his name. No matter. “You witnessed first-hand the other day that we are now short an Anointed One.”

“I was sorry to see Iris’ fate,” Luna said. “Perhaps she can switch out into a new body.”

“She can, should Murphy choose to revive her,” Clew said. “However, she is no longer an Anointed One. I would like that position to go to you.”

“I have never served in any leadership capacity before,” Luna said.

“We all start somewhere,” Clew said. “Do not worry about that.”

Luna bowed, eyes never leaving Clew’s. He couldn’t quite make out that expression. “You honor me, Elder. I accept.”

Clew smiled. “It is done.” He stood. “Come. We must introduce you to your sector.” He moved to place an arm around her.

She flinched, sidestepping Clew and peering back toward the Garden Room.

Clew plastered on an expression of calm serenity. “It’s okay.”

Luna’s eyes flitted to each of the Anointed Ones, as if

looking for danger. Looking for danger, or assessing an opportunity?

A pit formed in Clew's stomach, and he took a step away from Luna.

Luna looked at Clew with dread. He realized that her hands still had not left the confines of her robes. Her posture tensed, face resolving. "You betrayed this people," she said in a soft cry.

And with that, she lunged at Clew. From within the confines of her robes, she revealed a knife, which she swung right at Clew's neck.

Clew froze, the coming death an inevitable consequence of the gamble he had played.

Gareth did not freeze. He dove for Luna, grabbing her arm and forcing her away from Clew. But he did not have a plan, and he did not know how to fight. Soon they were both on the floor, and the fight went poorly for Gareth.

In his eagerness, he impaled himself on the knife, and Luna crawled out from under him, extracting the stained blade. Gareth writhed on the floor, glancing up at Clew, the fear of a dying animal in his eyes. He was fading, losing blood, and but by Clew's mercy, he would die forever.

It seemed he would at least die for now, and yes, Clew would revive him. He was a far more valuable servant than he gave himself credit. Luna appeared shocked to have killed Gareth, but she refocused on Clew. "The revolution . . . is not over," she said in a quiet voice, as if saying it cost every ounce of her courage.

She took a step closer to Clew.

Clew's other Anointed Ones surrounded him in a defensive barrier against Luna. Clew was her goal, and they would sacrifice themselves to stop her.

The sudden rally to Clew's defense stopped Luna. The fear

in her eyes deepened. She could not win. The truth was etched into her trembling face.

She stepped back, tripping over Gareth's motionless body.

She looked down at his pale face and seemed to snap out of her panic. "I can't do another twenty years in slavery. I can't. I'd rather die a permanent death than be beholden to another tyrant," she said, and raised her blade to her neck.

"Stop her," Clew said on instinct.

Lee rushed for Luna and wrestled the blade from Luna's hand. He then wrapped his arms around Luna to restrain her and turned so that she faced Clew.

Clew approached on weary feet, reclaiming the situation with a forced casual demeanor. "Do not worry, child. I would not let you die. Nor will your punishment for this crisis of faith be more than you can bear."

Luna cried out in Lee's arms. "You destroyed our chance at freedom."

Clew leaned into Luna. "I saved this people. Jolene would have been worse than Travis."

"Jolene could have succeeded," Luna said. "But you couldn't accept her plan. You couldn't let go of your control. You took the power for yourself. Jolene had you figured out. You didn't want to remove Travis. You wanted to replace him. And now what? You own this planet. And?"

Clew responded with an effortless shrug and a sly grin. "And now we harness the sun."

Her face broke down into a sob.

"Put her somewhere safe and ensure she cannot hurt herself," Clew said to Lee. He looked down at Gareth, dead on the ground, then up to the anxious faces of his Anointed Ones. "We have more to do than ever, if we hope to usher in the Hereafter."

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

It all started in the second grade when I skipped recess to finish a creative writing project with a very serious subject matter: zombies, and cursed magic, on an ancient burial ground, in Disneyland. That sounds cooler now than it probably was.

Despite my creativity having peaked in the second grade, I've been writing stories ever since. You'll probably never get a chance to read those early books, unless they resurface as blackmail, in which case, I deny everything.

After getting kicked out of one university and graduating from another, I now work full-time in data analytics. I like to think I wrote enough during my academic career to justify publishing as a full-fledged adult who still doesn't understand taxes. I write during my spare minutes and can often be observed staring off into space. Don't worry, I'm just working out the next plot point.

Follow me on social media for regular updates about ongoing projects.



