

EDEN

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

That's who I am to others.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sometimes things just *happen*.

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Perfect.

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

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

WATER | +1 POINTS

Other buttons hover over the classrooms.

ORGANIC CHEMISTRY FINAL

A | +100 POINTS

B | +50 POINTS

C | +10 POINTS

D | - 50 POINTS

F | - 100 POINTS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

ACCOSTING CLASSMATE | - 10 POINTS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Hey!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Undercity.

DANIEL

EDEN'S NOT PICKING UP HIS PHONE AGAIN.

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

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

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

No answer again.

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

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

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

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

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

He doesn't answer.

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

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

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

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

"Give her a few more minutes, yeah?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

Pretty ironic for me, yeah?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Lara barks out a laugh at that.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Drone races?” I say. “Where?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Drone races, eh?" she asks.

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

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

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

She sighs in exasperation. "Not this again."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Guess the system’s finally tracked my brother down.

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

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

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

EDEEN

DRONE RACES ARE ILLEGAL, TECHNICALLY.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I mean, he’s not all wrong.”

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

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

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

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

DRONE RACE

SEMIFINALS AT MIDNIGHT

8 RACERS, 8 DRONES

CASH ONLY, 100 CORRAS BET TO ENTER