

I wake up and the only reason why Mirabelle occupies my thoughts is because I noted how, for the first time during Project Seed, her absence in my bed was not an immediate concern of mine. Perhaps it is because I have grown accustomed to the empty spot within my sheets (not that I have her appearance laying naked next to me is of habit, it's more of a lust reaction if anything), or maybe my subconscious is being cryptic, as it is want to do. Oh, how my colleagues would mock me for thinking on such Freudian wavelengths. Outdated, they say. Outdated? Hah!

The Quitter's Square sends its initiation jolt into my skin as I place it on my wrist. My mornings as of late have been welcomed by voltage coursing through my veins.

The city's black clouds have dispersed into the grey smog. Typical of mornings on Earth now. Ivory clouds are no longer existent in the day and seeing the stars hang blissfully in the sky is nothing but a dream to those who could remember them. The doors open to my left and Herst enters, rubbing his eyes and adjusting his robe, a silk piece with the Battery's logo on the right pectoral. The same one as mine.

"Awfully bitter this morning," I say.

He yawns. "Can't say I'm used to it, honestly. Harvest is warmer."

"That's because we don't have winter."

Herst turns to me. "Want to know my favorite word?"

"An odd question, but okay."

“Wind,” Herst leans on the railing of the balcony. As if he were omnipotent, a gust of chilled morning air carried through the city, beyond the lawn of The Stem, and into our complex, intercepting our face with a brittle force. Goose prickles appear on my skin.

He continues after I do not answer, “It’s because it is always so free, so flowing, like the currents of an ocean but more poetic. A gentle breeze graces your body and a harsh gust destroys buildings. Wind can be utilized to power entire platforms of technology for an eco-friendly environment. Plus, you can’t spell ‘wind’ without ‘win’.”

“Want to know what my favorite word is?”

“Shoot.”

“Nuclear winter.”

“That’s two words!”

“Whatever.”

“That’s pretty grim, don’t you think?”

“So is this city but we continue to interact with it.”

Herst scoffs, “Correction, you’ve continued to interact with it. I’ve been sitting here doing calculations with the mathematicians. They are both...very peculiar. I don’t think they get my humor.”

“That’s because you don’t have it.”

Herst laughs and straightens his back, “So how did the interview go?”

I look to the city. I watch several lights flickering in the distance. I turn my head and I can see the dying hologram of Kilstrom Industries fighting to hold a spark of its past self.

I gather in my breath and my lungs fill with cold air, “His name is Samuel Steele. Luminn.”

“Sounds like a Human name.”

“It is. He was odd. Put me on the spot, to be honest.”

“Was he rude?”

“No, just the opposite. There was no logical reason as to why I felt nervous in his presence, but,” I gather in another breath and I can feel my left arm beginning to vibrate. My fingers clench sporadically into a fist, “There was sometimes when I felt that he was in control. He understood the concept of power, and keeping it too. The soldier came in not because they detected his blood rising, but because they detected mine.”

Herst jumps and his blond hair rose with him, “Wow. What was he like?”

I shake my head, “Very charismatic. From what I got, and I didn’t get much, he is the type of individual that can very easily find your vulnerabilities with a single conversation. Very high social intelligence.”

“Huh. Imagine him in Harvest. How successful he would be.” Herst suggests.

“I don’t know if he’d be a politician or a psychopath,” I admit.

“Same thing,” Herst says.

We both laugh. The jolts in my arm have subsided. Herst has reclaimed himself. I'm sure that he won't be touching a firearm for quite some time, but his personality has bloomed since Oxford's death. Since my talk with Clair two days ago, she achieved the closure that she was looking for. I've seen her outside her room more often making conversation and just last night she was working on her diagram out in the library. As for the remainder of the Ghosts, I am not sure of their mental state, although it must not be as dire as ours because they were not present in the markets. I bet Kester McDrad is warm in her bed right now, being pompous and writing a memoir of her brief time in Project Seed. It'll look good on a resume when we all have to find occupations after this is over.

"Have you ever heard of the Brooklyn Bridge?" I say, recalling Clair's information on the structure.

Herst shrugs, "I've heard of it."

"I want to check it out. It's a park now."

Herst's frowns, "Do you really think they'd let us out again with minimal supervision? You're crazy if you do, James."

"We can ask Lutace," I suggest.

He shakes his head, "Not even worth the effort. She said that all the liaisons have basically been given an embargo on the freedom of their activities. The incident in the markets made them a glorified middle man. Everything is sort of a mess now."

I nod, "Use your charm, Herst!"

He rubs his bearded chin and frowns, "I need to shave first. This has got to go."

"So are you two official now?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean. Are you and Lutace, like, a thing?"

He jumps and smiles, "I mean, I like her, but in this environment there won't be anything but a couple of dates and that one time I spent the night with her. I'm thinking perhaps after Project Seed something could come of it. Are you excited to see Mirabelle?"

"Yeah, of course."

He looks at me and says, "If you need any help with anything let me know, alright James?" He gives me a nod and goes back to his room for prepare for the days events. I suppose I should do the same.

Herst and Lutace are already in the dining hall when I arrive. They are on the ground floor, to accommodate for my increasing aversion to the elevated platforms. The rustle of conversation is thick around us. I'm relying more on the movement of their mouths to organize their words. Technifical robots wheel on the ground around the tables or float with repulsor adjustments from elevated platform to elevated platform. Circular shadows are cast over us as the floating levels travel gently above our table. I can see Meredith Baxter on an elevated platform several stories up. At this distance I would not be able to discern facial features, but her striking red hair makes me confident that I had identified her.

Lutace puts down her cup of tea and dabs a napkin to her lips. Her suit is purple and matches her skin. It is tight fitting and open to reveal an amount of cleavage that teeters on professional and casual. Black hair pulled back behind her head. Her yellow eyes are marigold and throughout the course of our breakfast I can see the shades of her eyes lighten with every sip of caffeine, fighting to deflate the bags under her eyes.

Herst butters his toast and wears a brown suit. His blond hair has been trimmed (presumably an independent endeavor) and his face is void of any facial hair. He looks younger but not as young as he had before we entered Project Seed.

This intergalactic endeavor has caused considerable strain on its inhabitants. I can see it in the Library. More cups of coffee are in the hands of Ghosts analyzing research. More Addictus Sticks are cradled in between fingers, waiting idly to be inhaled. It's like midterms at the end of the semester. For the Battery, endeavors such this are common. Wake up early, perform duties, go to sleep. Oftentimes their duties include battles. I'm sure a day without firing their weapon is slow. As for the Ghosts, we are being tested to our academic limits. We are succeeding, but losing our youth in the process. Oxford's death amplified this process.

"Ms. Shields?" Herst puts down his knife and watches me speak. We connect eyes.

She looks up from her datapad and says, "Yes, Doctor Pilgrim?"

"What are the odds of Dr. Mackeren and I leaving the confines of the city today?"

A shadow floats over her as a levitating platform travels from end of the dining hall to the other. Her purple face is cloaked by the temporary darkness and the smell of bacon whiffing through the air.

“That would be...difficult.” She raises a cup to her lips.

“So is all exploration into the city off limits?” I say.

“Not necessarily. There are just more restrictions.”

“Like?”

She places the cup down on the plate and says, “How far away the location is, for starters. Admiral Kalus has issued for all activity to take action within a ten mile radius.”

My body trembles and my hands open. I look at Herst and he looks back. “Then how are we supposed to conduct our studies if our intellectual prowess is limited at the start? The mathematicians won’t mind, sure. But what of those in Herst and I’s realm of academia? Social sciences? What about the historians? Or Clair? How are we to acquire significant results if we are blunted?”

Lutace’s eyes flash and I am hit with the sudden force that I might have spoken out of line, “Doctor Pilgrim, you must understand that Oxford’s incident has caused some rewriting of the code. I can try my best, but I am not sure if my position alone could warrant you an exploration out of The Stem’s designated parameter.”

My shoulders drop and I say, “Please, we’ve been here for three months and this formula works, Ms. Shields. I’m not upset, but it would be a shame to watch Project Seed’s success dwindle because of precautionary measures.”

Lutace looks to Herst and then to roof of the dining hall which is ten stories high. She redirects her gaze to me, “Where were you thinking?”

I lean back in my chair and say with the highest concentration of confidence in my voice that I could muster, “The Brooklyn Bridge. Arcadia.”

“Arcadia?” Herst repeats.

“That’s what the civilians call it.”

Lutace bites her bottom lip and picks up her datapad, “That’s very far away.”

“I can try to get clearance from Admiral Kalus too. I could contact Vooms to help out.” A technifical robot travels by me and I feel that I am only arguing to hear myself speak.

Lutace shakes her head, “That won’t be necessary. I will find a way to fight through these documents. I will receive the signatures.”

Herst and I connect our gaze and he nods to me. Turning to Lutace he says, “Thank you. I know that the liaisons are getting limited too because of the incident in the markets. It’s hard for everyone.”

Lutace smiles and stands up, her datapad in hand, “Doctors, if I did not believe that you two were some of the most competent Ghosts enlisted for this mission I would not even attempt to go beyond the strata of rules.”

Her eyes flash and she gets up, leaving Herst and I alone. I’m sure there is a warm feeling in his stomach because there is one in mine. I do appreciate Lutace Shields as our liaison and I know that she genuinely cares for Project Seed as well as the Ghosts that she was assigned to. I know that her professionalism is important to her, and her fighting for us to obtain clearance to explore Arcadia is an act of favor, not her duty.

Herst leans forward over the table and clasps his hands together, “So tell me, James. Why Arcadia? Why the Brooklyn Bridge?”

“Well,” I say, ready to regurgitate Clair’s words as my own, “With the advent of aeromobiles, the bridge became obsolete. Long story short, the city of New York Prime commissioned to make the useless landmark useful by turning it into a park. Water on both sides, the perfect blend of nature and technology.”

“Sounds like Harvest.”

“It does. Or it did, rather. Now it’s apparently over grown. I want to check it out because it is an important symbol of Earth’s culture. Even before First Contact. I wonder who lives in Arcadia. I want to know what type of lifeforms live there. Who knows, it might be like the markets in the sense that it could be a functioning society.”

Herst looks away, “One of us could die. Oxford did. I don’t see anything getting more peaceful on this planet than the markets.”

I’m afraid that Herst is losing his momentum for this potential expedition. It wouldn’t be the same without him, “But Herst, it’s a new environment in the city. It could be different. And if it isn’t, we’ll have protection. You won’t have to use your gun.”

He is silent for a while and I fear that he is going reason again as to why vouching to go to the Brooklyn Bridge is not necessary, but then he says, “It would create a better understanding of their culture.”

“It would,” I get up from the table to conclude the conversation before he could conjure up an argument.

“Before you go,” Herst says, “Did Clair tell you all about the bridge?”

I nod, “Yeah.”

“I think you like her too.”

My brows furrow, “Hm?”

Herst smiles with a guilty expression and says, “No offense! It’s just that I haven’t heard you talk about Mirabelle in a while. Are you too still together?”

I nod, “Yeah. I talked to her the other day, actually.”

Herst nods and says, “Alright. If you need anyone to talk to, you know I’m here.”

“Thank you Herst, but I’m fine.” I say with the most genuine smile that I can muster.

In truth I feel awful because upon hearing Mirabelle’s name the image of her only appeared in my mind for a fleeting moment before she was replaced by Clair. I know that Herst’s intuition is not wrong. There is something amiss about my psyche. I can feel it. I retire to my quarters in the hope that Lutace’s ability to persuade the opposing parties is successful.

Once I enter the room, I feel dirty so I take another shower. I forget to detach the Quitter’s Square from my wrist and I am treated by an electric shock up my arm and through my spine before I turn the water off. Nude and blanketed with a layer of steaming water, my spinal cords bends as I hunch over on the scanner that deactivates the shower. Breathing in gasps, I

recuperate and take the Quitter's Square off my wrist and find that it has broken. Its circuits were flooded with the hot water. I sigh and crush the miniature tablet with my index finger and thumb, tossing it to the floor where a technical robot (the very same that patrols the hall outside) enters my room through a slot in the wall and consumes the broken shard. I've gotten used to their presence while vulnerable. When I was younger I used to project living qualities to them but as I grew older my imagination seemed to dwindle in that regard. Now the only thing that makes me uncomfortable, and probably forever will, is the muted voice of the System Circuit in this room.

I get out of the shower to a blinking datapad. The towel is still wrapped around my waist when the text pops up and it says:

*Doctor Mackeran and Doctor Pilgrim,*

*You have obtained clearance to travel to the Brooklyn Bridge for your endeavors. However, a Troop of Battery officials will be present and within the immediate area. I understand this will hinder your studies but it is the best that I could do. Good luck. We shall meet in the hanger in one hour.*

*-Lutace Shields*

My mouth drops and my adrenal glands activate, coursing energy through my body. My breathing is sparse and within fifteen minutes my hair and face are groomed and my brown suit is pressed and tucked. I look into the mirror and see myself in the misty terrain of my bathroom that has the subtle scent of burnt flesh. My brown hair is in need of a competent trim. My brown eyes are surrounded by marks in my skin that are surely wrinkles. Project Seed has aged me, just

as it had everyone else. I look at myself now and see that I had fit into my achieved status as a doctor. I remember feeling aged by the title. It felt foreign, as if the lifeform referring to me as doctor was actually talking to someone behind me. Now, I feel as if I deserve that role because I had earned it. It is a bit empowering.

Herst is already waiting for me at the balcony when I leave the room.

“You got everything?” He asks.

I pat myself down. Datapad, Circuit speakers, pistol. “Yeah, do you?”

“Yeah.” He says, “I have everything.”

I move closer to him, “You might have to fire it today, too.”

“I know.”

“You did the right thing in the markets.”

“I know. I could have saved him though.”

I pause to pick my words, “But you brought him justice.”

“I know.” He blinks, “You ready to go?”

“Let’s do it.”

We meet Lutace in the hanger. Aeromobiles fly over us and cast their rectangular shadows. Some of them enter through the gargantuan threshold, passing those that are leaving. I notice that the commotion is less than it was when Project Seed had begun. It is because of the

combination of the new regulations, the reduced number of Ghosts, and the fear of venturing to New York Prime. But I am not afraid. It is the city that is corrupted, not those who live within its bowels.

A Varanian and Luminn are leaning against a parked aeromobile, smoking Addictus Sticks while technifical robots circulate around them. They nod at us and tip their cylinders in our direction as we pass. We return the favor. On the second level several soldiers step out of a duster, travel to one door, open it, and assist a female Scalst, iron cladded with singed shoulder armor, out of the vehicle. She wraps her arm around her teammates for support.. She limps off and I can see the facial tentacles of the male Scalst rumbling as he says something that I cannot hear.

“Another riot broke out...” An engineer says to another as they mend the scathed exterior of a smoking aeromobile.

“They said there was phoenix. Do ya think there is a correlation?”

“I dunno. But I don’t like it.” She responds, looking at her partner from across the engine, “Got an Addictus Stick?”

Lutace stands with her hands clasped behind her and her chest protruded due to her posture. Her cleavage is not modest. It is times like these that I am not sure if she wants attention or is just awfully oblivious. Behind her is a troop of soldiers with their assault rifles in hand. I count eight of them, enough for two prepared dusters. They weren’t kidding about taking precautions.

“Doctors, I introduce you to Troop Crescendo,” Lutace says, releasing her hands and opening her arms to encompass the collection of soldiers behind her, “Soldiers, care to introduce yourself?”

They step forward one at a time. They introduce themselves with such a speed that once I hear a new name I have forgotten the previous one. The only ones that stand out are the Captain, Floures Aegis, and the two Keriens with the last name of Melver.

Herst points to one of the Keriens and then to the other, “Brothers?”

“Triplets,” One of them says. I think his name is Denier but I am not sure.

Lutace nods and repeats, “Troop Crescendo. Personally administered by Admiral Kalus,” she moves closer to us and her eyes illuminate, “To allow this clearance I had to compromise. The soldiers will accompany you on the bridge on foot, and you will be allotted three hours of your exploration. Anything more and you lose your participation in Project Seed. Words from the higher ups, not me. Understood?”

I straighten myself and after a second Herst looks up from Lutace’s chest and does the same. “Yes,” I speak for the both of us, “Thank you.”

“Good luck. Doctors.”

She moves to the side to allow us a straight entry into the armored aeromobile. Its doors are already open and Herst and I get in the back. The soldiers of Troop Crescendo walk to their respective vehicles and we find ourselves sitting behind one of the Kerien brothers and the

Luminn. One of the Varanians is driving our vehicle and the Human sits in the passenger seat, his rifle sitting on his lap.

This caliber of precautionary measures makes me wonder what dangers we are expected to encounter. I know there have been cases of riots against Gia-Net System supporters in the city and I know that the frequency of them is rising but I do not think this amount of soldiers are necessary. I'm already trying to find ways to ignore the confounding variables of their presence, but I guess that's what makes them confounding.

“Everyone set?” The Varanian, Gatch or Mekks, asks.

The patrons of the vehicle adjust in their seats and pat themselves down. I check myself to reassure that my datapad, Circuit speakers, and pistol are on my person. There is a collective grunt of agreement and a plume of smoke busts out from under the transport as it ascends into the air. Lutace is on the grounds of the hanger, clutching a datapad to her chest with one hand and shielding her marigold eyes with her forearm of the other. Her black hair, jacket, and skirt are whipping behind her from the gust of wind that the two convoys are producing.

The aeromobile turns and I see the hanger on a spinning axis. Addictus Sticks are shared between workers, technical robots working indefinitely, traveling around the floors of the hanger picking up discarded items or levying heavy objects from one individual to another. An engineer guiding a Scalst operating a lifting machine to move one step forward and slowly place the armored shell on top of a dusters roof. There are soldiers tending wounds.

And we're off! The cement ground below us is replaced by the moving blur of grass underneath our vehicle. The second convoy containing the other half of Troop Crescendo trails

after us. The electric whirring as the force fields are temporarily dropped to allow us entry into New York Prime.

We pass the elevated walls and fly over the heads of the soldiers standing guard with their rifles primed. Mounds of technifical robot carcasses pass us underneath as we enter the city's streets. The robots are replaced by fainted, dead, sleeping, or unconscious lifeforms on the sidewalks, strewn about like discarded toys. Those walking with their torn jackets and grimed clothing look up from their position to watch us fly overhead. I swear I make eye contact with some of them but I know that it impossible because the windows of the dusters are tinted.

Fires burn in trash cans on the corners of buildings. It suggests a joint comradeship between those seeking survival through cooperation instead of dominance. A Kerien, Varanian, and Human all warm their hands using the dimming heat from discarded items that were deemed to useless to be scavenged. Lights flicker on and off in the buildings. In the flashes of illumination I can see a blood splatter on the wall trailing down the floor to a dead Scalst. In another I catch a brief glimpse into a narcotic lord's abode, occupied by dominating Varanians who stand near the corner. Two scantily clad female Human's dance in front of an ashen faced Luminn in another room. These flashes are my temporary entry into the lives of the citizens on Earth from all spectrums. I see the ruling class as well as those who find themselves submitting to death.

“Huh.”

Herst looks to me and he says, “Something catch you eye, Doctor?”

“Everything,” I answer, “But it’s odd because I am no longer affected by seeing the lives of these lifeforms. Remember when I vomited from being out here the first day? Because this culture was the polar opposite of anything we’ve encountered on Harvest?”

Herst laughs, “Yeah, it’s odd how acclimated we became. I can say that about most of the other Ghosts too. I don’t see anyone in the library flinch any more. Kind of makes me miss that Human ethicist. I think his name was David.”

“That guy’s got to get a grip,” I say, leaning back in my seat.

We move through the streets, traversing in between the buildings at such a height that we might be fifty circuits up if there were rules governing traffic. But there are not, as aeromobiles have been absent since the Second Depression. We pass the Empire State Building. Its windows are blown out and the rooms inside are dark. I fear for what horrors lurks in the blackness. In the distance I can see the Statue of Liberty and the Giant of Unity, defaced monoliths representing a fallen planet.

The Brooklyn Bridge is within our sight. I can see its curved supports of reinforced steel from the front of the duster. The rafters look like metal hills plated with iron and magnets to strengthen the support of the platform that once transported cars when they traveled on land. From this distance I can see the foliage of trees and bushes behind the bridges exterior. Clair was correct, it has been converted into a park. As we draw nearer I can see vines drifting down from the sides. They have grown long and dangle loosely over the rafters. It is a wall of green behind a gargantuan metal fence. The metal platform is roughly a mile in length, and ever since its conception way before First Contact it was a popular tourist attraction. It connects the two boroughs of New York Prime, Manhattan and Brooklyn. In its prime, both sectors harbors a

myriad of culture and influence, now I'm not sure which one is more dangerous than the other. From a functionalist perspective, the park would generate further attraction to the bridge, which already harbors the connotation as regal and a landmark. This attraction would generate revenue for New York Prime, allowing further creative infrastructure that would advance the cities fame.

“How interesting,” Herst notes

“Yeah.”

The Captain sitting in front of Herst presses her face against the window. She grumbles, “I hate bridges.”

The vehicle turns and we advance towards the bridge at an angle, slowly descending to the ground. The park's scenery widens into further clarity for me. I see the dividers that separated the lanes of traffic from each other as well as the pathway for pedestrians have disappeared in accordance to the death of the grounded vehicular industry. Aeromobiles dominated the upper levels of the bridge, with circuits occupying the rafter's ten stories up. On the ground the bridge is a flat platform elevated over the water. The concrete that once blanketed the bridge has been replaced with overgrown grass, benches, and trees. Disheveled benches lay scattered and without organization amidst the park. Vines coil around the forgotten rafters of the bridge, providing a curtain of fauna the size of a building. In a way, the vines remind me those in Harvest. The coils scale from the top of the bridge to the massive pillars that wedges in the bay to stabilize the platform. What stands before us is Arcadia.

I try to conceive an image of Arcadia in my head when Earth was prominent. A blue sky and marshmallow clouds immediately comes to mind. A warm breeze with clear waters rippling

in small waves underneath. Beautiful grass, cut and soft and inviting for a picnic or nap. Clean benches and tables underneath healthy trees and in between lively shrubbery. The occasional vine that would entangle around a rafter, providing life and color to the metallic platform, a sensation of uniqueness through art. It was an island of metal and concrete, representative of industrialization and malleable as such, caked with a blanket of fauna as aeromobiles move soundlessly in a summer's grace.

This of course was when Earth possessed seasons. And community. And economy. And stability. Now the present state of Arcadia rests before me, stretching across the murky water like a pulled rubber band ready to snap, fatigued from connecting the two landmasses for all these years. The park looks more like a forest now, the trees large and with a scarcity of leaves and branches that were probably used as fuel for a barrel of fire. Grass sharp and in some places as high as my knees. Shrubby with pointed edges and liberal growth, creating an erratic maze of fading green and sticky yellow. Vines claim entire portions of the bridge's exterior boasting thorns instead of flowers. The smell of dirt is heavy, and the air feels moist and dry at the same time.

Our vehicle lands with the second vehicle deactivating behind us. The doors open and I step out.

Captain Aegis holds up her free hand and shouts, "Rally up!"

The soldiers in Troop Crescendo gather to their captain and we all stand in a circle. I stand next to Herst to lessen the feeling that I am out of place with the rest of the Battery personnel. While they don assault rifles, knives, and palm explosives, we possess datapads.

While they communicate through an interconnected communication link, we have Circuit speakers in our pockets. While they have armor and helmets, we wear suits and ties.

We stand in a circle and the Captain orders, “Eight soldiers and two Ghosts. Who’s good at math?”

One of the Kerien brothers raises his hand, “Four to a Ghost?”

“Good.” Aegis looks around to us, “Doctors we will follow you. We have three hours.” She returns her gaze to the soldiers, “Do not have them out of your sight. I repeat: *do not let them out of your sight!*”

There is something challenging about Captain Aegis. Her grit, the short cut black hair...something makes me wary of her. Like a dog with a mean streak. What strikes me most is that her eyes have not illuminated yet. Even in this environment her adrenaline isn’t spiking. It must be her steadfastness that puts me off guard.

However, I must admit I am quite comforted by the dedication of Troop Crescendo towards Herst and I’s protection. Hypothetically, everyone who carries an assault rifle and currently harbors the Battery crest on their chest would die in my stead. Not that I would wish for such an incident to happen, but it assuring to know that I am being protected. Oxford’s demise must have made me more paranoid now that I have returned to the uncharted streets.

Aegis turns to Herst and I and she asks, “Anything you brainees would like to add?”

Herst and I connect our gaze and he nods. Synchronicity at its finest. I say for us both, “Thank you for protecting us.”

Some of the members of Troop Crescendo smile another others vocalize a hurrah that echoes off the metal banisters of the bridge. They collect themselves and Aegis says, “Lead the way.”

Arcadia is long. The opening structure of the bridge has been preserved as it was two thousand years ago. The arches that are characteristic of the landmark stand untested against time. Although its exterior has been plated with a metallic alloy that protects it against weather and the agent of erosion, the base foundation is still present. Now as we approach the giant threshold I see a low hanging curtain of vines and green reaching to contact with the ground. The vines stop about twelve feet above our heads. The road has sprouted unkempt grass and sharp shrubbery that looks like upward facing knives. The place once intended to be a park is now beginning to look like a jungle due to its lack of upkeep.

The waters on both sides are murky and dank. I would be fearful of what monsters could hide submerged if I was confident that a living creature could thrive in that environment. I doubt even a Scalst could function. Behind us is the distancing of Manhattan, a crumbling portion of New York Prime. I can see several rooms flicker in the skyscrapers behind us. There is an unnatural silence, a miasma of hushed sounds that envelops me. I notice that as we approached the bridge the amount of lifeforms decreased. A negative correlation. But why? When we had touched down the only lifeforms in the vicinity were the ones associated with us. I input these thoughts into my datapad for further study.

We move along the sidewalk that skirts the edges of the park. Herst and I are in the center of the soldiers. They form a physical barrier between us and the dangers of New York Prime and Arcadia. We pass underneath the arches. I can see thorns riddling the green, over hanging vines.

Sharp like knives and as thick as a fist. Our path is constructed of concrete but the green of Arcadia has begun to make its domination over the sidewalk. Grass is peaking out through cracks created by shifting of tiles. Vines and roots have created an erratic pattern of lines permeating from the seam connecting the sidewalk and grass. A shadow lay heavy over us as we move under the arch. I can hear the echoes from our footsteps.

“There is no one here,” Herst remarks.

“I know.”

“Spooky,” A soldier says.

“Silence soldier,” Aegis flares.

The shadow falls behind us and we are greeted with the uninviting calamity of a forest given the epithet of Arcadia. The thinness of the platform makes me feel as if I am on the elevated platforms in The Stem’s dining hall. I battle the coming nausea. I feel as if the bridge (or forest) could easily fall over in any direction by the suggestion of the wind. We move into the foliage. I take advantage of one of the Kerien twin’s in front of me. He is paving the way through the overgrowth, with a machete and crushing the grass with his feet. I tread behind him, mimicking his footsteps and notifying any peculiar observations. On the other side of the park I see Herst doing the same. Aegis and the both Scaslt soldiers are watching the rafters of the bridge near him.

My foot hits something hard and I look down. It is a metal plank, once belonging to a greater whole of a bench. It is half covered by shrubbery and moss is beginning to absorb it into the ground. A tree stands before me and I see that its branches are bare and mutilated by the

force of a hand. I look out over the opening of the bridge and I see both Manhattan and Brooklyn in my peripherals. I feel a pinch on my wrist, and in my shout of pain all the soldiers within ear shot turn and face me with their rifles poised.

I pick the thorn out of my wrist and say, "It's okay! It's okay! Really!" I move my hand away from the collection of shrubs near me and I notice that my wrist has a growing tear drop of red. I rub the splotch out with my other hand.

"Doctor Pilgrim!" Herst calls me. He is waist deep in over grown grass and is pointing to the bottom of a tree with one and holding a datapad in another. "Look!"

I rummage through the foliage, wrestling over thorns, fallen benches, signs, tables, and over calloused shrubs.

"What is-" My voice stops when I follow Herst's direction, "Oh. Goodness." Several soldiers appear behind us. One grunts. Another cough and he returns his lunch.

A Scalst lay slumped at the trunk of the tree. His limbs are contorted and several of his tentacles have been lacerated and now spread deflated at his feet. A blue blood stain, still glistening from a fresh wound but stale enough that it had stopped running and started scabbing, radiates from the center of his chest. I'm not my father, but I would say that wound has been inflicted maybe two days ago. One of his yellow eyes has been punctured. The other eye is open, cracked and dry from the lack of blinking. Dirt and mud caked leaves cover his body. Fragments of branches have fallen over his face. I am suddenly reminded of my position on the bridge and I feel my breakfast boiling my stomach.

One of the Scalst soldiers gasps, "His tentacles. Oh no."

The lacerating of a Scalst's tentacles is perceived as the most shaming act of their species. Equivalent of a male Human losing their genitals to a rusted blade. As Scalsts age, their tentacles grow longer on their face. It begins to look like a beard, and often the elderly are viewed as wise or of holding high social status. This is an inter-species crime, as only a Scalst would obtain the satisfaction of shaming a member of their species in this manner. I wonder what circumstances had caused this unfortunate demise. For starters, he lives on Earth.

“Wait,” Herst says, “We know him. Right?”

By the sheer alarm of the question I detach my gaze from the Scalst and I say, “What makes you think that?”

He points to the sleeve, “It's burnt. We met this Scalst.”

I rub my chin and recall all the individuals that Herst and I have had equal interaction with during our outings into the city. My eyes widen. I gasp, “It's the doctor that we met in Contenste Bank.” I feel as if my realization is a lie, that I am conjuring it up as a falsehood to justify this coincidence.

Herst's brows curve and he nods in confirmation, “That's him.”

“On a planet with thirteen billion lifeforms, what are the odds of this?”

A soldier appears next to me. It is one of the Scalst soldiers. “You know him?” The top of her eyes curve inwards. Scalst's have no pupils, but I know she is staring at the detached tentacles.

I shrug, “Not really. We encountered each other once. He told us to fix Earth.”

The Scalst soldier looks to Herst and I and says nothing. Her gaze is magnetized to the dead figure of the Scalst doctor.

“That’s not all,” Herst says, pointing above the Scalst’s head, “That looks familiar.”

My eyes follow up from the Scalst’s feet and up his body. The lacerated tentacles laying unceremoniously and gruesomely in their own miniature puddles of blue blood. The azure dampness on his chest followed by an exposed mouth and a punctured eye at the head. Up the bark of the tree the crest of the familiar phoenix is engraved rather masterfully with a blade in the bark.

I put the datapad back in my pocket and I say, “Something tells me we need to leave. Now.”

Aegis’s voice roars yells to us. Her eyes remain marigold. “Everyone, back to the convoys! We got a Phoenix!” She positions herself with the assault rifle, balancing it on her shoulder and facing it forward with her arms.

The soldiers of Troop Crescendo establish defensive stances and arm themselves. The hair on the back of my neck is standing up. Adrenaline courses through my veins. Last time there was a riot we were fortified in an armored duster. Now we are exposed in the city, and within an overgrown park that has dominated a bridge. I look at Herst and he nods at me. I nod back and place my hand on my pistol. He does the same. I do not really know what I am going to do with it, but having it within my grasp provides me with some comfort.

Aegis yells, “Everyone, fall back! This mission is over. Stay close to the doctors!”

One of the Kerien brothers leans forward to Herst and I and says, “Stay close to Kino and I. We’ll get you out safely.”

“Yeah,” Kino, the other Kerien brother says, “Just remain-”

A crack of thunder and Kino’s skull erupts into a bloom of fragments and brain matter in front of me. Several splinters of his skull land on my jacket. His black eyes don’t even widen as his head erupts. A red streak lands into a tree like missile.

“No!” Denier shouts, gripping his rifle, “Kino!”

“Positions soldiers!” Aegis yells.

Like a muscle contracting, the soldiers enter a formation around Herst and I. Kino falls to the ground on his knees and then onto a patch of grass. A puddle of red is growing underneath his head, staining the blades with a scarlet hue. The sound of velocity rings into my ears. Something is speeding by fast. Metallic echoing resonates from a crushed metal bench as a bullet smashes against it ricocheting into the air. A riot. On the Brooklyn Bridge no less.