

C O L O M B I A



COLD

WIRE

CHLOE GONG

MARGARET K. McELDERRY BOOKS
NEW YORK AMSTERDAM/ANTWERP LONDON
TORONTO SYDNEY/MELBOURNE NEW DELHI

ALSO BY CHLOE GONG

These Violent Delights

Our Violent Ends

Foul Lady Fortune

Last Violent Call

Foul Heart Huntsman

MARGARET K. McELDERRY BOOKS

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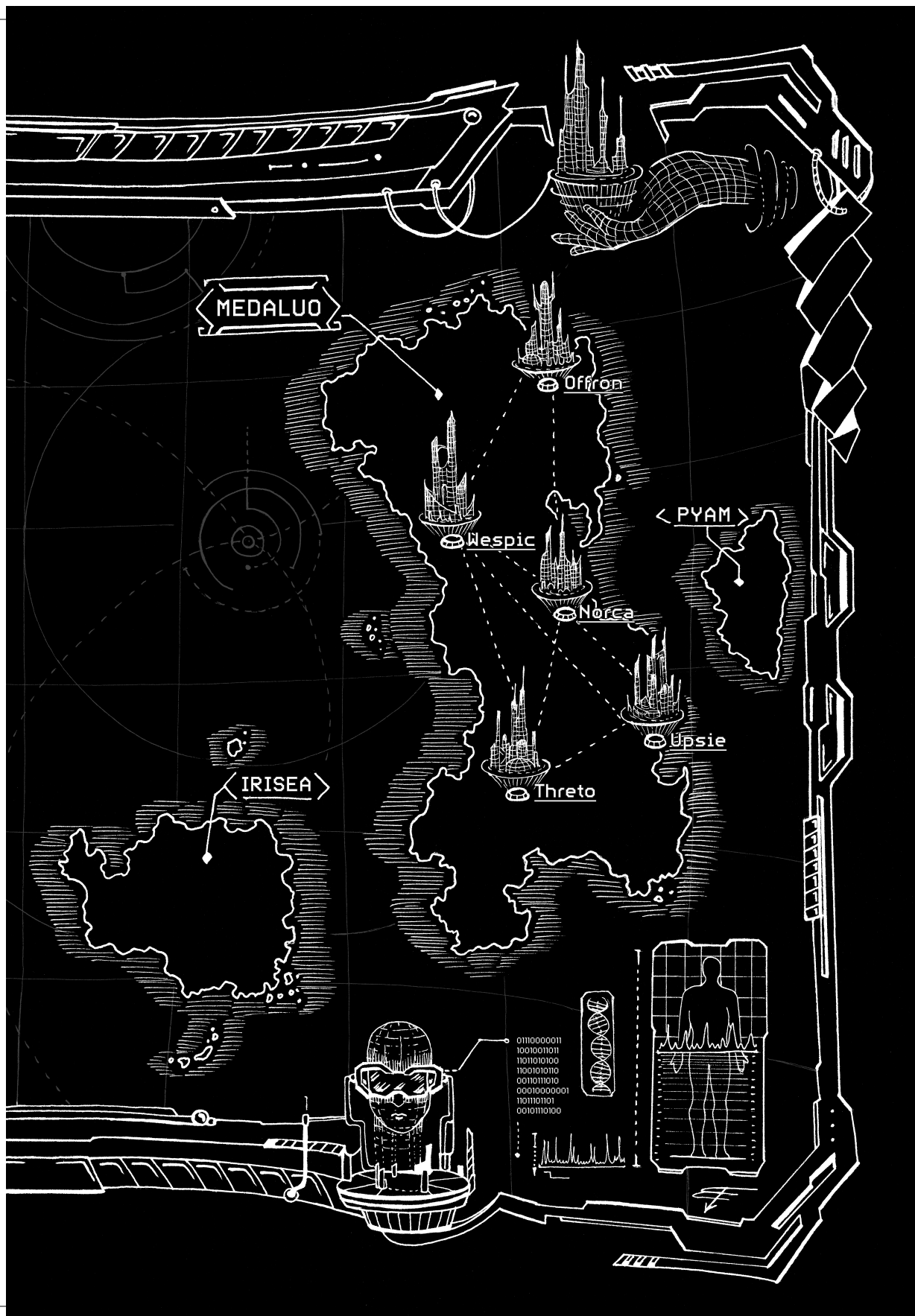
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For Owen—

**because “this cyberpunk novel idea I have”
sparked such conversation on our first date**

**and because of every conversation since then.
I love you!**







1

E I R A L E

At ten minutes to midnight, the riot bots detonate around the block.

Our ropes tremble, each suspended harness bracing against the shock waves slithering up the skyscraper's exterior, but we stay put patiently, twenty floors overhead. By the time the protesters run in our direction, the tear gas will have dispersed fully from the explosions, exactly as we outlined at the base. They won't see us.

"Capture unit, get ready."

Anti-NileCorp protests are a common sight along Button City's main avenues. When they get too unwieldy, NileCorp rolls in their riot bots on behalf of the Atahuan government, always faster on the scene than local police. Button City has more NileCorp warehouses per square foot than anywhere in the world. There's going to be something at the ready no matter what sort of trouble disrupts.

I test my line. The hold loosens enough for me to take two careful steps down the vertical glass before glancing over my shoulder, tracking the panicked figures running below. There's faint yelling, maybe. Hard to tell. My suit helmet does its best to block out nonessential noise.

"Mint, keep eyes on surveillance." My earpiece continues to feed through. "Eirale, proceed to ground floor."

Tonight's demonstration is made up of truckers. They cobbled together their signs when a new line of NileCorp's autonomous semis put tens of thousands out of work, and then NileCorp's data scraping smoothly deposited their plans onto our radar. There's a process to shutting down a protest quickly, efficiently. Riot bots steer the dissidents all to one side of the road. Tear gas explodes from the canisters and takes out their vision for a few hours—or a few days, with the unrulier troublemakers who try to tackle the bots. Before long the street will clear, and their resistance symbols copied off the internet will be nothing more than soggy signs disintegrating in the sidewalk puddles. Usually, there's no need for the corporate soldiers, the units like us, to get involved.

We're reserved for high-level hire. Such as capturing anarchists.

"All right," Teryn declares, satisfied with the coverage we have. "Let's go."

I unlatch my carabiner, let the rope run slack. My suit screams a warning that I'm going too fast, that I'm going to hit the concrete and I should consider rappelling properly. The screen before my eyes flares red, trying to calculate the damage upon impact.

I turn the line taut suddenly. My harness seizes tight; I jolt to a stop just before my boots touch the ground. I haven't been a NileCorp contractor for long. They assigned me to the Button City base six months ago. While everyone else in my grade who went the route of NileCorp private forces was posted directly after our final exams and sent downcountry to run amok in the real world, I wasted three months recovering. Still, all those years of military school have prepared me to be fast, faster than the NileCorp-issued suit that tries to propose my next movements for me. The red fades. The suit's screen clears when I detach my harness.

My quick exhale warms the inside of my helmet. A row of billboards synchronizes on the street level, changing from Eveline ads to a news segment. I barely catch President Sterling taking the podium, the crawling ticker at the bottom announcing **RELATIONS SOUR FURTHER WITH MEDALUO—INCIDENT IN THE NORTH SEA**, before the tear gas has clouded my vision, closing over the top of my head.

My suit switches on infrared capabilities.

I was eavesdropping earlier in the barracks when Teryn received the emergency briefing for this mission. She hadn't stepped far enough into the hallway before answering the video call on her handheld. The trucker protest was forming along Seventh, three blocks away. The riot bots would intentionally push them toward us and then detonate, conveniently offering cover from the surveillance cameras pointed at the entrances of our target building. It would save NileCorp from having footage of its forces barging into civilian businesses: more fodder to sell to the tabloids, more ammunition for hit pieces on the governance of Atahua and the country's reliance on private military contractors.

"Everyone else, get to your assigned entrances. He's not getting away this time."

Gravel crunches underfoot when I pivot. I circle the exterior of the skyscraper, the tall lobby unmoving on the other side of the thick glass. Infrared shows nothing in my way at the back entrance. By official registration, some hedge fund owns the building, abandoned by well-to-do businesses who continue to pay rent but no longer perform operations on-site. One security guard clocks in during the day, then another is bought off after-hours once the nightclubs and tattoo parlors and dog-fighting rings set up shop. That's classic downcountry.

"I'm in place," I say. My voice is hoarse. I haven't spoken aloud since we left the base. Teryn turns any complaint into a motivation speech, and if I'm not in the mood for her usual spiel, I've learned to keep my mouth shut.

"Enter the stairwell," Teryn instructs immediately. "Get closer to the nightclub."

I push through the back entrance, surprised to find it isn't locked. In the dark, my suit warns there's movement to my right, but it's only a tendrill of tear gas slipping through with me before I shut the glass door and hurry into the main lobby. The space is open-concept: dilapidated pillars that hold up a white ceiling, the front desk a strip of metal lifted by steel

beams sprouting from the tiled floor. I make a cursory scan. Empty. I head toward the elevator hall.

“Ma’am.” Smith’s voice pipes through my earpiece, getting Teryn’s attention. Our unit is split down the middle among the six contractors. There’s Teryn, Mint, and me. New graduates. Fresh blood on the base, intent on doing a good job because our team leader, Wright, intimidates us. The other three don’t care about impressing him. They’re Nile Military Academy graduates who are a decade older, bored of the job and struggling to be granted a promotion that puts them in charge.

“Ma’am,” Smith prompts again. “The locks are broken on the second-level balconies.”

“What?” Teryn exclaims.

I push open the door to the stairwell. It’s quiet—and glaringly bright, doused in an intense violet from LED striplights running up all four corners. The infrared of my suit switches off automatically against the onslaught, but I still can’t see. I tap the back of my suit to open the helmet. The stairwell door shuts behind me.

“I’m moving up,” I report, drawing my firearm. “Nothing here—”

“Hey,” Mint interrupts into the comm line. “Our surveillance is scrambling.”

My steps pad up to the second floor quietly, the rest of my sentence forgotten. The nightclub is accessible from its main entrance along a skywalk, or from a side entrance leading into the building stairwell. Teryn and Mint have entered: Teryn as a field scout and Mint to keep watch using the cameras around her. Smith and Buchanan have eyes on the skywalk. Penrose stays on the platform jutting off the thirty-fifth floor, where we rappelled from, acting as a backup sniper. I’m the only one stationed here.

“From what?” Teryn demands.

“It’s signal interruption,” Mint replies. I come to a stop outside the nightclub, the faintest whisper of music thumping past the soundproof walls. At this I pause, my grip tightening on my firearm. The only entity

that could block *our* signal is . . . “Someone from federal must be on the scene.”

“*Why?*”

No one answers Teryn. The Atahuan government offloaded this task to NileCorp, contracted us instead of a federal bureau to capture Nik Grant. But we’ve already attempted two capture missions and failed both times now, so maybe they’re losing patience.

“Federal only scrambles surveillance if they’re up to something,” Smith says. A snide edge colors his voice, obvious even through the comms. “I wonder what.”

Wright has been out of commission with an injury for weeks. Under normal circumstances, if Atahua’s most wanted anarchist entered Button City in that time, the task to mobilize and lead the charge that would apprehend him should have gone to another unit at the base, or to the contractor in our unit with the next highest seniority—Smith. Instead, they gave it to Teryn. Eighteen-year-old Teryn Moore, the niece of James Moore, the CEO of NileCorp.

“We won’t know until we know,” Teryn decides. Either she didn’t pick up Smith’s dig, or she chooses to ignore it. “Eirale, do you have a visual?”

“Negative,” I answer.

“Capture unit, proceed as planned. Our target is in the building.”

Teryn and I went to Nile Military Academy together, though the first time I spoke to her was after graduation, when I introduced myself in the Button City barracks. She was good enough to make valedictorian, yet I haven’t been able to match that repute to the soldier I’ve worked alongside. She’s capable, I suppose. She’s quick and she’s smart and she takes a few seconds every morning in front of the tiny mirror in the barracks to straighten the collar of her uniform and ensure that NileCorp’s logo is polished clean on her chest.

She also hesitates in the field and leads us astray during situations when we need cohesion. If we fail to close in on Nik Grant a third time, the rest

of us are going to have our jobs on the line. Teryn, meanwhile, will be fine. No one fires their own niece.

“Any visual inside?” Smith asks.

“Negative,” Teryn answers. “Keep every balcony secured. Once we give chase, he will have no qualms about making a leap onto the street.”

I tap my foot, its echo traveling across the stone floor of the stairwell. We don’t have enough soldiers on the perimeter. Penrose should have been situated on the skywalk too. Or we should have combined with another unit and doubled our efforts, given our previous failures.

Nik Grant first gained public infamy after he bombed a military base outside the capital. Three casualties, one a commander . . . but more importantly, the damage took out a whole surveillance grid. The government flailed directionless for a week trying to determine the culprit and left the District of Melnova to operate blind until their servers were fixed. The nation speculated viciously about the possibility it was Medaluo’s work. A terrorist emerging among the ethnic Medans who called Atahua home. Someone recruited on their ancestral ties to turn the cold war hot. Then an identical bombing targeted a NileCorp base, taking out a team of contractors, and in hours NileCorp had identified the perpetrator and generated a headshot for the news. It confirmed he was Atahuan, born and raised. Unlikely an agent of a foreign enemy power, but rather a domestic anarchist. NileCorp didn’t release his name initially. Their representatives refused, in fact, which led to speculation that he was a former contractor with a grudge. That was quickly put to rest when they relented with a sprinkle of biographical information: he was only seventeen years old.

Considering these recent attacks, Atahua’s Federal Bureau of Defense has entrusted our security forces to execute justice, NileCorp announced in a statement. Due to the perpetrator’s status as a minor, we feel it is best to keep his information out of public scrutiny. Please report any sightings on the NileCorp website.

In the next footage the live camera crews got of him, he was

spray-painting the rubble of his bomb site, finishing the last letter on his message—MY NAME IS NIK GRANT, LOL—before disappearing. A clear middle finger to NileCorp for wanting to conceal his identity.

With each of his subsequent attacks in the last few months, he has only grown larger than life. The news splatters headshots of Nik Grant to encourage Atahuans to report any information they have about his whereabouts, and the image continues to be no less baffling. He could have been one of my fellow cadets at the academy, slightly blond in the right light and frowning with the insolence of a class troublemaker. Atahuan media spins up one new theory after another about why he wants to destroy his own country—maybe a tragic past as an orphan, or secret parentage from an extremist group—all to avoid addressing the likely truth: he despises NileCorp, and he's doing everything in his power to ruin the company. He's become notorious for his slogans, all of which support absurd conspiracy theories but still spread like wildfire each time he spray-paints them over his bomb sites. NILECORP KILLS ITS CRITICS; INDISPOSITION IS REAL; LOG OFF BEFORE YOU LOSE YOUR MIND.

"The secretary of defense is here," Mint suddenly declares. "I see him. At the back, near the bar."

"Hm," Teryn says. She hesitates. "I suppose we leave him to his business. It probably has nothing to do with our task."

At least Teryn is very good at tame, controlled responses. Anyone else would have asked what sort of business Chip Graham could possibly have in a dingy downcountry nightclub. NileCorp contractors know our defense secretary's face about as well as we know President Sterling's. In times of war, while President Sterling addresses the public, we get Chip Graham. On paper he may be in charge of the Atahuan military, but the military has so many holes in its infrastructure that the country wouldn't feel a difference if it were dissolved tomorrow. There's no need to funnel money into the military when NileCorp exists to plug up the holes. NileCorp salutes to Chip's directives instead and passes the assignments down a cohesive line of corporate soldiers.

“Possible target sighting near the tables,” Teryn reports. Her tone changes, sharpening for combat.

“Ready on your signal,” Smith prompts.

A few minutes pass. My palms prickle with sweat beneath my gloves. I adjust my grip on my firearm.

“Never mind,” Teryn says eventually. “It’s a look-alike. I’ve gone through the northwest quadrant. Mint?”

“Nothing in the south so far,” Mint answers. “Everyone’s moving around too much for me to confirm if I’ve surveilled all patrons.”

That’s the problem with trying to capture a fugitive in a nightclub.

“I’m seeing some movement in the third-floor offices,” Buchanan contributes. “Any chance of it being the target?”

“Can’t be.” Smith’s answer is slightly muffled—he’s turned away from his mic, speaking to Buchanan directly. “Ward’s on the stairwell. She’ll have seen him move.”

A new layer of sweat breaks down my back. It’s certainly impossible that he got past me. There’s only one route.

“He could have climbed the exterior,” Buchanan returns.

“If he’s climbing the exterior to get away from us,” Teryn says, “he would have made a break for it rather than approach the third floor.”

“Maybe he was already situated there,” Mint says. “It’s not the first time we haven’t—”

A scream interrupts the rest of her sentence, piercing into the shared comm link. I flinch, my hand flying up to my ear in haste. It must be someone directly beside Mint if her mic has picked it up. I barely have a moment to brace before the door in front of me flies open and a mass of patrons pour into the stairwell. They’re funneling from the thin hallway outside the nightclub’s side entrance, moving in such a stream that the two adjacent doors don’t have the opportunity to close behind anyone. It pierces a gaping hole through the nightclub’s soundproofing. The music is suddenly loud enough to taste, the bass piping up and down the stairwell.

“What’s going on?” Smith demands. “What’s all that screaming?”

I barely make way for the crush, pressing to the wall to avoid the patrons scrambling through the threshold of the exit and hurrying down the stairs. I catalog each of their faces, needing to ensure Nik Grant isn’t slipping out in this chaos, but the ultraviolet light plays tricks on my sight. Everything has an odd sheen to it.

“Excuse me!”

I grab a girl out of the crowd at random, stopping her in her tracks. Though she attempts to continue forward, her arm stretching out for a friend who proceeds without her, she can’t break free. My grip is immovable.

“What happened?” I demand.

They don’t turn off the thunderous music inside. I have to shout to be heard. Electric strobe lights dart into the stairwell too, slashing through the bodies like a skipping rope I’m not jumping with in time.

“Let go of me,” she screams. The three piercings through her left eyebrow catch the strobe. Its glare almost blots out my vision. “Someone fired a gun in there.”

I do let go of her then. My own firearm is still clutched in my other hand, hiding at my side. The girl is quick to run off down the steps. The rest of my unit continues shouting instructions through the earpiece, but I haven’t been listening. My attention returns to the patrons. Teenagers with scarves tied over their faces to hide from facial recognition cameras. Older men in suits ushered by personal guards.

A server in waitstaff uniform coming through the door and making an immediate right, walking up the stairs. I can’t make out any other detail under the strobe lights. It doesn’t matter. No one else is ascending.

I bolt forward, pushing through the crush of people.

“I’ve got him,” I say. “I’ve got him. He’s in the stairwell.”

The moment my feet hit the stairs, taking three at a time, Nik Grant bolts. He hurtles skyward, trading subtlety for speed. Teryn demands that I

wait for her. Smith is yelling for me to hurry with a location so he can block Nik's exit from the correct floor.

A bang echoes from above. One of the stairwell doors has been flung open, striking the wall. I crane my neck and risk looking up directly through the middle of the railing, catching the telltale flicker that betrays his location before its door closes again.

"Fifth floor," I report. "Get to the fifth floor!"

I close the distance rapidly. There's a moment of resistance when I try to tug—he's tied something to the handle—but I yank again and snap the plastic cord that he looped with a knot.

I emerge into a ghostly hallway. The floors that aren't utilized by down-country opportunists appear largely the same, exactly how their owners left them. They're the remains of abandoned offices, crowded with boxes along the walls and mold climbing up the side of the tall windows. I'm careful while I walk toward the open-plan desks, stepping over a broken chair arm and the faulty bolt lying beside it.

A creak sounds behind me.

I whirl around, lifting my firearm. "Freeze."

Nik Grant goes still. There's little light at the mouth of the hallway, so I can't parse his expression. He lingers in the shadows, only half his face visible under blue and flickering pink bleeding in from the billboards on the street level.

"Put your hands up," I say evenly.

His hands stay where they are. His head tilts. "You again."

I was the one who almost got him on our last capture attempt. I had him blocked in, within a few feet and my cuffs prepared, but then somehow he'd set off a glaring flash bomb. By the time I opened my eyes, he was gone.

"There's nowhere to run," I say. "Put your hands up, or I have instructions to shoot."

"You know, it's never made sense to me why Wards work for NileCorp," Nik says. His tone is easy, as though we're making small talk on the bus. "It

may be law that you enroll in military school, but no law says you have to continue on as a corporate soldier to clear your debt. What's your opinion?"

I keep my arm steady. I don't speak my question aloud, but . . .

"Yes, I know you're a Ward," he says, answering it anyway. "Eirale Ward. I looked you up."

"I'm giving you three seconds." It's not a far cry to see a Medan face in Atahua and assume they're a Ward. When the cold war between Atahua and Medaluo started, most Medans living in Atahua decided to flee rather than be treated as the enemy. For centuries there had been a significant presence of Medan immigrants in Atahua, and within a few years—as people raised the funds to escape to Cega or another island in the Western Territories—the number dropped to paltry amounts. Those who remain now either have too many ties to give up, or they're orphans born into this war with nowhere else to go. Wards of the state, branded as property of Atahua down to the very name.

Nik Grant takes a step forward.

I shoot.

He avoids the first bullet, already moving out of its path before I pull the trigger. Despite everything I know, despite the hours we've spent on base watching surveillance footage of Nik Grant to prepare for apprehending him, I'm still taken back by how fast he is when he rams into me.

I avoid falling on a wholly instinctive lurch, regaining my balance right as he swings a fist. Instead of blocking him and risking my momentum, I veer away, then try to recover my stance and straighten my shooting arm, but Nik predicts where I turn. He grabs my elbow, twists, and suddenly I'm pressed chest-first to the wall, my firearm pointing skyward behind my back. My suit whines in the protest of danger.

"Tell me, soldier," Nik Grant says into my ear. "Why were you posted in Kunlun last year?"

When the billboards go black outside, the darkness in the hallway turns whole and blanketing. There's no boom, but the abrupt, accompanying

silence indicates another detonation has gone off. An electromagnetic bomb somewhere in the building, cutting out the voices that had been piping through my comm link. My team can't hear me. I'm on my own.

"What are you talking about?" I demand.

"It's a very simple question," Nik says. "Just tell me why you were posted there. Tell me what you did."

I raise my foot behind me and kick, striking his knee. Though I hoped that would be enough for me to tug free, Nik doesn't let go. He pushes my arm up, hard in the wrong direction with my shoulder. In that flash of screaming pain, I drop the weapon.

"I"—Nik kicks the gun with a huff, sending it skittering along the floorboards—"read your files. I'll know if you're lying."

I slam my head backward. Nik grunts, his grip releasing, and I immediately swivel, searching for where my firearm has gone.

I get the feeling he's allowing me to shift to the offensive now that he's disarmed me. The hallway flares with abrupt green, lit by the advertisement that returns to life on the billboard directly outside. My earpiece offers a bit of static, too, then:

"*Eirale?* Eirale, come in—"

"I already said fifth floor," I hiss into it. "Fifth floor, hurry *up*—"

Nik Grant is going to run for the windows.

I gauge it in the turn of his left shoe, in the flicker of his eyes under the awful green light and his attention latching on to the glass. The moment he starts forward, I lunge to stop him, colliding with him to send us both toppling to the floor.

"They will discard you, soldier."

I slam my forearm over his clavicle. He stops struggling. Both his arms stay splayed on either side, locked where I can see them.

"Don't move," I seethe.

"They will use you, then discard you. If you're lucky, maybe they'll post you upcountry first. You won't even feel it when you're squeezed out."

“Good,” I snap. “Maybe then I won’t have to watch your stupid tapes over and over again.”

Nik blinks. “Ouch.”

My earpiece keeps spitting overlapping voices at me. I finally use my free hand to grip the mic in my suit collar, shouting, “I *said*, fifth floor!” but seconds pass and Teryn continues asking for a location. I’m still blocked out.

I shift the smallest amount. Nik says, “Trouble getting through?”

His shoulder twitches beneath my arm. It’s only then that I notice he’s wearing an earpiece himself.

“Change of plans,” he says. He’s not talking to me. “I have something interesting here.”

“Excuse me?”

I catch the sleight of hand too late. A dark patch of something appears in Nik’s palm. By the time I’m attempting to move, to put distance between us, he’s already slapped it onto my neck.

• • • •

I’m not unconscious for long.

Two minutes. Maybe three. I scramble upright, lurching into a sitting position.

I haven’t moved. I’m still on the fifth floor, the billboards continue to emit green into the hallway, and the window is wide open, the moth-bitten curtain fluttering with the wind.

Shit.

I wince, pulling the patch off my neck. The micro-needles across its surface emerge with a thin smear of blood. I’ll need to get the wound checked to make sure Nik Grant didn’t give me some disease.

“Can anyone hear me?”

The sudden cacophony of responses would confirm yes, I’m transmitting through the comm again. I stumble to my feet. There’s no chance

that Nik will still be within sight, but I hurry to the window anyway. Indeed, he's long disappeared, but my eyes widen to register eight, nine, *ten* black cars parked all around the building.

"Eirale, where did you go—"

"He was here," I rush to say. "I went after him on the fifth floor. I'm coming back down."

I shoulder through the door into the stairwell. It's quiet. The ultraviolet LEDs have been replaced with an ugly, normal white light, calmer on my eyes while I round the landing, counting the fourth floor, then the third. Mint is trying to speak into her mic—"They want us out. They had a threat called"—and with someone else at the same time. She's arguing with federal. Government people.

I make it back to the second floor, then along the thin hallway. Inside the nightclub, the lights have come on as well, white-blue to replace the strobes. Not all the patrons ran out. There are still clusters milling around the walls, nervously wringing their hands. I push my way past them, searching for Mint or Teryn.

Then I see the blood.

"Don't come closer!"

I'm suddenly at the receiving end of ten rifles, red lasers pointing a collection of dots onto my suit. The nightclub is smaller than the blueprints made it seem—or maybe the chipping black paint on the walls pulls everything closer together. I've approached the back of its dance floor, beside the bar. And everywhere I look, there are federal agents. Holding weapons, directing camera drones, setting up caution tape.

"What's going on?" I mutter into my suit for my team to answer. I raise my hands to either side of me, keeping them in sight for the agents. "Why are they pointing their guns at *me*?"

"Eirale, over here." Mint's reply feeds straight into my ear, but there's a double echo, her actual voice coming from nearby. My eyes flicker to the side, and I catch a glimpse of her green braids over the shoulder of a federal

agent. She shifts until I can see her face properly, her folded arms wrapped tightly around her torso. Her head tilts, gesturing to her left, and I follow the trail of blood on the floor up to a booth.

My breath snags in my throat. A man slumps over the table, his face pressed to the metal at an awkward angle. Judging by the red spreading around him, oozing onto the tiles at his feet, I have to imagine there's a bullet embedded dead center in his forehead.

"Is that Chip Graham?" I murmur. I don't want to move my mouth too much. I don't want the federal agents to read what I'm saying, but my hands must lower in shock because they rush to scream at me, yelling to stay still or else they'll shoot, they'll fire immediately.

"I've been trying to tell them we were after Nik Grant tonight and that *he* did this," Mint hisses. "But the footage already leaked onto the feed."

"What footage?" I demand. The federal agents are starting to approach me. One is taking out cuffs. I can't understand what could have possibly prompted this reaction, why their rifles remain pointed at me, until Teryn's voice breaks over the comms, ice cold:

"You, Eirale. There's video of you shooting the defense secretary."



2

L I A

I can tell our backyard hasn't been cleaned in a while because last month's broken tree branch is still lying by the picket fence.

The early-morning wind howls against the window, rattling the latches. Downcountry sunrises don't bring much light anymore, not like the way they've redesigned them upcountry. I hate how gloomy everything is at this hour, how empty the world feels. Shadows shift in the room like the mist outside—heavy and viscous, hemmed with weight. Dad says I shouldn't sit in the alcove because it's too exposed, and the window could be easily smashed. Our house is in Haven State, north of Button State and two hours away from Button City, where the daytime sky is always tinted vaguely brown. When the winds quiet, I can hear our electrified perimeter: a faint, steady hum that Tamera swears isn't noticeable.

We've never had an incident at the house. The general public—despite their constant accusations that my father is a Medan spy—are not stupid, and they know he's not here downcountry. Dad, like every other senator in Atahua, keeps his physical body in the District of Melnova, inside a locked hideaway office within the well-protected Capitol Building. On his reset days, he'll be walking around the Capitol, summoning coffee to be delivered by service bots.

No one is getting past the fence, in any case. No looters, no hitchhiking vagrants looking for a warm place to hide out. I suppose there's the rare chance someone comes by to throw something for protest's sake, which is the only scenario I can imagine there being danger. SENATOR'S DAUGHTER CONKED BY A BRICK. Rather pathetic for a headline. I shift away from the window.

The television on the wall switches segments, starting the latest breaking news coming out of Button City. When I tilt back to listen, my hair protests the motion, caught around my shoulders like a black shawl. Apparently some government official was murdered last night. They don't say what the official was doing in the city downcountry to begin with, where he was at risk of getting murdered. Nor do they mention that these sorts of assassinations seem to be happening more and more often, despite the innumerable security initiatives NileCorp launches at every quarterly presentation to "protect Atahua." Before anyone can mull too long on the details, the newscasters turn over to a James Moore interview: an old one that I've practically memorized because I've watched it so many times, and I wave my hand to mute the television.

"Lia, are you up here?"

"Yeah," I call back. "Alcove."

Tamera's footsteps draw closer to my room. I busied myself enough yesterday when I first logged out of upcountry, going from the treadmill to the rowing machine to the pull-up bar installed on my door. Now I'm just impatient to finish my mandatory twenty-four hours downcountry. Monthly users in the Pods stay upcountry the longest, but we still need to reset downcountry—in the real world—to prevent our bodies from deteriorating. Most of my grade at the academy do it together: on the first of each month, they're all spat out from their Pods in the dorms of Nile Military Academy, free to move around as long as they don't leave campus. While they use the time to socialize, to go for a run around the school grounds and shake out their bodies, I wake up here.

As much as I grouch and grumble, critically afraid of missing good gossip in the time I'm away, I know that Dad only insists on having my Pod at home in Haven State to keep me safe. Aside from skyrocketing crime in the few remaining major cities, our mere existence in the real world is dangerous. It's why they invented upcountry, after all. Half a century ago, it would have been unfathomable to imagine how we have to live now. When Tamera reminisces about her childhood, she had blue skies in the real world and a minor flu season that took her out for a couple of days at most.

Then the seas started to flood the coasts, the very air turned cancerous, and the pandemics mutated at a rate that killed us faster than we could inoculate against them. The factories refused to stop pumping toxins into the clouds, and the megacorporations wouldn't unplug their machines eating up freshwater. What else were people to do?

When NileCorp invented StrangeLoom, it promised a server to each nation. They would virtually replicate their streets down to the shape of the cobblestones, and the property that anyone owned "downcountry" would become their "upcountry," too. I've had a ridiculous number of assignments on the famous presentation where James Moore introduced those terms to the world, how he paused after speaking both words as though he knew he was making history. Upcountry solved a problem without having to rectify the damage they were doing. The planet tried to wage a war after decades of torment, and NileCorp took its civilian combatants away. Now most of the world's population has migrated to experience life online, and though this existence is all I have ever known, people sure do seem happier for it.

I flex my hands, watching the curve of my knuckles, the lines of my bones shifting and straining. My handheld device is already buzzing with updates on the feed, posts from my classmates returning to virtual. Rayna promised to collect all the reset-day gossip for me, so at least that'll make an interesting lunch debrief.

Tamera pokes her head through my door.

“Do you want any breakfast, honey?”

“I’m okay.” The security system beeps from a panel by the television. It’s announcing an external temperature change, which could mean a dust storm is blowing in. I already have no desire to go outside, ever, but our house system’s diligent notifications only add to my repulsion. I’d probably shrivel like a raisin if I stepped outside. A radioactive raisin.

“Are you sure?” Tamera presses.

“I’m sure.”

Tamera puts her hands on her hips. “Real food is good for you.”

I don’t have any memories of my adoptive mom because I was too young when she passed away. Tamera is the closest maternal figure I’ve known—though, technically, she’s my adoptive great-aunt. While Dad is busy in Melnova, Tamera’s the one who takes care of me. She lives here, at the Haven State house, staying close on the off chance my Pod needs maintenance while I’m inside. During the day she’ll log into upcountry as a daily subscriber, help Dad out at the Melnova apartment, and when it’s time to take some rest, she’ll come back down, getting sleep in the real.

I huff, throwing my legs over the alcove.

“But, Tamera,” I whine, “I’m so not hungry. Perilously unhungry. In fact, I might throw up if I get a single bite inside of me.”

It’s not entirely theatrics. I’m usually somewhat nauseous when I come downcountry, even though the reset is supposed to be refreshing. Once I get back into the Pod, the nutrient line will keep me fed. I’m fond of the nutrient line. Most other cadets, like Rayna, go downcountry way more than mandated to work out and feed their real bodies. They say that no amount of training upcountry can replace physical exercise in the real world. Meanwhile, I’m convinced I could stay logged in forever if the mandatory reset didn’t exist. The Pods are built to hold us indefinitely as long as someone is topping up the nutrient line, and my body never shows signs of decline when I’m forced to log off. Clearly I’m doing fine without popping down as frequently.

“All right, well”—Tamera checks her watch, waiting for the band to flash—“you still have about twenty minutes before your Pod unlocks. I’ll make you some coffee or something. Your father always takes tea upcountry, but if you ask me, I don’t think they’ve quite perfected the caffeine reaction. . . .”

Tamera’s mostly talking to herself as she disappears back into the hall, then down the stairs to the kitchen. On my reset days, she doesn’t go upcountry until I do. So she waits with me, bustling around a wilted house with little to do. Secretly I think she’s impatient to return to the Melnova apartment, where she has a set list of tasks: buy ingredients to cook with, dust the furniture, put plants out on the porch. When I video-call Dad, I always see Tamera in the background, cooking despite her insistence that it’s all just pixels. Her dyed blond hair and happily plump shape make her appear younger, but Tamera lived a whole life before upcountry was invented thirty years ago. She speaks of virtual as a false reality, a copycat plane trying to replace the true experience. It’s why she only uses a Claw headset and doesn’t want a Pod of her own, so that she can be in and out as she pleases.

The windowpane rattles again. On the television screen, James Moore mouths through the NileCorp origin story, and I finally clamber off the alcove, contributing the audio for him in perfect synchrony: “*The future is online. The future is digital.*” The StrangeLoom icon flashes in the corner, an infinity-shaped arrow swallowing itself up like an ouroboros, and I wave the television off entirely.

Eighteen more minutes. I pad down the hallway. In the bathroom, the small touchpad for the light is always farther away than I think, and I grope my hand back and forth on the wall. My mirror image barely resembles a person hovering at the hazy gray entryway, more a silhouette than a body, more a phantom than anything solid. I don’t like being downcountry. I don’t like the empty white walls, the cold tile floors, and the clinical sterile smell that pervades every corner of the house except for the alcove, never going away no matter how much I try to create ventilation in my room.

The round bulb flares on. With the light, I'm suddenly crystal clear in the mirror, and my vision lurches. Everything appears flat. I have to take a deep breath. I force myself to count: *Ten, nine, eight* . . .

It's called Wakeman Syndrome. For as long as upcountry has been around, so has the disorder that afflicts the 0.5 percent of people who question their reality as a result. It's named after President Elliot Wakeman, the guy in charge when NileCorp introduced StrangeLoom and started allowing people upcountry. Wakeman was halfway into his second term when he went off the rails and tried to launch a nuclear weapon at Cega. Despite being downcountry at the time, he was convinced that nothing was real and he needed to wake up from a simulation. Atahua's western neighbor barely escaped annihilation because the vice president talked him down and had him committed for psychiatric help.

A rather fitting disorder given his name, and the term stuck.

Breathe, breathe.

I've only told Dad about my symptoms, but he thinks I'm overreacting. He says it's not Wakeman Syndrome, that I'm just too overworked at school. He offered to refer me to his therapist so I can talk through my feelings—*normal* feelings, he insists, for someone of my age and ambition. He thinks I need to pick up some hobbies, try to enjoy life outside my grades. In elementary I studied excessively to ensure I'd qualify for Nile Military Academy, and now at Nile I study excessively to make valedictorian. Of course I've grown paranoid that I'm nothing but an incomprehensible warp of pixels and code. All I've known is putting good work in and extracting good results. When I'm not upcountry as an avatar, when I'm supposed to be relaxing as a real girl, time feels blurry, and the things that I've done mere minutes ago feel as though they've faded hours into the past. I get the sense that time ceases to exist, that if I think too hard about it, I'll accidentally break out from its hold and become lost in a floating void.

"Lia?" Tamera's voice floats from the stair landing. "Which mug is yours? The blue or the green?"

“Blue,” I call back. “Thanks!”

On Dad’s official government About Me! page, they call me Lia Sullivan, even though by their own law that’s not allowed. There have been one too many Medan child spies pretending to be orphans, which means that while Atahuans can take us in, love us, make us a part of their family, we can’t ever shake off the Ward surname, and we’re still mandated to attend military school once we’re of age. Wards are also responsible for our own tuition, so we all go into debt to these institutions we’re forced to attend, and our adoptive parents can’t relieve the burden. It’s a protective mechanism for Atahua, allegedly, but everyone knows what it achieves. Atahua needs spies for their cold war too, and this guarantees them their most precious resource: Medan faces who can blend in when they’re sent to the enemy nation.

So when Dad messaged me the appointment slot for therapy last week, I declined. I can’t risk the academy suspecting I have Wakeman Syndrome. They won’t want a cadet struggling with a disorder in NileCorp’s private forces, and the only reason I work so hard at the academy is to secure the most desired posting after graduation. I’m going to stay close to Dad, in Melnova. I’m not going to be used as ammunition in their war.

I reach behind my head, touching the slight hollow at the top of my neck, where my hairline starts. There’s no scar. The procedure is so small and routine that the skin heals over perfectly to encase the chip inside. I got it when I enrolled on the StrangeLoom system at five years old—everyone does to allow full immersion through neural signals. Sometimes I wish they’d left a scar, just so I’d have some minor difference between my body and my avatar. Proof showing I have real skin that can be cut.

My hand twitches, unexpectedly itching as though I’ve been bitten by a frenzy of fire ants. I scrunch hard, making a fist when my arm returns to my side.

“I swear, Lia, I don’t know how there are so many mugs in this kitchen.”

Tamera again. While she continues chatting idly from downstairs, I

reach for the shelves beside the bathroom sink, trailing my fingers along the items. One of the fine-tooth combs sticks above the rest, its handle thin and tail-like, sharpened at the end.

Before I can think twice, I have the comb in one hand, pressing into the palm of my other. Its sharp end sinks into my skin, burrows parallel to a vein, carving an indent. Then I push harder, harder. My hand stings fiercely, but it's not enough. As long as it is bearable, it might be nothing but a virtual sensory response, manufactured to make me believe in a generated reality.

Break, I urge, imagining my skin splitting apart. *Show me something undeniable.*

"Lia!"

Tamera, suddenly, is at my side, grabbing my wrist. Though I don't resist, I keep the sharp end down, and when she pulls my hand away, the comb drags across my palm forcefully.

I really do wince this time. The comb clatters to the floor, striking against the tiles with a horribly discordant sound.

For a few seconds, the scratch is only bright red, a raised welt. Then blood beads to the surface, seeping through the damaged membrane. Little dots surround the cut in varying sizes before the red drips downward, landing one drop on the floor tiles.

It's not much, but it's something. It means I'm real. I'm *real*. StrangeLoom doesn't encode blood.

"What has gotten into you?" Tamera hisses.

"Nothing," I answer at once. "Nothing. I had an itch."

"An *itch!*" Tamera grabs a towel, then wraps it around my hand tightly to stanch the cut. "You didn't need to press so hard."

I wrinkle my nose, lifting the towel off to peek at the scratch. The bleeding has already stopped. I feel much better. A tension that had been building and building in my chest these twenty-four hours has been allowed a release, a hole punctured through my chest to begin pressurization.

"I'm okay, I swear," I say.

Tamera isn't so easily deflected. She frowns, still looking at my hand. I don't know when exactly it happened, but I've gotten a whole head taller than her, so she needs to hold my arm far above her eye level to keep it elevated.

"Come to the kitchen. I'll give you a bandage."

"It's already stopped bleeding. See?" I show her my palm. "A bandage will just get gross if I leave it on for a month inside."

"Lia."

I stick out my lower lip. "Tameraaaaaa . . ."

"All right, all right," she relents, dropping my hand. "Come on, then. Twenty-four hours are up."

We walk back to my bedroom. The moment Tamera steps in, she goes to open the side window's curtains, which doesn't change the lighting situation. She seems to realize it too, pausing before drawing them half-shut again.

"Are you going straight to school?" Tamera asks, turning around.

I pretend to check the watch on her wrist. "I thought I'd enter on a Button City landing station to do some luxury shopping first."

Tamera gives me a wry look. "A simple *yes, I'm going to school* would have sufficed."

"Sorry. I can't deny the urge to be a smart-ass."

I never miss school anyway, not even when I'm ill. There's zero chance I'll miss a minute during this critical week, when final exam postings are expected soon. Each grade I get could change the outcome of the race for valedictorian. As much as I'd love to think I've got the title secured, there's one competitor who's always been huffing down my neck.

Tamera pushes open the Pod cover. My Pod is installed in the corner of my room so that its wires can be plugged into the port in the wall, which makes the setup look rather sarcophagus-like. We have ports in every room, feeding into the cables that grant upcountry access, provided that Dad

continues paying the subscription fees associated with our log-ins.

"I checked your nutrient line already, and your level is fine for two back-to-back months," Tamera tells me. "If you need the entire ten weeks for your posting, though, I'm sure it'll alert me to replace it too."

It's supposed to be my responsibility to make sure the Pod has suitable levels before I log in, but Tamera likes to take care of everything in the household. It's nice. At the academy, they have emergency nurses on standby in case someone's Pod falls low on nutrient levels, but cadets can also easily log themselves out, walk over to the nutrient room, and shove a replacement into the Pod. The only time it becomes trickier is during our final exam posting, because if we're being hacked into another country, we can't leave until the posting is finished. In this specific case, NileCorp allows us to skip one mandatory reset day, knowing that it's worth the risk if we want to stay in a foreign server. If our Pods are well maintained, two months in virtual won't do us any harm.

Tamera tuts, peering into the Pod now. I left the Claw lying on the pillow, not on the hook on the side where it's supposed to go. I smile sheepishly while I climb in, but I haven't damaged any of the electrode rods.

The Pod has all sorts of other bits and bobs that make it suitable for long-term stay. Nodes stick out from the sides, attaching to my legs, to my arms, to my torso. NileCorp has had decades to perfect its stasis technology, zapping the body at the right intervals while our minds are upcountry to make sure nothing atrophies in the real world. I slide the nutrient needle into my arm.

"Comfortable?" Tamera asks.

I adjust one of the Claw prongs. The back needs to be aligned with the chip in my head. "Ow. Why is this so tight—"

She reaches in, unraveling a bit of my hair that got stuck on the Claw.

"I'm good. You can shut the Pod." I pause. "Thank you."

Tamera nods, then reaches in to touch my face briefly. "Have a good time at school. And good luck if I don't see you before your posting."

She closes the cover. The Pod goes pitch-black. In darkness I sigh with relief, waiting for the screen above me to buffer before the launch message appears. It recognizes my face after a few seconds, the text at the top displaying, **WELCOME BACK, LIA**. No need to enter my log-in credentials again—it'll only prompt me for my password the next time I've renewed my user ID. A map of Atahua and its territories shimmers to life, offering at my disposal every upcountry landing station where I could go. True to its purpose, the map of upcountry is identical to a map of down-country, each street and building facade replicated by NileCorp's satellites. I zoom in on Button State, then flick the map slightly above Button City, sixty miles north in a town surrounded by bright red trees with a river to the east and a castle floating on the edge of the water. I've performed this process hundreds of times. At this point, it's as familiar to me as breathing.

I tap my destination. Press confirm. The mist inside the Pod begins to blow: a cooling, numbing sensation sinking to the bone. The Claw gives me a small electric zap to tell me it's about to kick in.

A STRANGE LOOP . . .

My shoulders relax. My breathing eases. The map dissolves for the engine's greeting words, the same three-line phrase since StrangeLoom first hit the market.

ON A STRANGELOOM . . .

Letter by letter, each of the words appears, then fades. By the time the final part comes, I'm under in an instant.

THE FUTURE HAS LOADED.

• • • •

The academy has a landing station outside campus for arrivals into upcountry, but it's deserted when my avatar pops in. Early-morning landing stations for public schools in the city would be abuzz with activity while daily users make their entry, but all cadets at Nile Military Academy must board as monthly users. Yesterday everyone logged off half an hour earlier than me while I was finishing up some homework, which means they came in earlier too. I'm alone when I walk the short path up to the gate.

NILE MILITARY ACADEMY, the sign out front declares. EVER READY.

I grab the sign as I pass, squeezing cold metal. The cut on my palm obviously didn't copy over to virtual, but I feel the sting on my avatar, nonetheless. When I let go of the sign and continue walking, I receive a small pop-up in the corner of my vision.

Please refrain from any action that may damage academy property.

"Sorry!" I call out, swiping the pop-up away. No one's actually listening. The alerts are automated, warnings triggered by the rules NileCorp sets inside its property. If I accidentally damage the sign, it'll stay like that. StrangeLoom promises to scan the real world to create upcountry, but it's not continuously updating afterward. They'd have to bring in engineers to restore its image, or just get a new sign in virtual. Both of which take effort and money.

I blink once, opening my display to see the time. I really should hurry. It's a big campus, and there are certain areas that I have to navigate carefully, perpetually slippery because of the wet mud. I open my messages and find Rayna. She probably wouldn't have gone back to sleep after logging in with only forty-five minutes until first period, but in typical Rayna fashion, she'll still roll into her class right before the bell on purpose. I send **HELLOOOOO RISE AND SHINE!!!** to her inbox.

The wind blows at my eyes as I trudge onto the gravel path toward the school. Our shared calendar tells me Rayna's first period is math while I go to PE.

"Cadet Lia," the gate guard, Mr. Nell, bellows when he spots me. "You're going to miss your entire first class at this leisurely rate!"

I pick up my pace. "Sorry, sorry," I grumble. "Do I have time to change—"

"No, cadet! Report to the gymnasium, cadet!"

Most cadets on campus call him Mr. Yell behind his back. "Yes, sir. Have a great morning, sir."

My avatar reloaded with yesterday's fatigues: the clothes I was wearing before logging out. I'm glad I'd changed first and hadn't just pulled myself downcountry in my pajamas. There's nothing I can do about my loose hair, but at least it's shorter in virtual. More manageable than the length it's grown to downcountry.

In Atahua, we get very little adjustment on how we look upcountry. Our first scan happens at the NileCorp registration center, when we turn five years old and qualify for StrangeLoom credentials. They'll put us under the cameras, issue a user ID, then make the quick incision to implant the chip that interacts with the Claw. We renew our StrangeLoom credentials every year—those without Pods go back into the NileCorp centers, and those with Pods only have to press a button. The scans are completed in seconds, and our avatars are updated to appear exactly as we do downcountry when we log in again.

We're not without options, technically. We could buy hair extensions or get haircuts up here. There's even a thriving plastic surgery industry that has learned how to make avatar adjustments using legal code alterations.

The plastic surgery industry, meanwhile, is entirely dead in upcountry Medaluo. Over there, users have a cosmetic adjustment page in their very display, letting them change the shape of their avatars' chins and the brightness

of their teeth within reason. The feed debates all the time whether avatar customization should be allowed, arguing about how harmful it is to our perception of beauty when people can change how they look on a whim.

I don't mind that Atahua mandates cosmetic adjustments to be blanked out. One less thing to worry about so I can focus on studying instead.

My classmates appear in the distance, streaming out from the gymnasium in two rows. I'm late. They've started their first jog around the campus perimeter. Another pop-up shimmers into the corner of my display.

You are three minutes late to first period!

I break into a jog to catch up. The last thing I need is my participation grades slipping, especially when physical education is a bogus class upcountry. It's more about building habits and relaxing the mind. We must learn to push through discomfort. Spar with one another on the mats to quicken our mental reflexes and then do it again in the real during reset days.

I've argued with Dad about what I might be missing out on if I don't practice what I learn. I haven't stepped foot on the physical campus—it's too far to travel to when my Pod is in Haven State. I can work out endlessly at home, but for all I know, I could end up as one of those cadets who graduate and suddenly can't figure out how to throw a real punch when I'm a contractor posted downcountry.

It's happened before. The Pods are built to preserve our real bodies for optimal function, but that doesn't mean everyone puts the nodes on correctly; nor does it mean that we can build actual muscle while upcountry. I've obsessed over testimonials from former cadets who sue NileCorp for firing them when they're weaker than expected. I've lain awake at night wondering if that could happen to me even if I do make it into their private military. Those cases never win. If people aren't as competent downcountry as they were upcountry when they were offered a job, that's their own fault.

My hair streams behind me as I gain speed, the strands lifting with the wind. On my reset days, I can count to a hundred doing push-ups. The treadmill at home was intentionally placed in Tamera's room so we can hang out if I'm running for hours and she's knitting something. I've performed perfectly fine every month, with no indication that I won't be able to transfer my skills.

A thrill sparks down my spine as I close in on the back of the cluster. I veer slightly right, joining the group of cadets.

"Better pick it up, Nat."

Natalie Ward visibly jolts from the scare. A beat later, her expression smooths out when she sees it's me. "Oh, just overtake me and let me suffer in peace. See you at lunch, bitch."

I laugh, pushing forward. The eastern side of campus overlooks the river, where the sweet birch trees hang off the ledge and deposit handfuls of yellow-green leaves into the water. I weave and glide, steadily enough to avoid tiring myself out but keeping at a pace that cuts me ahead of a few classmates, then another. People have different stamina paces, even upcountry. However fit we are in virtual usually depends on the limits our own minds set for us. Other cadets have often accused me of having a big head, so maybe I'm competent upcountry by sheer faith and willpower.

The campus grounds curve up on a gentle hill, then back down in a muddy slide. I keep my footing delicate, arms held up for balance. I know the sharp rocks here by heart. None of our instructors are supervising us short of the status updates that the system must be running to the academy. Still, no one is going to straggle or go off-course to dally. We're not the only military academy outside Button City, nor are we the oldest or biggest, but we're the most prestigious. It takes the top scores on the entrance exam to qualify for entry. There's a certain standard that Nile Military Academy sets, one that every cadet is increasingly aware of each time the common room's screens are streaming the latest breaking news. NileCorp owns us,

and where NileCorp goes, renown rains down. The very nature of life as we know it is owed to NileCorp.

I skid at the base of the hill. It doesn't put any misstep in my stride—I recover in an instant and continue, approaching the end of the perimeter. When I'm the only one who runs up to Coach Chelsea, the warm swoop of achievement cradles my stomach. I've pulled to the front significantly.

"I thought you were a cadet from Tier B," she calls to me. Her hands are propped on her hips. "I didn't expect to see any Tier A's for another ten minutes."

"If you want me to go double and join Tier B's run too, just say so," I reply, coming to a stop. I heave a deep breath in. My lungs strain, then steady. NileCorp's long regulatory manuals will spell out which exact actions upcountry will create which reactions in our avatars, but it's easiest to assume the StrangeLoom engineers did the hard work and the usual logic we're used to downcountry follows. They're meticulous. They've gone as far as to ensure our breath will stink after a night of virtual sleeping, which means we monthly users also need to brush our teeth every morning.

"Half of Tier B is back already," Coach says, "but you could probably catch up to the other half if you go now."

"Okay." I pretend to lurch back toward the hill, taking the route of the other class. We didn't overlap in the middle because Tier B runs through the proper path of the forest rather than the edge overlooking the river, where Tier A goes.

Coach Chelsea rolls her eyes good-naturedly and checks her watch. She's one of many people who will still buy antiquated items upcountry. She could just as easily blink to open her display and look at the time, but I suppose it must be nice to lift her arm and perform the action she got used to in the years before virtual.

She waves for me to proceed into the gymnasium, where Tiers A and B will merge to resume class. I go through the outer doors, wiping down my

shoes at the entryway. I have another pair in my locker, but I don't know if this is enough mud to warrant a change.

The gymnasium's inner doors slam open. The sound is loud enough to jolt me, but I relax as soon as I see who it is. Kieren Murray, dressed in class uniform rather than combat gear for physical education. He's definitely not in this period—I'm pretty sure he has Atahuan Literature now. Not that I've memorized his schedule or anything.

"Ward," he says, and despite his smile, it instantly sounds like a taunt. "I've been looking for you."

"And to what do I owe the pleasure?" I return his smile, sickly sweet, while I go to open my locker. I make the decision to change my shoes then purely to skirt around Kieren and busy myself. He hates it when people don't give him their full attention. "We're twenty minutes into first period."

"I thought maybe you would have smelled final exam postings dropping and levitated your way to the nearest board."

My smile falls. "What?"

It can't have happened any sooner than seconds ago if I haven't heard about it yet. Typical of Kieren to make it sound like I haven't been paying attention. He and his twin sister, Hailey, don't keep their Pods on campus either, so for all I know he also logged back in right before first period.

He looms closer. "Did you do it?"

"Do what?" I demand. I've never cut short my teasing so fast. We can go back and forth in classic fashion another day—are *final exam postings* out?

"Don't pretend you don't know."

"I *literally* don't know what you're talking about."

Oh, Kieren Murray, my dear nemesis. I've been the largest pain in his ass since the summer before ninth grade, after we were accepted into Nile Military Academy based on national entrance exams. We befriended each other at a New Cadet Orientation party, then swore enmity just as quickly the next day when we were seated side by side for a second ranking

exam to establish class tiers. Somehow, he and I ended up *sharing* number one because we had both not only received perfect scores but maxed out the bonus points the exact same way. Though they did their due diligence and investigated us for potential cheating, the system didn't note either of our heads looking up even once. No chance of cheating. In retrospect, it's shocking that they let me share that rank with him instead of shoving me to number two, given that Kieren's own father is the academy headmaster.

Four years have passed, and nothing has changed. I rile him up so badly before tests that there are always rumors going around school convinced we must be secretly hooking up because no two people can truly care that much about scoring higher than the other. Rayna is frequently talking me down from sending a blast to the feed debunking the claims. Not that it matters, but Kieren and I have only kissed once. And we were thirteen years old, so it doesn't count. I don't know whether I'm more offended by the insinuation that I would partake in hookup culture or that I need another reason to give Kieren Murray an aneurysm beyond being better than him.

"The posting, Ward." Kieren throws his arms up in the air. "This is unheard of."

Dad might think that overworking is what fuels my anxiety and derealization, but being the best is what makes me feel most alive. Kieren, consequently, may be my primary competitor, but he's also my greatest source of joy.

I keep that to myself, of course.

Carefully, I poke one finger at his chest, trying to push him back. "Can you ease up a little? If anyone steps out right now, those rumors are going to be at full fire."

"You—" His hands grab at the space between us as though he wants to strangle me but can't quite bring himself to do it. "Fine. I'm going to go sort this out since I apparently have to do everything around here."

With an abrupt motion, Kieren pivots and storms away.

“Is it something I said?” I call after him. “Baby, come back. I can change!”

He gives me the finger without looking. If I can’t get further retort out of Kieren, this is very serious. I’m already grimacing before he disappears through the doors properly. *Final postings*. It’s early. I didn’t expect them this morning of all mornings, the moment we’ve returned from a reset day. We still have one more unit to cover in class.

I change my shoes quickly, then slam my locker closed. Inside the gymnasium, Tier B’s cadets who have returned already are clumped around the far wall. Drills will be starting as soon as the rest of their class and mine arrive, so it’s unusual for everyone to be congregated by the announcement board. They’re installed all across campus, each one accompanied by a holographic animation of the NileCorp logo overhead, looping in the StrangeLoom icon’s infinity shape. Sometimes the boards are displaying upcoming events, and other times they’re crowded with headlines of breaking news that the academy wants cadets to be aware of. Today, the board looks sparse.

“Is it postings?” I ask, rising onto my toes at the edge of the crowd.

Gena Wilson turns around. Her eyes widen. “Lia, you’re here!” She shuffles aside immediately to let me through. “Go look.”

I push into the crowd, trying to shift closer without prodding other cadets. I hardly need to worry. When my classmates spot me, they hurry out of my way, making a path for me to proceed forward.

This is getting really weird.

I get to the front. I scan the words at the top of the board at once. Final exam postings, indeed. My heart slams to my throat.

Postings and announcements are always made by class ranking, so I expect to see myself in the first row. But my name is nowhere to be found. It’s not in the second row either. Nor the third. Now my pulse is starting to hammer. I move down the list slowly, carefully reading the two columns: the posting on the left and the cadet to the right. I see Rayna, posted to

Medaluo. I see Hailey Murray, Kieren’s sister, also posted to Medaluo. That’s more unusual. Each individual cadet is designated to a location upcountry, followed by a short description of what their mission goal is. Most stay within Atahua. A fraction are sent to other nations. Cadets of Medan or Pyaish descent will almost always be sent to Medaluo. It’s a given that that’s where I’ll be posted.

At last I find my name at the very bottom of the board—which is a warning before I even register the rest of the words. I’m on a row of my own, separated from other postings.

I stare, aghast. I rub my eyes, then stare some more.

But no matter what I do, none of the words change.

SPECIAL JOINT POSTING

Medaluo

See Headmaster for details

CADETS

Lia Ward & Kieren Murray

“Shit,” I mutter.

3

E I R A L E

They take me in.

It doesn't matter how much I protest that I'm innocent, or that my team members claimed I wasn't at the site of the assassination. I articulated clearly to the federal agents what we were doing at the nightclub. NileCorp received word of Nik Grant's presence tonight, and we showed up. If something horrible has happened, he is responsible. That's simple observation and deduction.

Somehow, I've still ended up in the back of their transport van, my wrists bound together with magnetic cuffs. The windows are barred. Two agents sit in the van with me, speaking quietly between themselves. I can't hear them, though I suppose I'm not trying anyway. I halfheartedly tune in and out of the radio playing from the front: the civil war in Cega continues, Irisea has announced that they're cleaning the southern oceans. President Sterling will be making an emergency announcement tomorrow. To assign a new secretary of defense, I'm sure.

"All right, let's move it."

I'm being urged out of my seat before the van has come to a full stop. One of the agents takes my elbow, and the other hauls the door open. Gauging by his grip alone, the agent escorting me isn't very strong. MILDENHALL,

his lanyard says. He's pale, spindly, and the bald spot at the back of his head is shaped like a certain anatomical part. I bet I could outrun him.

Then Mildenhall pushes me to the sidewalk, my eyes scan the federal facility in front of us, and I change my mind. The line of uniformed military extends around the entire perimeter. I'm not running anywhere. They will shoot me before I can make a full turn on my heel.

"Inside. Come on."

The other agent's lanyard says PERRON. She walks ahead toward the building, the small heels of her shoes clicking audibly on each step. A few curious civilians peer over from their encampment down the road, lit a hazy orange from the fire burning in an overturned bin. They know better than to intrude in government business and certainly know to stay a healthy distance from a federal facility. By the time we've come to the door, there are no more onlookers straining to see.

Agent Mildenhall nudges me through the vestibule. On the first level, I scan the empty desks we march past, the screens dark and the holographic clocks turned off. Button City emits a murmur no matter the hour of the night, and beyond the window comes a series of faint car horns. I didn't know federal even had a facility downtown, but I'm not surprised.

In the interrogation room, they seat me without ceremony. A lamp flares on.

"Let's cut to the chase," Agent Perron says. "You can make this easier for yourself. A full confession will appeal to a jury far more nicely than us prying the truth out of you."

"I don't know how many times I can say this." I stay very still in my seat. "That's not me in the footage."

We stopped trusting sourceless video evidence about twenty years ago. Unless it comes straight from the recording, it's too easy to doctor faces and people into evidence. Surely these two know that whatever video they have won't stand up to scrutiny.

Perron leans back in her chair, then lowers a pair of glasses at the top

of her head. They jump to life, lighting up before her eyes. Maybe she's watching the footage again.

"Live deepfake doesn't work that fast," Mildenhall says. He remains standing.

"It's definitely moving that fast in some labs."

Maybe I'm supposed to keep quiet until NileCorp can get their lawyers here. I want to believe my employers will consider me too valuable an asset to neglect, but I have no one to plead my case within the company. Wright won't be easy to reach while he's recovering from injury. Teryn said nothing when I was being led away, which probably means she's not contacting her uncle personally to ask for help. She's always harping on about NileCorp greatness and our role as soldiers in maintaining it. Mint might have been willing to argue with federal and insist that I was framed, but Teryn turns her nose up at anyone damaging corporate reputation.

"Eirale Ward, if you took this as an assignment for Medaluo, now is the time to come clean."

My head snaps up. "I'm not a spy."

"Yeah, that's what you people all say before you're proven to be a spy."

"You were alerted to the crime as it happened," I say. "Then you were sent the video directly." The kerfuffle at the nightclub confirmed it, but calculating from the timing alone, the federal agents arrived at the scene before the doctored video even made it online. "You don't think that's weird? You don't find anything bizarre with the fact that someone has now posted the video to the feed?"

These are federal agents. Their education must have covered the incredible likelihood of tampered evidence. Most of the world spends their time in a computer-generated reality. No one takes video footage for the truth anymore. In court, prosecutions require eyewitnesses and undeniable human testimony. If they use video to prove anything, then there ought to be multiple angles from multiple sources.

Mildenhall puts his hands into his pockets. They sink in deep. He

either has enormous pockets or freakishly small fists. “You seem to have the perfect answers, don’t you? Medan folk love little cryptic idioms.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

I haven’t seen the circulating footage yet. But I’d assume the lighting was poor. The crowds were persistently shifting. If the video was sent to agents labeled RE: NILECORP CONTRACTOR EIRALE WARD SHOT CHIP GRAHAM, I can imagine that it looks convincing at first glance.

Mildenhall leans toward Perron. He whispers something into her ear, making an effort to cover both sides of his mouth so I can’t read his lips. The lamp is too bright anyway.

“I didn’t kill him,” I say once more. My voice stays calm. “I have no ties to Medaluo and no reason to kill Secretary Graham.”

“I’m getting here,” Perron says, squinting into her glasses, “that you attended Nile Military Academy and finished a final posting in . . . Kunlun?”

My posture stiffens. “Yes.”

“Any reason your corporate record is redacted from us, Eirale?”

Because NileCorp promised to keep it private. All graduates of Nile Military Academy have a mandatory final exam posting performed in virtual reality. That was my chance to prove myself in an otherwise middling academic career. I had scored well enough to qualify for NileCorp’s academy in the first place, but I went under the radar once I was actually enrolled—no awards, no special projects, no friends. It was unlikely I was going to be assigned to NileCorp’s forces, which was the aspiration for most graduates. If I was lucky, maybe I’d land a security job at a smaller company, or I could leave the field entirely and live paycheck to paycheck downcountry while paying back the debt of military school. No one does that, of course: I’d need two lifetimes to erase my debt if I worked outside of corporate forces as a Medan, and since the schools lend the money, they also set the time limits before they can hand us off to the parent company for forfeiture. My life would be over the moment I missed a payment.

I hadn't had a choice in this path. By law, wards of the state are yanked out of the foster system at age twelve and into whichever military school will take us. It creates the perfect cycle. The state doesn't have to keep supporting its orphans, and while we pay back our education, Atahua gains soldiers.

"I've done confidential work," I answer. "Ask your Federal Bureau of Defense. They're the ones who took the information I retrieved."

"And for that," Mildenhall says, "you killed Secretary Graham?"

"What? *No*."

Last year, the Atahuan media publicized claims that Medaluo was inventing technology at the cost of human rights up in Kunlun, and the feeds went wild. Kunlun is the only city in the world that exists upcountry without a downcountry equivalent. It's the birthplace of virtual reality as we know it, a rendering created by the first servers testing this technology before StrangeLoom introduced the ability to mimic our real world. As a matter of historical preservation, Kunlun was allowed to stay as a part of Medaluo's servers. Only citizens can enter, though—and citizenship to Kunlun can only be purchased for an astronomical price. Once a user is granted access, entry is possible exclusively through an additional, highly protected second password that a Pod or the Claw prompts upon selecting the open space north of Medaluo.

Like every other cadet in Atahua with a Medan face, I was put on assignment to Medaluo for my final exam. I don't remember what my task was. I don't remember why I finished in Kunlun, or how I even got there. I woke downcountry in the dorms, barely coherent and alive only because the school nurses received a warning that I was seizing in my Pod and pulled me out. After I stabilized in the hospital, NileCorp's CEO showed up himself to debrief me. James Moore told me where I'd been, then asked me how much I could recall, whether there were any additional details outside of my recordings. I had nothing: the seizure had put giant holes in my memory. Moore thanked me anyway. Said my findings were a matter of national

security, and that I did a great job protecting Atahua. Once I was healed, I would be assigned a good posting on one of his teams.

I haven't heard from him since. I haven't regained any of my memories either, and NileCorp isn't exactly jumping at the chance to sit me down and tap me back into the confidential material I dug up for them.

Agent Perron gets up. I scratch my wrists against the cuffs, turning my hands back and forth in my lap. After she leaves the room and the door slams shut behind her, Agent Mildenhall sniffs to fill the silence, mumbling something under his breath about late hours and a lack of cooperation. They'll file the report that way, I expect. Eirale Ward refused to answer our questions. Eirale Ward made our jobs harder, because we couldn't push her directly into the casket of guilt we'd opened, ready and waiting.

I don't say anything more. I've learned, through my childhood, that no amount of cooperation is enough for someone unwilling to extend goodwill. My innumerable foster parents. The dorm mothers at the care centers. Before the academy, I survived by staying silent when left alone and staying calm when picked on. I can't remember the names of my foster parents anymore—it wasn't the seizure that wiped those memories, only the passage of time. I can't picture their faces outside of a pale blur in my head. But I remember how I needed to handle their quick rise to anger, their inherent suspicion toward me because of who I was.

"People from NileCorp are on their way," Agent Mildenhall announces, breaking the silence after several minutes.

"With lawyers, I hope," I mutter.

"Your employers don't have a legal right to offer lawyers yet. It depends on how the bureau processes you."

Goose bumps prickle my arms underneath my sleeves. I am still dressed as a NileCorp soldier even if I've shed the combat suit. Head to toe in black, my trouser legs tucked into my boots. The agents took the handgun and the earpiece. The slots at my shoulders and the pockets around my torso are empty.

This entire time, I've been waiting for something to happen. Some