

The background of the cover is a dark, starry space. On the left, a bright, glowing light source, possibly a sun or star, illuminates a large, curved, rocky celestial body. A trail of smaller asteroids or debris extends from this body towards the center. On the right, a large, blue, gaseous planet is partially visible. In the foreground, a smaller, dark, rocky planet or moon is shown. The overall scene is dramatic and futuristic.

**JAMES S. A.  
COREY**

**THE SINS  
OF OUR  
FATHERS**

**AN EXPANSE** NOVELLA

# **The Sins of Our Fathers**

*An Expanse Novella*

**James S. A. Corey**



**orbitbooks.net**

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# The Sins of Our Fathers

The monsters came at night.

First came their calls: distant and eerie. Their wide, fluting voices echoed down the valley, complicated as a symphony and mindless as a cricket swarm. The deepest of them sang in a range below human hearing: subsonic tremors that the people in the township felt more than heard.

Then the night scopes showed movement. It could start as far as twenty clicks away, or as near as two. The science team still hadn't figured out what they did during the daylight hours or during the long, empty days when they seemed to disappear, but the feeling that they rose up from the planet's flesh with the darkness made the approach feel almost supernatural. Like the town had offended some nameless local god by coming here. It was only a mystery, though. They'd figure it out eventually. If they survived.

After the movement, assuming the monsters kept to their same pattern, their chorus would go on until the little retrograde moon started rising in the west. Then it would stop. Then they would come.

"They'll aim for the breach," Leward said, pointing with his chin. The perimeter wall was constructed out of prefabricated plates of carbon-silicate lace scavenged from ship hulls. The braces were titanium and compression-resistant ceramic. The place where the monster had come through last time looked like God had come down and pressed against the wall with His thumb. Ten meters of shattered plate and bent brace they'd shored up with local trees and scrap.

"Might aim for the breach, might not," Jandro said, with a

slow shrug. He was the head of construction and maintenance, and a bear of a man. “What you think, Nagata?”

Filip shrugged. His mouth was dry, but he tried to keep the fear out of his voice. “Wall didn’t slow them down much even when it was intact.”

Jandro grinned and Leward scowled.

The town was the second largest on the planet Jannah, at four hundred and thirty-six people. It had been named Emerling-Voss Permanent Settlement Beta, but everyone called it Beta. And with the ring gate to anywhere else broken, that meant Beta was its name from now on. Without the gates, the corporate headquarters of Emerling-Voss was just shy of twenty-three light-years away. Alpha settlement, with more than a thousand people, was seven and a half thousand clicks to the south. With no orbital shuttles or reliable ground vehicles, it might as well be seven million. And Alpha had gone silent when the ring gates shut down. Whether it was just a radio malfunction or something larger was an open question, and the residents of Beta had more immediate problems.

There were two dozen people drawn from different workgroups all along the north wall. Leward was in charge there. Another group was along the east, with lookouts and runners at the west and south in case something unexpected happened. In case the monsters changed the direction they’d traveled up to now. Filip considered the faces of the others stationed below the wall, finding signs in each of them of the same fear he felt. Almost each of them. Jandro and the four men from the maintenance team seemed relaxed and at ease. Filip wondered what drugs they’d taken.

Leward hefted his torch: a titanium rod with a solid, waxy mat of the local mosslike organism on a spike at one end. When he spoke, it was loud enough for everyone to hear. “When they come—*if* they come—we deflect them. Don’t go at them straight on. Just turn them gently aside so they don’t get to the walls. We aren’t fighting them. We’re just herding.” He nodded while he said it, like he was agreeing with himself.



It made him seem uncertain.

“Should just shoot them,” Jandro said. It was a joke. Everyone knew the town had run out of rifle cartridges and the reagents they’d need to print fresh ones.

“We keep them outside the walls,” Leward said. “But if they get in anyway? Get out of the way.” He pointed up and to the south at the fabrication lab, the only two-story building in Beta. “The engineering team has a magnetic slug thrower set up. We don’t get between it and the target.”

“Maybe they won’t even come this time,” one of the others said. As if in answer, the uncanny chorus swelled. The overtones rang through each other like a ship drive finding a hull’s harmonic. Filip shifted his weight from foot to foot and hefted his torch. Everything was too heavy here. He’d spent most of his life on ships, and the float or one third g were his natural state. When he accepted the job to join Mose and Diecisiete at Beta, he’d expected three years down the well at most. Now, it looked more like a lifetime. And a lifetime that might not last until dawn.

Leward’s hand terminal chimed, and the team lead accepted the connection. Evelyn Albert’s voice came loud enough that Filip could make out every word. “Get your people in place. We have movement half a klick out. North by northeast.”

“Understood,” Leward said, and dropped the connection. He stared out at all of them like an actor who’d just forgotten the St. Crispin’s Day speech. “Get ready.”

They moved toward the wall, and then through the access gate to the strip of cleared land outside it. The night sky was bright with stars and the wide disk of the Milky Way. With the autumn sun gone behind the horizon, the air cooled quickly, with a scent like mint and toilet cleanser. The atmosphere of Jannah smelled nothing like Earth, the Earthers at Beta said. Take away the mint, and Filip thought it smelled a bit like a freshly scrubbed ship.

None of that changed the fact that Filip and the torch bearers walking at his side were the invaders here, and he'd have argued for leaving again if there were a ship that could take them and anyplace to go. Instead, the walls, the darkness, and the rising howls of monsters outside.

He tried to hear a difference in the chorus. He imagined the huge beasts hauling themselves up out of the dark soil like the ancient dead coming up from their graves. It seemed like the kind of thing that would have to change how they sang, but he couldn't be sure. He took his place outside the wall. To his right, a couple of women from the medical team. To his left, a young man named Kofi with the long bones and just-too-large head that said he was another Belter like Filip.

"Hell of a thing," Kofi said.

"Hell of a thing," Filip agreed.

In the west, a dim light glowed at the top of the mountain ridge like a pale fire was burning there. It brightened, and resolved into a crescent, smaller than Filip's thumbnail. It looked to him like inverted horns.

All through the wide valley, the choir of alien voices stopped. Filip felt his heart start to labor. His head swam a little. The sudden silence made the valley feel as vast as space, but darker. The fear crept up the back of Filip's throat, and his hands gripping the torch ached.

"Steady," he said under his breath. "Steady, coyo. Bist bien. Bist alles bien." But it wasn't true. Everything was profoundly not fine. Leward paced behind them, breath fluttering like the edge of panic. Then from the darkness, a steady, heavy tramping that grew louder.

"Time to dance," Jandro said. A flare of orange fire sprang up to Filip's right. Jandro holding his lit torch.

"Not yet, not yet," Leward said, but Jandro's team had already started lighting all of their torches, and the approaching footsteps were so loud, Filip had to agree. The others along the line set fire to the moss, and Filip did too. The

Belter beside him was struggling with the igniter, so Filip leaned his own fire close until the flames spread. The cleared space was a bright monochrome orange. Smoke stung Filip's eyes and throat.

The first of them loomed up out of the darkness.

It stood higher than a building, at least any of the buildings on Beta. It moved with weirdly articulated shoulders and hips that seemed to ripple with every step like there was a vastly complicated mechanism under the rough skin. Its head was little more than a knob, set low between its shoulders, comically flat. The eyes were black: two at the front and two on the sides, and its mouth curved up like an obscene, toothless grin. It lumbered forward, into the light, seeming not to notice the line of flame and primates in front of it.

“Not straight on!” Leward shouted. “Turn it! Make it turn!”

The line to Filip's right surged forward, shouting and waving their torches. To his left, they hung back. In the center, he could go either way. The monster took a slow step, then paused as Jandro and his crew rushed at it from the side screaming obscenities and threats. The monster's grin seemed to widen, and it trudged forward, the ground shaking under each step. Filip lifted his own torch and rushed in. The monster's smile was an accident of its physiology and evolution, but it still felt like the great beast was pleased to see them. Or amused. Filip pressed himself in among the men, shouting and reaching up to thrust fire at the thing's dark eyes.

The monster made a deep fluting groan, and its next step angled away to the right, if only a little bit. A few degrees.

“Hold the line!” Leward shouted over the roar of the torch bearers. Over Filip's own shout of victory. “It's not over. Keep turning it!”

Filip pressed closer, waving the flame above him. Other bodies were with him, a mob of frightened mammals with the first glimmer of victory. It felt better than being drunk. Someone—maybe Filip, maybe not—touched the beast's skin

with the fire, and it shifted again. The shouting redoubled. There were more people in the crowd now, and the monster strode forward, its pace hardly changing, but its path bent until it was walking parallel to the town wall. Leward was yanking them back one at a time. *Let it go. It turned away, just keep it going forward until it clears the corner.* But there was a kind of bloodlust. They'd made the thing that had frightened them before now bend to their will, and it was intoxicating. A knot of people pushed toward it, drawn like a tide by the gravitational pull of power. Here was the enemy, and their victory over it. Even if the victory was just changing the direction it was walking. They waved the same fires, but now from spite and in triumph.

The monster smiled its fixed smile and lumbered forward, along the wall to the corner where Leward and two of his people made a barrier and stopped the mob. The monster shifted its weirdly flat head, groaned a vast, shuddering groan, and turned back to its original heading like it was following a star.

They shouted as it moved off into the wildlands to the northwest of the town. Jandro picked up a rock in his off hand and threw it at the monster's wide retreating back, and the others laughed and howled. Their torches were starting to gutter.

"Regroup!" Leward said, waving them back toward their posts. "Everyone grab new torches! This isn't over. We have to be ready."

Filip trotted back to his place and handed off the failing torch to a young woman in a science team jumpsuit. As she ran back into the town to refresh the oily moss fire cap, someone shouted. If there were words in it, they didn't matter. Filip couldn't make them out, but he knew what they meant.

A second monster loomed out of the darkness. Its head was a little higher up on its shoulders, its skin a little more green. Filip shouted and tried to light his fresh torch, but the beast had already come closer. Every step made the earth shake the

way dinosaurs and elephants were supposed to have. Like a nightmare.

“Line up!” Leward shouted. “Form the line!”

But it was too late. The people who had kept their torches burning and held their ground were clumped at the eastern end of the wall. The mob like Filip and Jandro and the others were just lighting up new ones on the west. A gap of darkness between the fires was guiding the monster straight toward the thing they’d sworn to protect. Filip waved his torch at the lidless black eyes, but the flame was weak and pale. The monster moved forward and hunched its forelegs. When it rose it was less like a jump than a weird unfurling of flesh, and it crashed down onto the wall with a sound louder than thunder.

Somewhere nearby, Leward was shouting, “We have a breach. We have a breach. We have a breach.” The same phrase over and over like the disaster had turned him into a siren. The monster slid into the darkness of the town, and the sounds of destruction echoed back. Filip’s mind jumped ahead, trying to think what they were losing. The medical center. The science barracks. The dry storage.

“Get back to the line,” Leward shouted, waving a torch in each hand. “Back to the line! Let the slug thrower take that one.”

“I don’t hear it.” That was Jandro. There was soot on his face, and his arm was red like it had been burned. Filip didn’t know how that had happened.

“Form up!” Leward said.

“He’s right,” Filip said. “The slug thrower’s not firing.”

“I don’t know about that. It’s not my job.”

In the dark of the town, someone screamed.

“Fuck,” Jandro said, then held out his hand toward Filip. “Nagata. Gimme your torch.”

Filip shifted it, dropping the handle into Jandro’s wide palm. The chief of maintenance put the burning moss on the

ground, scraping it off with his boot like the flames were dog shit. The spike where the mat had been was five inches long, set at ninety degrees from the main shaft. Jandro banged the spike against the ground once, testing it.

“Form up!” Leward shouted.

“Fuck yourself,” Jandro said, like he was suggesting what kind of sandwich would go with Leward’s coffee. The big man turned toward the new gap in the wall and started off at a long, loping run.

“I’ll get him back,” Filip said, but it was more that he didn’t have a torch now, and there was a monster loose in the town. He had to do something.

The darkness and the destruction made the town unfamiliar. A wall lay across the pathway, peeled off its building. The wraith-thin body of Arkady Jones sat, back against a water recycler and head resting on their knees. The lights were off to keep anything from drawing the monsters in. It seemed like a fantasy protection now. If you can’t see them, they can’t see you. Filip’s heart tapped fast against his chest, reminding him that it hadn’t been built for this. That he was a Belter down the well. That he was old.

Ahead, a huge shadow moved against the darkness. Filip went toward it, not knowing what he meant to do when he got there. Only that was the problem, and it had to be solved. In the starlight and the faintness of the moon, all he could see was the wide, shifting back. The twin tails, wider than both his legs together. The monster seemed to twitch, like it had stumbled to the left. When it roared, it roared in pain.

A spotlight went on at the top of the fabrication lab where the slug thrower was supposed to be. It tracked the monster as it shifted and stumbled toward the open ground of the town plaza. At first, Filip didn’t understand what he was seeing. Jandro was on the thing’s back, hunched down with his body pressed against it and one free hand banging the unlit torch against its head. The spike was dark and bright at the same time. Wet with blood. Filip paused.

Of all the places in the town, the plaza was the one with the least to destroy. The least that they couldn't rebuild or replace. Even so, he had to convince himself that Jandro had steered the monster, ridden it where he'd wanted it to go. Watching the huge man whip the titanium spike into the smiling monster's side, Filip felt something like awe.

Human voices floated down from the top of the fabrication lab, and a fast, loud rattle cut through the chaos. A line of wounds drew themselves along the monster's flank, and it writhed in pain.

"Stop shooting!" Filip shouted. "You'll hit him!"

But Jandro had already jumped free. The monster shifted and turned, confused by the light and by the new pain. The blood that sheeted down its side and poured from its eye and cheek was as red as anything Filip had seen. As red as a human's blood. Another shaking rattle, with better grouping now, a new wound opening on the beast like the slug thrower was a mining drill coring through its side. The monster raised its head and tried to sing again, but the sound that came out was choked and strained. It took another step forward, shifted, stepped back, and folded itself gently onto the bare dirt of the plaza like it was stopping to take a nap. The eyes didn't close, but they went dull.

Filip ran to Jandro, more than half expecting to find him dead. Instead, he was on his knees, swatting clouds of dust off his pant legs and grinning.

"You okay?" Filip asked. "You need a medic."

"I'm fine," Jandro said.

"You could have been killed, coyo."

Jandro's grin widened, and he shrugged. The monster seemed to breathe out, some last trace of life escaping the corpse. Even dead, it was huge. Jandro bent down, grabbed the bloody pole, and tossed it back to Filip. "Thanks for the borrow, yeah? Let's go show these pinche fuckers who's boss."



Jannah system was—had been—one of more than thirteen hundred connected to Sol and Laconia by the gate network. It had a middle-aged star and two planets in the goldilocks zone, four gas giants strung out into the stars with clouds of moons around them like little solar systems all their own, and a thin, disappointing asteroid belt. In the gold rush years, half a dozen different entities had put claims to the two life-sustaining worlds until a disagreement over agricultural assay rights had escalated into a brief and mutually annihilating nuclear war, and the Transport Union had been forced to step in. For the better part of a decade, the system had been fourth or sixth or tenth priority for the corporate lawyers and union administrators, rights adjudication always moving forward without ever quite resolving.

Then the Laconian Empire had rolled through, smashed through the red tape with the iron fist of imperial fiat, and Emerling-Voss Minerals and Financial Holding dusted off its blueprints.

It was more than possible that somewhere in those plans, there had been a little square with a double line hashing one side that had meant temporary barracks. Or, more likely, general-purpose room. Now, it was two-and-a-half-meter walls of prefabricated metal with yellow chips in the blue sealant and a patina that made them look dirty no matter how much Filip scrubbed them. The ceiling had the same kind of full-spectrum worklights as the cabin on his last ship, the *Rhymer*. And inside the building's only room, two canvas cots. One was his. The other belonged to Mose, his supervisor. Diecisiete, the third of their three-person team, was in Alpha if she was anywhere.

“Wake up,” Mose said.

Filip turned on his cot and moaned.

“Wake up.”



“Can’t wake up,” Filip said. “I died. Dead men don’t wake up.”

“You didn’t die.”

“Then why do I hurt so much?”

“Because you didn’t die,” Mose said with a long, wheezing laugh. “Dead men don’t hurt. That’s being alive.”

“Could be in hell,” Filip said. By now, sleep had retreated, and all that was left was the ache and sense of fear.

“Could be,” Mose said, but the laughter was less now. Filip rolled onto his side, and Mose put a plate on the cloth by his shoulder. Textured protein and the last of their pepper sauce. With the state he was in, it even smelled good. He rose to sitting and took a spoonful. Mose stood, folding his wide arms.

“Now you’re done sleeping the day away, there’s work to do.”

“Be right there,” Filip replied, as if his work contract was still what it had been. As if the *Rhymer* was coming back to drop off the new crew and take them back up the well and out to the stars. It was a little piece of theater they played out between the two of them. Mose played at being the good boss, Filip played at being the diligent underling. He could hear in the way Mose talked that the act was wearing thin. It was wearing thin for everyone.

Between them, Alpha and Beta were the whole human population of the planet, and the majority of the people in the system. There was, Filip had heard, a prospector’s ship on one of the watery moons of the second gas giant. If that was true, whoever they were needed to get their asses back down to the planet as quickly as they could and then find a way to land. With the gate gone, the human population that mattered—that had any meaningful effect on any of them for the rest of their lives—had gone from tens of billions to under two thousand. Maybe less. If they weren’t careful, maybe a lot less.

Filip finished his breakfast, scraping out the last bits of nutritional yeast and mushroom with his fingernail. The voices

of the others filtered in from outside. And behind that, the clanging of a mallet on steel. He went to check his hand terminal, but it had broken a week before and there weren't any replacement parts. The fabrication lab could have built some, but the supply of reagents wasn't deep, and he didn't need a hand terminal anymore. He could just walk outside and look up to know the time of day. Or consult with the weariness in his back to know how much rest he still needed.

Of the seven worlds Filip had set foot on—all of them light gravity, two of them too heavy for him anyway—Jannah had the most changeable skies. Some days it was an indigo so dark he could see the brightest stars at midday. Others, like today, it was a pale olive from horizon to horizon. The breeze was cool and musky, like one of the old water treatment plants on Ceres. The damage to the town was different in the daylight. Better because he could see it and not just let his imagination tell him how bad it was. Worse because he couldn't tell himself they'd gotten off light.

The monster had stumbled through a storage building and the machine shop where the science team worked on their small fleet of prospecting drones. Both of the buildings were flattened. If it had kept on the path it started, it would have gone through all the barracks, and they'd have been digging graves for half the town. Instead, the corpse lay in the plaza, its flesh cut open, swarmed by the local carrion insects and biologists. Leward paced among them, gesturing excitedly with his wide, blood-streaked hands. Filip scanned the crowds until he found Mose coordinating a salvage crew at the dead machine shop. Kofi was there too, and a broad-faced woman whose name was Aliya or Adaliya. Something like that. With the *Rhymer* gone, it probably made sense to pay more attention to things like that now. Filip slid over, hands in his pockets, and looked over the mess. Kofi noticed him and lifted a hand in greeting.

“Could have gone better,” Filip said, gesturing to the ruin with his chin.

“Could have gone worse too,” Mose said. “We lost some of

the fine-work machines, but if we pull this up careful enough, I bet we can reuse almost all of it.”

“I’ll see if the welding rig’s free,” Maybe-Aliya said, and strode off. The patch on the back of her jumpsuit said she was maintenance. One of Jandro’s crew. Filip looked back at the dead monster and the men and women around it. The ones who were working by talking a lot.

“I see it too,” Kofi said.

“Yeah,” Filip said. “What can you do, though.”

It was natural enough. The scientists and administrators were doing science and administration. The mechanics and workers were working with machines. Filip found a length of conduit and used it to scratch the itch between his shoulder blades. Up between the light olive sun and them, something huge and distant unfolded wide, curving wings and cast them all into shadow for a second.

Mose spat on the ground. “Slug thrower got the fucker, yeah?”

Filip considered the dead monster. The autopsy had peeled it down to bright pink bone and pale flesh. It looked only a little smaller than it had in the darkness. Its flat face still had the permanent smile, like it knew a joke the primates that had killed it didn’t understand.

“Took a while.”

“Misfired the first time,” Mose said. “That’s what I was fixing before I came here. They had to ground out the main capacitor and bring the whole thing back up from battery. Overengineered and slapped together at the same time.” He spat again.

“Why we been using old-fashioned explosive propellant guns since forever,” Filip said. “They’re like sharks. We found a perfect design for killing the shit out of some coyo that needs it, why change?”

“Yeah, we used to have spaceships too.”

Spaceships and gun cartridges, both relics of their past.

“Coyo in chemistry group says we can get saltpeter from the local guano. Seems like we should try.”

“We do this first,” Mose said with his supervisor voice.

A woman broke off from the flock of administrators and scientists. She was smaller than Filip, with light brown skin and a mane of tight-curved hair that was auburn where it wasn't gray. She'd done his intake interview when he and Mose had arrived from Alpha. Her last name was a mouthful of Russian that sounded like a puppy falling down stairs, so everyone called her Nami Veh.

“Moses. Filip.” She nodded to each of them as she said their names. She had a gift for making it feel like they were friends, and knowing everyone by name was part of it. “We're calling a town meeting tomorrow after dinner.”

“Yeah?” Filip said.

“It's to talk about everything we know so far about...” She looked back at the dead monster. “About those. And planning for what we do next. It's important that everyone come.”

“We're not really part of all this,” Mose said, shaking his head. “Me and Filipito? We're subcontractors, not permanent here.”

Filip didn't know if Mose was fucking with her, or if that was really still how he thought of himself. Of them. At a guess, Mose wasn't a hundred percent sure either. Nami Veh's smile was ready and real.

“It matters for everyone, so we want everyone to be part of it.”

Mose shrugged. “Okay. We can try. Not like we're going to be out at the dance hall.”

Nami Veh laughed like it had been funny, put her hand on Mose's shoulder, and moved off to some maintenance group workers who were resetting a water purifier the monster had knocked down. When she was out of earshot, Mose chuckled.

“I guess she can call ‘town meetings’ now. Think we can all do that? Go tell the science leads that there’s a thing they have to come to? Think we can all decide there’s something on the schedule, or is that just them?”

Kofi smiled, but his eyes made him look angry. “Typical, yeah? No problem inners can’t solve with more fucking meetings.”

“We don’t go,” Mose said, then turned to point at Filip particularly. “That’s the rule. If extra meetings aren’t cleared by the union, we don’t go. You give these bastards a millimeter, they’ll take a klick.”

“The union? Are you kidding?” Filip asked, and then regretted it.

Mose’s face went dark and his chin jutted forward. “You listen to me. You and me, we’re *union*. That’s the way it is. All this other shit doesn’t change anything unless we let it. And we are not going to fucking let it. *Never*. You understand?”

Kofi looked away, embarrassed. Mose wasn’t insane, but here he was shouting about getting something cleared by the union offices, as if that could happen. As if the way things used to be had anything to do with how they were now. If he’d dropped his pants and started dancing with his ass out, it would have been just as connected to their current reality.

Grief made people weird.

At the corpse, Leward was talking animatedly to a half dozen of the science team. Nami Veh was already halfway around the plaza, organizing whatever it was she was organizing. And Mose was staring at Filip with the kind of aggressive silence that could turn into a fight if he let it. Mose was ten years younger than he was, and when he looked at Filip, he just saw an old Belter technician with white in his beard and hair. He didn’t see Filip as a threat, and Filip had put a lot of effort into keeping it like that.

“I hear you,” Filip said, carefully. “We should probably get this thing salvaged, yeah?”

Mose hoisted up his chin a degree more. Filip imagined slamming the conduit in his hands into Mose's face. The look of surprise the man would give him before he dropped. Instead, he let his own gaze fall, looking more submissive than he felt. It seemed to satisfy Mose.

"Where the hell is Adiyah?" Mose muttered, and stalked off, ready to vent at her. Filip dropped the conduit he'd been holding and started to pace off the ruins of the machine shop. Kofi fell in beside him. After a few seconds, the younger Belter spoke.

"Mose, he's..."

"Yeah," Filip agreed. "Lot of people shook. Strange times, que?"

"Strange times." And then a moment later, "Are you really going to sit out this town meeting because of the union?"

"No."



Forty years could be a long time. Or it could be hardly any time at all. Most often, it was both of those at once. Filip had taken this form of his name as a boy. The older he got, the more distance he had from his childhood, the stranger it became to him. Fifteen was the age when most people were taking their first contracts. He'd been leading terrorist raids that got people he knew and cared about killed. Watching his mother throw herself out an airlock without a vac suit. Helping his father commit genocide. Filip Inaros, he'd been then.

And he'd fallen from grace and renamed himself Nagata. He could remember when all the sins of his childhood had felt like glorious virtue, but he couldn't get the feeling itself back. And then his father died, and the systems of law and commerce remade themselves, and he was just another face among billions. No one knew that he'd left before that final battle. The records of his desertion had been lost with the Free Navy. He was dead, and so he was free to move on with his

life. That was the theory anyway. The practice was more complex.

He'd been angry, and he hadn't understood why, not for years. Even saying it aloud—*My father was a terrible man, and I helped him do terrible things*—didn't carry the weight of it. He failed out of his first apprenticeship from having too many panic attacks. And the Filip Nagata name was a thin shield. If anyone looked too closely into him, they'd see past the paint. So he took other names, other pasts. Oskar Daksan. Tyr Saint. Angél Morella. Somehow, though, he always gravitated back to Filip Nagata. His past was like a wound that wouldn't heal. Or a poison.

Other people, they put together lives that followed from one thing to the next. Instead, he'd spent his life dodging justice that might not even have been looking for him except in his head. That had been enough to break him. At thirty-one years old, he had been Tyr Saint for a year and a half, an unofficial part of a group marriage on a Transport Union colony ship, and in line for the chief mechanic's place when she retired. For no reason he could fathom, he'd woken up one morning with an abyss of fear opening under him. He'd murdered billions. He'd seen his own friends die. They, whoever "they" were, would come for him. He'd dropped his identity at the next port and vanished, starting over again from nothing. Never letting anything build.

He took the work nobody wanted. Low pay, high risk, long contract. He signed onto the ships where people didn't talk about their pasts. He avoided any conversation about Marco Inaros or the Free Navy or the bombardment of Earth. And if anything ever went right for him, if he ever seemed in danger of gaining something he might be able to keep, he ran.

Once, he'd tried reading about the experience of child soldiers and the paths they'd taken through the trauma of their adult lives. Before he'd even finished the first half of the book, he'd descended into panic so deep that the ship medic had put him on antiseizure medications. He'd never tried again.

Forty years could go fast that way. They could feel like a thousand.

The *Rhymer* was the latest in a long string. Filip Nagata had never dropped out long enough to lose his place in the union, but his work history had long and inexplicable gaps in it. There were a million work histories like it. Mental illness. Addiction. Religious or romantic fixation. Families made and left behind. There were a thousand reasons for moth-eaten careers like his. And there were slots on a ship like the *Rhymer* for people like him. The ship's full name was *Thomas the Rhymer*, and it was owned by a trade organization out of Bara Gaon that catered to new and struggling colonies. For the first few years, he'd been on strictly as crew as they carried workgroups through half a dozen gates, dropped off people and equipment or picked them up again to transfer off to other ships, other systems. When Laconia rolled through, the *Rhymer* and her sister ships had gone from working for the Transport Union to the Association of Worlds without missing a beat. It didn't matter who was in power, they wanted someone doing the shit work that the *Rhymer* made possible.

Filip had been happy there, or at least not unhappy. He'd have kept his slot if two things hadn't happened. First, the XO had taken an inexplicable dislike to him. And second, the junior technician in Mose's workgroup had a heart attack three weeks after they'd passed through Jannah gate. The company needed a replacement, and pulling from the *Rhymer*'s crew meant not having to spend the extra transit time. Filip needed off the ship at least until the XO calmed down or shifted his paranoia elsewhere, and the gravity of the little planet was light enough that Filip could stand it without risking circulatory collapse.

It had seemed like a good choice for everyone, and him most of all.

He and Mose and Diecisiete had delivered a solar power array to Alpha and spent a few months setting it up, troubleshooting it, and helping the locals work out the bugs. Diecisiete had stayed in Alpha to track down a power drop,



while Filip and Mose rode a supply shuttle to Beta and started the whole damn thing again. Filip could still picture the shuttle leaving them there, heading back to the relative metropolis of Alpha. There was a strange calm that had come from being at the edge of civilization. Or maybe just past the edge.

The news of the rest of the systems, the attack on Laconia, the loss of Medina Station, the eerie losses of consciousness that turned off minds everywhere, including Jannah, were all things that had happened during his time in Alpha. And the other, stranger thing. The timeless stretch when all minds had smeared together like oil paints being mixed by a gigantic, uncaring thumb had come when he and Mose had reached Beta. Filip's memory of that period was spotty and odd. Like he was trying to recall the details of a dream too big to fit in his finite skull.

When they'd all come back to themselves, the gate was dead. The *Rhymer* was still weeks from its scheduled passage back, and both the ring and the ship were now gone forever. Someone on the astronomy team had spotted the ring falling sunward into a new long elliptical orbit, shoved out of its former place at the edge of the solar system by some unknown, godlike hand. No one on Jannah knew why. They never would. All the problems they had now, all the ones they ever would have, they'd have to work through here.

Alone.



The sky darkened fast. A scattering of high, thin clouds clustered in the north took the red of the sunset and turned it into gold leaf. The monster's corpse had been dragged off the plaza, but the place it had lain was black with blood. A cloud of local insects buzzed around the stain and ignored the people.

The damage to the town was real, but the salvage and repair effort had left it less wounded. What had been the machine shop had become piles of salvage, squared away and

ready for reuse. The new breach in the wall was shored up enough to keep the wildlife out. Just because the monsters could walk through it didn't mean that the other animals were welcome. The town kitchen had given out bowls of riced tofu and black sauce, some of the last of their supply, and Filip was finishing his now. The bowl was made of hardened and vacuum-formed vat-grown kelp. He'd eat that too, when the tofu was gone. Every calorie and vitamin was so precious now, that someone on the science team had suggested using calories as the basis of a new currency.

At the edge of the plaza, Jandro and his crew were sitting together, laughing and talking louder than anyone else. They had what looked like beer. Since Jandro had ridden the monster down, he'd been treated like a hero and a badass. Which, Filip figured, was fair enough. If the price of beer was hauling himself up on a monster's back while the bolt thrower on the fabrication lab shot holes in it, water was fine for him.

Mose wasn't there. Probably he was back at the room, making his point about union rules to himself. Kofi was, along with a handful of other Belters, sitting not far from Jandro and his crew. The scientists and administrators were sitting in clumps of their own, except for Nami Veh, who circulated from group to group to group, talking to everyone, touching shoulders and arms, smiling like she was running for office.

As the early-evening sun continued to drop, the golden clouds flared and faded to gray. Filip took a bite of the bowl. It was crisp and layered and salty, like baklava without the sweetness. He chewed and watched Nami Veh approach.

"Filip," she said. "Long day. Thank you for coming. I really appreciate everyone showing up."

"Mose won't be here. But he doesn't mean anything by it. He's just working some things through, you know?"

Her smile dimmed a little. "I think we all are."

"Yeah," Filip said.

She looked for some way to touch him without it seeming

awkward, didn't find one, and moved on. The relief he felt as she walked away surprised him. He didn't dislike her. Her kindness seemed a little too consistent to be real, sure, but it wasn't her that bothered him. It was talking. That bothered him because he was trying to listen. And he was listening for the monsters, singing.

So far, they were silent.

At the front of the plaza, Leward hauled out a little metal bench and a holographic projector. From where Filip sat, he could see the science lead's lips moving. Practicing. There were probably four hundred people in the plaza. Almost everyone. Filip shifted. His leg was falling asleep.

Leward stepped up awkwardly, holding his palms out to ask for quiet. Or to demand it.

"Everybody?" he said, and while it was inflected like a question, it wasn't one. "Everybody? Thank you all for coming here tonight. I know we've all been through a lot, and I wanted to start by saying how much I appreciate everything all of you have done."

The sunset was dimming fast. It was hard to make out the expressions of people across the plaza, but Filip thought he saw Nami Veh shake her head just a little.

"We've learned a lot. We know a lot more than we did before, and it's really going to help." He nodded as he spoke. Someone to Filip's right muttered something. Someone else laughed. Leward's smile widened. "Beta's site was selected based on a slate of criteria. Water availability. Shelter from major weather patterns. So on."

He took out his hand terminal, tapped it, and the projector came to life. A topographical map of the valley sprang into slightly fuzzy existence, with a red ball the size of a fist where the town was. Filip leaned forward, considering the shape of the hills.

"All the reasons this is an attractive site for us?" Leward said. He was getting his rhythm. He sounded like a university

lecturer. “They also make it attractive for the locals. We knew that. Biosample diversity was a plus for us. But we didn’t know about the size of some of the local fauna, or that we were setting down roots pretty much exactly in its migratory path.”

One of the communications team stood up, raising her hand. “So the monsters aren’t attacking us? We’re just... in their way?”

“Turns out we built our houses in their hallway. But that makes a solution pretty straightforward.” Leward flexed his wide hands and tapped his hand terminal again. The red ball that was Beta was joined by a green one halfway up a nearby slope. “One of the tertiary sites that we didn’t pick is close enough that we can relocate even without the shuttle.”

Filip felt himself sink. He glanced around at the town. The structures for more than four hundred people to work and live. The recyclers, the reactor, the power grid. It was all designed to travel in the hold of a colony ship: easy to take apart, easy to put together. *Easy* meaning *maybe not impossible*. He thought of the conduit that he and Mose had put in place, the wire and vacuum channeling they’d laid down. Relocation would go faster if the whole town was focused on the task, but the prospect left him weary all the same.

It wasn’t until someone else interrupted that he noticed that Leward had kept talking. Jandro was standing in the middle of the holographic display, gesturing between the two versions of Beta. The real and the imagined. Filip had missed whatever the start of his comment had been.

“I mean that’s got to be half a klick up, yeah?”

“That’s true,” Leward said, “but the carts were all built with a full g in mind. They’re pretty robust for this kind of short-distance travel, and there are game trails that the local animals have made that we can appropriate.”

Jandro looked around at the crowd. The stars had come out above them to compete with the worklights and the backscatter

of the display. Jandro shook his head slowly, crossed his arms. “This is a bad plan, boss.”

“We’ve run the numbers,” Leward said. “The whole move won’t take more than five days, start to finish.” That sounded optimistic to Filip, and probably to many of the others sitting under the stars. He’d probably picked a low number to make the whole thing sound feasible. But it was so overly optimistic that it made everything else Leward had said seem a little more suspect.

Nami Veh stepped up to the bench, smiling and holding out her hand to Leward like she was doing him a favor by helping him down. He hesitated for a moment, then let her take his place.

“Can you share more of what you’re thinking, Alejandro?” Nami Veh said. “This is a big decision, and we don’t have a lot of time to make it. Anyone who has thoughts about this, it’s important that we hear from you. That’s what this meeting is for.”

When Jandro spoke, his voice had less of a buzz in it. “Here’s the thing. We’re talking about taking down everything. All of it. And then putting it back up. Every time we do that, we risk breaking something. It’s just wear and tear, yeah? And that’s if these big fuckers don’t come while we’re in the middle of the shift. Look at how much it would take to move, and instead we put that work into making what we already have a harder target. Dig some trenches. Put some spikes in ’em. Get that slug thrower tested out better. Get the chem lab to cook us up some gunpowder. Some bombs, maybe. These big fuckers bleed. They die. We can teach them not to fuck with us.”

“Fortification is less effort at first, but it’s also a commitment to permanent upkeep,” Leward said. “Relocation, we do once and then we can get back to our routine.”

“Unless there’s something at the new site we don’t know about like we didn’t here.”

“These are interesting questions,” Nami Veh said.

Jon Lee, one of the recycler techs, stood up, and Nami pointed to him. “What about water availability? We chose this spot for reasons. What would we be giving up if we went?”

“I can speak to that,” a younger woman in a research team jacket said. “The tertiary site is on a creek that feeds down into the valley. We’d be seeing a reduction in overall flow compared to the river, but it’s still more than we need in the near term.”

“Even with the recyclers?”

“Recyclers, hydroponics, cooling. Even some secondary energy production for when the reactor runs out of fuel pellets. The new site’s enough for all of it.”

Filip listened and watched but didn’t take a turn standing up. He’d spent a lot of his life trying not to get noticed, and there were more than enough opinions to go around.

About half of it, it seemed to him, was really about the monsters and their migration paths. The rest was about fear. Fear of the monsters. Fear of what had happened with the gate and what it meant for them. Fear of losing what little they still had left. Filip understood, because he felt it too.

It was close to midnight when Nami Veh called a halt to the proceedings, told everyone to go get some sleep and think about what they’d heard. They’d take a vote in the morning. Filip joined the line at the latrine, then went back to his cot without changing clothes. Mose was watching something on his hand terminal that had a man in a bright red suit getting into a floridly choreographed gun battle in what was supposed to be Ceres Station but looked more like a cave network on Callisto. It occurred to Filip that the entertainment feeds saved on the local system were the only ones they’d ever have. Unless the data went corrupt. Then they wouldn’t have the man in the red suit either.

“You went to the meeting,” Mose said coolly as Filip curled under his blanket.

“I did.”

“I told you not to.”

“I know you did.”

“You went anyway.”

“Yeah.”

Filip waited to see where Mose took it from here. He didn't think he'd push the issue, but times were odd. Things came out sideways sometimes. He almost thought the other man had gone back to his feed or turned over to try to sleep when he spoke. “I'm not going to bullshit you, Nagata. I'm going to have to report that. If I don't and the union finds out, that's my balls in a sling.”

“Okay.”

“Okay,” Mose echoed. And then, “I can maybe make it better if you report in, though. Like you were there to keep an eye on these assholes. What happened?”

“Everyone debated about whether to move the town out of the way or dig in and try fighting the monsters off. The science teams like moving. The technical staff lean toward punching it out. There's going to be a vote at breakfast.”

“Shit,” Mose said. “Well, I guess we'll see what the plan is tomorrow.”

Filip rolled onto his back, looking up at the featureless gray of the ceiling. He thought of Leward's map, and the crowd sitting close to Jandro. The black mark where the monster's blood stained the earth. He remembered his mother saying *The only right you have with anyone in this life is the right to walk away*. He thought about his father's need to frame everything as an epic struggle between himself and the universe. He pictured Nami Veh's calm, sweet voice, and Jandro's angry growl, and knew which way the vote would go.

“Stay and fight has some good points, but it doesn't have the votes. We're going to move the town.”

“You sure about that?”

“I am,” Filip said.

When morning came, he was right. And he wasn't.



After the vote, Leward and six of the civil engineering and administrative workgroups, Nami Veh among them, headed out to review the new site and the paths they could use to reach it. The rest of the town got to work. Filip and Mose, Beta's only local experts on the power grid, took two hours isolating lines and preparing the pocket reactor for shutdown. When they'd gone as far as they could, Mose went to help with the medical bay equipment and Filip headed over to where half a dozen of the long-timers were breaking down the food production units.

It was a simple enough setup. In the depth of space, a ship's galley could use water and energy to cultivate textured fungus that, with the right compounds and spices, the system could use to mimic a wide range of foods, some with better fidelity than others. In Beta, they had fifty separate meter-long cylinder units mounted in steel racks. The power regulation on them could be tricky. The capacitor design was kind of shitty, and more than one untrained person had died from misunderstanding the caution warnings on the little red box, so Filip took that part of the job himself.

If half of the cylinders went down, the town would still have enough to eat. The fabrication lab could probably keep these in replacement spare parts for six years. It sounded like a long time, until Filip started thinking about what they'd need in year seven. Then it seemed very soon.

The person overseeing the breakdown was named Jackson. Thin as a Belter, but with a Laconian accent. They were a contractor just like him and Mose, but with a different company. Jackson's plan was to break down half the units, install them at the new site, and then come back for the rest.



“If we can get a pinche cart to carry them on,” they said with a scowl. “Can someone go find a cart?”

One of the others, a younger man named Cameron, jogged off looking for Jandro and his maintenance crew. Filip shifted the power couples off the unit he’d been working on, but before he could start on the next, Jackson put a hand on his shoulder and shook their head. They had wide lips and a narrow nose that Filip might have found attractive in other circumstances. The barely restrained annoyance Jackson gave off any time they looked at him reassured him his interest was irrelevant anyway.

“No point if we can’t get them on carts,” Jackson said. “You can strap one of these fuckers on your back okay, but you better really fucking want it.”

Filip chuckled and went to clean his hands. All around the settlement, people were at work breaking down what they had. He’d only been there a couple months. There had been people living in Beta for much longer than him. Still, it felt a little like seeing an old ship getting scrapped. There was a loss to it.

He found Mose sitting outside the medical bay. One of the walls had been unhitched and the guts of the bay left open to the breeze. Filip shrugged his question.

“Need some tie-downs,” Mose said. “I get the feeling people weren’t expecting to take the place down and haul it halfway up a mountain.”

“We’ll figure it out,” Filip said.

“Diecisiete’s going to laugh about this when she gets here,” Mose said. “Those fuckers at Alpha better get their radio back up, or when the shuttle comes, they’re going to piss themselves. Whole place just...” Mose whistled between his teeth and swept one flat hand like he was erasing the town.

Filip sat. The ground was a little damp. It smelled like potting soil and citrus and the ever-present note of toilet cleanser.

Mose chuckled to himself. “Yeah, Diecisiete’s gonna

laugh.” And then, softly, “When we’re done here, I’m taking us back to Alpha. Whole team. That’s an established colony. This penny-ante bullshit? It’s no way to live. Alpha’s better.”

Filip nodded. There was a pleading tone in Mose’s voice. He recognized it. It was the same sound people had when a ship went unexpectedly dark. The universe wasn’t kind. There were millions of things that could go wrong. Every now and then, a ship hit a micro-meteor or had some cascade failure they couldn’t catch in time. Every now and then, a colony or station got surprised by an accident. Sometimes, apparently, ring gates went dead. Whole civilizations, billions of people wide, pared down to a few hundred between one day and the next. Look at it that way, and Mose wasn’t having a psychological breakdown. He was just thinking things through out loud. Catching up to a universe that had changed faster than he could and didn’t give a fuck if anyone kept up or not.

“She’ll laugh,” Filip agreed. Down near the food pods, Cameron was back and talking animatedly to Jackson. Filip couldn’t tell what he was saying, but he kept pointing north and shaking his head. Filip scratched his neck even though it didn’t itch.

“Hey,” he said. “I’ll be right back.”

“Whatever,” Mose replied. “Where the fuck am I going to go?”

Filip went toward the north end of the settlement. Three other teams were busy breaking down structures and piling up supplies. Beta was packing to move, but no one was moving yet. Even where crates and spools were ready to load, they weren’t loaded. The protective wall was broken in two places now where the monsters had lumbered through it. Filip walked slowly, looking for whatever Jackson and Cameron had been talking about. He heard it before he saw it: voices raised outside the wall. It wasn’t anger or laughter, but loud all the same. The shouts of people coordinating with each other. Work voices. Filip lifted himself over a low spot in the broken wall.

The carts were there. Past the wall, he could hear their motors whirring and straining, and the whine made him wonder what they'd do when the bearings wore out. For now, they all seemed fine, lumbering along or parked. Great loads of dark soil were heaped up in two of them. The yellow metal was streaked with mud. The workers that crewed them were streaked with mud too. They carried shovels. And from one end of the town almost halfway to the other, a deep gouge ran through the earth, three meters wide and a meter deep, the displaced earth piled in a berm between the hole and the town wall. The smell of fresh-turned soil was thick and weirdly astringent.

Filip strolled toward the workers, his hands in his pockets. They were all maintenance and construction. Jandro's crews. One woman saw him and nodded sharply, as much a challenge as a greeting. Filip smiled and nodded back.

"Nagata."

Jandro, lumbering up beside him, was a mess. Mud caked his legs to the middle of his thighs and smeared his arms and chest. When he grinned, Filip noticed that one of his eyeteeth was chipped. He hadn't seen that before. He found himself very aware of the physical size of the man. The strength, the sense of ease, and a deep maleness that wasn't a threat unless it was.

"Jandro," Filip said. And when Jandro only grunted in reply, "Lot of work."

"Yeah. Figure about four passes. So about twice this wide and twice this deep. Build up the hill on the side. I figure we use the mud and some of that shit that looks like grass. Make bricks. Lace plating doesn't stop these fuckers, but make a hill steep enough, they'll get tired and go around, same as anyone."

Jandro shrugged like he was commenting on all he'd just said and leaned a little forward, waiting. Filip wasn't sure that he wanted to be the one who said the next thing, but he was the one who was there. "The plan was that we move the town,

though, yeah?”

“That’s a bad plan. Better that we do this.”

They were quiet for a moment, looking out over the growing ditch. The maintenance crew working and shouting. Filip wondered what would happen if he made it into a confrontation. He thought of Mose saying *We’re subcontractors*. That wasn’t exactly right, but he wasn’t the one who’d called the town meeting or held the vote. Nobody had elected him to be in charge of anything.

Jandro shifted his weight again, stretched his shoulders. His smile was friendly enough, but it was friendly with an edge. Like milk that was just starting to go bad.

“Well,” Filip said with a nod, then turned to amble back into town. A few others passed him, heading the other way. The news, getting out. He kept his eyes down as he walked. His jaw ached.

Mose and Kofi were at the medical bay, sitting on ceramic crates with their backs against one of the walls that hadn’t been taken down. As Filip came close, Mose lifted his hands, asking a question without saying what it was.

“Mining, though,” Kofi said, continuing the conversation they were already having. “There’s a lot we can do as long as we’ve got power. The fuel pellets run out, and then what? No hydroponics. The yeast vats stop working.”

“Kofi’s decided we’re all gonna die because he’s out of cigarettes.”

“It’s not just that, it’s everything. The guns are out of cartridges. Med center’s out of bone density drugs. Security’s down to half a dozen tasers. You think those big fuckers are going to give a shit about tasers? And the fabrication lab can’t just print new parts out of nothing. The printers aren’t magic. They need metal and industrial clay. Carbon. And even if we get everything where we don’t starve to death... Shit, we’re gonna need to make babies.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake.”

“No, serious! We don’t have any kids here. Youngest person in Beta’s probably twenty-something. We’re all going to be dead of old age and no one to keep things going if we don’t.”

“Good thing there’s no kids. You’d be scaring the shit out of them,” Mose said, and spat like it was punctuation. “How about we don’t start freaking out about our legacy until Alpha gets their radio working and we hear from that survey mission? Anyway, what we need now is some fucking carts. I’m not strapping this shit to my back and walking it halfway up a mountain. I don’t care if we are under four tenths.”

“Don’t wait underwater,” Filip said.

Mose scowled. “What’s that mean?”

Filip shook his head and left it at that.

Over the next few hours, the town slowed to a halt. The teams that had been focused on taking the structures apart paused. The piles of supplies stopped getting bigger. Conversations were quiet and tense, people stood with their heads close together. The expectation of action, of business, of having the hours filled to the top with things that needed to be done and done fast gave way to a half-nauseating torpor. Outside the town, the maintenance crew shouted a little too much and laughed a little too loud.

The afternoon was slipping into early evening when Leward and the others came back. Filip watched from a distance, the same as everybody else, as Evelyn Albert and Nami Veh headed north past the wall. The tightness in Filip’s chest made him feel like he was a child again, waiting for something bad to happen. He checked the power feed to the magnetic bolt thrower on top of the fabrication lab. It gave him something to do, and he couldn’t bring himself to stay still.

He wasn’t there when Leward and Jandro faced off, but he heard about it. Leward had shouted himself red in the face about how Jandro was defying the will of the town and

breaking the plan. They'd lost a day because of him, and the carts had *better be* cleaned and ready to start the evacuation in the morning. According to Kofi, Jandro had listened and been calm while Leward poked him in the chest and yelled in his face. Then he'd said that Leward's plan was a bad plan, and that Jandro wasn't going to let the town do something that could get them all killed just to save Leward's feelings. Then he'd tousled the science lead's hair and walked away. Just like that. Like a big brother messing with his little sibling.

"You should have seen it," Kofi said, awe in his voice. "You should have been there."

"No," Filip said. His stomach felt like someone had punched it. "I'm fine here."

They were sitting on a bench with legs made from spools of optical wire and a seat of a local tree analog with veins of green and blue lacing through pale woodlike flesh. Filip, Kofi, and Mose. With their backs against the medical center wall, they could see the plaza. The dark stain had almost vanished, and Filip wondered idly what had happened to the blood. Around the town, other little groups were huddled together like they were. The uneasy sense of conflict was like smoke in the wind, an invisible maybe-threat that everyone felt and no one could see.

"Leward's an asshole," Mose said.

"Is," Kofi agreed. "But he's the boss asshole. Or used to be, I guess. Now, I don't know."

Filip knew how this would have gone before. There would have been a message sent out at the speed of light, tightbeam lasers hitting relays one after another out to the ring gate and back to an administrator at Emerling-Voss, then a conversation with the union rep, then authorization for the company to sanction Jandro and his team. Loss of pay. Loss of union benefits. A berth back out, maybe. Maybe on the *Rhymer*. Maybe on one like her. Part of Filip was still expecting it to play out that way. It wouldn't, though. Leward had made a plan, had gotten people to agree, and he'd failed. There was no

corporation or union behind him. There was no process now. Just power.

“You’re not eating,” Mose said, and Filip realized the man had still been talking to him.

“Not that hungry.”

“This is crap,” Mose said, lifting his bowl. “Did we run out of sauce?”

“Yeah,” Kofi said. “Plain is what we get from now on. Barrett over in the chemistry group is looking at what we can harvest from the local organisms that won’t taste like shit or kill us. We’ll have something in a few weeks, probably.”

“I’m not eating alien shit,” Mose said. “Are you crazy? None of this stuff’s made with the same chemistry we are.”

“There’s some overlap. And salt’s salt, no matter where you go. I’m just hoping we can find something that tastes like pepper. Or cumin.”

“We’ll get resupplied from Alpha when the radio comes back up,” Mose said. “I can eat shit until then.”

“If there’s still an Alpha,” Kofi said. “They’ve been down for a long time. And if they didn’t eat all their stuff while we were eating ours. Not like they’re getting resupplied.” He lifted his bowl like he was displaying an exhibit. “This shit is all the shit there is.”

Mose’s cheeks darkened and his lips went thin. “You know what? Fuck you.”

He stood up, shoulders high around his neck, and stalked off muttering. Kofi watched him leave with surprise in his eyes. “What’s with him?”

“All of it, I guess,” Filip said. “Our ship. Our team in Alpha. The gate. It’s a lot, you know.”

Kofi nodded. “I forget how new you two are around here. Beta was just supposed to be a stop for you.”

“It was.”

Kofi took another scoop of the yeast protein in his bowl and nodded toward Filip. “You should eat. It’s not good, but none of this gets better by starving.”

Filip made a scoop of his first and middle fingers. The mush was bland and viscous. His gut was too tight, but he swallowed it anyway, pleased not to gag. “What do you remember?”

“Que?”

“About the thing before the gate went away.”

Kofi nodded. There was only one *thing* before the gate went away. “I don’t know. It’s hard to bring it back now. I was here working on... I think the water feed. And then, I was other people. Or no one. And I was huge. What about you?”

“It’s like a dream, you know? How when it’s over, you don’t remember? Like whatever it was doesn’t fit in your head. I was in this dream...”

“And you woke up in a fucking nightmare.”

Filip laughed, and Kofi laughed with him. “Fuck, you know? It’s just... Mose is weird. I get that. But I keep thinking the *Rhymer*’s coming. Or that Diecisiete’s finishing up in Alpha and coming here. Or I’ll go there. Or... Our next contract was in Tridevi system. Five-workgroup contract putting a power grid up for a city of half a million people. We were going to be hauling teams in and out for four years, and we were just doing the backbone. I keep thinking about how that’ll be, like it was still going to happen. Half a million people. And now, there’s four hundred.”

“All those others are still out there.”

“Are they? I don’t know that. Maybe everyone else everywhere else got snuffed out like candles, and we’re the only ones left. How would we know?”

“There’s Alpha.”

“Maybe.”



“There’s the survey team.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Yeah,” Kofi said.

Across the plaza, Eric Tannhauser, a short blond man with skin so pale you could see the veins in his forehead, was talking to Mina Njoku. He was shaking his head and pointing an angry finger up in the tall woman’s face. Nami Veh appeared at his side, and Tannhauser turned his wrath, whatever it was, on her. Filip tried to take another bite of his food but couldn’t bring himself to do it.

“You think they’ll call another vote?” he asked.

Kofi shrugged. “If they do, I’ll bet you half a week’s wages that Jandro wins it. You should have seen him. Leward spitting like a wet cat, and Jandro letting it all wash past him like it was nothing. Anyway, doesn’t matter what the vote was. We’re staying here. Holding our ground.”

“Maybe we won’t have to. Maybe those things already moved past us. Moved on.”

“Or maybe they’re growing wings and getting ready to breathe fire. Who knows on this planet?” Kofi took a last scoop of his meal, then held the empty bowl up like an exhibit. “I am going to get mighty fucking tired of this.”

Mose didn’t come back to the cots after dinner. Filip lay on his back, one arm behind his head like a pillow, and waited for sleep that wouldn’t come. Every time he started to drift, some tiny noise would pour adrenaline into his bloodstream and snap him awake again. He wasn’t even certain what he was anxious about. There were so many options.

When he didn’t sleep, he thought about Jandro. He imagined the confrontation with Leward, building versions of it from Kofi’s description. Putting himself into it. The knot in his stomach kept getting tighter. Jandro smiling his wide, sharp threat of a smile. The man was a hero. He’d ridden one of those monsters. He’d saved the town, maybe, when he’d steered it into the plaza and within range of the slug thrower.

He didn't remember who'd said it, but when he'd been much younger, someone had told him that saving money for an economic collapse was a bad plan. Who knew what scrip would matter and what would just be a number in an account no one cared about? The things that would last were bullets and liquor, not cash. When the apocalypse came, bullets and liquor would be the only currency that mattered. They weren't wrong. Beta could have used a lot more of both.

But that half-remembered giver of wisdom wasn't talking about Beta. They'd been talking about the bombardment of Earth. They'd been talking about the billions of people Filip had killed. Filip and his father. He wondered if Mose was out somewhere in the town right now, finding whoever had been smart enough to set up a distilling pot. They'd be the richest person in Beta soon, whoever did that. Until someone else made some bullets and took it from them.

"Fuck," he said to the darkness, and hauled himself up. His jumpsuit was filthy. He'd take it to the river tomorrow and let some of the dirt wash out of it, but tonight it was slick and sticky, and he felt dirty putting it on. Outside, the night sky was a riot of stars, and the astringent stink of the broken ground north of town was thicker. He didn't know why that was, and probably no one else did either. He stuck his hands in his pockets, put his head down, and walked.

If the monsters were coming tonight, they'd have started singing earlier. He'd be out north of the town with a torch in his hand. With Jandro and Leward and all the others. It was a fucked-up thing to feel nostalgic about. But at least they'd all still be on the same side.

Maybe, they would be. Maybe now it was different. He wondered, if Jandro went to risk his life for the town again, whether Leward would try to stop him the way he had last time. It was harder to picture.

The breeze was cool against his cheeks, and the light gravity wasn't enough to make his joints ache. Here and there in the town, lights glowed, and the local insects drawn by them

made little humming clouds. He heard a few voices, but they weren't raised in anger. They were just people talking. Some of them laughing. A couple having some kind of sex, he was pretty sure. Human sounds. It was bigger than a ship, but not so much that he couldn't get back some of the feeling of walking decks. He could almost imagine that Beta was an old colony ship, burning through the long darkness. He could make sense of it that way. The planet was just a weirdly designed ship, spinning through the same vacuum he'd grown up in. The people of the town were crew and passengers, their fates locked together by the ship's recyclers and the thrust of the drive. The problems and dangers they faced might express differently. There weren't great, strange, smiling monsters lumbering through space. But there were micro-meteors and the unforgiving vacuum always trying to get in.

The mission was the same: Keep the food supply going. Keep the water drinkable. Don't boil in your own waste heat. Survive. That was always the job. Survive.

By the time he'd made it all the way back around, the knot in his stomach was looser. The fatigue of the day had come out from under the tension and fear. He could imagine sleep.

Mose was on his cot, snoring gently. Filip stripped down to his undershirt in the darkness and crawled into his own. Mose muttered something once but settled back down to sleep without making sense. Filip's body felt like it was growing heavier, the cot rising up from below like the ground had started a faster burn. Leward and Jandro, Nami Veh and smiling monsters were all still there, floating through his thoughts like echoes from another deck. He could ignore them. Let them go. When he closed his eyes, it felt comfortable to let them stay that way. Even the little pang of hunger wasn't enough to keep him awake.

Filip slept, and for the first time in more than a decade, he dreamed about his father.



“We found them.”

“Who?” Jackson said.

“The big fuckers. The monsters,” Cameron said. He was practically hopping up and down with excitement.

Jackson made eye contact with Filip in a way that meant *Can you keep the work going while I deal with this?* Filip wiped the sweat off his forehead and nodded in a way that meant he could.

Jackson stood with a grunt. The food production unit they’d started taking apart yesterday, they were putting back together today. The racks that had been emptied of cylinders were almost half full now, and half of the remounts had power. It was slower putting together than it had been taking apart. Filip felt like that was true for a lot of things.

“So what are you talking about?” Jackson asked.

“Muhammed Klein? Fat Muhammed, not the one with the bent nose? He put chemical sensors on the survey drones. The reason we couldn’t track them before is that there’s another species that follows them. Little bird-things that eat the grubs and stuff that the big fuckers churn up. It’s like they’re sweeping away the tracks. Only the tracks are outgassing trace ammonia where they dig down to hibernate or whatever. So we found them.”

Filip took one of the capacitors, a flat red box a little larger than his hand, and triple-checked the charge status before he fit it into the base of a cylinder. His attention was on Cameron. The big bastards’ tracks were giving off trace ammonia. Like a freshly scrubbed toilet. Filip realized they’d had an early-warning system all along.

Jackson spat on the ground. “Where are they?”

“Everywhere. North of here. South of here. All over the valley.”

Filip and Jackson shared a look. “I can’t finish it all, but I can get it to a good stopping place,” Filip said. “I mean if you

want to go see about working on the defenses.”

“Better should,” Jackson said.

“Yeah.”

Jackson smoothed their hands on the fronts of their thighs like they were wiping the palms clean, then walked off with Cameron toward the science labs. Filip hoisted the next cylinder into place, steadying it with one hand while he fixed the bolts to hold it. It was a little unwieldy without another pair of hands to help, but it wasn't bad. At a full g, it would have been impossible.

All around the town, people were doing similar work. The false start at moving left everything half broken down. Or half put together. Depended on how you looked at it. The sky had taken on an almost emerald green. To the west, pure white clouds billowed up so high, they seemed like they'd reach orbit. Filip didn't like looking at them. He'd gotten to where living without the safety of a ship didn't panic him, but something about the cloud banks made the scale of planetary life harder to ignore. It was odd, the way that living in an emptiness infinitely vaster than the distance between him and even the tallest cloud could feel comfortable if there was a thin bubble of metal around him. Something about the perspective, probably. The universe was always vast, if he thought about it. The trick was not to see more of it than he could stand at any given moment. And picking the right part to look at.

He put the last bolt in place, checked that everything was stable, and grabbed up another capacitor. This one was still holding charge, so he set it to a safe-ground cycle and sat back for the minutes-long wait. He heard Leward before he saw him.

“Put that back. That isn't yours!”

Filip leaned forward to get a better look. They were coming from the east side of town, moving in the aisle between the buildings where months of habit had stripped away the plants and left packed dirt behind. Not dignified enough to call a

street, but where one would be, given time. Two men in maintenance crew uniforms were pulling a handcart. It was a low thing, with wheels broader than they were deep, like a yellow steel pallet on rollers. The science lead was behind them, chin high, and lifting his knees with every step like he was marching. He looked angry, which Filip had seen before. But he also looked ridiculous, which was new. It wasn't him, not really. It was the grinning and snickering of the maintenance crew.

“You stop!” Leward shouted. “We have need of that! You can't just take it.”

The taller of the maintenance crew pair leaned over and said something to the shorter one too quietly for Filip to hear. The shorter one chuckled. It wasn't a kind sound. Around the other buildings, a few people paused to look. Leward made a strangled sound and darted forward. He grabbed the back end of the cart and tried to yank it back. The cart bucked, and the two maintenance men stopped smiling. They let the cart's lead drop to the ground and turned. The smaller one put his arms out at his sides, widening him.

“What the fuck are you doing, coyo?” he asked, and Filip felt a little thrill of fear. He knew that tone. He knew what it meant, even if Leward didn't.

“This,” Leward said, stabbing a finger at the handcart, “is the property of the bioscience lab. It is not construction equipment. You can't just come in and take whatever you want whenever you want it!”

The taller one feigned sadness. When he spoke, his voice was a high, mocking singsong. “Ooh! It's not construction equipment! Oh no! So sad. So *angry*.” Then he grinned and stepped forward, speaking in a regular, low voice. “It's what we say it is.”

“Take it back now,” Leward said, but he quavered. He was starting to understand what was going on.

“Or else what?” the shorter one said.

“What are you talking about?”

“I said, ‘*Or else what?*’ What are you going to do when we don’t, eh?”

Leward glanced around, saw the eyes on them. Filip felt his humiliation like they were passing through a resonance frequency. Like they were back in the dream together. Like it was his own. Leward stepped forward, reaching for the cart again, ready to take it back himself. The tall one put both hands on Leward’s chest and shoved. In the light gravity, the fall took a few seconds, Leward’s legs flailing as he went down. When he landed, it still knocked the breath out of him. The shorter one laughed and stepped forward, his hands in fists.

“Hey!” Filip shouted. One syllable, but hard. Sharp. It brought the two maintenance men around. *Well, fuck*, Filip thought as he stood up. It was too late to think about whether he wanted to be in this. He already was. And as he walked across toward the two men, he didn’t actually regret it.

The taller one made a show of looking Filip up and down. “You a friend of this one’s?”

“I don’t know him,” Filip said. “I’m just a subcontractor.”

“So what are we talking about, subcontractor?”

Behind them, Leward was coming to his feet. There was finally some real fear in his eyes. Late, but better now than never. Filip considered the two men. They were younger than he was. They’d grown up in gravity wells, he could tell from their builds. In a fight, they’d kick his ass. The smart thing was to back down. He wasn’t feeling smart.

All around them, work had stopped. The violence against Leward was shocking, maybe, but with everything going on, they had to expect it. The new guy standing up was unexpected. If he weren’t doing it, he’d be keeping a weather eye on it too.

“Just want to know how you’re going to be when I come take your tools without asking,” Filip said. In the back of his

mind, Mose said, *We're union*. It was ridiculous, but what else did he have? "Jandro's pissed at him, that's not my problem. I don't care who likes who. I'm just here getting the work done. But you need something, union has rules about how you get it. This isn't that."

"Union?" the short one said, tilting his head.

For a moment, Filip was sure the man was going to come for him. That there was about to be violence between them. He wasn't scared. He wanted it. He had a visceral memory of being a child, barely in his adolescence, leading a raid on Martian shipyards. Watching soldiers die, the enemy and his own. He remembered that joy. More than that, he felt it again, just a little. The short one must have seen something change in him because he looked confused for a moment and took a half step back.

"He's right, Alyn," Jackson said, appearing at his elbow. "You know better than this."

The taller one shrugged theatrically. Alyn, apparently. Filip really needed to start learning these names. "Whatever, Jacks."

"Whatever your whatever," Jackson said. "It's a worksite. Not a playground. Get the fuck back to work."

When the maintenance men turned back to the cart, Leward was gone. No one mentioned him. They just took the cart by the lead and pulled it off to the north. Filip watched them go.

"Well, you got balls, Nagata," Jackson said when they were out of earshot. "I'll give you that. You want some free advice, don't get in the middle of this."

"I hear you," Filip said. "Cover for me for a little, okay?"

"You've got something to do?"

"Yeah," he said. Then, "Don't let Cameron—"

"We'll wait for you on the power hookups. I'm not stupid," Jackson said. "Just... be careful."

He hadn't been in Nami Veh's office since he and Mose



had arrived on the shuttle. They'd done their project intake there, affirming all the corporate boilerplate they always affirmed, getting their bunk assignments and the review of local legal policy. He hadn't paid much attention.

It was the same space. Just green and gray prefabricated walls with a little window and a light metal desk. All the small details he noticed now had probably been there before. The picture of a man with dark hair and a thin beard in a silver frame on her desk. The little vase with local flowers in the corner. The discreet silver cross on the wall. He hadn't picked Nami Veh as pious, but it didn't surprise him.

The woman herself was the same. He had an image in his mind of what she looked like, but as he talked, as he watched her for signs of how she was hearing him, she didn't really match the picture. He thought of her as professionally, blandly attractive, with the gentle eyes and hard smile of someone whose job it was to say things were all right even when they were not. But she actually had a much more expressive face, with a webwork of wrinkles at the corners of her mouth and eyes that seemed equally at ease with both sorrow and laughter. Her hair was auburn and touched with gray, but it had more warmth to it than he remembered. He suddenly found himself wanting her to like him.

"Sit," she said, gesturing to a rickety stool in front of her desk.

He did, and spread his hands in an old Belter gesture of passing on a task. "You're administration here. I don't know what needs to happen, but I'm not the one to do it."

He half expected her to say *What am I supposed to do?* And it would have been a good question. To her credit, she leaned forward, elbows on the desk, and pursed her lips.

"Did they hurt him?"

"I don't know," Filip said. "You'd have to ask him. They knocked him down."

"And Alejandro wasn't there."

“They were his people. There’s a way people get sometimes, and if it sets in, you can’t get it back. It’s like...”

“Contempt,” Nami Veh said, and her voice had none of its usual pleasantness. There was exhaustion in its place. And maybe a kind of mordant humor. “It’s contempt.”

“It’s a problem. Somebody has to do something about it.”

“And that somebody is me,” she said ruefully. “Thank you, Filip. I may need your help again. But I hear you, and I will take this seriously.”

“Is that going to be enough?”

She frowned her question.

“I mean,” Filip said, “does Jandro still listen to you? You used to have pull, but you had the company behind you then. I had the union. We had... Now, is he going to listen?”

“We’ll make it work,” she said with enough conviction that he could almost convince himself she had answered the question.

“You don’t understand what he is,” Filip said, trying to keep the frustration out of his voice.

To his surprise, Nami Veh didn’t brush him off. Whatever she was seeing on his face made her frown and settle back in her chair. “Tell me, Filip.”

“Men like him—” he started, then stopped. “My father was like that. Strong. Certain. People loved him, and wanted him to love them. They wanted to have even a tiny piece of his confidence, if they could. It made them do terrible things so that he would notice them.”

“Like what?” she asked.

Filip didn’t answer. He suddenly found he couldn’t meet her eyes. She nodded and smiled, then pointed at the cross hanging on the wall.

“My mother was a saint,” she said. Filip couldn’t tell if that was sarcastic or not. “When she died here a few years ago, I

think a lot of the people at this colony were surprised that the sun didn't go out."

"Sorry I never met her."

"You say that now," Nami said with a laugh, "but having anyone care that much and try that hard to save you from yourself can be fucking exhausting."

"Do I get to pick? Because—"

"Look," Nami said. "I don't need to hear all the ways your father made life harder for you, and I'm not going to explain how living with Saint Anna broke a few things for me. We have no reason to compete, you and I. The only point is that our parents can lay burdens on us, all without meaning to, that we'll have to carry around for the rest of our lives and there's nothing we can do about that. But you and I still get to decide how we carry those burdens."

She reached across the table and took his hand. Hers was warm and dry. Her smile was both sad and comforting at the same time. It made Filip want to scream at her.

"That's all well and good, but this Jandro problem isn't going away," Filip said, and yanked his hand away, needing to break the shared intimacy of the moment and finding himself almost happy to see her smile disappear.

"I know," she replied.

Filip jumped up off the stool and bulled his way out the door, slamming his shoulder into the frame as he went. Once he was back out of her office and into the town, things felt different. He couldn't tell whether the others were watching him, seeing the junior power tech in a new light, or if he only imagined that they were. His chest felt tight, like he was just a little too far from his ship with not enough air in his tank. He found himself bouncing up with each step, pushing too hard against the ground.

Mose was waiting for him by the food cylinders, arms crossed. The clouds in the west had come much closer, and the smell of rain was in the air. Jackson and Cameron weren't

there, but their toolboxes were, like Mose had asked them to leave for a little bit. Filip put his back against the steel racks and shoved his hands in his pockets.

“The fuck are you doing, Nagata?” Mose’s voice was soft, but there was a buzz in it. Anger. Maybe fear. “Are you getting us involved with these people’s problems? Is that what you’re up to?”

“We’re going to be here. At least for a while, maybe for longer than that. Their problems don’t stop with them.”

“That’s bullshit.”

“It isn’t,” Filip said, and Mose took a step back like the words had been a slap. “I know men like Jandro. People are scared and they’re hurting, yeah? And some big man comes along, and he seems confident. He looks sure of himself. All the things that are eating at your heart, they aren’t eating at his. And yeah, he gets a team. Everyone falls in line behind him, and bad things happen. The worst things.”

Mose cleared his throat, but Filip kept going before he could speak. “We’re at the start of something here. We can’t let it slide. If it’s okay now, it’s okay forever. You plug a leak when it’s small, or you suffer when it’s big.”

“And you think you’re going to fix it?”

“I saw a problem, I took it to administration. But these are not the kind of people who know what to do with this.”

“What kind are they, then?” Mose asked.

“Gentle,” Filip said. “They’re gentle.”

“So maybe it’s not your job to find the toughest son of a bitch in this place and make an enemy out of him?”

“That’s how it works, Mose. No one stands up, and no one stands up.”

“I don’t know what the fuck personal shit you’re working through,” Mose said. “I don’t much care. I’m telling you as your supervisor we stay out of local drama. We’re putting in

time here until we can get back to Alpha and Diecisiete.”

“And when I tell you to fuck off? When I tell you your rules don’t matter anymore, and I do what I want, then what, Mose? When I’m like Jandro, what do you do? How do you stop me? Because we both know there’s no union behind you anymore, and don’t fucking mistake me for one of the gentle locals, coyo.”

Mose’s scowl dug lines into his cheeks.

“You’re out of line, Nagata,” he said, pointing a finger at the center of Filip’s chest. “You’re way the fuck out of line.”

But then he walked away. What else was he going to do? Filip turned back to the cylinders. He needed to get them mounted and the walls back up before the storm came.



Filip walked through the downpour. The rain floated down, moving slowly enough in the fractional gravity for the drops to join each other and become a heavy, unforgiving mist punctuated by water balloons. Somewhere behind the cloud cover, the sun was setting. He could only tell by the world growing slowly darker around him.

The plaza wasn’t empty. Several of the buildings had walls that swung up and out, making awnings where people could sit with the weather without being in it. Little pools of light, like pictures of street carts on planets Filip had never stood on. He passed the place where the monster had been unmade. Even close up, there was no sign of the blood, but he thought he caught a whiff of something strange, like overheated iron.

By the time he reached the administration building, he was soaked. He knocked on the door, and Nami Veh called him in. In the hours since he’d been there, the metal desk had been taken out and more chairs had been brought in and put in a little circle. It looked like a very small support group meeting.

Leward sat with his back to the door. Jandro, across from

him, sat with his legs spread and his arms out, resting on the backs of chairs to either side of him. Nami Veh was the professional version of herself again, smiling and gracious. Filip was surprised to realize he was sorry to see that.

“Hey, Nagata,” Jandro said.

“Oye, Jandro,” Filip said, then turned his attention to Nami Veh. “You wanted me?”

“And thank you for being here,” she said, motioning him into one of the empty chairs. “There were some questions about what exactly happened today? I was hoping you could help us with what you remember.”

Jandro turned a half smile to the space about halfway between Filip and Leward. Leward crossed his arms tight across his chest.

“Okay,” Filip said. “Sure.”

He told the story again. Leward, the cart, the push. Jackson coming to back him up. He didn’t look at any of them while he spoke, but he didn’t put his head down either. Just focused on a spot on the wall. When he was done he shrugged.

“Well,” Nami Veh said. “That doesn’t sound exactly like your experience, Leward?”

“It was an assault,” the science lead said. “Does it matter how many times they hit me? I was *assaulted*.”

“Maybe you were, maybe you weren’t,” Jandro said. “You ever been in a fight, Nagata?”

Filip felt a surge of something cold. The hum of the rain seemed to go a little quieter. “What are you asking?”

“You ever been in a fight? Ever seen someone really trying to hurt someone else? You see a few guys messing around. It gets a little physical. If you haven’t been in a real fight, maybe you get mixed up. See some things that aren’t really there.”

Filip said, “I’ve been in a fight,” but he said it softly, and Nami Veh was talking over him. “Regardless, it’s clear a line

was crossed. And we all know who was involved, so the question for us now is how we move forward. Jandro, these were your crew. They need to make this right.”

Filip saw the amusement in Jandro’s eyes and the corner of his mouth. “Yeah, okay. I’ll make sure they come apologize. You bet.”

“And return the cart,” Nami Veh said.

“If he needs the cart, he can have the cart.”

“And Leward?” Nami Veh said, turning to the science lead. “I think it would be good for the community if you and some of the science team could help with building the defenses.”

The cold feeling in Filip’s chest shifted, swelled. “What about the vote?” Three sets of eyes turned to him. “We voted to move the town. What about the vote?”

“Yes,” Leward said, waving a wide hand toward Filip. “Exactly.”

“We’re past that now,” Nami Veh said. “Leward? For the community.”

“We’ll give you the easy jobs,” Jandro said. “It’ll be fun.”

Leward pressed his lips together, thin and bloodless, then stood without speaking and walked out. Jandro chuckled as the door closed. He’d won, and he knew it. Filip knew it too.

“You need to keep your crew in line,” Nami Veh said, somewhere to Filip’s right. It seemed like she was a long distance away. “We desperately need everyone in the community working together.”

“They will,” Jandro said. “As long as we’re working on the right things, they absolutely will.”

Filip rose, made himself nod to both of them, and walked out. There was something wrong with him, but he didn’t know what it was. It felt a little like nausea, a little like vertigo. It wasn’t either one, though. This was something different, but though he didn’t have a name for it, he knew it. He had felt

this before.

In the plaza, fewer of the buildings had their awnings up. The rain was getting colder and lighter. Filip listened for the song of the monsters behind it, but the white noise of the rain hid anything. If there was trouble coming, someone would have to warn them. And if there wasn't trouble tonight, there would be soon. Every night of peace made the next night more dangerous. Filip thought that felt familiar too.

At the room, Mose was sitting on his cot. His jumpsuit was unzipped to the navel, and his eyes were red and bleary. Even without the smell of alcohol, Filip would have known he'd been drinking. Mose had finally found the still that some enterprising future rich person had set up. Filip sat on his own cot, his back against the wall. His clothes were wet, and rain seeped out of his hair and down his neck. He let it.

"You need a towel, Nagata," Mose said, and then when Filip didn't answer, he pulled a steel bottle out of his pocket. He reached over and put it on the cot by Filip's leg. "One of the biochemists is making gin. I mean, it's not real gin, but it's close. It's good. No tonic water, but it's got the right..." He shook his head, searching for a word he couldn't find. "It's good."

"Thanks," Filip said, but it sounded like someone else's voice.

Mose laced his fingers together, then looked down at his hands like they were a puzzle he was trying to solve. "I, ah, wanted to apologize. I keep it to myself, you know, but this whole thing? It's been... It's made me less good than I used to be, you know? Less professional."

"It's okay."

"Denial. That's what they call it, yeah? It's just... I can't..." He started to wheeze. It could have been laughing or crying or just the man starting to hyperventilate. Filip waited, watching Mose's knuckles go pale where he was squeezing the blood out of them. After a while, the wheezing stopped.



“Nobody’s coming. No ships. No shuttle. The gate’s gone. Whatever happened at Alpha, they’d have gotten the radio back up by now. We’re all there is. This shit-ass little squat of a town is all that’s left.”

It was true. It had been true for a while. It was still strange to hear Mose say it out loud, admitting the secret they both already knew. “It makes things more important,” Filip said.

“If I think about it too much, I can’t do anything. I’m taking off a fastening clip, and I think what if I break it? We’re never going to get another one. What if I fuck it up, and it turns out we need it later on? For this to work, a million things have to go right. For it to fall apart, just one of them has to go wrong.”

Filip opened the bottle and took a drink. It wasn’t anything like gin, but it wasn’t bad. He wiped the mouth of the bottle on his sleeve and passed it over. Mose unlaced his hands to take it. Where he’d squeezed, there were marks in his skin. Filip watched his throat work as he drank. He wasn’t leaving much.

“One thing,” Mose said. “One thing wrong, and we all die. We’re all there is, and we all die. And no one even knows.”

“Could be worse.”

Mose’s gaze swam slowly upward until it found him. Outside, the rain had stopped and some of the local insects had started calling to each other with a sound like an air compressor going bad. Filip looked at him, and when he spoke, he felt like the cold in him was talking.

“What scares me, Mose. It isn’t fucking it up and dying. What if we fuck up, but we don’t die. What if we fuck it all up and live? We’re at the end of something, sure. Maybe we’re at the beginning of something too. Maybe we make a whole new world. A whole new planet like Earth used to be. Hundreds of generations. Billions of people, that all start here. And we fuck it up for them.”

“I don’t understand.”

“What if we just go on like people always have? The same

bullshit. Give the same bullies and liars power like we did before. Cut all the same corners. Put up with all the same hypocrites. Make everything here into more of the shit that got us here. That seems worse. For me? That's worse."

"I just want you to know I'm sorry for how I've been," Mose said. He seemed confused by this new direction the conversation had taken. "I try to hold it together, but it all comes out anyway."

"Everyone's like that right now," Filip said. "I'm sorry for how I've been too. For all of it."

Mose started crying then. Not the wheezing, but slow, racking sobs. Filip went and sat beside him, one wet arm around Mose's shoulder, and held him while the sorrow crested and fell away. He let Mose slide down onto the cot, pulled a blanket over the man, who was asleep almost at once. Filip rescued the liquor, put the lid back on, and left it on his own pillow like it was sleeping there.

He made one stop on the way to the maintenance barracks.

Jandro and his crew had two of the little prefab buildings near the western edge of the town. One was standard sleeping quarters with bunks stacked four high against the walls. The other had a few utility cots like Mose and Filip used and a lot of supply lockers. A little group was gathered outside the sleeping quarters in the light of half a dozen torches. Filip recognized the long metal shafts with spikes at the ends from the last time the monsters had come. The mat of oily moss burning at the end seemed like an improvement over what they'd had, though. The flame, longer-lived.

He counted ten people, most of them men, in the flickering light. Jandro, in a chair leaning back on two legs, had his back against the building. He was at the center like a king or a celebrity. Filip stepped into the light, and the conversation and laughter went silent. One of the people was Kofi, but the Belter didn't acknowledge him. Fair enough. Filip didn't know what he would have done if their places had been switched. Or, really, he did, and so he could forgive Kofi for his youth

and cowardice. He also saw the two men who'd taken Leward's cart. Their expressions were blank as snakes.

Jandro tilted his head. "Nagata," he said. "You're up past your bedtime, yeah?"

One of the others snickered, but Filip plastered on a little grin, like he was in on the joke. Like the little humiliations were shit he was willing to eat. He knew how to do that. One of the few useful lessons his father had taught him. "Guess so. I had some things on my mind."

"Yeah?" Jandro let his chair come slowly down. Filip averted his eyes, showing his submission. The coldness in his chest was rage.

"About what she was saying," Filip said. "Nami Veh. Community, you know? The good of the community."

"I remember that part," Jandro said.

"I thought I should clear the air."

"You didn't do anything to cross me. Maybe Alyn and Yuri got a little annoyed, though."

Filip looked over to the two from the cart. "Hey, Alyn. Hey, Yuri."

"Hey, subcontractor," Yuri said. Jandro made a disapproving grunt, and Yuri looked away. Chastised.

"I just wanted to say—" Filip meant to apologize, but the coldness in his chest wouldn't let him say those words. The lie of it was too big to fit through his throat. "I just wanted things to be right. I want things to be better than they were."

The two glanced at Jandro, unconsciously seeking for what reaction they should have. It was all so familiar, Filip could almost see Cyn and Karal, Wings and Chuchu and Andrew. The ghosts of the war he'd fought and lost. The dead he'd turned his back to.

"Your boss tell you to come?" Jandro asked.

"Mose? No. I'm just... following my conscience. And, hey.

Something else. Something to help, yeah?”

He took the little red box out of his pocket, sliding off the protective rubber sleeve as he did it. He held it out, careful not to touch the case and the power port at the same time. It was wider than his hand, but just by a little. Jandro frowned and pointed his chin at it. *What is that?*

“You remember how the slug thrower failed that night the monsters came? They had to cycle the capacitor.”

“That’s true,” Kofi said. “I heard him talking about it.”

“Okay,” Jandro said, but there was interest in his eyes. Now they were talking about when he’d been a hero. They were talking about killing. He liked that.

Filip held up the box with a grin. “This, though? *This* is a capacitor from the yeast tanks. Take a look.”

He tossed it gently, like he was passing a beer to a friend. Jandro caught it, turned it over. “I don’t know about this power grid shit, Nagata.”

“Open the back plate,” Filip said. “You’ll see what I’m talking about.”

Jandro steadied the box on his knee and pressed against the back plate with a palm. “What does this thing do?”

The discharge was as loud as a gunshot and as bright as lightning. Jandro drifted to the side, collapsing slowly in the light gravity. His thigh had popped open like an overcooked sausage, and his eyes were empty.

“It kills monsters,” Filip said, but no one was listening to him. They were all shouting and jumping to their feet. Filip turned and walked into the darkness. Jandro’s crew were so shocked and confused that he made it almost thirty meters before they caught him.



The improvised cell was dark and cold. He lay on the bare

floor. Everything hurt. He was pretty sure that at least one of his ribs was cracked, and his left wrist was swollen badly. Whatever other damage the beating left, he'd have to wait to discover. For now, it was enough just to hurt.

He knew that day came from a little fault in a weld about a third of the way up the wall. A pinpoint of light that started fainter than the smallest star and grew slowly brighter until a tiny shaft of light pushed through. A pale dot no bigger than his thumbnail began its slow track across the floor. He watched it. The air tasted like dust.

Outside, there were occasionally voices. He recognized a few. Kofi. Mose. Nami Veh shouting in a way that wasn't her usual style at all. He wondered if she was holding off a lynch mob. It seemed plausible.

The shaft of light came closer and closer to the wall, and then faded as the sun came overhead. Filip became aware of a growing thirst, but there wasn't any water, so he tried to sleep instead. The most he could manage was a half doze disturbed by his aches. He'd lost all sense of time when the sound of a bolt being thrown roused him.

The door opened, light spilling in around Nami Veh's silhouette. Filip tried to sit up, but his back had stiffened so badly that it took three tries.

The administration woman sat across from him. In the spill light from the next room, she looked both tired and resolute. An angel, come to pass sentence or grant absolution.

"Well, it took eighteen hours," she said after a long pause, "but we lost him. You are now officially a murderer. What? Is that funny?"

"I don't mean to laugh," Filip said. "There's some context that makes that... I didn't mean to laugh."

"What were you thinking?" The angel was gone. The façade of gentleness and kindness and professionalism was gone. It was almost like meeting her for the first time. The weary anger in the words was like the back of his own head,

given voice.

“That it had to be done,” he said. “And no one else was going to do it.”

“It didn’t have to be done.”

“I’ve known men like Jandro. He showed you what he was. He showed all of us what he was. And he got away with it. There’s no law with a man like that. The town voted, but he was more important. And you bent. You failed. You let him do what he wanted, and there was never going to be a path back for him. When someone like that wins? He’d never stop pushing.”

“And so you decided that deserved a death sentence? You’re seeing the irony here, right?”

“There’s a difference,” Filip said. “You’re going to punish me. I’m going to answer for what I did.”

Nami Veh shook her head. “Oh, Jesus.”

“This is how it’s supposed to go. You do something wrong, and you’re supposed to pay for it. Supposed to suffer. That’s what keeps the Jandros from taking over everything all the time, just because they can.”

“So that’s your plan? Make yourself a martyr on the cross of the law? Am I supposed to thank you for that?”

“You don’t understand what men like him are.”

“Of course I do,” Nami Veh said. “Alejandro was a bully and narcissist. And more than a little sadistic too. And he was physically strong. And he was charismatic. And he was brave. He’d throw himself into danger without a second thought. Leward? He’s one of the smartest people I’ve ever met, and he’s a snob. He can’t ask you to pass him a fork without rubbing someone the wrong way. Adiyah will work double shifts and never complain for the rest of her life if you let her, and she’ll stir up romantic drama every chance she gets. Moses is a solid worker and emotional wreck. Merton is one of the most lovely, empathetic, kindhearted people I’ve ever

met, and he's already got a still set up in the biolab because he's an alcoholic. We're all like this. This is what humans are."

"Jandro was different," Filip said.

"And you," she said, leaning over and putting her hand on his ankle. "You are a very experienced technician, with an irreplaceable wealth of knowledge and experience. You're also desperate to be punished for something, and I don't know why."

"He would have taken over. You'd have lost control to him."

"Maybe."

"If I have to die for saving you from that, it's all right."

Nami Veh's laugh was low and earthy and rueful. "Oh no. As my sainted mother would say, no easy way out for you. I've failed at a lot of things, but I won't be the one who gives this settlement capital punishment. Can you walk?"

"Can I get some water first?"

Walking hurt badly when they started. His whole body was stiff, and when they got outside, he could see the bruising more clearly. All the others in the town lined the little almost-streets. Mose was there, looking dour. A clot of people in maintenance crew uniforms, standing together with hatred in their eyes. They didn't follow, but they watched him pass. Filip tried to keep his back straight, to carry himself with some dignity. Nami Veh walked with him, ready to steady him if he needed it. He made a point not to.

Yesterday's rain had left the ground slick with mud, but the sky was wide and clear now. Cloudless. Filip found himself expecting the crowd to do something. Cheer him or vent their rage. They stayed quiet, watching him go.

By the time they reached the wall at the edge of town, his joints were starting to loosen. His wrist had angry, shooting pains when he tried to turn it, but that was the worst. He didn't complain. Nami Veh walked out the access gate between the

plates that had once been the hull of a ship.

The southern valley rolled out before them. It was easy, staying inside the town, to forget how wide the valley was, and how full. Things that looked not entirely unlike trees rose along the banks of the river below them. A pack of long-legged animals somewhere between deer and huge spiders made their way to the west, following some trail he couldn't see or else making their own. A pile of equipment lay in a circle where human boots had crushed the ground cover. Nami Veh walked to it and stopped.

“That’s an emergency blanket you can use for shelter,” she said, pointing to a tiny silver packet. “That’s a micro-solar array. It’ll power the yeast cylinder there. Moses said that the carbon fixation chamber is only good for about two years at best, so you should find something local that provides sugar if you can. Hopefully the device can make it nontoxic for you, but be careful eating new things.”

“Exile?”

“It’s the compromise I could make,” she said. “The maintenance team wanted you dead, no surprise. I think Leward would have given you a public stipend and housing. It was between incarcerating you in town or... This takes up fewer resources. It’s the best I could do.”

“It’s probably more than I deserve.”

“If anyone from maintenance sees you here in the next five years, they’ll probably just kill you, and I won’t be able to stop them. I think most of the rest of the town wouldn’t, but there are some that would, and you won’t know which is which. After that, if you’re still alive, you can come petition to be let back in. If we’ve survived that long.”

He looked at the equipment. It was heavy, but it wasn’t unworkable. There were straps on the yeast cylinder, and a mounting for the solar array. He could wear it on his back and trickle power into the food supply, as long as he didn’t walk in the shade. A bottle for water, and if he stayed by the river, he’d



have enough. Unless some native microorganism slipped through the filter and decided he was a good environment to set up shop in his bloodstream.

“All right,” he said. “Thank you. I’ll go.”

“Do you have a plan?”

“No,” he said. “Maybe I’ll try for Alpha. It’s a long way, but there could be supplies there. Maybe people. If not, I can find out what happened to them.”

“If you figure out why the choice you made to kill Jandro was wrong, come back to us, okay? I’ll do everything I can to make sure you have a place here.”

Filip picked up the emergency blanket. It was very light, and small enough to put in a pocket. “Thank you, but I don’t deserve any mercy.”

“Of course you don’t. That’s why they call it mercy. If you deserve it, they call it justice.” She put her hand on his arm the way she always did with people. It seemed more genuine to him now. “I’m going to do everything I can to keep these people alive. I’m going to compromise and bend and be adulterated and impure and imperfect. And there’s going to be a time not too long from now that I’m really going to wish you were here. Just like I’m really going to wish Alejandro was.”

Filip was silent, but she nodded like he’d spoken.

“That’s the mystery, and that was your clue,” she said, stepping back. “Try to figure it out.”

He watched her as she walked back to the wall, and then past it. Once she had vanished, he got to the task of loading up his kit. It was like a little, scattered ship. The blanket was his environmental controls. The cylinder was his food recycler. The planet, vast around him, was his air recycler. There was a logic to survival that didn’t change, no matter which vastness he was traveling through. And the regret was there too, the way it always had been.

He walked south, keeping far enough from the river that

the land wasn't damp. It was less than an hour before the valley curved and Emerling-Voss Permanent Settlement Beta passed out of sight. The sun tracked to the west, reddening, and Filip found what seemed like a good spot to make the first camp of his new life. The yeast output was less than he'd hoped, but the carbon fixation chamber looked clean. He found a creek and filtered the water before he drank it.

At sunset, the stars came out. The great smear of the galactic disk. The universe that humankind had once been heir to and then lost, now just a light show and a promise. Or a hope.

In the distance, the monsters began to sing.

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## *Meet the Author*

JAMES S. A. COREY is the pen name of Daniel Abraham and Ty Franck. In addition to writing the novels and short stories of *The Expanse*, they wrote and produced the television series of the same name. Daniel lives with his family in the American southwest. Ty will tell you where he lives when and if he wants you to come over.

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