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A RHAPSODY WILD

by
Corey Davis

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford
April 2020

Approved by

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ABSTRACT
COREY DAVIS: A Rhapsody Wild
(Under the direction of Matt Bondurant)

This thesis is a fictional novel which explores themes of morality and tragedy within the society of a crime-and-murder-ridden city called Spekender. The mayor, Ev Edison, has become a disgraced recluse as a result of the tragic deaths of his wife and unborn child a year and a half prior to when the story takes place. His remaining children (three boys and a girl named Nimble) are left to navigate their disaster-torn worlds in isolation from their father and from each other. All of this changes one day when Nimble encounters a dangerous supernatural character that seems to know everything about her own personal tragedy and that also seems to be connected with the steadily climbing murder rate. This experience inadvertently unites her with four unlikely strangers and enlists them all into a secret fight to prevent the loss of more life while also striving to banish the evil force that is terrorizing the city and turning its inhabitants against each other.

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Critical Introduction

At the present moment, as I attempt to write this introduction from my dining room table at home, the world is in the grips of a global pandemic. Daily life for everyone has been almost completely turned inside out, or, more precisely, *outside in*. Restaurants, bookstores, churches, schools, parks, museums, music venues are shuttering up indefinitely, and it seems that the population of the earth is retreating into a hibernation filled not with fitful sleep but with restless anxiety. While I struggle to block out the state of uncertainty that this prolonged homebound existence has implemented for me, I cannot help but be struck by the eerie similarity between this period of sheltering-in-place and the citywide lockdown that Ev Edison issues in response to the unity parade bombing near the end of *A Rhapsody Wild*. Once again, for about the thousandth time since I began seriously writing this novel, I am reminded of why I promised myself early on that I would not shy away from the dark reality of what I was intending to write.

Still, in light of the current circumstances, part of me is sorry not to have written a sunnier story that could act as a pleasant and lighthearted distraction from the doom and gloom of the world. But, honestly, even in its roughest beginning stages, this story was never imagined with a sun in it. As far back as I can remember building *Spekender* in my mind, its skies were always overcast, always cold. Accordingly, any sunshine that manages to make a notable appearance in the narrative (besides that which exists in flashbacks) is always met with an inescapable filter of cloud. To me, this twofold imagery—sun and cloud, both friend and foe—is what best encapsulates the scope of what this novel explores and engages with. This is a story about the indeterminate barrier between light and dark in the human heart and the environments that either hone or harden them. This is a story about the constant threat of good things becoming bad, about the unavoidable prowler that is tragedy and the furthest reaches of the damage that it can do. Though it evolved into a social/moral commentary more out of

natural progression than out of a necessity to submit a “woke” argument about an abject American society, I do not think that its relevance can be dismissed. *A Rhapsody Wild* is a collective and personal fear legitimized and subsequently destigmatized, spiritualized, and humanized—despite the fact that I was scared to make it so.

The Blueprinting of a Story

The idea for the story that would eventually expand into this novel lay on the worktable in the back of my mind for years, after having been initially conceived when I was a young teenager. In my original plan, the story was a young adult fantasy novel called *Dimension Castle* involving characters with supernatural powers and portals into other worlds. As I started high school, it began to veer away from traditional fantasy and wander more into the territory of magical realism, and, alongside this, took on a distinct comic-book feel with the development of a cast of characters that belonged to a covert crime-fighting squad called the Secret Police, who worked with the government to guard their city from supernatural threats. This version of the story, intended to be titled *The Secret Police* right up until a few months ago, laid the framework for my preoccupation with good versus evil (which would become the novel’s preoccupation) and also produced early renderings of almost every character that appears in the novel’s final form.

Since the beginning, the story has always revolved around a girl fighting an adversary invisible to just about everyone but her: Nimble Edison. There is one particular image on Reddit that, over the course of the story’s development, I kept returning to for a visual reference of who Nimble is and what she looks like. Captioned “Yezidi girl carries an assault rifle to protect her family against ISIS,” the picture consists of a teenage girl in the forefront of the shot with a water bottle in one hand and a large firearm strapped to her back, pausing to look back at the camera while in the process of walking with her mother and sister down a dusty road presumably in Iraq,

where they are fleeing threats of terrorism. The girl's eyes are fierce and hard, but her shoulders are visibly hunched with exhaustion. That was how I envisioned Nimble: driven by an intense need to safeguard her loved ones, yet so weighed down by that need's connection to grief and fear—a dilemma which I had to do no research in order to understand. Nimble is aged fourteen in the narrative because I was fourteen when I had my first major encounter with personal tragedy, which racked me with anxiety in regards to my own mortality and dismantled any hedge of protection that I previously perceived my family as having. Nimble's ever-looming panic was once my panic, and it so often manifests itself around food because that was how mine was born: over a family dinner. It was an involuntary and immensely cathartic thing to write about her struggles with mental health through the lens of my own, and it became a decision which spilled over into the experiences of other characters and the overall subtexts of the novel.

Che Dupriest was an extremely personal character for me to write, and, because of that, he is probably my favorite. He was based on the specific brand of so many boys that I knew and idolized growing up as an only child in the early and mid-2000s. These were skinny, white teenagers with skateboard shoes, baggy jeans, oversized dirty T-shirts, and unkempt shaggy hair whose musical tastes fell on a spectrum spanning from Slipknot to Eminem. As a kid, I was always fascinated with their fearless attitudes, but it was only later, as I became older and more aware, that I realized the mental and emotional turmoil responsible for much of their recklessness. Che slowly became a reflection of many friends of mine who exude so much light while secretly wrestling with the worst demons, and I love that about him. As an incredibly caring and optimistic individual dealing with depression, Che acts as Nimble's closest friend, basically her honorary brother, and the one person who intuitively understands her own afflictions. This is what, to me, is so beautiful about him—that he is a nuanced vessel of happiness and sadness, shallowness and depth, strength and weakness.

Like Nimble and Che, I worked hard to fashion the rest of the characters in the narrative with full-bodied, multifaceted identities that contrast with what their lifestyles might suggest about them. I wanted to purposefully manipulate stereotypes and subvert them, to create people that, in both positive and negative ways, do not adhere to the narratives that their appearances dictate for them. Tarro Carthage is an educated young man who displays strong leadership qualities but is so often blinded by his own angry biases. Kat Mercier fits the mold of a wealthy, shallow socialite, yet she is warm and accepting in spite of her own abusive home environment. DK could be dismissed as another harmful criminal without hope to better his life, yet he pours himself into his creativity and poeticism to stay sane. I sought to group them together in a circumstance where they had to actively abandon their judgements about one another and forge a union for the sake of their own lives and others', which also meant reckoning with the moral conundrums of trickier cases, such as Baj Guerrara—both an esteemed genius and a despised gang leader—and Jenner Chalice—both a respected government official and a dirty-dealing traitor. But, more than anything, it meant having these characters understand the places that one another hailed from, which meant me having to understand the place that they all hailed from: the city of Spekender.

The Building of a City

For a while, the story persisted as it was with a fantastical yet detached spirit that I could not seem to put flesh to. I had the basic infrastructure of Spekender decently visualized and thought through, but any crime-ridden city that I could dream up seemed so safe sitting in my imagination. I needed the grim, complicated, and consistent reality of one that was right in front of me, only a ten-minute drive down the highway from my own house.

So, Spekender, at its blood and bones, is my beloved Jackson, Mississippi. I say ‘beloved’ even now with a faint guilt, as if some authority will pop out of nowhere and expose me for never having technically lived there or established some on-paper proof of existence within city limits. Instead, I grew up in the surrounding metropolitan area, and, at least in my experience, if you live in central Mississippi, a lot of your comings and goings overlap into nearby cities, and you end up claiming many of them as your own. Jackson, being the capital and most-populated city in the state, was the natural setting for a lot of my best childhood memories, which took place in several locations whose counterparts feature prominently in Spekender.

One of these places is the Mississippi State Fairgrounds downtown, upon which, every October, the State Fair is held—an event which greatly inspired Spekender’s lively and licentious Bazaar marketplace. For my friends and I, the Fair was always a staple of the autumn season, with its rides, games, food, and strange entertainment. But, to me, the real appeal was always in its atmosphere: a vibrant, haphazard wonderland which transformed into a danger ground after dark—a time that my parents restricted me from witnessing. However, despite their rule, I would also compete in the Fair’s talent show, which lasted a full weekend and often went late into the night. There was one specific instance, close to midnight on a Friday night, when my friends and I decided to walk the fairgrounds while we waited for the judging ceremony to commence. We trickled through a thick, rowdy crowd amidst bright, blinking lights and deafening music, and I remember feeling so electrified by it all. With the Bazaar, I wanted to recreate that same dynamic of the marketplace being a community watering hole in the daylight and then turning into a hotspot for thrills and mischief at night. Visually, I took inspiration from pictures of Hoovervilles from the Great Depression in terms of its hodgepoded, makeshift construction, and from traditional Asian outdoor markets in terms of its vibrancy and variety. Similarly, like the verve of New Orleans and its famous Bourbon Street, I needed the Bazaar to perform more than

one function: to be the cultural hub of the city as well as its notorious garden of sin—both holy and godless on the same strip of asphalt.

Broadly speaking, most all of Spekender’s landmark attractions or locations mentioned in the novel are based off of actual places in Jackson, such as Stippo’s deli (modeled after a particular Piccadilly Cafeteria that I frequented as a kid), Great Winston College (a vague amalgamation of every institution of higher learning in Jackson), City Hall (modelled after the State Capitol Building, the Arts District (inspired by the Fondren District in North Jackson), and the Banger District (loosely based on various areas in South Jackson). But apart from the multitude of other physical properties that Spekender borrows from Jackson, where they truly coincide is in a mutually-troubled internal condition, which provided a canvas onto which I could splatter my own questions and convictions about the notions of good and evil.

The Dawn of a Crime

A Rhapsody Wild opens, most befittingly, with a crime: the “beautifully unreasonable, untraceable” shattering of a window. It is a non-threatening and inconsequential-enough act of vandalism, and yet it stands as a killing in its own right. With the destruction of this barrier which allows for the observation of the outside world but not the intimate knowledge of it, I wanted to frame the introductory chapter around an occurrence that was ethically ambiguous in a metaphorical sense. Is it a bad thing, which could compromise safety and invite all sorts of monstrosities to wreak unspeakable havoc? Or is it a good thing, one which could lead to the unification of a community and the breakdown of misconceptions, paranoia, and isolation from others? An implied query that both of these questions are also asking is one about the nature of *people*. Who is a bad person, and who is a good person? These are great moral debates that wage

war at the heart of this novel and that have waged war in my own heart for years—especially regarding a particular metanarrative that I made sure Spekender inherited from Jackson.

As far back as I can recall, at least for as long as I have known to pay attention to the ways in which the seasoned adults in my life describe Jackson, primarily the only times in which the city has been spoken about in a positive light have been instances in the past tense. Looking back now, I can see that this was always the key to legitimizing the lore of Jackson's social decline: Once upon a time, it was a good, safe place filled with good, safe folk until the bad, dangerous folk came in, chased all the good, safe folk out, and transformed the city into their own wicked playground. This was always reinforced by the flagrancy of whatever Jackson's current debacles were with generalized crime, gang activity, derelict neighborhoods, ineffective leadership, and, most of all, murder. Later, with each summer that I would return home in between college semesters, I would watch local news broadcasts loaded with grim reports of fatal shooting after fatal shooting—more often than not involving those my age or younger—and think about the credibility of this narrative. This version of Jackson and the version of Jackson that I cherished—the grand, quirky, artistic one—did not appear to exist as the same city at all, yet they were. I began to wonder if a city could be forgiven for being horrible if it could also be wonderful. Likewise, as those fatal shootings became fixtures in an apathetic evening ritual, it began to seem increasingly disingenuous how many names and faces idly flashed onto the TV screen and then were gone with further story to them. It began to feel increasingly disingenuous to passively dismiss them as only victims and suspects (somehow both criminal), to not pay mind to the credibility of their experiences that preceded and maybe even orchestrated the acts that either ended their life or threw it behind bars. Thinking deeply about literature which exposes societal climates that necessitate criminal lifestyles (such as Richard Wright's *Native Son* and *The*

Autobiography of Malcolm X), I wondered about the metaphysical effects that so much tragedy could have on its environment—hence Spekender’s afflicted characterization.

This was an intimidating thing for me to face down—writing a story which was grounded in such systematic social problems and also in philosophical conundrums. I knew it would be tricky to explore the motivations behind rampant crime through an analysis of the spirit and not sound naïve, sappy, or fanciful, as well as biased towards the inherent goodness or evilness of any one character. To avoid this as best I could, I needed to disassociate them from their actions and understand the experiences that cause them to subscribe to the emotions they subscribe to and behave the way they behave. Accordingly, to earn an ending rooted in forgiveness and love, I needed to all-the-more lean into the opposites of these two things: resentment and hate. This subsequently led to the invention of a villain which could embody those ideas—not a manifestation of bad people, but of bad feelings, bad beliefs, and bad spirits—and also aid my efforts in fleshing out hatred as a reaction to tragedy.

The Appearance of a Ghost

Out of the multitude of contexts in which the concepts of good and evil are considered and utilized, perhaps the most obvious are religious or spiritual climates. With this in mind, it only seemed natural that the main antagonist of the story should be a supernatural force. For most of the novel, he is referred to as simply a ghost or a spirit. Only once does he suggest a name for himself, joking that he is Spekender’s ‘Spekter’ and adorning the moniker with the signature *k* that the Spektator uses in his own alias. But I think the fact that he is so unnamable attests to the nature of what he is: more principle than person. He is certainly not human, as Nimble and the other characters quickly gather. At times, he embodies what it generally means to be a phantom, with his unpredictable appearances and vanishings, and his constant imprinting

of past traumas upon the present. At other times, he could more accurately be described as a demonic creature, who physically possesses the humans around him, deliberately positions them in situations which endanger their lives, and subverts their attempted acts of goodness, as he does with the story's main characters in order to manipulate and undermine their moral codes. To me, this is what makes him the spirit of hatred in the novel. The villainy that he performs while impersonating various citizens of Spekender represents the villainy that hatred performs in the hearts of the humans that it occupies. Like hatred, he flourishes off of fear, fashioning it such a powerful distrust of others that it begins to seem not only conceivable but crucial to forcibly eliminate another's life or even one's own for the continuation of one's perceived safety.

However, despite the fact that he is more metaphor than man, his physical appearance plays an important role in substantiating his unearthly nature. His wardrobe shapeshifts throughout the story, arranging into visual riddles that reference who his next target will be, while his facial features remain unchanged as that of a young white male. Throughout every murder that he orchestrates and incites, he continues to *look* like a man, which he uses as a costume to expose the main characters' near-fatal flaw of judging someone's substance and worth from what they think one's appearance denotes. Even more than this, the ghost seeks to throw the realization of this detrimental thought pattern back onto the characters' perceptions of their own selves, thus creating an infinite cycle of inner and outer hatred.

His dark successes are best actualized in the character of a secondary ghost which lurks throughout the story: Wharton Wools, better known as The Spektator. Although I have a clear idea of what he looks like in my head, I chose to refrain from ever having him appear in physical form in the novel. Instead, his disembodied voice is what constitutes his existence—coming and going, distantly commentating on the workings of his city but never actively joining them, booming with power and hope and then weakening with despair and cynicism. The transcripts of

his radio broadcasts offer up precious few tidbits about his life, and I wanted to maintain a shroud of mystery around how he came to be a prisoner to his bitterness. Personally, I imagine him as the victim of a horrific personal tragedy that caused him to lose everything he loved and subsequently seclude himself from the society that he held responsible. In that lonely space, he has fallen prey to the internal battle between the ratios of his own light and darkness, which he airs out like a dismal score for the city to choreograph its wrongdoings to until the time that he goes silent presumably for good. But, as he himself notes at one point, *Spekender* possesses other creative outlets through which it processes its pain day after day, and, in the absence of his audio, those remedies are what remain to fill the city up with sound again.

The Redemption of Spekender

At a general overview, it is no wonder that *Spekender* appears to be a steadily dying city with equally unsalvageable citizens. Its populace is plagued by a laundry list of harrowing afflictions that are only amplified by their environment: anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts, grief, homelessness, domestic abuse, rage, corruption, guilt. In the wake of such an overwhelmingly negative track record, Nimble, in a state of utter hopelessness, demands this of Baj Guerrara: “Is there even anything good at all?” (133). The answer that Baj gives her—reconciliation of differences, suspension of judgment, ultimately *acceptance*—is what she goes on to physically demonstrate at the end of the novel in order to save her father.

Ev Edison is probably the story’s most tragic known character, in that he commits a heinous crime that was entirely accidental. Nevertheless, he is still responsible for the deaths of his wife and unborn child. But once this is revealed to Nimble, rather than choosing to hate him (and therefore allowing him to succumb to his self-hatred and certain death), she saves his life. This climax is built up to by several smaller moments of preserved humanity scattered

throughout the story, which are extremely vital because they constitute its hope. They are the proof that, not only is Spekender still capable of goodness, but it is also capable of healing the wounds that were inflicted by its own wrongdoings.

In figuring out how I would go about portraying Spekender's flashes of beauty, I took inspiration from two novels that feature deeply flawed but deeply hopeful urban cities. One was Guy Gunaratne's *In Our Mad and Furious City*, which so masterfully poeticizes a section of London that is desolate with poverty and racial violence, and yet triumphant through the friendship of three boys who live there. The other was Jim Crace's *Arcadia* (recommended by my thesis director, Dr. Matt Bondurant), which offers a picture of an antiquated city coming to terms with modernity and showcases the ensuing human connections and compassion alongside corporate greed and classism. Both of these stories helped me to better envision and execute the scope of *A Rhapsody Wild*'s beauty amidst its ugliness, ultimately culminating in the decision to have the citizens of Spekender express their joy and process their pain through art—and, particularly, through music.

Throughout history, music has existed as a crucial vessel for the conveyance of raw emotion. In saying this, I specifically think of genres like spirituals, protest songs, religious hymns, gospel music, and, of course, hip-hop and rap, which have been conduits for everything from the articulation of inner torment to the execution of powerful social change. In terms of the novel, its very title, *A Rhapsody Wild*, is a nod to this service that music can perform, which is to communicate a story that is in many ways an emotive, spanning epic of life and death. For Spekender, music acts as a mode of survival for many character, not the greatest of which are the banger gangs. Their very name, 'banger,' is a slang term used to describe a song that is exceptionally good. Their brand of music—dubbed 'banger music,' which is very obviously a stand-in for rap music—can be something exuberant and celebratory, as is exemplified with the

Gypsy girls' dance circles and the scene in which Nimble witnesses Greek and the other Metros dancing in the bed of the banger truck. However, it can also be construed as treacherous and incendiary, as Jenner Chalice describes it when he issues the banger ban. However, once banned, it restricts an integral means of release for pent-up emotion which is at risk of being amplified rather than neutralized.

Likewise, along with the Banger District, music breathes vibrant life into every corner of the city—from the symphony theater where Che and Nimble witness the ballerina, to the CUF stage and the unity parade with their rhythmic chants, to the convocation which takes place in the ramshackle cathedral. This particular chapter (and my favorite in the novel) is so essential because it adds a spiritual element to the way in which music operates in the story. There, in a church that has been stripped of all ornamentation, the song that is sung is one driven purely and involuntarily by the combined misery and faith of the soul. For Nimble, it conjures thoughts of everyone that she loves and reminds her of what is most important to her, of what she is striving above all else to protect.

I listened to so much music during the writing of this novel that Spekender began to develop its own signature sound: a contemplative, shrugging piano that is almost jazz-like in its moodiness. Overall, there were many albums and songs to which I am indebted to for their inspiration, which I will list here: *2014 Forest Hills Drive* by J. Cole (the first song, “Intro,” contains Spekender’s piano sound); *Crooked* by Propaganda; *AIM* by M.I.A.; “Day ‘N’ Night (nightmare)” and “Frequency” by Kid Cudi; “Rejoice” by Julien Baker and “I Found” by Amber Run (inspirations for the cathedral scene song); “Mixed Messages” by Big K.R.I.T.; “Blackout” by Steffany Gretzinger; “Best Me” by Sylvan LaCue (again, with that piano); “Bag Talk” by Meek Mill; “NO HALO” by BROCKHAMPTON; “All the Things Lost” by MS MR; “Circle” by

Flyleaf; “DNA.” by Kendrick Lamar and “m.A.A.d city” by Kendrick Lamar feat. MC Eiht; “No Church in the Wild” by Jay-Z and Kanye West feat. Frank Ocean and The-Dream.

Parting Thoughts

During the summer of 2019, in the middle of writing this novel, the United States experienced a horrific mass shooting in El Paso, Texas, and again the very next day in Dayton, Ohio. National news sources aired seemingly relentless interviews with police, the FBI, government officials, first responders, witnesses, and survivors. I remember sitting at my dinner table with my family watching a reporter interview a man in El Paso who had lost his wife in the shooting. At one point, the man burst into tears, and I barely stopped myself from doing so as well. That night, I drove to the park near my house and trudged lap after lap on the walking trail with my earbuds in, frustrated with my own sorrow, racked with terror towards the swift approach of what I perceived to be my own due date for tragedy, crushed by an increasing doubt in the prevailing agent of goodness that I had been taught about all my life.

Those national tragedies, as well as the new perspectives that they prompted me to seek out, were what hijacked the moral trajectory of this story and aimed it in the direction of hope. I wanted something to tell me that, even if the worst thing imaginable actually happened, life could still be good and beautiful. I wanted the truth of the small glimpses that I got on the news of volunteer citizens working tirelessly, of strangers embracing, of memorial murals being painted, of a man passing out slices of a pizza he had bought to exhausted medical personnel and police. I wanted proof, and I found it, and I wrote it. Even now, in the wake of a world paralyzed by fear, I continue to find it and write it.

There is absolutely nothing that is safe from disaster. There is no life so protected that it cannot be killed in the course of a split-second. There are also viral videos of quarantined people

singing and playing instruments from their balconies in Italy. The streets below are quiet and deserted, but there are others coming to their windows in surrounding buildings to listen and to sing along to the music.

I said, do you wanna, do you wanna be happy?

I said, do you wanna, do you wanna be free?

Free from pain, free from scars
Free to sing, free from bars
Free my dawgs, you're free to go
Block is hot, streets is cold
Free to love, to each his own

J. Cole, "Intro"

Now the sneaking serpent walks
In mild humility,
And the just man rages in the wilds
Where lions roam

William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.

Mary Oliver, "Wild Geese"

SOUTHSIDE

It was a beautifully singular crime. A beautifully unreasonable, untraceable crime.

Morning overhead in Spekender, at about the time when the thick, opaque cloud cover brightened the sky to a cotton gray. In a pocket of the city's bullet-riddled Banger District, somebody fished a brick from a storm gutter on Rhee Avenue. Then they crossed the empty street and hurled it through a window in the Public Observatory.

When a battered pair of police officers were finally dispatched from one of the five murder scenes that had accumulated overnight, they found that nothing else about the building had been disturbed. The exterior had not been cartooned with electric-blue Metro fists or motor oil Panda faces or any other banger gang emblem. The entrance gate had not been plastered with anti-Edison flyers or Xeroxed obituaries, or spray-painted with hate rhetoric of varying eloquent degree for the local government. The front doors had not been pelted with eggs or doused with red soda or otherwise defaced by restless adolescents who had not yet been recruited to banger territory.

There were no telltale signs of a break-in. Nothing inside the building was reported missing or appeared to have been tampered with, save for the brick sitting blameless amidst its mosaic of window glass in one of the back storerooms. When reviewed weeks later by a measly task force of interns, the security footage yielded no suspicious activity. Only the breakage, the takeoff of a flock of pigeons from the front lawn, and, hours later, the cutting headlights of what was probably a banger ride passing by as it patrolled its borders.

The search for witnesses was fruitless amongst the surrounding businesses and residences, and, if there had been anyone on the street at all that morning, it would have been the faceless passers hunkered on their pallets by the roadside—impossible to track down. In the coming days and weeks, no follow-up activity was reported, and any excess attention devoted to the case was

eventually overtaken by more pressing matters. So, on a stark overcast morning in Spekender, somebody simply killed a window.

SOMEWHERE

(Radio static) (Radio static) (Radio static)

(Beep—) (Radio static)

Audio: “Come on, you piece of junk—”

(Muffled banging) (Radio static)

(Beep) (Beep) (Beep) (Beep) (Beep) (Beep) (Beep) (Beep)

Audio: “Morning, kids. We’re all going to die. For all you late-risers and class-cutters out there who are, as of yet, unaware of the new blood slicking your streets, eight more of our own are being casket-sized today. And so Spekender sinks to a new level of hell as it churns out one-hundred-and-sixteen homicides so far this year—and it’s still winter.”

(Muffled laughter) (Heavy sigh)

“Promises cannot be trusted, as I make graphically clear each and every segment, and as you all have lived enough life to have learned for yourselves. Promises for this city might have been real at one time. Maybe. But what good does that do us now, you know? You wanna see the power in a promise, then go join forces with the happy pappies who find it commendable to believe that this city is an innately good yet tragically misguided child. Throw your faith to the politicians who sprinkle promises like sugar in their addresses. They’ll melt come next rainfall.

“In lieu of this reminder, and, as always, I’m not going to promise you anything. I don’t have your answers; I have your anger. I have what you can see and hopefully a little bit of what you can’t—of what’s being deliberately hidden from your view. And that’s a hell of a lot more than what your friendly cable-access news station will spoon-feed you. Names and dates, then onto the weather. See me if you wanna know the life in the deaths surrounding you. Come to me when you want to stop roaching around in the dark like the honorable Mayor Edison would have it—especially *you*.”

(Radio static) (Radio static)

“Alright, here’s the programming. Here’s the tragedies that you tuned in for. This will not be easily digestible over your eggs and bacon. This will not cut to commercial. This will be a final testament to the individuals, the people, the *youth* who have been taken away from us. This will be evidence that they were here and now they’re not.”

(Radio static) (Radio static) (Radio static)

“First. Drive-by shooting, eighteen-year-old Dowry Wiggs. Originally initiated into the Metros at thirteen, but, since then, entertaining the idea of renouncing his servitude in favor of a life after high school. My Eyes tell me that he was poised to accept an academic scholarship from Great Winston College—pardon me—*go Eels*. My Eyes have also informed me of a rumor circulating Bangerland that Dowry was getting a bit too friendly with some ex-Pandas. So, at approximately midnight last night, as he exited the Open All Nite on the corner of Grand and Hipe, Southside, carrying a carton of milk and an ice cream sandwich, he was gunned down by three unidentified males—most likely Metros. They fired twelve shots altogether, shredding his chest and torso, before speeding away in a white utility van. His half-eaten ice cream sandwich was still in his hand when he went down, bleeding out on the stoop in front of the store.

“Second and third: double homicide, married couple Floyd and Bess Staves, aged forty-nine and forty-seven. Fixtures in the Park View area of North Spekender, known for facilitating monthly antique auctions. Around one-thirty this morning, an indeterminate number of intruders forcibly entered their home. Floyd was killed in his kitchen following an apparent struggle, in which his face and throat were slashed. Bess was killed upstairs in their master bedroom from a single gunshot to the head. The couple’s dog was found drowned in the bathtub. Following the murders, the rest of the house was picked clean of jewelry, cash money, electronics, and alcohol.

“Fourth: assault, twenty-three-year-old Meridian Bower. A recent graduate of Great Winston and *my* age, if that makes any difference. We went to Spek High together. Her boyfriend reported leaving her apartment complex in the lower Amberka neighborhood at around two A.M. At five this morning, garbage collectors discovered her body stuffed in the dumpster behind her building. Her face was covered in bruises, both of her eyes were blackened, and her right arm was broken in two places, along with three cracked ribs and a fractured spine. In school, she used to hand out chewing gum to anyone who would ask. Generosity—that should be her remembered quality.

“Fifth, sixth, and seventh: triple homicide; Olken Vaught, fifty-four; Pelio Stephens, forty-nine; Clary Furrow, fifty-six. All three belonged to the prominent homeless community occupying Millionaire Park, which, might I add, is the second largest beyond that of the downtown Bazaar, with the backlot of the Banger District coming in close third, if you want to count traitors. My Eyes tell me that all three shared a tent by the public restrooms, where they were discovered by their fellow passers slumped in their sleeping bags, each with multiple gunshot wounds to the chest.

“Eight: hit-and-run, Holland Sutherland, fourteen. Around four-thirty A.M., her body was found by her mother in the middle of the road outside her house on the Eastside. My Eyes tell me that she ran a paper route for *The Decree*, and she had a habit of taking her dog out every morning before biking to work. Speculation suggests that her dog bolted into the street for whatever reason, and she ran after him, where she was hit by an oncoming vehicle, which immediately fled the scene. Holland’s mother was drawn outside by the sound of the impact coupled with the screech of the escaping car. Holland was a Spek Middle honors student and would have turned fifteen in eight days.”

(Radio static) (Radio static) (Radio static)

“I’ll keep saying it. I’ll keep saying it. With every new identity I have to flesh out only to then detail its demise, this city thrusts its head deeper underground. Before long, we’ll all be buried whether we’re deceased yet or still kicking, just to hasten the inevitable. And I’m done asking what, because I know what. I’m done asking where, because I’ll know where soon enough. I’m done asking why, because I will never know why. My question now is when. When is the breaking point, and will it be battled? When will everyone stop killing each other, or when will everyone start and never stop at all? And just how many more names do I have to list off before that hermit hiding out in his own hovel of reality finally decides to put on a suit and call himself mayor again?”

“Kids, here are the cold-hard facts. Support Ev Edison’s reelection, and concede in killing yourselves for the future. Because, as far as I’m concerned, *he* is our murderer. Until he remembers that he pledged himself to be a leader, until he yields more than a placeholder monologue delivered every week by his advisor, until he chooses to stare down into the depths of the danger that is coming for him and every face in the populace that he professes to care for, I blame him. *He’s* at large. His crime is his indifference, along with his failure to strengthen our maggoty police force, his disregard towards the increasing bloodlust of Bangerville, and his negligence in regards to Spekender’s most precious untapped resource: *you*. He let me have you, so there. I’ll take you. I’ll big-brother you, if you’ll have me. And I’m not altogether cruel in my hatred of Edison; let it never be forgotten that his wife and unburn child perished tragically a year and a half ago. But that was a year and a half ago, kids, when the city’s murder rate was less than half what it is now.

“So excuse me a moment while I address the paper tiger directly, should he happen to be listening in live time: Mr. Mayor, it’s long overdue that you gave the camera a glimpse of your cowardly face instead of a fill-in shadow and nonsense damage control, you *piece of shit*.”

(Radio static) (Radio static)

“Alright, I’m back. Had to get that one in. And, while we’re at it, hello to his lackey administration, who are no doubt recording this segment to pick apart later in their ongoing search for who I am and where my hideout is located. Enjoy my voice, because that’s all you’ll ever have of me. Hope it keeps you awake at night.

“And as for the kids, I believe in you who are listening. I believe you can and will talk back. I won’t readily admit that I’m *for* many things, but I am for those of you who want the conversation, even if it’s just for the noise. So think on it. Don’t let your minds and your youth go to waste. Make the day mean something better.

“This has been the Spektator.”

(Radio static) (Radio static) (Radio static) (Radio static)

WESTSIDE

He let the white noise garble unfettered atop the nightstand and down into the carpet that he sat on, hoping that it would burrow into his head and numb it through and through. Sometimes it worked like ice, and he wanted that. He wanted ice-cold showers and ice-cold glasses of water and ice-cold rain scratching against the bedroom window. He craved the way they punctured his senses, riddling them with holes. He thought about leaving the radio on for the rest of the day and letting the *Spektator's* static play on while he sunk lower and lower to the floor. Surely, it would dominate the frequency until the following morning, when the airwaves would once again sharpen and crackle into Wharton Wools' next slated attack on him.

As his hand ghosted up to slap the dial, he turned his attention to the flat-screen on the wall, where the *Spekender Action News* was broadcasting their coverage of the eight murders that had occurred the night before. His one mercy to himself was the muted volume, but he still made himself watch the montage of police tape, blue lights, spot-lit house fronts, cordoned-off streets—a placid creation devoid of gore and grief, a strategy which his advisor assured him was helping keep up citywide morale.

He himself was not mollified. Their names still flashed across the screen, and each one was carved into his mind by the fire-bladed sickle that was Wools' voice. If he were any other man with any other life than the one he had made for himself, those names could fill him with the same just rage, the same equitable sorrow. He could move himself to soldier against the dark as well. But, as he was, he could only slump against the bed with his knees drawn to his chest and the sleeves of his button-down rolled to his elbows, waiting for the daily dispatches from his children. However, what came first from the other side of the bedroom door, was a light, pecking knock that belonged to none of them.

“Mr. Edison?” his secretary tested in a small voice. “I’m sorry, sir, but we didn’t get a paper this morning. Is that alright? I could go to a gas station and get one.”

He took a deep breath and trapped it in his cheeks, urging a neutral tone to sheath over the voice that would come out so she wouldn't be able to estimate the few hours' sleep he had gotten the night before.

"That's fine, Arla."

He could tell she was hovering. "Alright, sir. You want any breakfast or anything?"

There was an aged exhaustion in the question, like a mother fed up with nagging their child to eat their vegetables, and he knew she knew his answer.

"Alright, sir," she said. "You know where I am if you need to page me."

He stared at the door and replayed the rap of her knuckles, imagining himself turning the knob and catching her halfway down the hall, engaging in the small talk of the morning, smiling. A long-time government employee, she was the first of his appointed staff that he had become acquainted with after his election, back when she introduced herself as Arla Palmano, middle-aged wife with a retired husband and a recently-engaged son. Two weeks into his term, her husband and son left on a fishing trip and never returned. They were found a day later, buried in a shallow grave in the woods and stripped of their clothing, car keys, and wallets. A week later, she became a honorary Edison, moving alongside them into Muscadine House, the historic downtown estate that had housed every mayor's family since the city's founding.

The screen on the wall flickered. The thrill of an incoming video call broke apart Ev's thoughts. The notification box that blipped over the broadcast showed him one of the few names that he would bring himself to pick up for: JENNER. Hardly even moving, he pawed at the remote control lying on the floor beside him and aimed it at the TV.

A finely-pixelated image engulfed the screen: a balding man in square glasses, suit and necktie, a wax plant behind him decorating the beige wall of his City Hall office.

“Morning,” his advisor said, toasting a Styrofoam cup of coffee to his computer webcam.

“You seen the news?”

Ev nodded from the carpet, barely in frame.

“You gotta speak to me so I know you haven’t lost use of your vocal chords.”

It came out like gravel spun from tires. “I heard it.”

Jenner sighed. “I told you to quit listening to Wools. He’s a rascal bastard that gets off on hating the world and making sure everybody knows it. The guy thinks he’s some kind of cultural icon amongst the young people, claims that he inspired the formation of that kiddie angst club—what’s it called? CUF? Like that’ll last more than a single phase of hormones. All he lives for is crawling up your skinny end and laying eggs in your head, the *fucking parasite*.”

“Eight people were killed last night,” Ev answered. “One of them was an eighteen-year-old boy, Jenner. My son turns eighteen in four months. Another one was a fourteen-year-old girl. My daughter is fourteen.”

He remembered meeting Jenner Chalice at a political dinner not long before he first announced his plans to run for office. The youngest and greenest person in the room at the time, he had excused himself from shaking hands and escaped to a back corner of the Halo Hotel ballroom just to find some air to breathe. His mind had been on his children, making sure they got to bed at a somewhat holy hour on a school night. His mind had been on his wife, locating her amongst the socialites, flagging down the valet, driving home. Then a miniature man with a sardonic smile had shuffled out of the crowd towards him, opened with an off-color joke, and suddenly became his campaign manager and, eventually, his political advisor.

Now almost two years later, Jenner was like a softening raisin, with wrinkles shoveling fine ditches around his eyes. The crime spike had taken a toll on him as well, along with the workload

of covering for an absent mayor at countless legislative meetings and press conferences. Finally, his advisor was starting to seem as old as he actually was. It was a disheartening epiphany.

“Ev, you know you’re probably going to have to make a statement about this one. This is the largest single-night incident we’ve had so far this year; people will be expecting something. I mean, there was that violinist for the symphony three weeks ago that had the Arts Council crying out for vengeance, and then that banger squabble two blocks from a daycare. But last night—that was *extensive*.”

“I thought we were going to stick with the news broadcasts.”

“Well, your *Spektator*’s whole agenda is fucking that plan to shit.”

“Jenner, I can’t get on camera. I can’t make a speech. I can’t do that anymore.”

His advisor smoothed his hands over the stubble patterning his head. “You just need to get back into it! I’ve been on the phone with the police chief four times since I put clothes on this morning. He’s working his force like horses, but they’re backed up three weeks in cases. He said there’s only so much he can do.”

Ev scrubbed his hand across the carpet, the garish wine-red fibers tingling pins and needles in his palm. After the funeral, Jenner had helped facilitate he, Arla, and the rest of his kids’ move out of Muscadine House and into a dead judge’s mansion sitting in a half-remodeled state on the outskirts of the Westside. Single-storied and flat-topped, the place was dusty and bare, with nails jutting from walls and patches of paint peeling from the walls. It was not a home, he knew for sure, but it could be a cave. It could be a citadel, as far away as needed from any vital organ of the city—especially its heart. He had no idea how his children thought of it.

“Look at you, bud,” Jenner said, his forehead crinkling. “Good God. Golden thirties, four kids, you’ve still got—Ev, you’re a natural-born leader. You’ve got a good level head. You’ve got

sharp instincts, fair judgement. You care, you always have.” His voice dropped into a low, helpless chuckle. “There’s only so much *I* can do too, you know.”

A heavy silence barred between them. Ev caught a glimpse of what he looked like at the bottom of the screen, in the reverse camera’s rendering of the city’s highest authority living like a transient: tan skin jaundiced in the overhead light, thick black hair matted, eyes grayed and spiritless. *One day soon, something will kill me*, he thought, very strangely and very surely.

Jenner tried to laugh a jovial tone back into his voice. “So how are the kids? I haven’t seen ‘em in a while. Ari used to bring ‘em up here all the time, you remember that?”

“They’re fine. How’s Blair?”

“Yeah, she’s good. Yeah, yeah, she’s alright. Always harping me about taking her on a vacation, but. *Okay*, Ev. I’ll leave you to you. I’m here in the office until about four or five if you need me. Have a better one than I’m having, bud.”

His face clicked away, and the news filled the screen again with a waist-high shot of a hairsprayed reporter and a wreck of a man. The caption underneath the video read TARRO CARTHAGE, BOYFRIEND. Against the dark of the night before, the man’s face was struck ghostly white in the glare of a nearby spotlight as he swallowed his words down and tried to thrust a foam-topped microphone away from him as if it were the head of a snake.

Ev let his body collapse on itself, leaning his head against the bed to watch the feed cut quickly back to the station, where the anchorman smiled steadily and reassuringly into the camera. The best noises in the world came after, rescuing his attention from the remainder of the broadcast.

First, it was two brisk knocks. That was Maverick, most definitely. His sixteen-year-old, all polished up, smoothed down, the most impressive version a teenage boy could be. As courteous and conversational as one of the anchors on the TV, he would grow up beyond his

years into an upstanding man, God willing. But it was hard to believe that anything, if it hadn't already, could succeed in dragging him to low places.

Second, a series of drumming slaps. That was Lasso, his youngest as twelve. Bigheaded and brash, fueled by an unlimited reserve of levity and constant amusement, he was completely unfazed by the urban darkness that he bicycled through. He would level out with age, of course, but not all the way, Ev secretly hoped.

Next, three light taps. That was his daughter Nimble. Fourteen years old, swift and measuring at all times, cautious around everything—even familiar things. Too cautious to be fooled, he prayed, even if it rendered her timid and reticent. She would be alright, he knew. She had her brothers to watch out for her.

Lastly, a single booming thud. That was Wry. Loud and jarring on purpose, heavy-handed with intention, like a punch to the wood. His oldest was seventeen and dangerous with it, even more so due to the progression of the last couple years. After all, it was his trigger fists that had prompted Ev to remove his kids from the public school system and administer private tutoring. It was his fists that would break through that bedroom door someday, when they finally got angry enough.

Ev clung to the sound of each of them before the customary silence resettled, and, even then, his ears rewound their echoes. From his place on the floor, with a pounding heart, he managed to whisper back, “Good morning,” and wondered if any of them were still standing outside his door, their ear pressed against it, straining to hear a quiet-worded “come in” beckon them closer.

BAZAAR

She stood alone in the foyer, posted at the wall of windows surrounding the front doors from floor to ceiling. As she peered out at the withered lawn and the street and the woods behind both of them, she wondered once again if the former owner—a judge she had never known—had designed it that way for the illusion of those woods leaning in, as if the entryway of his once-stylish estate were a natural den of the Westside’s tree canopy. But now the windows were grimy and spider-cracked, and any prospect of sunlight was canceled out by a thick coating of cloud. She felt like she was standing parallel to a body of murky water, unable to gauge the bottom. She waited this way most days, gearing herself up to go out.

Can I get a coffee slushie? The phrase was a morning mantra inside her head, constantly being revised for its best version. *Coffee slushie. I’ll have a coffee slushie. The usual, please.*

As the familiar apprehension began to well up, she drew in a long breath that caused something in her stomach to start scratching at itself. Like most mornings, she had been swirled out of sleep by the incessant tease of sickness but never the follow-through that resolved it. Breakfast had been nibbled at while her brothers blustered in and out of the kitchen with bowls of cereal and buttered toast. After they had gone, her share had been carefully stowed in the trash under an old issue of *The Decree*.

Now, a soft hunger summoned up in her as she flicked the wad of dollars in her pocket to a nonexistent rhythm, matching the tap of Arla’s shoes as they entered the foyer.

There was a tired snap in her voice. “Nimble Edison. There better not be a portable radio stuffed up under your mattress if I go looking today. Thought I heard a voice jabbering when I walked down your hall earlier. That Spektator is doom and gloom all around—nothing you need to be hearing.”

Nimble felt the woman’s shadow move up behind her, reaching around her to squeeze her shoulders with an ill-fitting motherliness. “How’d you sleep?”

“Fine.”

Then came the question, quiet but baited. “You eat your breakfast?”

“Mmhm.”

Arla hovered for just a fraction of a second before she let off. “Good. Growing girls gotta have their energy for the day.”

She turned to head back down the left-hand hallway to the wing where her bedroom doubled as an in-home office, but Nimble heard the cadence of her footsteps halt suddenly in the wake of a passerby.

“That goes for you too—*no radio!*” she feigned a reproach, letting a smile slip into her voice. “How’d you sleep last night, Wry, honey?”

“Good, thanks,” Nimble’s brother said curtly.

She pictured him brushing past Arla, ruffling his woolly nest of black hair before he popped the hood of his sweatshirt over it, moving in his loping gait toward the front double doors. Then he was beside her, pushing open one door and holding it there. The watery acid of wilted grass and dewy concrete drifted in, burning her nose.

“You gonna go out or not?” he snapped.

Slowly, she turned to face him—lithe bones under electric, whirring eyes. He had grown to be a scary thing at most times, as reactive as an untimed explosive, a manifestation of what both their lives had become in the past year and a half. But, unlike her, he had let himself roughen in relation to the world outside, and now it was nothing for him to walk back into the city that had spit him out so violently. It was his mandatory brawl, a bloody obligation to continue punching at each day.

“Okay, then go,” he ordered, and she scuttled past him out onto the patio.

The chill of the air hit her too soon, coursing up both sleeves and prickling down her back. Stepping into the yard, she waded through it at a snail's pace, sensing Wry gaining behind her and preparing to pass her, before one of the doors behind them was shoved open so forcefully that the handle slammed into the windowpane beside it.

“Hey, watch it, scrup!” Wry barked. “You wanna bust the glass?”

Nimble turned just in time to see Lasso hustle past him. “I’ll bust you up in yo’ face,” he grinned cheesily, like he could barely contain himself.

“The hell you will,” Wry said, slapping the back of his brother’s head hard. “Your midget ass can’t even reach my face. Get your training wheels out of the driveway before somebody runs them over.”

“At least I *got* wheels,” was Lasso’s final jab before Wry tested him with a muscle twitch of a lunge and sent him running to his bicycle where it lay crumpled in the drive.

Nimble watched him pedal to the street and off to wherever he usually whiled away the morning hours—meeting up with the routine mix of class-cutters from Spek Middle, or, God forbid, fraternizing with the Southside crowd. But now such a fear was reserved for Maverick, though it might never be believed by anyone.

Just then, she peered over her shoulder and caught him slinking around the side of the house. When he realized that he had been noticed, he slowed tentatively, his eyes shaded under the brim of a baseball cap. At last, he offered a neighborly wave to her before ducking behind the mangy shrubs that lined the drive. *Gray zip-up*, she noted, as the distant shards of him faded into the treeline. *Maybe a white T-shirt underneath.*

For a while now, she had been suspecting that her brother was in a banger gang. Beneath the cloaking constancy of his mild nature, no one else seemed to notice that he vanished for hours by day and sneaked through the halls at night. His explanation for a jaw bruised purple

was an unlucky bump into a wall. His excuse for why a pair of new shoes had been sprinted to shreds seemingly overnight was excessive skateboarding or a particularly grueling basketball game. Every day she scanned him for evidence: the abrasive aqua of the Metros, the smudged black of the Pandas, the lime and tangerine of the Aztecs, even the fuchsia of the Gypsy girls. Every day he walked into the woods, blank and blameless, perfect in hiding.

Cratered and weed-choked, the old road that ran by the Edison outpost was travelled almost exclusively on foot by the waif youth that was Nimble and her brothers. The only vehicles that ever rumbled down it were either lost or wandering, or they were the black sedans that stopped by on the rare occasion that her father went into work at City Hall. As they approached it, Nimble matched her pace with Wry's, keeping as close a distance as he would allow before he strayed off in the opposite direction, wherever it led. She tracked his departure like she always did, her throat sticking on an almost-voiced goodbye. Then she was alone.

When they lived at Muscadine House, the hub of the city was only a short stroll away, practically reaching through the wrought-iron gates like a beckoning rosebush. But, from the edge of the world, it was almost half an hour at a brisk walk to downtown Spekender. This daily excursion was Nimble's mission: into the residential cubbies of the Westside, past gas stations and barbecue joints and nail salons and parks, until the trees peeled back and tall gray towers jutted up to poke at the cloud cover, and only a highway overpass, under which an encampment of passers gathered, separated her from near-victory. It was a race against space, and what was in that space, and what it could do. Every avenue, every stoop and crosswalk, could be a spy; but her destination, it seemed, was content to be blind to her.

If downtown was the heart of Spekender, then the Bazaar was the fluke arrhythmia that kept it trembling—deadly to sustain but perhaps even deadlier to try and straighten out. Through sunshine and storm, holiday and work-day, economic boom and flop, its marketplace

remained consistent in commerce and faithful to the most wretched persuasion of rest and relaxation that the city desired. It was a resident shantytown of blue tarps spread over plywood structures, sagging tents pitched in paint buckets, lean-to food huts, rickety carnival rides, smoky sludge dens—a churning tropic that seemed to float the entire population of Spekender in its current.

From the west gate, Nimble had a view that shot straight down the length of the main strip, all the way to the candy wheel rotating sluggishly above the thoroughfare like a cauldron tipped on its side. *Go*, she told herself in Wry’s voice, thrusting herself into the foot traffic. Direct contact with such a dangerously alive environment was always the most disconcerting part of her journey. It was the smell of smoke and fried meat, the sour damp straw emanating from animal shows, the heavy perfume from the fashion tents alchemizing with a thousand different notes of human sweat. It was everyone moving and meshing at once: businesspeople in suits and mothers weaving their baby strollers through the grocery market and bangers burning berry in their respective packs and school-age kids in line to ride the candy wheel and every passer bumbling down the strip with a dirty bottle of bilge in their grip. She didn’t know why these strange powers were the ones she felt she needed to prove herself to each day. They had looked indifferently upon her back as a mayor’s child, and they looked indifferently upon her now as the forgotten daughter of a ghost. Mingling with their practitioners, she felt like a trespasser, but somewhere in that was a feeling akin to fitting in.

The café that she frequented was located on a stubby row shooting off of the main strip, slumped between a shoe shed and a rice house. The translucent door flap was beaded with steam from the inside, and Nimble ducked underneath it into a plastic-walled sauna packed with patrons. One of the baristas busying behind the counter glanced at her and yelled over the noise, “I got that for you, Miss Edison!”

Nimble felt the blood rush up her body and into her cheeks as a few customers around her eyed her with brief suspicion and then looked away. The worst test was passed. She floated over to an empty spot near one of the walls, barely hearing the barista making loud conversation with someone nearby: “Nah, it’s been crazy, we’re so short-staffed! A guy who works for us, his girlfriend was one of the ones killed last night! Yeah, it’s *horrific*—”

As the whirlwind in her mind began to ebb, she looked out through the warped plastic at the strip where a group of Gypsies were circled around a wireless speaker and let her attention fade to thoughts of her mother. Oftentimes in public settings, when she was riding the high of a successful venture, she let herself indulge in a wishful experiment of a continued life. That morning, she would have dragged herself out of bed in her old room to the alarm she had set for school. Her mother—sunny-skinned, black-haired, with a smile that was all sharp cliff and magnificent rock—would have been at the breakfast table, figuring the crossword puzzle in the paper with her much-hated reading glasses balanced on the tip of her nose. Her father would have been trying to throw her off track, nudging her elbow, stealing her pen. And her brothers beside her, hastily fudging unfinished homework. And Savory, the only sister she would ever have, giggling in a highchair, mashing food against her face.

“Coffee slush up!”

The trade was conducted: Nimble’s dollars for the drink. Then she slipped back out into the cold, bobbing along on the crowd to find an unpopulated perch from which she could watch the Gypsies from a safe distance.

This was another payoff of the peculiarities of the Bazaar: the free shows, all of which afforded her another chance to pretend. Tucked discreetly in a cleft between a vacant stall and a dollar shack, she could teleport over to the penny-game stand across the strip that they had hollowed out and tagged with their own territorial graffiti—*pink stars*. From there, she could be as

they were and laugh like them and braid hair like them and trace on eyeliner like them and mess with the banger boys that hung around like them. And the greatest wonder: she could magic with them.

She had witnessed countless circles of theirs come together seemingly out of no orchestration whatsoever, only the nature of spirit. Someone in the mix would play a certain song off her phone, and the others would step back into ceremony as if a force of gravity had pushed them back that way. One by one, cycling in and out with hitchless fluidity, the girls would turn to flame in the middle of the group, dancing for fun, when always just behind them loomed a length of chain-length fence pinned with the husks of dead spirits.

The Prayer Wall was Spекender's ever-growing memorial, an interactive mass obituary of fabric flowers and stuffed animals and laminated photographs and burned-down globs of candle wax. The names of the dead were engraved upon cardboard and strung up with cable ties to stare ominously at passerby without eyes and without faces. It had started out with four, many months back. Now there were well over thirty, with a small crowd gathered around to it to tend to the additions from the night before.

From where she was, Nimble could make out only one name: Holland Sutherland. A sharp panic dashed into her gut, and she was in the midst of remembering a math class from the past and a blonde ponytail sitting in the front row, when suddenly the walkway in front of her was stormed with a steady stream of bangers: bright green tied around heads and sticking out of back pockets and knotted around biceps, fiery orange peeking out from sagging waistbands and logoed on the front of hoodies. Aztecs.

She felt the wind off of them as they flew by her. Then she spotted the goods. A black trash bag cradled in skinny arms, and a squadron of bodyguards forming a barricade around the carrier. *Money*, she thought as the bag streaked past her. A getaway in progress.

“Rammy got the ride going!” one of the Aztecs yelled over his shoulder as he glanced back to gauge the slow pursuit of a police officer on foot farther down the strip.

Fascinated, Nimble watched them cut a current through the crowd, hopping dollies of boxes and jutting around bystanders. One after another passed. And then the last one in the line slowed, swiveled, and turned to her.

The look of him burned into the developing solution of her mind. She would remember him just as she saw him first: short dark-golden hair, green drawstrings, orange shoelaces, colors neatly separated. He was walking backwards with a torturous linger in his stride, smiling, and, all at once, she knew that there were a thousand and one traps between them.

“Oh, right!” he said. “Your dad’s the murderer!”

Nimble couldn’t move, even as he turned and escaped with the rest of the Aztecs. She heard his voice over and over, while the Gypsies across from her vanished, and the Prayer Wall became a blur, and the tired whine of police sirens slogged through the city a hundred steps behind her.

SOMEWHERE

(Radio static) (Radio static) (Radio static)

(Beep)

Audio: “Morning, kids. And anybody who’s listening, really.

“If you are in the market for a nugget of truth in our shifty environment, then take this freebie for all its worth. As long as you live here, you will never find fault with it: you’re going to die by this city. It’s trying to kill you, *right now*. For the most part, it will succeed. But even if you manage to somehow evade a physical death by its hands, you’ve already got its poison in your blood. You think like it, you act like it, you look like it, and you will never shake it. It’s a lifelong thorn in your side.”

(Radio static)

“But today, seeing as how you’ve caught me in an uncharacteristically cheery mood, I’ve decided to help you out. This place might have it out for all of you, but here is a friendly reminder that there are at least some options of activity with which to go out swinging. And isn’t it grand that we get to make the selection of our futile gesture? Isn’t it generous that we get to pick which losing fight to join? See, I can still recognize goodness, even if it’s through a cracked perspective.”

(Radio static) (Muffled laughter)

“Anyway, before we get into that, here’s your daily reminder of the approaching end—lest we get too comfortable with ourselves.”

(Radio static)

“Three days have passed since the unprecedented night when eight citizens were murdered in isolated incidents across Spekender. Since then, there has been a notable lull in crime. But never hope too soon, kids. Not here. Learn that now. Yesterday marked the first documented murder since, when an unidentified male body was discovered in the wooded area behind the Fieldington neighborhood in South Spekender—and, for the sake of party lines, yes, that would be Panda territory, Bangerland. Our exemplary authorities have yet to release his

identity, their reason being that the poor kid's face had been torched 'til it resembled a bald apple. However, my skillful Eyes have employed some facial recognition techniques of their own and determined that the body is most likely that of twenty-two-year-old banger Milo Ramirez III, affectionately known by his fellow Aztecs as Rammy. He had been dead for almost twenty-four hours before his body was stumbled upon by local children—and if it's you that's listening, then God wrest your nightmares because you will never forget them. Anyway, since his body was burned beyond recognition, one can only assume that this was what killed him. Tortured to death, as it were.

“Here's what I have to say about that. A suggestion, if I may. Humble detective work. Do not let the name Dowry Wiggs slip from your minds so easily. Banger murders are oftentimes connected in much more sinister ways than one. But if it was retaliation for what happened to our friend Dowry, then why pick an Aztec? If you will recall, smart children, Wiggs was a former Metro. A former Metro and a pending *Panda*. But good 'ole Rammy, an Aztec, was found dead in Panda territory. What, did the Pandas send colorblind assassins? Did they mix up their blues and greens? Maybe. Unless this kill wasn't entirely about Dowry Wiggs. Unless it's a message to a larger ordeal brewing inside Bangerville, just itching to blow. And, mind you, this is just an onlooker, calling it like he sees it. But a word of advice to the four quadrants themselves, if I may be so bold: you might find it helpful to double-knot your alliances, lest you trip on a loose end you thought was tied.”

(Radio static)

“Now onto the main body. Here's your well-balanced breakfast before the school day, if you swing that way, or if you don't, then here's something to chew on either way. Yes, this city will slaughter us, but we might as well comfort ourselves with the delusion that we can all serve a purpose as we bleed out into the storm drains. And, luck for us, Spekender has provided us with

such a well-rounded repertoire, taking into consideration everyone from humanitarians to inhumans. There's something out there for everyone! What are your interests? What are your compulsions? Pick a career path. Pick an ideology, any ideology will do. Why not start with the heavyweight contender? It's where a little more than half of you will likely end up anyway.

“The banger gangs of Spekender have been conscripting soldiers—I mean, recruiting members—since the city saw its inaugural criminal act. Located in the notorious Southside, the Banger District boasts some of the city's best and brightest who were neither bettered nor brightened but instead suckered over to a mercenary family dynamic that, although over-possessive and vengeful, is at least a step above the broken homes they were born into. And so the vicious cycle—however you want to define that term—continues, backed by the glamour of big guns, big money, and power promises. The Big Four in a nutshell: Aztecs are all style and no substance, Gypsies are all flirt and no firepower, Pandas are all rage and no reasoning, and Metros are all asshole and no accountability. And the redeeming quality of this option? At least when you get shot up going to buy an ice cream sandwich from the corner store, you'll have family at your funeral.

“Now if you're interested in a feel-good alternative, particularly one that appears to be altruistic in theory but not in practice, then look no further than the fad of charity. Although charitable organizations can be found all over Spekender, the dainty hub of this movement is embedded in North Spekender. There are some *nice* neighborhoods on the Northside. I should know. *Gated* neighborhoods, with swimming pools and tennis courts. Whole getaway destinations in the midst of the disaster zone that is the rest of Spekender. This is how the superficially commendable but realistically ineffective soup kitchens, food pantries, passer shelters, community fundraisers, and after-school programs came to be. That's right, kids. Your afternoon activity

hour at the middle school is the product of a bandage solution. Why not perpetuate the fantasy? Justify yourself. Pat yourself on the back without ever having to get your hands dirty.

“And not even a stone’s throw away, let us not neglect the endurance of the one social ill that we can’t live with and we can’t live without. The butt of many jokes, the salesman of many false solutions, the schemer of much sleaze: our city government. You wonder what it’s like to be totally unethical yet knowingly untouchable? To receive all the blame but none of the hazardous effects? Preview of what’s about to happen in a couple hours when Mayor Edison sits down with Chief of Police Darius Starick to, in all likelihood, discuss the fact that our police force is desperate enough to accept walk-ons at this point. I would call out that department the same as all the others if I thought they wouldn’t try to talk me into applying.

“Now, on the other side of the blue lights, in addition to organized crime and disorganized leadership, Spekender is also famous for its expansive passer population. Victims of circumstance and the venoms that the city offers its citizens as coping mechanisms. Bilge and berry. The two bad B’s. A drink to drown in and a smoke to go blind with. You can find these zombies confined to highway underpasses or abandoned lots around the city or the Bazaar promenade, wandering in search of the nearest shelter or the quickest way to a purple haze. Not the worst strategy though—permanent disengagement. No feelings involved. Something to consider.

“And since we’ve covered the fraction of the population that cares the least, let’s move to the fraction that most definitely cares too much. It’s probably the second largest pull to your demographic, listeners, behind the banger gangs, so I guess it’s beneficial to detail them out. They’re an option just like everything else, aren’t they? Since the Citizens Urban Forge, or CUF, was first founded about three years ago, they have been the go-to civil society for the disconcerted youth of Spekender, conducting protests against just about any and everything the

government does that pisses them off. Which, as you can probably guess, I'm not entirely against. But do I think it'll do any good? Absolutely not. But if you're as enraged as the rest of your compatriots but unsure of how to express it, why not stop off at the Bazaar sometime today? They're at the event stage located directly to the left of the Prayer Wall, where they plan to hold demonstrations from noon to six P.M. daily in light of the eight murders three days ago. So unify your fury. Strength in numbers, so they say. I am not with you, but I will watch you. Just make sure you know who you're blaming."

(Radio static) (Radio static)

"But, in other news, circling back to the agenda that I mentioned earlier, the paper tiger goes on a walk today. The mayor's alleged sick days have run out, as has the mysterious ailment that has conveniently prevented him from making public appearances and going into work at City Hall. But, in about four hours, Ev Edison will immerge from his hideaway and attempt to do his job—or so we hope.

"For a number of years, the Spekender Police Department has been gradually declining due to various issues, but most notably reduced funding. A rundown of the current status, kids: our ingenious government is still in the process of implementing its crown-jewel-dud solution to this problem. A pipe-dream of former mayor Ranke Belham's final term in office, the Beautiful City Adjunction Plan was hyped up to be *the answer* to all these problems. What a college-educated idea, Beautiful City. What a logical theory, that if you flush a mud hole with fresh water, then eventually all the mud has to wash out, right? Never mind the possibility that it'll just make more mud! No, that would be ludicrous! But here we are. That's what's earned top priority over the criminal justice system: a limp tactic to transplant attractive young families into the city's most crime-infested areas in hopes that they will gentrify the toxic systems that have been rooted there for years on years.

“I had hoped that, when a promising Ev Edison took office, he’d do away with Beautiful City. Instead, he gave it mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. He gave it a pretty-penny expansion plan. And who were the jokers that went along with it all, slapping each other on the back, guzzling champagne at their proud little parties? Ev Edison might have proved to be naïve and inexperienced, but the administration that he walked into certainly was not. And neither is he. Anymore.

“So, in conclusion, good luck with your meeting, Mr. Mayor. Good luck with policing your Beautiful City. Have a *great day* at work.

“And, as for you kids, I hope you’ve enjoyed this grand tour of avenues that you can choose to be run down on. May they substitute for hope in any way they can. May they afford you some illusion of control in this place. May they enlighten you, if at all possible. We’re all alone here, but at least we’re *all* alone here.”

(Muffled laughter)

“Bad joke. But true. This has been the Spektator.”

(Radio static) (Radio static) (Radio static) (Radio static)

CITY HALL

Ev squirmed within the mold of the suit that he had hung over his shoulders that morning, baggy now against his body where it used to fit perfectly. The squelch of the backseat was deafening in the silence of the sedan, prompting the driver to cut his eyes in the rearview mirror and Jenner to glance over in annoyance.

Outside his window, visions of downtown Spekender tracked by as if on a horizontal reel, gritty and temporal. It had been a solid week since he had seen the skyscrapers loom against their backdrop of snowy sky, and every clicking turn signal tore shreds into the upholstery. Every prolonged red light made time for the sidewalks to crowd the car, for pedestrians to peer too long at the tinted windows. Every street sign brought him closer to viciously familiar territory, to the Business District, to Muscadine House.

The meeting that he was about to attend with the chief of police would have been bullied into being, had it not first shocked him into finally agreeing to it. Ever since his first political dinner, when Ev was engulfed in the shadow of a chiseled giant, Darius Starick had secretly scared the daylight out of him. The man had been a direct product of the banger system, one of the last members to break from the Muds before they died out in a hail of Metro gunfire a couple decades before. In a conversion of power structures, he had joined the police force and muscled his way through the rising crime rate to clench the chief position by his late thirties. After his last phone call in a string of incessant inquiries about scheduling a one-on-one meeting with the mayor, Jenner had even noted that Starick sounded like a different man. Dry-mouthed exhaustion had become standard moods for most members of law enforcement, but he had sounded worse. He had sounded spooked.

Raindrops sprinkled across the glass as Ev pressed his forehead to the window, the chill of the glass and the turbulence of the road drilling into his skull. The car braked at a stoplight, and, to his left, he could see a pack of teenagers swaggering out of a pancake house, adorned in

flaming orange T-shirts with the letters CUF ironed onto their chests. By that metric, Wry would already be down at the Bazaar, absorbed in his own line of work.

The last few that Ev had glimpsed his son trudging through the front yard, leaving the house, he had been flaunting the paraphernalia of the group proudly, with his own orange T-shirt pulled down over his hoodie. At that moment, he was probably only a few blocks over—a jumping ember kindling himself with the rest of the young and estranged. *They're not protesting the murders; they're protesting me.* He could hear Wry's voice, like the jeer from the back of the room at a political rally. *He's not protesting the fact that he's angry; he's protesting the fact that I'm the cause of it.*

“Sir—” the driver started, as the car turned onto Consolidation Street to pull up to the front steps of City Hall. It was meant as a warning, Ev knew, but still it sounded so bored in its predictability.

Nevertheless, Jenner cursed under his breath, snaking out of his seatbelt to stick his head in the gap between the front seats. “Well, so much for trying to fly under the radar.”

Ev did not need to turn his head to see the throngs of protestors—the contorted faces, the sweating brows, the bulging veins, the shouts battering their mouths and their signs. He could probably greet them all by name, they had for so long been his most faithful demons. He did not need to use his eyes to be blinded by the flash of photographers or the red blipping of news cameras or the bladed questions thrown at him by the journalists barely being restrained by Starick's officers. But when the discord rose up on either side of him, closing in as he trailed Jenner through the thick of it, he heard only a muffled blare. One sweet scab that this consistent torture had granted him: where there had once been a disorienting assault, now only a few soundbites speared through the stupor that he had learned to self-induce.

“How's that Shitty City solution going—?”

“Get the *hell* out of office, or—!”

“DOWRY WIGGS! FLOYD STAVES! BESS—”

And then their sound was cut. Somewhere in his stunned awareness, he recognized the change in tone as the lobby of City Hall—high heels clacking, elevator doors pinging. He felt a dozen hands shake his, and then the pull of his stomach going up, floor after floor after floor.

“*Wools,*” Jenner’s voice spat. “He’s probably got informants working in this very building. Probably the damned custodials. You can’t keep anything unpublicized around here anymore.”

The elevator doors swooshed open, and then Ev was moving through the smell of coffee and the sound of incessant typing, following some attendant’s murky smile as they directed him down a familiar hallway. The buzz of Jenner’s voice tickled his ear, once more walking him through the course of action that had been decided upon the previous day, restating why a firm no to any request whatsoever was the only feasible option given the current circumstances.

He understood that he was standing in his own office only when the shapes rotated, and Jenner’s voice left him, and he realized that the blur of color he was fixated on was his family portrait hanging on the wall.

“Sir, we’re in desperate need of more funding.”

Suddenly, he was dumped into a sitting positions, legs woven in a position that was supposed to insinuate ease. Two feet away from him in the opposite chair, was the hulking frame of the police chief. Darius Starick’s eyes were expectantly serious, proportionate to the rest of him that was hunched over his knees, his fingers laced tightly together as if clutching an invisible weapon.

“You’re backed up two weeks in cases . . .” Ev began slowly.

“And Imma tell you why, sir,” Starick said. “In the past four months, we’ve had six officers quit because we’ve had to severely decrease their salaries. There’s two out right now with job-related injuries, and most of the others, quite honestly, should have retired by now. When we

have to pursue a suspect, we can't chase them for too long because half the squad cars overheat. It's a gamble every time we fire a weapon because we never know if they'll jam. Our equipment is outdated, but we can't buy new gear because we don't have the budget for it. For every murder investigation, we have only two crime lab specialists to work with because the rest requested transfers, so now we're stretching unqualified officers to fill those slots. And we are backed up two weeks in virtually nothing but cases of *homicide*, including the eight that occurred three days ago. If we don't get more funding soon, we will not be able to operate. It is *vital* that we get more funding, sir."

The wall clock above the door—a Father's Day gift from a pint-sized Lasso—ticked maddeningly. A cup of untouched coffee steamed on Ev's desk beside the chief: the only warmth in the room. Starick had laid his peaked cap next to it, and Ev saw his own mottled reflection in its silver badge. He closed his eyes, breathing from the base of his chest, and tried to recall his lines.

"Chief, you know we can't give you any more money right now. Any funds that we could spare—well, you know where they go."

Starick stiffened, his eyes searching the carpet. "Sir, with all due respect, may I ask how many successes the Beautiful City initiative had accrued since you reissued it?"

Heat struck Ev's body beneath its casual posture. He dreaded this loaded question each new way that it was posed: *What would they say if I admitted that I question it too? If I said that it's not that easy to know how to save something? That stability is a wobbling table covered in heavy objects, and sometimes, to keep everything upright, you have to throw the better options off for the sole reason that they just weight too much?*

"Chief, honestly, I couldn't tell you. I haven't been in a place to check up on it lately."

Starick nodded at the floor. "You haven't been in a place to check lately," he repeated softly.

With a pang of fear, Ev glimpsed a furious smile flicker across the chief's mouth for only a second, and he scrambled to crank his mind into motion.

“Look, I'll admit that we thought we would see more progress by now. Maybe the secret to the early success of Beautiful City really did die with the Belham era, because people in our target areas are just not responding like they did before. Granted, that was when the program was in its infant stages, and even then it wasn't exactly attracting the masses. But with healthcare, employment, and housing benefits, we were sure that it would grow into itself within a couple of phases. We had hoped that, with the influx of new families moving in, the officer shortage would be resolved. Needless to say, that all rode on its success. And the problem? Well, there's a number of different factors that could be interfering. A number. The most obvious one I can see right now is just the fact that outsiders aren't seeing Spekender as a worthwhile investment. But, then again, it could just be a matter of waiting a bit longer. It's hard to know.”

The chief's mouth was a straight edge, his eyes wide and penetrating. “I gotta agree with you in your confusion, sir. You'd think that, with the upgrades it's received, the program would at least be making minor development by now. That's a lot of money touching a lot of hands going to a single place. A lot of money to not be doing a thing.”

Somewhere out on the street, a siren blared. Somewhere in the adjacent room, a telephone rang through the wall.

“I'm not sure I follow you, Chief,” Ev found himself saying.

“With nothing but respect, sir, I might suggest that you take a look into how things are going. *Where* things are going. There's a reason why I wanted to meet with you alone.”

Ev wanted to throw a punch at the man in front of him. He wanted to grab him and scream at him: *Don't you understand that it kills me to be here? I suffocate every time I try to solve something! I tip the table every time I walk back into this role! Don't you understand that I'm no good for this anymore?*

Calmly, he asked, “Was this the sole purpose of you wanting to meet today?”

Starick sighed. “No, sir, there’s actually something else. It’s hard to explain, but, with the crime spike, with one murder after another, with the grief and the pain that this city is experiencing—it’s like you can just walk outside and feel the air goin’ bad. And I think the majority of the trouble is, of course, the bangers, but it’s gotta be more than them.”

Ev’s anger chilled in his stomach. “You mean you think there’s another organization behind it?”

The chief’s brow knitted together. “I don’t know, sir. Like I said, it’s hard to put into words. All I’m sayin’ is, I been on both sides of the law, and I know what walkin’ around in the wrong place feels like. That’s why now more than ever, police have *got* to be able to do our jobs.”

Distinctive now through the patter of the rain, an ambulance was barreling down the street outside. Ev shut his eyes against the wail, options whirling against obligations in his brain. And behind them all was Jenner wiretapping his ear against the wall in the conference room next door, the faceless Wharton Wools evangelizing the death of the city into every young person’s itching ear, his own children hearing and believing, his wife—

“Okay, okay, okay, okay.”

With a hard shove, he thrust his body up from the back of his chair, blinking hysterically.

“Okay, Chief, how about this? I can’t give you the money for the new equipment, but I can try to fix your officer shortage. We’ve been trying to recruit a general pool for so long, so what if we narrow it down? I’ll lump it in under Beautiful City so the Board of Trustees will fund it without me having to take time convincing them to cut money from one place and put it in another. We’ll assemble a team of some of your officers to recruit candidates for temporary positions on the force. And I know that takes them away from working on cases, so we’ll do it in waves. First wave, we pick up as many as we can get, train them, and get them out in the field.

Wait a little while, and then go out and get a second wave, and more and more until we get out of the red. Not that we'll accept, you know, any trigger-happy vigilante off the street, but we need to get officers on the job as soon as possible, right?"

"Yes, sir," the chief said, all ears now.

"We'll recruit surrounding areas, of course, but the number-one priority will be here in the city. And obviously we'll have to figure out temporary payment, but, once everything is stabilized enough, we can talk about reimbursement." He took a breath. "Can you do a follow-up meeting in the next couple of days to go over the logistics?"

"You just call me up," Starick replied. "And I'll be here."

"How is all this sounding, Chief? It's just conceptual right now, but do you think this could work for the time being?"

"Yes, sir, it's a start."

Ev gripped the armrests of his chair, his head spinning out. The adrenaline of work coursed through his veins like a long-lost drug finally taking effect. He hardly even noticed that the chief's eyes were still on him until he felt the bulky energy of his sympathy drape across him.

"Listen, sir. I wanna thank you for taking this initiative today. I know things have been hard for you. I know how much you care about this city. They may not think they do right now, but these people need you working for them. They need you."

The pain of that sentence was gnawing. *No, they don't. They don't.*

Ev barely managed to mumble a thank you and fit his hand into the chief's strong grip before he found himself standing in the next room, two inches away from his disheveled advisor—his spectacles thrown off, his sleeves bunched up to his elbows.

"We did *not* agree to this, Ev! This was not the plan! You cannot just improvise in the heat of the moment! You cannot redirect a government program without consulting the

government first! You know there's gotta be a proposal, an approval—which could take months—”

“Tell them our police department is in a state of emergency.”

The whip in his own voice surprised him, and he watched Jenner's face age before his eyes under the sting of it, the wrinkles around his mouth digging deeper, the electricity in his eyes dying down.

“Ev, these things take time,” his advisor said in a skintight voice. “We could be right on the cusp of a breakthrough, and you wanna tamper with it? Brother, you should know the importance of waiting by now. You should know the value of patience.”

The telephone in the corner of the room rang suddenly. Jenner turned to watch it, but Ev was already at the door, one hand resting on the knob. His shadow was thrown against the wall in front of him: the scraggly hair of a madman, the clean-cut silhouette of his suit underneath it.

“We're doing this,” he said over the ringing, pointing down at the phone. “You tell them that. I'm meeting with Starick later on this week to work out the kinks. Once this new phase starts, I want periodical progress reports on Beautiful City. I want to be kept in the know always. We *have* to have police, Jenner. If we lose that, we will unravel. And tell the press in the lobby that they've gotten all they're gonna get of me this morning. Today I'm working.”

WESTSIDE

That night, Nimble and her brothers and Arla sat divided at the dinner table, chewing against the silence. The vast dining room felt sterile, like they were all eating in a hospital waiting room, picking at food that appeared waxy and wet in the glare of the lights. Normally, there

would have been at least a moderate level of noise. A spurt of a joke. A bantering exchange. Small talk supported majorly by Arla. Maybe the jazz of a viral video or a sports highlight reel. Nimble wished more than anything that such a typical irritant would come rescue the room, because, for some reason, that night her father had decided to join them.

He shuffled into the room, and Lasso's spoonful of mashed potatoes froze halfway to his open mouth. Maverick straightened his posture with abrupt etiquette, yanking his elbows off the tabletop as if not to offend. Wry did not move at all from where he was slouched in his seat with one foot propped on his knee, perfectly relaxed. Nimble watched her father's hand tremble as he pulled out his chair at the head of the table and dipped himself down into it with a strangely manic light glinting in his eyes.

Arla shot up from her seat. "I'm sorry, sir! I didn't know you were planning on eating with us tonight! We would have waited—*here*, let me get Royce to make you a plate!"

"Thank you, Arla," his voice rushed out, as if it were straining too hard to sound appeased. Then, upon hearing himself, he let the vigor slip from his tone. "That'll be fine."

She disappeared into the kitchen, and a supercharged atmosphere invaded the room. Nimble padded her fork down into her napkin as softly as she could, afraid to trip any alarms planted in the silence. Her father hunched over the tabletop on his elbows, running thin fingers through his hair.

"Take your hood off at my table," he said to Wry without looking up. "You too, Maverick. Hat off."

Maverick quickly laid his baseball cap beside his plate, the Great Winston logo facing away from him. Wry sat immobile for a few defiant seconds before grabbing his hood and tugging it a couple centimeters off his head.

"How was everyone's day?" her father asked next. "Nimble?"

Such a question was a spite to the activity at hand, a forbidden resurrection of a long-dead dinnertime ritual. Nimble forced herself to swallow the lump of food in her mouth, reaching for her drink to wash down the nausea that was lurking up her throat. “Fine,” she said to the bottom of her cup.

“Lasso?”

Her little brother stabbed his fork into a mound of peas. “A’right.”

“Mav?”

“Good, Dad,” Maverick replied, lifting his eyes. “How was your day?”

There was a hesitation, then a flicker between his resting face and a smirk. It sounded like he could hardly believe it himself: “Productive.”

Just then, Arla swung the kitchen door open, carrying his steaming plate. No sooner did she set it down in front of him did he dig into it. To Nimble, he looked like one of the passers that she saw sentinelled on the street corners downtown: a domesticated crazy man, shoveling peas into his mouth with simultaneous relish and disgust, repulsively greedy for the handouts of others.

“What about you, Wry?” he attempted to continue, swallowing his food down.

Nimble gripped the edges of her chair, sensing the jerk in her brother’s breathing before he even opened his mouth and spat his poison: “Best day of my life.”

Undeterred, her father replied, “It must have been, considering it made you two hours late for school hours this afternoon.”

Nimble’s stomach flipped. Arla visibly tensed up beside her, her head bowed as if to cast a posture of prayer over the building tension.

“Cortez told me you didn’t walk in until about four-fifteen,” her father went on. “And even then you hardly did any work. School starts at two. Where were you?”

“Whoops.”

“That’s not a place. I asked where you were.”

Wry yanked his chin to the side, his darkened gaze cutting to his father in reaction to a violation of respect. “Lost track of time,” he sighed with a wide fling of his hands. “My bad. Won’t happen again.”

“No, I think it probably will, because apparently it’s already happened twice in the past week.”

Lasso scooped his food into his mouth. Maverick angled himself towards the wall, bracing for the impact of what happened only seconds later, when Wry slammed his fork down. It clattered across the table and skidded to a stop in front of the empty seat beside Arla.

“Fine, if you wanna suddenly decide to care where I was, then *c’mon down* sometime! See me in action! Every day I’ll be where you won’t ever go. And until all those faces on the Prayer Wall get their justice, I’m not gonna leave! As if you *even knew* that what I do down there is substituting for your shortcomings, as if you *even knew* that the murder rate is breaking records for the worst it’s ever been, as if you *even knew* that eight more people—”

“I know.”

The words pitched themselves out of his mouth, dead already before they hit the floor.

“Then get off your ass and do something about it.”

Arla thrust her chair back from the table, pounding her fist onto the top. “Wry Edison, you watch your mouth! That is your father you’re talking to!”

Nimble shuddered at the grating thunder of her voice, awkward even in its anger. When she glanced up involuntarily, she saw her brother stooped over the table, his finlike shoulder blades jabbing through the back of his hoodie, as he leaned as close to her father’s huddled form as he could get.

“When I turned eighteen,” his breath heaved. “There’s no way I’m voting you back in.”

The quiet crashed back down with him as he plunged into his chair again, stifling a belch, knifing into his chicken and stuffing it into his mouth. Nimble sat paralyzed in the reverberating chaos of the room, feeling it hit her in waves as it thrum itself out. Her father had not stopped eating the entire time, chewing almost mechanically.

“You’ve bared touched that food, Nimble,” he said lowly. “Eat.”

She jerked her head up and caught the bloodshot rims of his eyes peering back at her.

“Good luck with that,” Lasso snickered through a full mouth. “She never eats. She just pushes it around her plate to make it look like she does.”

A liquid ice bled into her cheeks. “I ate lunch late.”

“Dude, you ate lunch with us at noon—”

“Chill out, Lass,” Maverick jumped in. “If she’s not hungry, she’s not hungry.”

Silence stretched out miserably as the food on everyone’s plate diminished. Her father kept his head down for the remainder of the meal, chasing every bite with a large gulp of water. By the time he rose from his chair to dunk his plate in the kitchen sink and vanish again, Nimble’s plate was half-cleaned: a feat of strength. She escaped swiftly just as Arla and her brothers were shoving their chairs in, melting with relief at the click of her bedroom door closing behind her.

This was where the world was not, where breaths could be measured easily and where time could be taken liberally and where no one’s scrutiny could creep in on what was inside her precious bunker. The room had been a windowless cinderblock when she had first hauled her belongings into it, but she had since rainbowed the gray walls in layers of magazine centerfolds, pictures of tropical places and vacation spots printed out from online, art collages of tissue paper and glitter, a stick-on solar system that glowed in the dark. All other available spaces were packed

with the defunct miscellanea of her childhood—dog-eared books, oversized stuffed animals, towers of salvaged CDs on which the anthems of her desert island lived.

She cranked up the ancient stereo system that had been a hand-me-down from Wry, and the speakers fizzed to attention. Shuffling through the discs stacked in tall towers on the floor, she found the one that she always relied on when imitating the sorcery of the Gypsies to practice for herself.

The song bumped into the speakers, and she started out like they did, bobbing her head, gliding her socks on the rug beneath her, feeling out the music while she waited for the entry of the beat. And when it arrived, she moved to meet it like the best girls in pink, ticking her shoulders, firing her feet, dancing angry. She closed her eyes and saw the dinner table again in stark white. She squeezed them against the darkness, and there was the monster of her brother spewing his venom into her father’s drinking glass. She squeezed them again, and there was the Aztec from the day before, swaggering across her line of vision. There had been something wrong that day walking the asphalt, trailing a robbery procession. Like a spirit from her memory, mouthing the same word endlessly, calling her father by a different name: *murderer, murderer, murderer.*

A sudden knock on her door threw itself against the beat, and Nimble scrambled to mute the base booming out of her speakers. Catching her breath, she opened the door a crack to see Maverick standing outside.

“Hey, Nim,” he said. “You know where the bandages are? The big ones? They’re not in the bathroom, and I, uh, I tripped in the foyer today and busted up my knee. I put one on earlier, but I need to switch out.”

She looked him up and down in one glance: the same ball cap on his head, the same gray zip-up, the same jeans—the denim unscathed, the knees without any rips or abrasions.

“No, I don’t know where they are,” she said quietly, studying his face for a reaction, wondering if he had a gun stashed in his belt, if he had someone else’s blood drying on him where she couldn’t see. “Sorry.”

“It’s cool,” he said, turning to leave.

“You going somewhere?” she pressed daringly, eyeing the spotless shoes on his feet.

He followed her gaze down to the floor. “Nah, I just haven’t taken them off yet.”

A wet squeak sounded from down the hallway just then, and Nimble peered over his shoulder to see Lasso walking by in oversized gym shorts with a towel draped around his neck to catch the droplets that slipped from his damp hair. His bare feet slicked their prints across the linoleum as he dripped past her door, smirking crookedly.

“Hey, turn off that shit you’re listening to. It sucks.”

For an exhilarating moments, her thoughts came sharp and unmanned. “Better than what you listen to!”

But Lasso was already at the end of the hall, beatboxing contentedly to himself as he swung his bedroom door open, the yellow desk light inside casting a rectangle resembling sunlight onto the opposite wall. Then he kicked it close, and the light disappeared.

“Thanks, Nimble,” Maverick said again.

“Do you think Wry’s okay?”

She had meant it to stall him from wherever he was planning on lurking off to, but it had come out so free a fear. An odd silence hung between them for a moment, and she cursed herself for ever attempting the question.

“What I mean is, do you think he’ll keep skipping school to go down to the Bazaar?”

Maverick pretended to inspect a series of chips in her doorframe. “He’ll cool down after a while. You know Wry.”

None of us know each other at all anymore, Nimble thought. But before she could drum up anything else to delay him with, Maverick had gone. She pressed her cheek into the doorframe as his footsteps faded down the other side of the hallway, listening forever for the metal wrench of the front door being pushed open but only hearing the familiar quiet that had once again reclaimed the house for the night.

SOUTHSIDE

At midmorning, the borders of Bangerland were lifeless. Despite their war-torn property lines, the outskirts of what was essentially the crime district of the city were soft edges, host to none of the unregulated chaos that raged closer to where the Four Quadrants overlapped. They were a ghost sector of a defunct commercial block of the Southside that had been gutted and repurposed as the unofficial scrapyards of the bangers. The rubbish was their own throwaways: criminals of the clique guilty of internal offenses, sentenced not to death by gunfire, as was

customary, but to life as a distanced prisoner, always fearing the one step too far out of bounds that would finally earn them a late bullet. No police lights stained the boarded-up storefronts. No civilian vehicle or pedestrian toured the deserted streets. There on the fringes, there was no society and no lawlessness to disrupt that society; all the glory in such a simple push-and-pull system had long since soured away for those marooned on the sidewalks.

That morning, a single shackled voice dared to pit itself against the silence. He was the gargoyle that spoke just to talk. His name was DK—two solitary letters that he had been using all his life and especially now—and he was the sole exile occupying the cellblock of Marower Street. The bench that he had made his home was pushed up against the front of what used to be a barber shop, with an awning that was still intact to protect from rain and the occasional snow flurry. The sidewalk in front of it was strewn with the few items of clothing that he had been permitted to keep, none of them showcasing anyone’s colors although he was technically an accessory of Panda turf. He donned no one’s symbol or logo on his body that was miraculously still young and muscled and puckered from where he had dug the bullets out. And, even still, almost every free inch of skin on him was inked in verse.

“You ever been happy?” He spoke what was scrawled across his forearms, just to voice it out loud. “See, I started wonderin’ that in my head, where they censorship can’t black it out. I got thoughts in my mind that they shoulda toughened outta me. I got thoughts in my mind that I ain’t s’posed to have. I feel the ache of walkin’ through streets with an ancestry of violence, knowin’ that I’m programmed to do the same things with the same fuckin’ genes. No, I don’t feel the strength they supposedly gave me, not the way I might if I didn’t have no scars. No, I don’t feel empowered, not the way I might if they freedom from power didn’t also mean compliance. My mistakes ain’t even feel accomplished—you think they scared of me?”

He paused, listening for more words on the wind, and spotted someone coming down the other side of the street towards his plot of concrete. It was assumedly a man, bundled in an oversized coat that shielded his face behind a popped collar.

It was not entirely uncommon to see passers cutting through the borderlands on their way from one public shelter to another. Sometimes in the parts of the city that he was still allowed to frequent, he would stand on the street corners with them and position the empty orange juice jug that he used for tips in front of him as he spun his poetry for anybody who would stop to listen. Those whose faces he knew would occasionally drift through, their eyes permanently tinged purple, their grins tarred with rotten teeth,

As the man grew closer, DK nudged the jug out to the edge of the sidewalk on the off-chance that some change might be dropped into it or at least an extra smoke in exchange for a few lines.

“And they never told you that you could be any other way, right? They never took me aside, clasped my hand with a man’s grip, enlightened me on the momentum of an action or the complexity of a conscience. And *should* I believe in me? What have I really done to earn that? Did I make my own dreams, or did I just succeed in the system and act like it was mine to take? I’m stuck between disownin’ me and idolizin’ me. This how survival works? Then tell me how the good hearts got here. Tell me how the good hearts livin’.”

The man shuffled in front of DK and stopped, frozen in a side profile. Something dropped into the jug from the unseen hand hidden in the man’s coat sleeve. DK’s eyes followed it all the way down: a crumpled five-dollar bill. *Pay dirt.*

“Much appreciated, my man,” he made sure to say, squatting down to fish it out. “Very generous of you.”

When he stood back up, the man had folded down the collar of his coat to reveal a face unlined and alert. DK tried to recall a banger that he had once crossed paths with, Metro or maybe even Panda, or even farther back to one of those smug scrups he had once tossed up against the lockers at Spek High. The man was smiling scarily, like he wasn't supposed to be there at all but somehow still was—a ghost from another life, maybe one that DK had never even met.

“I got one for you,” the man said, still grinning his bared teeth. “They never took you aside when the four of you held up a corner store. They never told you which one of you gets to choke and which one of you gets to take the fall for it. They never told you that you couldn't be good, did they?”

When he laughed, it was rusty nails and crooked needles crunching in his mouth. DK thought immediately of the sound a pipe bomb makes when shaken. He watched the man sharply as he continued down the rest of Marower Street, pausing at the stop sign to lift a hand and catch the drizzle before he sauntered around the corner and was gone—an unknown predator just passing through.

EASTSIDE

For days, Nimble was haunted by the Bazaar man every time she entered the marketplace. Instead of lingering with her coffee on its weathered blacktop, she skimmed over it like a beetle on the surface of a puddle, darting through the foot traffic, shying from every face that stared too long and any color that popped too brightly. With every peal of laughter nearby, his smirking eyes threatened to manifest in her mind, and she fought herself to keep the contours

of him shadowed in darkness. It was the same as the notion of a childhood monster: if she thought him, he would conjure, and then he would surely come even closer. So she secured her coffee quickly and then escaped into the rest of downtown.

The Business District practically emptied into the Bazaar, blurring its onyx edifices into the gritty muck of the city's playpen. Walking up into it from the marketplace was like trudging the wrong way up a steel slide: mud turning to clean metal. Once at the top, what surrounded Nimble was the toneless music of loafers and heels, cell phones pinging dully, the city's crisp-suited and sanitized white-collars. Even her father, who was just a few blocks away at City Hall—or, at least, *supposed* to be—could pass himself off as unsullied in such an environment. She could not even picture him going down to the Bazaar for a sandwich and a pint, for a stopover at the CUF stage.

She too used to be bubbled inside the Business District's protective membrane, back when its sidewalks had carried her from Muscadine House to Spekender Middle School on weekday mornings and back in the afternoons. Lately, she had been reworking that familiar route, stepping back into the soles of her old self. It was more immersive than a memory.

Here, she could walk through the skyscrapers and relive the days when she had hustled a school backpack up the steep hills with her brothers strung out in front of and behind her, too cool to follow by her side. Back when the sun was coming up anew or bleeding slowly away. When police cars ambled by with nowhere urgent to be, waving the schoolchildren on at crosswalks. When Millionaire Park, an open-air housing project for Spekender's passers even then, was a spectacle of wire sculptures and glass gazebos and flowering greenery still living in innocence of its poverty.

Past the last sprawling acre of the park, the Amberka neighborhood began at the mouth of the Eastside. Populated by a congestion of townhouses and apartments, it was sought after for

its cheap rest and close proximity to Great Winston College. Nimble recalled passing between the toothpaste-colored tenements, with her brothers cackling the oldest Spektator joke in their book: “Morning, kids! We’re all gonna die!”

After all, such a uniform, mazelike area seemed like an ideal hole to spider up in, especially for someone like the Spektator. To lure him out with his own quotations was a gag that her brothers hoped even he might appreciate. For them, the mystique of Spekender’s angriest phantom was just about synonymous in value with that of the superstar of the bangers, Baj Guerrara. The satellite dishes, the jagged radio antennas atop roofs could be his. Any glow of a computer screen or flicker of a TV behind the blinds of a window could belong to his network. And his information source—his Eyes—were they metaphor? Were they a giant rouse? Were they a system of miniscule cameras planted all around the city, or was it really as simple as his own vision? Even so, he was their impish god to revere and speculate about.

Nimble herself had never given him much thought back then. Now, each morning, she made him her penance, as she crawled into her closet with her radio at its lowest volume, pouring his poison into one ear. Truth be told, she craved his vilest attacks most, when he would drag the airwaves with her father’s name. She listened carefully to every barbed slander, letting them bite into her and still somehow shaking them loose. *But you are . . . you are . . .* she tried to say to the memory of Ev Edison in order to restore him to the easy hero she had known him as all her life. But she could never finish the sentence. The Ev Edison that she had known had gone under the ground when his wife’s name had been etched in stone on top, his second daughter’s name beside it. That was the one thing she and the Spektator could agree upon.

Like in the old days, she followed the route, slipping into a gravelly backlot behind two duplexes which, long before her time, had served as a shortcut to the high school and the middle school beyond it. It was also incidentally an optimal alcove for staging ambushes in, like the one a

few years back that Wry had gotten tangled up in that had earned him a bruised jaw and a nasty gash above one eye. After he had snuck upstairs past their parents, she overheard him telling Maverick about “these three horse-ass scrups” that had cracked his head against the dumpster back there.

Now, as she tossed her coffee cup in the same dumpster, she imagined Wry’s swinging punches, the sound of his skull against metal, the blood—

“Get down here!”

“You ‘bout to die!”

She stopped, trying to discern what she had just heard. Two distinct whispers, the first gruff and serious, the second squeaky and pitched with a string of expletives. But they had both been low. She dropped to her knees and peered under the dumpster, where two boys were flat on their bellies, their chins digging into the concrete. Their eyes lasered out at her as the straight-voiced one spoke, his shaggy bangs flipped across his eyebrows.

“There’s about to be a full-on banger war out there any second. Get under here if you don’t wanna get shot up.”

Just then, a flurry of car doors being opened and shut sounded from the road she had just come in from. Breathless, she dropped to the ground and pawed her hands at the loose gravel under the dumpster, as if she planned to tunnel into it like a dog.

“Oh my God, just get down flat!” one of the boys ordered. “Go in backwards!”

Spooked by the open air behind her, Nimble managed to turn herself around and shove her feet under the dumpster, wriggling in place until felt a sharp tug on the back of her shirt, and then she was compressed between jagged dirt below and cold metal above. Tiny rocks fanged into the palms of her hands. A wet, spoiled tang seeped into her clothes and around her heart pounding the hard ground.

“Wow, we just saved your life,” the boy with the shrill voice said. “Thank us, ungrateful.”

“Ar—” she stuttered before the shaggy-haired boy cut her off.

“That’s Wade,” he said.

She peered over at the miniature kid beside him: pale, scrawny, with a spiky mess of dark hair. He twiddled his fingers in as much of a wave as he could manage in his cramped position, appraising her with an unimpressed slouch in his face.

“I’m Che,” the boy beside him said, his eyes straight ahead.

He was bigger, older, with longer legs in baggy jeans and skater shoes that braced against the brick of the duplex behind the dumpster. Swallowed up in an oversized T-shirt and a mop of hair that tickled his shoulders, he must have been a skeleton underneath. She could see from the corners of his eyes that they were a clouded blue, like he had stared into a harsh light for too long and dulled them.

“I’m Nimble,” rushed out of her.

“Skipping school is not cool,” Wade sniffed. “Does your mother know that you’re fraternizing with death at this very moment?”

Before she could think of a way to respond, Che cut in again. “Don’t take him for real. He’s a skinny-ass hyperactive.” He glanced at her. “So you skippin’ or what?”

She had been looking down at his arms while he was speaking, fixed to the four identical, neatly-spaced scars that striped the back of both his wrists. When he turned his head, she ripped her gaze away, skittering clumsily across her floor-length view of the backlot.

“Yeah, uh, *yeah*, I’m skipping.” Then, for no reason, “My brother got into a fight here once.”

“Who’s he?” said Che.

“Uh, he’s, uh, Wry.”

Instantaneously, Wade's small head popped out from behind Che's, his eyes and mouth pinholes of excitement as he smacked his friend's shoulder. "Holy shit, dude! Her brother's Wry Edison! She's a friggin' Edison kid!"

A new panic roiled in Nimble's gut, but just as she was gearing up to answer, swift footsteps pattered softly somewhere near the dumpster.

"Shut up," Che commanded them. "Don't move."

As soon as the words came out of his mouth, the backlot silenced completely. Nimble could feel the air wind up tight along with the boys beside her. Wade's anticipation was giddy, like a theme-park thrill. But Che's was hardened, like someone watching his thousandth car wreck, calculating the seconds that belonged to the calm before the crash. Outside the dumpster, there was controlled movement, the rustling of many bodies, the rushing of secret people behind clusters of trash cans and discarded furniture. She looked over and saw an Aztec in full profile not six feet away from her, huddled behind the garbage, hand gripped tightly around a gun.

Her breath escaped. She looked back ahead just in time to see something fly up over the top of the fence and hit the ground in the middle of the lot. It was a massive dead rat, its patchy fur drenched not in blood but in Metro-blue paint. And its head was missing.

Nimble did not remember hearing a first gunshot. The barrage had simply blustered into existence—a horizontal torrent, bullets pinging off the surface of the dumpster and smoking off the brick and perforating the fence boards. She did not remember seeing any one banger initiate the advance. Both sides had simply appeared. From where she lay, she saw them as giant attackers, saronged in the colors of their clans, a blurred decoupage of green and orange and black and white and blue. Their faces were not their own, split halfway by bandanas or rags, smeared dark and deathly with oil, frescoed vibrant and monstrous like demon masks. The guns

in their hands were extensions of their arms, and they fired them as easily as pointing their own fingers in pantomime of a weapon.

Then someone went down in front of the dumpster. His hand flung out and banged the side of it as he went down, and then his face was inches away from Nimble's, bellowing in agony. With wide eyes, she looked down to where he was clutching the back of his calf and saw a neat hole in his pants darkening with blood. She felt her own voice groaning in her throat with him as he roared intelligibly and dragged himself out of the line of the fire and back into cover.

Suddenly, just as abruptly as it had arrived, the madness stole away. The gunfire ceased. The backlot emptied. Distantly, car doors opened and closed. Tires squealed. The ground steamed with fresh shells, blood-dribbled gravel, the pummeled lump of the rat.

The three beneath the dumpster loosed their breath.

Nimble had been digging her fingernails into the ground so hard that two had chipped off. Her ankles were bent behind her at odd angles where she had been unconsciously shoving her body as far away as possible from the shootout. Her ears felt as if cotton balls had been stuffed into them, and she watched Che's lips move at her, his voice encased in foam: "Alright, I think it's over. Come on."

He pulled his head and shoulders into the open first to double-check before shimmying the rest of the way out. Wade slipped out easily, performing a comical roll to his feet. Nimble strained to dislodge her own body and wobbled up to a hunched standing position, tucking her hair behind her ears with tremoring hands and scanning the lot for the assassins in hiding that she was sure had to still be aiming into the clear. But there were only the spent cartridges littering the ground, and the splinters of wood from the bullet holes in the fence, and one forfeited shoe lying waterlogged in a rain puddle. If anyone had been seriously wounded, like the banger she had seen go down in front of her, then they had been hauled away with no breadcrumb trail

sprinkled behind them, except for the mark on the air. The atmosphere felt sulfured, scorched with a phantom fire.

“Dude, did you see who they were?” Wade exclaimed. “What the *hell*. Those were Aztecs shooting Aztecs.”

Che stared into the distance past the fence, as if he was trying to catch the last of their thunder dying off. Then his eyes came to rest on the trampled rodent at his feet and the blue paint smeared into the gravel. “Somebody’s a rat.”

Nimble wanted to run all the way back to the Westside. She stumbled sideways and tripped over a scattering of shells, dancing madly to keep her balance.

“Chill out, Edison!” Wade snickered. “It’s over. Congrats. You lived.”

Che’s foot plinked against a shell, and she whipped around to find him right beside her, his stare steeling into hers as he flipped his hair away from his eyes. “You good?”

She looked back at him, angry with a terror she didn’t understand. “Why do you do this? Why were you under there waiting for this?”

Wade snorted, shrugging dramatically. “Why do we do this? Um, maybe because we’re *allowed* to watch a banger war like that without getting our brains splat out of our ears? Che Dupriest is a five-star prospect. He’s got Baj Guerrara trying to recruit his ass. See those lines on his arms? Safety marks. He’s a pending initiate. Nobody can touch him, says the Metros.”

Che stuffed his hands into the pockets of his sagging jeans, his arms flipped around, where Nimble couldn’t see his wrists. But he held her puzzled scowl unwaveringly, and, in that moment, she felt as though she were staring through heavy water to a clear bottom below.

“It’s exercise,” he replied.

Morning traffic swished by beyond the fence and through the gap between the duplexes, and, farther off, police sirens, as the world caught up again. But all she could understand were his

eyes—punished and yet somehow enlivened. *What do you hear in that gunfire?* she wanted to ask him. But, the very next second, he transformed back.

“C’mon, let’s get the fuck out of here before the cops come.” He glanced at her shortly, a boy again, floating on the breeze. “Hey—*Nimble*, right? You wanna come with us to the store to get some chicken wings or some shit? I’m starving like crazy.”

SOMEWHERE

(Radio static) (Radio static) (Radio static) (Radio static)

(Muffled laughter) (Unintelligible voices)

(Radio static)

Audio: “Oh, you sick bastard, that’s a good—”

(Radio static) (Radio static)

“—Alright—”

(*Beep*) (*Beep*) (*Beep*)

“Morning, kids. We’re all going to die. And can I just say, *I told you so?*”

(Radio static) (Chuckling)

“It’s an unfaithful game. It’s always been an unfaithful game. But now, kiddos, we have a radical change in play. We have evidence of a kind of cheating deplorable even by the standards of organized crime. We have declarations of war pending. And the writing on the wall has been hawking the same headline for two weeks now: ‘Bangerland Scrambles!’

“Common sense, kids. Recall the rumors of your cohorts in the school cafeteria—it’s water cooler chatter. Recollect the battle stories heard from friends that witnessed the most recent banger squabbles, or from those young initiates that actually played minor roles in them. Forget the news. Forget the paper. Know now that they have opted to pretend that city limits stop at the base of downtown; to them, there is nothing south of it. But you’ve heard the talk, haven’t you? You’ve seen the colors, and they’ve *mixed*. And now a major conflict is a-brew. Did the oracle not read it in his cards?”

(Radio static) (Radio static)

“I’ll revert back to my scholarly roots: at times like these, the vibrant history of Spekender’s crime organizations is important to dredge back up. Unfortunately for both you and I, neither of us have the age on us to be able to testify to these events firsthand. But there was, at one time, a different order of operations that implemented sovereignty and submission in Spekender’s banger gangs. The last configuration of alliances pitted a totally different chief on top. Of course, I’m referring to the Muds, long-since obliterated by—wouldn’t you know it?—a small rival group that was just gaining momentum, declaring itself to be the new metropolitan competitor. In short, the Metros. At this time, due to ineffective leadership, the Pandas were relative nonentities in the banger world. The Aztecs had much more leverage against the Muds, as well as a high membership rate and an equal amount of resources. But the Metros fought scrappy. They blinded themselves with imperialism before they ever even had an empire to

claim, and they succeeded in doing what the Aztecs only dreamed of doing. They massacred. No more Muds. And so the law of the land was reset for a little over three decades: Metros ruling at the top, with Pandas and Aztecs beneath them vying unsuccessfully for an overthrow, while the Gypsies remained neutral cheerleaders on the sidelines.

“Now, after all that time, the course has changed once again. You heard it here first. I’ll break it down simple for you: Pandas and Aztecs versus Metros *and Aztecs*.”

(Radio static) (Radio static)

“Okay, so now we have a house divided. Mommy and Daddy divorced. Not to mention, in Panda-loyal Aztec eyes, we have infidelity. Hanky-panky with the enemy, synonymous with high treason. And as for the opposing side, I have reports that Metro-allied Aztecs have already incorporated blue into the colors of their apparel. No time for remorse, I guess. One’s heart just breaks.

“So what does this mean for the city? I mean, these kinds of shifts have happened before, haven’t they, on smaller scales? And the infrastructure of order hasn’t gone to pieces. I mean, no system can stay exactly the same for too long, right?”

“But there is a difference here this time. Why would this give rise to threats intended for Metros and graffitied in black paint on the sides of office blocks downtown? Why would this prompt gunfights behind burger joints in the Westside or impromptu skirmishes in quiet neighborhoods across East Spekender? Or banger sightings on the Northside at jewelry stores and on golf courses and in banks—and, yes, I’m talking about Guerrara, I’m talking about Panda and Aztec authority, I’m talking about everybody! Why the mobility? Why not keep the conflict in their own kingdom?”

“Do you want a really, really good guess, kids? Because this will not be a crapshoot for their own acreage. This will not be a backyard battle royal. No, this is for the city. This is for new

land, *all* the land. There is a reason why this is happening now. Just take a look at the state of the government. If it doesn't appetize *you*, then, rest assured, it looks like a four-course meal for a smarter vulture. Power may vary in looks, but its nature tastes good always. And this is exactly what a weak government fears most: being swallowed up by its citizens.

“So that leaves the most obvious question. What will the paper tiger do about all this? What happens when hell breaks loose in the middle of rush-hour traffic? When the innocent grannies and babies and goodhearted bystanders are caught in the crossfire? But oh! Of course, of course, he's taking action already! How could I forget? He's got a solution in the works! Fostered under the perforated umbrella of Beautiful City to catch its acid rain, Ev Edison's Safe City initiative has undergone one whole week of activation. We as a city are now being assured that, as we sleep and breathe, reliable law officers are being recruited to aid us in safety and protection—or, more bluntly, to clean up the Southside.

“There is a longstanding perception that crime has a place that it goes, naturally gravitating down to a world that is detached from anyone who wishes to remain untainted and well-meaning. It's embedded in the 'glory days' that your parents, if you still have them, romanticize about. It's the unspoken angle that every government policy is composed with. And it is fiction, kids. It's easy fantasy. Everyone around you is talking about trying to stop the black sore from spreading, when really the whole body has been contaminated from the start. There are no distinctions, there are no zones, there are no safe places and dangerous places. Everyone is your monster. Everyone is fucked.

“Here's some evidence.”

(Radio static) (Radio static) (Muffled sigh)

“First: fatal stabbing, forty-nine-year-old Lennel Garick, better known amongst friends and frequent barflies as *Chug* Garick. It happened around four A.M. yesterday morning at the

Bazaar in the gap between The Grotto and Upper's Lounge Bilge Bar. His death would have been reported sooner, but passerby perceived Chug to be merely sloshed-out drunk until his friends rolled him over and found multiple stab wounds in his abdomen. Employees say that he was seen arguing for most of the night with a variety of bar patrons. But if you want the hard truth, with the amount of customers flooding in and out, it's unlikely that any one suspect that could be pinned down or even remembered.

“Second: twenty-year-old Reia Frylum, who was critically injured two days ago in the most recent of the banger shootouts in East Spekender, was pronounced dead yesterday around twelve-forty-five. She was a fourth-year Metro and a popular nail technician at the Spruce Salon on South Spruce Street. She leaves behind four younger sisters, a single mother, and a whole future.

“Third: seventy-seven-year-old Alvin Belcamp. At around six o'clock yesterday, Belcamp reportedly exited the post office on Bailey Drive in North Spekender and was walking back to his vehicle when he was approached by a masked individual that pointed a gun in his face and demanded his wallet. After Alvin relinquished his wallet and all other valuables, the masked man ordered him to get into his car, where he subsequently shot him in the head and then fled on foot into the woods nearby. Alvin was a husband, father, grandfather, and retired schoolteacher.”

(Radio static) (Radio static)

“Everyone, all over.”

(Radio static)

“This has been your Spektator.”

(Radio static) (Radio static) (Radio static) (Radio static)

GREAT WINSTON

At an hour to midnight, Great Winston College was a village in an unshaken snow globe of white lamplight and dark stone. The bustle of the school day had packed up and either headed home or to nocturnal festivities elsewhere in the city. All that remained were the settled flurries: crisp leaves that the wind had stripped from the shrubbery and discarded cups from the campus cafeteria and nearby cafés left clustered like mod-art gargoyles atop overstuffed trashcans. Parking lots were chilled and empty, save for the circle of asphalt that curved in front of the engineering building, where two lone vehicles were parked nose to nose.

Inside Isserd Hall, the last professor on campus flipped the lights off in his office, locked the door, and whistled down two flights of stairs in the dark to the first floor. As he made a habit of doing most late nights before leaving, he passed the front doors and took a turn down the

lefthand corridor, towards the golden light pouring out from the auditorium. Bouncing his satchel against his knee, he stepped inside and smirked down at the front of the room.

“How’s it coming, Mr. Guerrara?” he called, his voice echoing off the rows of lacquered wooden seating. “Any ingenious breakthroughs thus far?”

The kid had inscribed both blackboards with a cypher of measurements and equations, diagrams and design modules. It looked like he was planning a city, or otherwise deconstructing one, annotating wide angles and percentages with a whittled nub of chalk. He turned at the sound of the professor, and the look on his face displayed the same neutral grandeur as always.

The professor liked to think of his brightest student—and arguably the best in a long time that the college had to call its own—as a brown-bag puzzle box. His brain was a labyrinth that could solve itself a hundred times over with sweatless efficiency, as he had demonstrated in terms of grade point average, scholarships, awards, and even a few government grants before the administration had gone to pot. But, on the outside, with his shoulders slacking in a black hoodie and a button-up flannel, he could be indistinguishable from the general pool of his fellow students. And maybe that was his self-enforced compensation, his intended gift to them.

But the thing was that his contemporaries had neither the ability nor the desire to spar with him. To them, he was a strange, untranslated text looming above their heads like a required reading they did not have the energy to take on. However, to the college, he existed as the cornerstone of its scholarly society. The ripe elders in the higher administration had taken him on as their own fountain of youth, inviting him to research studies and field visits and conventions and even faculty wine nights. He put life back in the program, they liked to say. But now, surrounded by an array of coffee cups and potato chip bags on the podium in front of him, there was hardly any way of knowing that he was actually an ancient tinkerer disguised in modern clothing.

“What are you doing here again tonight?” the professor felt like saying sometimes. “You belong out there, not in this musty place! Go take a break, have some fun, put some color in your life!”

There were rumors, of course, that followed the kid almost as closely as his celebrity brilliance. They had reached the administration’s ears too. But jealousy was a strong enemy to contend with, and an *expected* one too, especially when the accolade of ‘genius’ was being so frequently bestowed on one person. Besides, the professor could scarcely believe that something so low-class as organized crime could possibly be an interest for someone so intelligent.

“I’m just finishing up,” Baj Guerrara said in his delicate murmur. “Sorry for keeping you, sir.”

The professor smiled. “No, no, you didn’t keep me at all. I had to finish up some grading anyway.”

He chuckled as he scanned the work on the blackboards, almost incoherent to even him. *Must be a side project, he thought. The kid’s not working on his dissertation already, is he?*

“Besides, don’t ever apologize for putting in extra work. It’ll pay you back in spades one day in the near future. You’re building a fine foundation for a fine career, I hope you know that. I mean, you could go anywhere, do anything. No one can fault you for your work ethic, son.”

The corners of Baj’s mouth tweaked upwards only the slightest degree. “Thank you, sir. I really appreciate you letting me stay late.”

“Well, you certainly make the most of your time. Wish there were more with your level of dedication. And natural smarts, for that matter.” He stifled a yawn. “Alright, son, I think I’ll call it a night before my wife turns the porch light off on me.”

Still the same wispy, linear smile. “Yes, sir. I’m gonna clean all this off, and then I’ll go.”

“That’ll be just fine,” the professor said. “Just turn the lights off when you do. And I know it’s probably a futile suggestion, but *try* to get some rest, alright?” He chuckled all the way out into the hallway. “Tomorrow, Mr. Guerrara.”

The auditorium returned to silence. Baj Guerrara picked up his eraser and paused, surveying the night’s progress one last time. A few moments later, everything was gone, all evidence destroyed, the slates wiped as black and cloudless as twin skies.

With a satisfied sigh, he stooped down and quietly closed the notebooks scattered on the floor at his feet, storing them away in his backpack. He disposed of his trash. He straightened the podium. He eased the window down that he had cracked open earlier in the evening. With one last sweep-over of the room, he glided up one aisle to the doors and reached for the light switch.

“Done for the night, Mr. Guerrara?” a voice called from the hallway.

A mop stick in a bucket was wheeled into the room, bumped by a knee in a blue jumpsuit, a knit cap, black rubber shoes. Baj stared back at the custodian’s jovial smile, and, only for a moment, wondered if it would be so: assassinated in his own safe zone. He had been looking into happy, hating faces like for as long as he could remember, and any distinguished animosities had begun to run together. But this one, for some reason, looked different. Like an old forgotten foe, someone who had been hating for much longer than his lifespan.

“If you’re through here, you can just leave the lights on,” the custodian grinned. “I’ll finish up, after you leave.”

Baj only looked him back in the eye, the same as he would treat any enemy. It was the recognition that was important. If you saw a monster, then you saw it. And you made sure it saw you in return.

“Very good. You have a safe night out there, sir.”

Baj slipped past him, down the dark hall, and out the front doors without a single word. Once outside, he breathed, and the night sipped into him like soda over ice, crashing in smooth falls down his throat, as he walked to the jeep parked at the curb. It beeped in submission to the key fob in his hand, and he looked up as if to track the sound as it rippled past the murky lamppost globes, the scraggly tresses of overhanging trees, the silver studs of stars, the lozenge of a moon. Night seemed to be the only time that the clouds over Spekender agreed to die.

He slid his backpack into the backseat and shed the flannel shirt from his body. In his hoodie, he ducked into the front seat and started the ignition to a muzzled purr, rolling down the windows to usher in the chill, steering so softly onto the street that the gravel under his tires barely simmered.

He cruised with headlights sniffing the asphalt, pulling out from under the limestone archway of Great Winston's main entrance and turning onto a lifeless side street lined with rusted warehouses and razor-wired scrapyards a few blocks from the breach of downtown. He slowed the jeep to a stop on the shoulder of the road and stared out at the skyscrapers ahead, their pinhole windows and blipping antennas like the lights of a panoramic control board.

One hand mothed out to gingerly twist the radio dial up to a riot of a volume. As the music inflamed, he heard the back door open and slam shut, feeling someone scratch the headrest of his seat in playful greeting: Ciessa, her bedazzled nails always painted aqua blue. Beside him, the passenger door popped open, and Greek climbed in, sighing a contented *ahhh* into the music as he fished his pistol from the waistband of his pants and cocked it at his hip. He dug his other hand into the container in his pocket and then swiped his arm out to snatch Baj's up in a firm grip, their eyes locking in hot-lead flashes. Baj pulled his hand back, studying the bronze dome of City Hall, the bejeweled loop of the Bazaar candy wheel, the jewel case of the city. He raked his hand across his face, massaging the fatigue that itched there. When he reached

down to shift the jeep into drive, there was a blue streak scarring him from cheek to chin, like a gash of tears.

When he veered back onto the street, his caravan was already in position, two runner rides in front, their tailpipes spewing fluorescent smoke into the beam of his brights. He shifted his gaze to the rearview mirror to check the three tailers lined up behind him. He blinked his lights once, and his frontmen began to move at a silent, ominous prow. In the backseat, Ciessa absently bounced to the beat of the song. Beside him, Greek flicked at a lighter, puffing a column of purple smoke out the window and into the night.

STIPPO'S

Che Dupriest lived on the seam of the Southside and downtown, Nimble learned in the two weeks following their initial meeting. He was sixteen years old and occasionally showed up for class at Spekender High School. If he had any siblings, he didn't mention them, and, if he had any mother besides who he referred to as his father's "weekend bitch," he didn't mention her, and, if he had any admiration for said-father, it didn't come through in the limited mentions of him. All the time, talking about anything, his face held a form that hammocked somewhere in between commitment and detachment, even while he devoured the fried food and energy drinks that he seemed to live off of. Nimble chose only the most careful of moments to steal glimpses of the white strikes etched into the wrists.

For a week straight, she had only been stealing—from the Westside, lightning-fast through the Bazaar, and back to the scene of the Eastside’s gunfight spectacular. The shells had been swept from the backlot not long after the banger incident, probably by the police or a coalition of concerned neighbors, but a few were still scattered around the dumpster like the last tarnished confetti from an old party. This was where the three class-cutters met again and again until a couple days after the shootout, when Wade’s mother caught wind of his playing hooky. After that, it was just Nimble and Che.

“So you don’t go to school anymore?” he asked her one morning as he nudged a plastic bottle across the ground with the toe of his shoe.

His crack-laced cell phone—purchased on the sly, according to him, from a guy who knew a guy who knew a girl—was laid flat on the lid of the dumpster where it could garble out the chorus of a bootlegged song to the backlot’s arena. Nimble was leaning against the dumpster, eyeing the smudge on the ground where the blue blood of the Metro rat was fading into the gravel. There was something infectiously rousing about entering that space every morning with a mark like that on its ground, and then bouncing such a heedless topic as school off the bullet-nicked walls. It was like they had set up clubhouse atop a sacrificial altar—a place painted with blood and convergent with evil, and yet, because of that, utterly sanctified.

“Not actual school,” Nimble replied. “Me and my brothers get tutored in the afternoon.”

“Fuckin’ wish I could do that. Didn’t you say your brother skips like whenever he wants? Must be sweet not to have to sit in classes all day, feelin’ like you’re in prison.”

Nimble stifled the urge to backtrack and express to him that it was actually a serious matter that Wry had been skipping so much—or, at least, it was *supposed* to be serious.

Che prodded the bottle down the length of the lot. “Yeah, I skip all the time. I don’t get good grades and I’m not a kiss-ass, so, you know—what’s the point? I’m just a problem the

teachers gotta deal with, so it's easier if I don't show up at all. So what do you do in the morning if you only have school in the afternoon?"

Nimble swallowed dryly. "Well, after I wake up, I, um, I turn on the Spektator—"

"You know he thinks your dad's a piece of shit, right?" he said, flipping his hair to meet her eyes.

She stared back at him, feeling a gentle throb of irritation. "I know that."

"So do *you* think your dad's a piece of shit?"

She wondered if this was him baiting her, attempting to draw out a secret hatred. *What does he want, who does he hate, is he looking for a reason to hate me*—"No."

It shocked her how true and disappointing it sounded coming out. But Che was undeterred.

"Then why do you wanna listen to the Spektator?"

A heat was clinging to the backs of her cheeks. "It's hard to explain." She scratched an itch that didn't exist on the back of her neck, feigning nonchalance, buying time. "It's stupid, but it's kind of like—like I'm toughening myself up. Like I'm testing myself, to see if I believe him or not. I can tell him no, and he can't even argue back. It's just something weird that I do."

When she glanced up again, Che had stopped moving, his hands on his hips. The song on the dumpster seemed to evaporate into a silence that he himself commanded into being, a wavelength that he halved in two and was sharing with only her.

"You know after the shootout when you asked why me and Wade wanted to watch something like that, and I said it was exercise? Well, I meant that. Sometimes I can't feel things. Like, anything at all. I have to take myself places to feel things. I have to go watch things. So even though I didn't shoot at anybody and nobody shot at me, I could still be pissed off. That's why it was exercise." He sniffed sharply. "Do you think the Spektator's for real about that thing he

always says? That the city's gonna kill all the kids eventually? Or do you think he's just fuckin' with us?"

Nimble stood bewitched. Suddenly, the song beside her sputtered into a hiccup of static and then cut off completely. Che hurried to the dumpster and picked up the black screen of his phone, whacking it against the heel of his palm to no avail.

"Damn, it died," he whispered.

"Do you wanna get a real lunch today and not just gas station food?"

She couldn't explain what would cause her to ever suggest such a thing, except for the fact that he had suddenly moved so close to her. He was so near that she could smell his home on him: a tinge of crisp smoke, husky cologne, the rough boy-smell that she knew so well. She wanted another moment to find what he had just shown her so fleetingly. She wanted to show him something in return, some good place that he could feel, somewhere that she had felt so very long ago.

Che was chuckling. "Yeah, sure, if it didn't cost what I don't got."

She was speaking fire now. "There's this deli downtown that does five-dollar lunch on weekdays. I'll pay for you."

"A'ight, sweet. I'm for it."

And it was done. They headed out of Amberka and into the sleek stream of the Business District, where the stacked offices were airing out their doors for an early lunch break. The destination that Nimble had in mind was embedded amongst the skyscrapers like a jeweled fossil in a slab of granite. For most Spekenderites, Stippo's Luncheonette was just that: a fan favorite revered for its nostalgic appeal if not also for its student meal deals and bottomless coffee for all downtown nine-to-fivers. It was also one of the rare city staples where, even if one had never spent a childhood Saturday afternoon chomping its fish sticks with a souvenir balloon tied to

one's wrist, one could still walk in and participate in a reminiscent glory as if it had actually happened—which, for Nimble, it *had* to have. The crumbly old deli was a testament that there had once existed a dreamy world so bright and so warm, where summer weekends were ruled by family outings and sleepy rides to and fro in the backseat of the Edison van. Stippo's was holiday dinners preserved, post-sports practice feasts and after-school snacks. Funnily enough, the restaurant had always reminded her of a school cafeteria. Maybe Che would comment on it and find it laughable. Maybe, once they were safely inside, she would try her bravery enough to fashion a joke of her own out of it.

But as they inched their way down the buffet line, the safety of the place seemed to choose only him to bestow itself upon. He tapped the glass in front of the foods he wanted with an unfettered certainty, uttering his *pleases* and *thank you's* in a low but full-bodied voice. The meal on his tray was a fatty and fried mosaic, big and banquet-worthy. He didn't even notice the sunny days of Nimble's past to revere them. And how could he? None of them were his. None of it was holy ground like it was to her, suddenly too precious to even invoke a memory of to share out loud. He probably couldn't see the happy apparition of her father there even if she told him—at least, not like she did.

So, when they seated themselves at a long table near one of the front windows still curtained with morning condensation, her tray was sparse, arranged with only the blandest foods that could be washed down with a small sip of water. Che attacked his meal voraciously, shameless even in such close proximity to a guy typing on a laptop two seats down, a man swiping her manicured nails across her phone near the end of the table, a man in a battered windbreaker nursing a cup of coffee across from her. The soda in his glass crackled down to ice cubes. Every plate on his tray turned white again within minutes, while Nimble slid her fork into a heap of butterless rice.

Che tongued his food to one side of his mouth. “You’re not hungry?”

“I am,” she lied. “I’m just—I’m a slow eater.”

Before he could respond, something thumped against the window, punctuated by a muffled shout. The whole dining area turned to see a blurry horde of neon orange shirts through the glass. Somebody had been roughhoused, jokingly shoved up against the pane. Through the porthole that his back had cleared in the condensation, Nimble saw him tip his head back in laughter and lunge at his mock attacker as the rest of the CUFs flowed past the restaurant. Out on the sidewalk, they seemed like such regular comedian teenagers; it was hard to believe that it would all chemicalize into an acid fury once their feet hit the Bazaar blacktop. It was hard to believe that, with only a couple muscles more, a grin could overextend into a grimace so easily.

“You ever go to their rallies?” Che asked.

Nimble sifted a few grains of rice from her fork. “Wry does.”

“Oh, yeah? I guess it’s kinda popular to be one, right? It’s something to do, at least. A way to, like, try to be a good person.”

Nimble thought of her brother outside on the pavement, swallowed in fire, in the armor of his clan. She highly doubted that what he was seeking was goodness. Even passing beside the place where he too had stretched out his childhood on pleasant afternoons, she knew he would not look in. He would not look back. And for that thought, she hated being there right then and witnessing them pass by. She hated herself for convincing Che to trespass with her on such beautiful ground and then only having this ugly, blazing procession to dazzle him with. Why hadn’t he joined their ranks already, if he wanted free aggression that badly? Why hadn’t *she*, for that matter, if only to have something to be during the day?

Something else banged against the window, and, in a moment of panic, she pictured Wry beating at the glass. But when she looked up, someone else was standing there, cupping their

hands around their eyes to see in. When their gazes met, his nameless face ripped wide in a jackknife of a smile that clicked into place like the expanding jaws of a cobra. The restaurant was dining in spite of him. The current of CUFs curved past him. But he was there, no longer an Aztec at the Bazaar but one of them, duplicated in the explosions that they wore, pausing for a stopover on his way to burn with them at their stage.

He was writing in the condensation with his finger. A stack of numbers, starting from the ground up. He made it to 10 and then paused, stepping back to review his work and shrugging at her with a cartoonish shamble of his shoulders. He pointed upwards, as if to address the volume of a silent radio, and Nimble watched as he engraved two more numbers in the weeping glass: 11, 12.

They were the years of her life, now obsolete. She didn't know why believed that, and she didn't know how he knew them. But maybe he did, and maybe he was listing them like annulled ages to be wiped away as easily as dreams could be forgotten upon waking.

"You know that guy?" Che asked beside her. "Hey, Nimble."

Her head snapped away, and all she could do was look at him with a scream in her eyes, unable to breathe a word. Che put his fork down slowly. Together, they turned to face the window.

It seemed to happen all in an instant, but the evil thing behind the glass strung it out in agonizing stills. He was looking right at Che this time, his chin dropping until his eyes were two winking slits. He made a gesture like he was sawing a board or cutting into a steak, except the meat was the inside of his wrist. The stack of numbers trickled tears as he added one more to the top: the last age of Nimble's own innocence. *13.*

"Hey, do you know him?"

Both Nimble and Che whipped around to see the man with the laptop a couple seats down staring at them with a dark urgency bloodying his eyes. Nimble scanned his belongings scattered around him: pages of notes, a textbook. College student.

“Do you know that guy?” he asked again, almost demanding. “Because he’s not a CUF.”

“Why, *you* know him or somethin’?”

The man in the windbreaker had said that, hunched so far down to the table that the steam from his coffee cup was colliding with the stubble on his chin. He was covered in tattoos, in countless words covering his skin.

The college student’s face hardened. “He was a reporter for *The Decree* when I saw him.”

“Looked like a passer when I saw him.”

“A *what?*”

The windbreaker man fixed him with an icy stare. “Homeless. Passin’ through the ‘Ville.”

Nimble’s stomach flipped at the mention of the Banger District, and she involuntarily turned towards the woman near the end of the table, hoping that she would step in and referee the tension that was forming. But she was staring past them all at the front window.

“He’s gone, it’s alright, it’s alright, he’s gone,” he chanted through gritted teeth, one hand on her belly as if she was speaking to it instead of to them. Only then did Nimble notice the rounded bump under her blouse. Pregnant.

All of them turned to see for themselves the empty sidewalk outside, the CUFs already moved out, the condensation on the glass already streaked through to daylight. That was when Nimble looked over at Che, and it was like he had left the surface of himself. His hands were folded limply in his lap, and his head hung over his tray, drained of its desire to see the room anymore.

“Che,” Nimble squeaked at him. “*Che.*”

When he finally hoisted his eyes up for her to see, there was a deep gloom hanging onto them, a drained gray shackled onto the blue of his irises. Nimble jumped up from her seat immediately. They had to escape, she knew that much. They had to leave. That place was poisoned now. Whoever the man outside was, he had inscribed a curse on it. He had seen her sunny days, and he had blackened them. All she knew to do was run from it and from the strangers at the table trying to make sense of it. All she knew to do for Che was to drag him with her back to the Eastside, to retreat to the backlot that was just cauterized enough to protect them. It *had* to, it *had* to.

“Wait a second!” the college student hissed, scrambling to his feet as Nimble made a move for the door. “Where are—you can’t just—m-my name’s *Tarro!*”

No, Nimble thought. The desperation that rolled off him ached in her own bones. She couldn’t give into it. She couldn’t heed its begging to be understood anymore that day.

“Don’t tell me that,” she choked out as she pulled Che up from his seat and whisked him out of the restaurant.

BAZAAR

For two weeks straight, Ev had managed to make himself a real man again. He had seen more of the city in the past fourteen days than he had in the past two months, now that he was regularly showing up at City Hall each morning. It only took a couple days of consistency for the daily protestors to grow bored with their rallying and clear themselves from the front lawn. It only took a couple minutes for him to get reacquainted with the familiar cologne of the old building: a blended musk of chilled marble and burnt coffee. Even beyond City Hall, he had successfully sat down to five separate dinners with Arla and his children, skirting relatively unscathed past his eldest son's quills. The previous weekend, he had stepped into a supermarket for the first time in years just for the novelty of a bygone lifestyle, a sweet chore of a normal existence.

Moments like that were why he knew he should distrust them, those suspicious two weeks that tempted him so greatly with their comfortable balance. And when the mirage finally vanished, like he feared, he was almost giving into it, on the verge of a catnap in the afternoon drowse that hovered over the Spekender Police Department headquarters.

He was slumped in one of the chairs in Darius Starick's office, the bottom of his button-down wrinkled where it was gradually working itself untucked. His head was dazy and agreeable after a hefty lunch at a downtown steakhouse that he used to frequent so often that the waitstaff still remembered his standard order. There, he had filled his stomach with greed, as if it were his first proper meal in years. Jokes had combusted beautifully between he and the police chief. Conversation rolled off his tongue with a finesse that he hadn't tapped into since his campaign days.

Back at the police headquarters, he and Starick had discussed the progress of Safe City. Starick was talking up the first round of recruits that were scheduled to be given the makeshift admittance test that his team had compiled. Ev was approving it all, nodding at every next-projected step and every suggestion that the police chief offered up. Almost smugly, he found himself musing about what angle Wharton Wools would choose to take on its preliminary success once they could release a public update.

Then the door swung open, the loose set of blinds rapping against the glass.

"Sir, there's been a shooting at the CUF stage."

The words seemed to snag on everything between the door and Ev before they finally wormed into its ears. His body was still folded in his chair as he turned to see the pale face of a man in a collared shirt standing in the doorway, a sauce spot from his own lunch still dotting his breast pocket. The man's eyes stalled on him briefly, the way an adult eyes a child too young to hear of tragedy, before flicking sharply to Starick.

The police chief was already in action, fitting his hat to his head. His voice ground out of its lunchtime stupor. “How many dead, Laurence?”

“Multiple casualties. Brixton and the rest of the Bazaar squad responded immediately, along with all the other ground patrols in the area.”

Then the man stopped talking. Or, rather, the man and Starick exited the room. Ev was left clinging to the chair, his forearms scratching against the fabric where he had rolled his shirtsleeves up in youthful habit. Outside, beyond the grimy windowpane, commanding voices rose up. Sirens began to rattle hellishly against the glass. Delayed, he scrambled to his feet, knocking his suit jacket off the back of his chair, clambering on all fours to the door.

Officers tore past him down both sides of the hallway—radios buzzing, boots jogging, keys clacking—as he trailed behind Starick and Laurence.

“What about the shooter?” Starick was asking.

“He’s down,” Laurence confirmed.

A pang of terror barbed into Ev’s chest. A single gunshot fired in his mind, and the echo of it bounced against the wide sky and plummeted back down, unable to puncture the cloud cover.

“I want that whole Bazaar shut down. Market closed. Entrances and exits blocked. Witnesses rounded up and questioned. Everybody else, clear ‘em out. There ‘gon be kids crawling all over the place down there.”

The three men were hustling through the backside of the building, through utility hallways and garage entrances. They bounded out into the parking lot, and the curdled chill of the afternoon raked across Ev’s skin. Tires were already spitting beads of gravel as they whipped out onto the street. The lights of those vehicles ready on deck flashed in madness, but the blues

seemed bleached and the reds seemed faded and the engines coughed exhaust gruffly like a cavalry of overworked horses.

Laurence and the chief headed towards a squad car panting with its doors open, where an officer in the driver's seat was furiously jamming a key into the ignition that growled in protest.

“Damn it, Yuri, leave it!” Starick bellowed at him, rerouting them towards another car on standby. He crammed his mighty stature into the passenger seat and barked a question of which only one word could be heard between the dying of one siren and the swelling of another: “—*shooter?*—”

“They said he was a CUF kid!” Laurence shouted above the wailing, slipping behind the wheel to crank the car and flip the lights on all in one motion.

Three steps behind them, Ev clawed the back door open, his breath adhered to his throat. When he spoke, it was with a stupid voice, the bumbling sound of an ignorant onlooker.

“Darius, my son is there.”

“Get in,” the chief said through the bulletproof divider.

Ev pulled the door shut behind him, and they railed out into the late-lunch traffic of downtown. The towers in the Business District filled up the view from out his back window, and his thoughts came to his head with dangerous and strange precision: *I forgot to pick him up that one time from school, and he had to wait for hours. I was late to his third-grade play. I didn't ask him about his day enough. I'm this way, and now he's—*

He felt grabbed by the city outside, pulled at a reckless speed through all the places he could no longer avoid: past City Hall, past Millionaire Park, past Muscadine House standing like a pristine mausoleum, until the crown of the candy wheel crested above the buildings. Masses of people—majority kids—crowded the roadway leading to the mouth of the Bazaar, ignoring the

officers attempting to direct them away from it. There were strobes of bright orange in the mix. Dashes of blue, black, pink, green in a chaotic painting. He pressed his face to the glass, needing to force himself to see. *He won't be there, he won't be among them, because you know what's happened, and you know why.*

Laurence maneuvered the car through the police barricade and down the deserted main thoroughfare of the Bazaar, mashing discarded boxes and sheets of loose flyers under its tires. Then the sheets grew bigger in size. They were scattered like fallen blankets of snow—thirteen of them, Ev counted—in front of the abandoned stage ground, where the tables were toppled and the microphone stand was left standing alone. Officers were already scouring the scene, circling the blacktop aimlessly as they guarded the white sheets and waited for the squad car to come to a gentle stop in front of them.

There was one moment's pause inside the car as Starick observed the scene beyond the windshield. Then he climbed out of the car with Laurence following suit.

In the backseat, Ev pawed the door handle with hands so skeletally thin that he could practically hear the scrape of his bones with every move. He thrust himself out into the raw, noiseless air and made sure not to breathe the air too deeply. It already smelled like he thought it would—leaden and stuffy. *Sleepy*, in such a terrible way. The Bazaar grounds were ghostly without their rabble-rousers. The wind slapped against the wooden tendons of the tents, flaying the gristle from the bone.

“Chief, we got thirteen confirmed fatalities,” a whiskery officer said as he approached Starick. “We’ve got ambulances on site at the end of the strip, and those with more serious injuries have already been transported to St. Leon’s.”

Starick just looked at him. “Benny, tell me what happened.”

“We’ve pieced it together from witnesses that, during the middle of a speech, a CUF kid pulled out a gun and started firing at the crowd that he was in. Parkley was on duty and was just passing the candy wheel when he heard the shots and ran for the rally. The kid had stopped to reload when Parkley charged him and got him down with three shots. I took a look at him, Chief. He’s not but seventeen or so.”

“No accomplices? No buddies supposed to come in as reserves that chickened out at the last second? No souped-up bomb that he didn’t get around to detonating?”

“Not that we know of, Chief. We’ve checked for everything. And, as you know, the bomb squad—well, our canine unit is—”

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” Starick muttered, mounting his hands on his hips. “We got I.D.’s on the victims yet?”

Benny’s eyes fell as his foot clinked against a pair of trampled sunglasses, both lenses stomped out. “No, sir, we wanted to wait ‘till you got down here.”

“Okay, nothing gets released until we identify the victims. I need personal effects collected and bagged—driver’s licenses, school I.D.’s, cell phones, purses. I need people rounding up CUFs, asking if any of their friends are unaccounted for. I do *not* want any parents or anybody else gettin’ through here until we have names with faces, you hear me? You hold ‘em back.” He turned. “Mr. Mayor . . . Mr. Mayor—*Ev.*”

He was walking down the strip as if in a dream. The candy wheel still turned leisurely, its lights winking to a muted tune. The grill outside a barbecue shack still smoked, a rack of ribs blackening in the cold. A metal blockade had been assembled at the end of the strip, where, on the Bazaar side, four officers marched the length of it, trying to hold back a sobbing and seething fire of orange T-shirts. Then, one officer shifted out of the way, and there was Wry pressed up

against the barrier. Ev looked at him, and he looked back at Ev, forty feet of a concrete spirit world between them.

His mind churned out, *Son, son, son, son*, and he knew he should feel an intense relief, but what he smelled was the marketplace around him losing its luscious scent to the cold. Still staring, he heard Starick quietly walk up behind him.

“Sir, I can let you look first.”

“I can see him, Chief,” he barely whispered, watching Wry disappear back into the crowd. “It’s alright. I see him.”

The chief took a deep breath and clasped him briefly on the shoulder. “Good. Thank God.” Then he turned and walked back to the crime scene.

To Ev’s right, the posters and plastic flowers of the Prayer Wall seemed to wave the chief on, flapping ominously in the breeze. Ev was struck by how much more room there was on the chain-link, by how evil it was that whoever had constructed it had accounted for such space. There was enough for a whole city of empty, winding streets. Enough for a thousand, a *million* wallet-sized faces. And then for the last of him curling away at the edges like a yellowed, invalid treatise. But what about him warranted that kind of sad honor? What guilt of his deserved close proximity to the sweetest innocence of the world? How was he worthy of memoriam?

Suddenly, a monstrous cry scraggled up behind from the nearby blockade. The jawing of the CUF crowd died down immediately as a shirt, a jacket, a person cut through them and smacked the barrier so hard that it wobbled. Their mouth was stretched so wide that Ev could see the pink of their throat from where he stood.

“My baby! Is my baby in there? Somebody tell me! Oh my God, is my—”

And then, distinctly, “Hey, there’s the mayor—!”

He sprinted to the squad car, ripped the back door open, and threw himself inside, crumpling over to the filthy floor of the cab, mashing his hands over his ears to hold his head together. His body lurched, trying to rid itself of emotion, trying to yield an appropriate sound.

“*Baby*,” he spattered out, a thin strand of saliva trickling from his lips.

He hoped to anything that the car was bugged and that somebody in some darkened basement somewhere—some devious reporter, some hired Eye or Wools himself—was listening in and recording every strangled syllable to play for the masses the next morning. He wished he could give the whole city the word.

His cell phone buzzed in the pocket of his pants. He watched the illuminated square shine through the fabric for a moment before he dug it out and squinted at the screen through watery eyes. JENNER CHALICE.

“I know,” he said, answering on the third buzz. “I’m already here.”

SOMEWHERE

(Radio static) (Radio static) (Radio static) (Radio static) (Radio static) (Radio static)

Audio: “Tell me. Do these times make you feel the same way everywhere you go? Or, especially now, maybe you’re afraid to go anywhere anymore. In which case, do these times make you feel the same way all the time? Do you feel besieged? Do you feel captive? Like you’re being skipped over not to be saved but to be tortured even more? And there’s no angel after you. No, you’re just farther along in the schedule. Do you feel the entry of the knife that will kill you? Do you watch the bullet go in? Because I do. I watch it go deep every day.”

(Radio static) (Radio static)

“I’m the Spektator.”

(Radio static) (Radio static) (Radio static)

NORTHSIDE

In one of the gated subdivisions shelved neatly in the center of North Spekender, the last of the sports cars and luxury vehicles pulled into their garages for the night not to move again until the next morning's commute to high-rise offices downtown or yoga studios in the Arts District. The sky above was sodden with clouds holding in their rain, tinged with incoming darkness. Soon the streetlights would all pop on in a unified diamond finish and join the sapphire glow of home entertainment systems beaming through the blinds of each grandiose house.

For a while, the neighborhood was silent. The landscaping that velveteed each yard in an unnaturally emerald sheen shifted quietly at the touch of a wind that barely parted the air. Then one of the houses cracked apart, and a woman sliced out into the serenity of the evening.

No front doors eased open, no curtains drew cautiously to one side as she stormed across the treated green of her lawn to the driveway. Her flats clacked down the length of it. Her hand raked blonde highlights out of her face before reaching down to cup the swell of her belly. She made it to the end of the drive and then stopped, her feet toeing the shore of the street.

Her breath sawed in her ears as she stared down at the asphalt and fought to thin out the noise. Then again, there was also a blessed music to it singing over the horror in her head: a cell phone back inside the house lying on settee where she had hurled it down. One missed call after another: *Katrina. Katrina. Katrina. Katrina. Kat.* The man she was married to would soon be returning home from his law firm downtown, or, more realistically, one of the rooftop bars nearby.

She watched the palm ferns planted around her mailbox sway and bow in a current of cold wind as she eased herself down to the concrete, grimacing with the effort. With bits of gravel digging into her knees, her fingers skimmed over the blouse covering her stomach in an attempt to calm the tiny distress inside of it.

“*Baby,*” she murmured, eyes closed. “Mommy’s okay, Mommy will be okay for you, I will be okay for you.”

She chanted until her mouth distorted with tears, and then she wrenched her head to the side to stave off what was not allowed to break out, and there he was. Standing beside a jeep parked in the circular drive of the house beside hers was a boy like a deer in pause, studying her with eyes both attentive and impervious. His hand rested on the door handle of his car as if he had just gotten out, or was about to get in and leave.

Kat blinked at him over the median of their yards, and immediately her vision watered him into a blur. Frantically, she scrubbed the backs of her hands across her face, smearing her eyes with black bruises of mascara. His image cleared, neither any closer nor any farther away.

“Are you alright?” he asked. It was only a question, no dripping sympathy or gallantry about it. Not even alarm.

She watched him lift his hand to his lips and take a drag of a cigarette, blowing the smoke out in short, intermittent plumes. One, two, three wafted upwards in an ethereal pillar of cloud. He tugged the jeep door open and heaved a backpack that had been hanging off his shoulder inside.

She did not drum up an answer for him. Instead, her gaze flicked to the small-scale chateau looming behind him, where she pictured his parents spying through its windows—parents who might have much nosier questions than that, and, worse yet, direct connections to her husband. But she had never actually seen the faces of her neighbors or any son that they might have, had she? Until this moment, the house to the left of her own had never made that much of an impression on her. Even now, despite its symmetrical grass and opalescent stucco, it seemed to stand dark and hollow behind him. Did anyone occupy it at all, even this statuesque creature poised against the vinery?

“Do you need an ambulance?” the kid asked.

He sounded almost bored, yet, when she refocused on him, his eyes were knife-sharp, his chin angled toward her belly rounded in her arms. She glanced down at herself and forced one hand off, leaving it suspended in a stationary wave.

“Oh, I’ll be fine!” The saturation of her voice burned acid in her throat. “It’s not that! Good gracious, I *hope* she’s not coming yet! She’s still got another four months! I just needed some air.”

The kid stared at her with a straight line of a mouth. The pine trees towering above them rustled in the wake of a tall wind, loosening the scent of old rain to the ground below. Kat’s heart hammered in her chest.

“I’m sorry, I’m probably not very observant!” she made herself laugh. “But has your family lived here long? I don’t think I’ve ever seen any action around your house until now!”

The kid flicked the ash off the tip of his cigarette. “I live alone. And I come and go.” He paused, searching the pristine landscape as if hunting for the flaw in it. “But you should know that if you want to get on the street, you have to always be running.”

Kat watched him take one last sip of his cigarette before letting it fall to the concrete and gingerly grinding it with his shoe. Words seemed to have been taken from her, leaving only a wild breath. He was no nearer to her than when she first noticed him, but somehow he was right in front of her, asking a question only she could answer.

“Does praying help?”

Down at the base of her stomach, she felt a tiny hand press outward gently. “What makes you think I was doing that?”

The kid folded himself into the jeep. His eyes were elsewhere, in a place beyond the marble mansions populating the neighborhood, beyond the Northside, outside of the world.

“Pray for me, and I’ll pray for you.”

Then he pulled the door shut. The engine grunted to life, brake lights glowed a ruby red, headlights flashed on and gilded the grass as he eased out onto the street. As he passed, Kat could hear a smothered artillery behind the tint of his windows, his cab a closed capsule of radio escape. And then he was gone.

The lights above the street slowly booted up to their full brightness. Kat labored to her feet, pausing to settle her balance. She took hold of her stomach and walked up the driveway and back into the fragranced warmth of her house. As she turned to shut the door and flip the deadbolt, the work of the evening flashed ahead of her: the pot roast needing to be taken out of the oven, the salad she needed to throw together to go with it, the craft bilge that she needed to

set out on the table, the TV that needed to already be on. It wasn't until she was back into the kitchen that she let her thoughts sink back down to the driveway and her neighboring escapee, and she wondered with an aching desperation where it was he had been headed.

STIPPO'S

In the backlot in the Eastside, Nimble sat hunched atop the dumpster, afraid to move from it at all. At both her own and Arla's apprehension, she had not left the Westside the day before, when what had happened was still a continuous loop on the news and in her mind: over and over the same dripping blood of condensation down faraway glass. Now, after two days, she had reemerged into a city that, if it had not cared before, now had much of its care taken from it. It was as if it could feel the weight of more bones stowed under its dirt, and that excess tugging was making its life so, so heavy. As she ran through the streets, she found herself fearing the cut of the concrete beneath her. She already knew the wilderness that a world caught in perpetual winter could become, especially devoid of any fire. And a fire neither misplaced nor forfeited, she reminded herself, but stolen.

Che couldn't sit. He had to move, pace, grind his shoes, rummage for bilge bottles in the trash to lay sideways on the ground and punt so hard at the fence that they shattered like cymbals. Fueled by the commotion, curses began volleying out of his mouth, and then he was charging toward the dumpster. Nimble ducked her head, flinching at the violence that she heard in each step.

"We have to get back to that deli." He was breathing hard. "We have to go back there."

She dug her fingernails into the dumpster lid and wanted nothing more than to be nailed down to it for real. She didn't even know what had pulled her across the city and into East Spekender except for the respite that it could offer her from the tornadic atmosphere of her house. She and her brothers had watched Wry return home that day after the Children's Disaster, as the paper had dubbed it, and Arla had sobbed and thrown her arms around him. Without a word, he had shrugged out of her embrace to turn and leave again, and he had not been back since.

After two strange weeks of her father's resurrection, one day had made him a myth again. He had not breached the threshold of his bedroom since the shooting, when he had dragged himself home to no such welcoming party as Wry had received—just one daughter spying down the tunnel of the right-hand hallway. Since then, the only sounds that had escaped his walls had been the periodic rush of the bathroom tap and the mindless yammering of the news broadcasts. She pictured him sitting in the blue light of the TV, hypnotized as if by a jammed police flasher.

"We're never gonna find those people again," she found herself murmuring to Che. *I'm Tarro*, her mind remembered.

Che spat sharply onto the ground. "Who the hell says they're not there right now waiting for us to show up again?"

His voice sounded bladed, like all it wanted to do was stick into someone and draw blood. She ducked her head down again and felt an acute panic rising unfettered from her stomach. They could not go back to Stippo's, not at any cost. She knew that, she needed to know that.

“Hey, we saw what we saw, okay?” he said. “There's nothing we can do about that. The point is, we saw it. All of us—you and me and those two guys and that woman. We were supposed to. Now we gotta figure it out. We gotta at least—”

“Why aren't you scared?” Nimble's head snapped up, her eyes bulging. “This is something that you should be scared of! And you're acting like this is some fine, okay thing that can't hurt us at all! That guy—that *guy*—did you not see what he was doing when he looked at you?”

Che gaped at her. “You think I'm not scared? Yeah, I'm fuckin' scared! This doesn't make any fucking sense! But you really wanna act like it didn't happen right in front of you? You really wanna forget? Thirteen numbers on the window, and thirteen kids dead!”

“If we go there, if we meet those people, we're gonna see him again! You don't know it, but I do, okay? I *know* it. He's gonna keep showing up, and he's gonna keep doing what he's doing! The feeling that I had in Stippo's when we saw him, it's the same one I had the morning I woke up and my mom was dead! My mom and my sister! It's the same exact one!”

She cursed herself for how outwardly insane she sounded, for ever letting her guard down enough to suggest that they sneak back into one of the last pieces of heaven hidden in the city. Silently, Che flopped against the dumpster beside her, folding his arms across his chest. As he flipped his hair to squint up at the sky, she tried to breathe herself back to reality, wary now that she had pushed him too far away with such naked fear.

But then he said, “You think there's a sun up there anymore? Feels like it hasn't come out in years. Shit, you think it's been there all along, and there's just something wrong with our eyes?”

Like, you know, cataracts or something? And if you look hard enough, you can break through the cover and see it. Maybe we just think there's clouds. Maybe there's nothing at all in the way." He looked over at her and chuckled. "Maybe we're all dumbasses."

Nimble slid down from the dumpster and landed on rubbery legs. "Maybe *you* are." It came out shaky and without a smile, but it was a knife nonetheless.

As they headed to the Business District, she wondered how it could be that he could joke her dread into a weapon and get away with it. The boy beside her was loping forward without care of cold or drizzle or the command of gravity itself, but something destructive had been shown to her in the backlot, and it was still daggered in him then as he walked. She wanted to believe that he had shown it to her as an act of kinship, from one afflicted to another.

They rounded a corner, and there was Stippo's, still doing business, still standing despite the invisible plague slathered on its front windows. Che led the way inside, and Nimble followed, forfeiting any chance for a ruse of comfort at the sight of the table in the center of the dining area.

There were two of them—the pregnant lady and the tattooed man in the windbreaker—sitting across from each other in replication of the very posture they had held two days before. Their heads were lowered, as if they were engaged in repressed prayer, or otherwise just trying to keep from the awkwardness of having to face each other.

The man in the windbreaker noticed them first and caught Nimble's eye immediately when he glanced up. He looked like a wild animal in captivity, predatory without a firm idea of how to be so anymore, and she couldn't help but rip her gaze away nervously as the woman finally looked up across the table.

"Oh my God, you're here!" she laughed in loud relief. "We thought—" She gestured to the man in front of her and then thought better of it. "—well, *I* thought you would come back

today. I'm sorry, I feel so crazy—but I mean, here you are! I just—I just feel a bit better now. I don't really know why.”

Before Che or Nimble could say anything else, the front doors of the restaurant burst open in a rapture of white light, and the college student bounded into the dining area, his eyes wide and hyper-tuned, a canvas backpack thwacking against one shoulder. *Tarro*, bulleted through Nimble's brain. As if he could hear the very thought in her head, he stutter-stepped across the carpet when he saw the table of them.

“I meant to get here sooner,” he explained in more breath than voice. “I would have come yesterday, but I had class and a dissertation thing and, uh, papers to grade—” He paused, staring at all of them. “But I dipped out early today.”

The rest of them were silent until the pregnant woman spoke. “You go to Great Winston?”

He eyed the question like it was bait of some kind. “Yeah. First-year grad student.”

Nimble had been silently dreading the crossing of the next line, but the woman glided over it without a second thought, as if it were the next most sensible thing to do. “I'm Katrina Mercier. Kat for short—*oh, shoot*—” She winced suddenly and then chuckled with effort, clutching at her belly. “Sorry, don't mind me, I'm just her dance floor.”

Nimble stared at the bump under her shirt and the manicured hand resting on top of it.

“*Tarro Carthage*,” the college student said. “Good to meet you.”

All eyes flicked to the tattooed man next, who folded his arms limply on the tabletop and offered only a grunt of a name. “DK.”

“Che Dupriest,” Che said, his name blowing off his lips like smoke.

Apprehension flushed through Nimble's veins as she tried to copy his leisurely tone. “N-*Nimble*.”

Immediately, the tattooed man—DK—cocked a question like a gun at her. “You got a last name?”

She could only stare at him, the words wilting in her throat.

“Do *you*?” Tarro suddenly answered for her, his voice hooking the air.

DK steeled a stare back at him. “No.”

“You a banger?”

“I look like one or somethin’?”

Tarro shrugged, unreadable.

“At one point in time,” DK said dryly.

“Did you quit?”

“Man, can’t nobody quit.”

“Then why aren’t you dead?”

The words on DK’s skin rippled as his muscles rotoed tight. Nimble instinctively braced for an impending strike, but the only attack he gave was in his response: “I guess it’s just ‘cause when I decide to run my mouth with questions, Imma make sure they’re educated ones.”

Nimble scrambled to fix her attention on anything else—the pattern of the carpet, the frayed laces of Che’s sneakers. She pictured him inhaling the conflict in front of them, trapping the high of it in his temples. How much war could he consume before he began to lose his taste for it? How much would he then try to manufacture for himself?

“*Edison*,” she blurted out. “Nimble Edison.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought,” DK bristled. “And you the one that knew that scrup in the window. He looked at you like you was real friendly.”

As she stood blanking, unable to say anything, Tarro let out an incredulous laugh.

“Whoa, don’t we wanna take this from the top before we start—”

“Who the fuck you think I’m talkin’ about?” DK broke him off. “We all saw him. He was lookin’ straight at her, markin’ those numbers.”

Nimble could only sputter frantically, “I don’t know him! I swear to God, I don’t know who he is! The first time I saw him, he acted like—he just—he knew my name somehow!”

“Well, you’re not exactly a nobody,” Tarro muttered just loud enough for her to hear. “Alright, you said you’d seen him before. Where?”

“The Bazaar. He had on Aztec colors.”

“Nah, that scrup wasn’t no Aztec,” DK confirmed.

“But you heard who did the shooting, right?” Kat cut in. “It was a CUF boy. The police gunned him down right after it happened. It wasn’t that guy that we saw.”

“But he knew how many were gonna die,” Che said eagerly. “He knew, and he was *showing* us. They talked to witnesses—the cops, I mean. Every one of ‘em said that the kid started shooting random into the crowd. He didn’t shoot like he had thirteen kids in mind.”

DK pushed himself back from the table, tossing his hands into the air. “Look, I don’t see what the point is in sittin’ here speculatin’ like we some kind of task force. This is Spender, right? Murders happen here every damn day, don’t nobody give a damn about half of ‘em anyway. What’s it gonna change to—”

“*Yes, it goddamn does!*” thrashed out of Tarro, reeling into the expanse of the restaurant.

The dining area paralyzed momentarily, breath suspended, heads whipped around in paranoia. The table of them froze in shock. Tarro stooped over the top of it, his shoulders bricked together, his knuckles white.

“Forgive me if I’m a little cut about all of this,” he whispered, eyes shut tight. “Just forgive me. But one of the eight people that were murdered a week ago was my girlfriend. And nobody’s done a goddamn thing about it.”

Before Nimble could stop herself, the Spektator's voice was in her head, and she was mouthing the name of a ghost. "Meridian Bower."

Tarro's eyes stoked fire. "You knew her or something?"

"No," she breathed, immobilized in his stare.

"I was gonna marry her," he went on. "I've still got the ring in the box in my dresser drawer. The top one. Where I keep my old essays, because she'd never look there."

He jammed up for a moment, working his jaw open and closed until the rest of the words he was trying to say loosened out. "We've all seen this guy before, but he's never been the same. He was there after Meridian, and he was there two days ago for those thirteen kids. I just feel too tied up in it, okay? I feel sighted. And, whatever I do, I can't keep trying to go on with my life like I don't see any of it. I can't keep going like normal; I'm gonna . . . *play out* if I do."

Nimble took a deep breath of the heavy air and wondered for the first time if she soaked up sorrow like Che soaked up discord. If maybe she was designed to know tragedy perfectly.

"Maybe we should go down there, see the Prayer Wall," Kat suggested quietly. "Pay our respects." Her eyes fluttered beneath their curled lashes. "I've never gone and seen it in person."

Before anyone had verbally agreed, they were all on their feet, Tarro's backpack slung onto his shoulder, Kat's purse looped around her arm, DK's windbreaker wrapped around him, Che's hands stuffed in his pockets. *Say no, say no*, Nimble tried to think as they moved out into the damp wind. *This is the most unsafe thing*. But still, she found herself moving with them towards the wounded heart of the city, as if it was her very right to gravitate to its off-kilter rhythm.

WESTSIDE

The foyer windows sent spears of pale light down Ev's hallway, sharpening them against the jagged tile to cut through the crack beneath his door. He had been watching them intrude for days now, fearing the afternoon when they would finally prod him deeply enough to acquiesce to their demands that he reemerge.

Now, it was the afternoon.

For several minutes, he had been standing with one palm fitted around the doorknob, periodically and violently shaking his head to roughen up the thoughts inside of it. If he was to go through with escaping, if only for a minute, there could be no indulging in a remembrance of the city's freshest incident. He had to be militarized about it. Earlier that morning, precautionary measures had been taken to hopefully prevent any cave-ins. He had ducked his head under the bathtub faucet longer than usual, holding it until his teeth ached and the muscles in his face lost their feeling. That sweet numbness had steadily become his most sacred nirvana, more necessary than putting on the pretense of business attire, more crucial than closing his eyes at night and

concocting a state like sleep. If kept up, maybe it could even block out the blather of the news, the incessant buzzing of his cell phone, the haunting call of his wife—

He slapped himself hard across the face. For a moment, his nerves were stunned, and it was blessed. Then it lessened until it had subsided altogether in a matter of twenty ringing seconds.

When he scissored his gaunt body through the doorway, the hall hardly creaked in response. The house was still and soldierly, and he felt like a traitor walking through it, scavenging after nothing to steal but more solitary space. And goodness knows, he could just as well take it. Arla had given up on knocking at his door with offers of meals and mail the day before. His children should have already been well into school hours, provided they had all managed to show up. Royce wouldn't be in to cook for dinner until much later. So then, he could let himself appear. He could stock up on rations again.

“Water,” he mumbled aloud, slipping into the empty dining room and heading towards the kitchen.

Halfway there, a rogue memory flickered across his vision. The tight-coiled muscles of his mind twitched a familiar image into his head, and suddenly there she was, shimmering like a hologram behind his eyes. His pace slowed to a crawl, his breath stopped in his chest, and he recalled the time that his kids were housebound with a particularly bad strain of stomach flu that had plagued the public schools for weeks on end. Muscadine House had the cornflower-blue look of sunshine mingled with sleep. A pleasant look, overall. An ample one, a healing one.

He remembered heading home early from City Hall in the heat of late summer. He remembered what Ari had been humming—some old cadaverous song, maybe even a hymn—when he walked into the sitting room and inadvertently coughed. Immediately, she had looked up at him from the book she had been reading, eyes wide with their warm simmer.

And her voice: “Oh no, you can’t be going down too. Uh-uh, I need you or else I’m screwed here, dude.”

He had laughed along with her, tying his arms around her stomach that had already started filling out with their fifth child. He had kissed her, the scruff of his beard tickling the amber dunes of her skin. Then he had teased with all the damning joy he had in him: “Well, if I go down, I’m taking you down with me.”

In the kitchen now, his hands fumbled a cabinet open and pulled a glass out. Careful to keep out of range from the daylight burning through the window over the sink, he flipped the water on and filled his cup.

Then, “Ice.” He pawed the refrigerator handle desperately, tugging with muscles of string, just as a footstep sounded across the room. He railed out of the trance of his memories, heart hammering, to see his son frozen in the doorway.

“*Dad!*” Maverick sputtered out, genuine shock dashed across his face under the brim of his ball cap. But it was all composed in an instant. “Dad, hey. How you doing?”

Ev stood enveloped in the steamy light of the freezer and watched his son prop himself against the doorframe with a casual spryness. An old intuition flaked rust in the back of his head: *I caught him in something*. But the parental sense that usually backed it up would not operate correctly. Something was wrong. He was supposed to be able to feel the wrong thing and know it.

“What are you doing?” he decided to ask instead.

Maverick shifted his weight. “I was gonna make myself a sandwich.” He paused, eyebrows raised. “You about to go into work?”

Ev scowled against the pain of trying to answer such a question. He dealt the lie out gruffly. “I’m going back in tomorrow.”

Maverick nodded approvingly and propelled himself towards the cabinet that Ev had just fished a glass out of. He worked with his back to his father, easing a dinner plate onto the counter, tossing a bag of bread beside it, feeling in the back of one cupboard for what Ev knew, what he *remembered*, would have to be a jar of mayonnaise. He stared down at the water idling in his glass and felt a surge of frustration finally surface.

“Have you realized that you’re missing school hours?”

Maverick spun around immediately and rocked back against the countertop, good-natured laughter bubbling out of him. “Yes, sir, well, I woke up feeling sort of sick, so I just slept in until a little while ago. Now my stomach’s growling, so I guess I’m good.”

He chuckled again, then rummaged a butter knife out of a drawer beside him and set to spreading his bread with a condiment that Ev could now see was indeed mayonnaise. The next question came darted out from under his son’s arm, quick and unexpected. “Have you been watching the news?”

Ev set the glass on the counter and pulled the freezer door closed. His son continued to make his sandwich, unaffected by the threadbare silence that followed.

“Somewhat,” he finally breathed out, biting down on the half-true word. Yes, he had seen it all in seclusion: the grueling press conferences that Starick had been left to conduct damage control at, the thirteen hellish torturous minutes of silence that the newscasters had taken during their broadcast of what they had christened the Children’s Disaster, the footage of parents reduced to slobbering wrecks, CUF kids stonily recounting the moments when their friends fell dead beside them, the protests that had frothed up again on the front lawn of his workplace, the picture slideshows and home video and *faces, faces, faces* of thirteen dead kids stamped into his brain to remind him always of the evilness that abounds when what is beautifully alive is eviscerated without repercussion.

Maverick was screwing the lid back onto the mayonnaise jar. “The city’s done a lot to honor the victims and their families. More than just the Prayer Wall. They’re talking about sectioning off a portion of the Bazaar and putting up a sculpture or a statue. Like a symbol of hope, a starting point to move forward from.”

Why is he talking about this right now? Ev thought. What is he doing? Why is he reporting this back to me?

“Some people want to recruit the banger gangs to help with a mural. They think maybe something like that can promote some unity for them too. Considering what’s happening and their ties to CUF.”

Suddenly, his son was right in front of him, his face devoid of the malice that Wry deliberately let show, and, yet, still as serrated as a saw edge. “Can I get past you to get some ham, Dad?”

As he wavered to one side to let Maverick pass, he looked him over compulsively for any pop of neon, any low blow of orange allegiance. He knew his son was not sick, but what had his lie been for? What heroism gone haywire had he bred into this second son of his as well? Who had, in teaching Spekender’s children to speak, also taught them how to weaponize words? Who had, in preserving life for them, also taught them that they could sacrifice it? *He* was supposed to be the problem-solver. *He* was supposed to be in the streets. Not those girls, those boys out there. Not his girl, his boys. Not this mannerly young man before him, already well-versed in the business of putting on a face and doling out the pats and punches of a professional reproach.

“Artists get buried just the same as activists do,” something bleak and nasty leaned out of him to growl at the same time that Maverick said, “I knew one of the guys that was killed in the shooting.”

The refrigerator door smacked shut, and they both stared at each other for a moment before Maverick carried his packet of lunch meat over to his sandwich, waiting for the zip of another stray-bullet remark before continuing to speak.

“I didn’t know him really well, but we were in the same grade at Spek High. We used to shoot hoops sometimes after school. He had two sisters and some grandparents, and that’s who he lived with. Just about everybody knew him liked him because he sold candy and crackers and stuff out of his locker to make cash on the side.”

His voice sounded so shorthanded, so brisk in understanding. Who had taught him to speak so plainly of calamity? Had he even cried about this? Had he screamed? There were better reasons why Ev would not allow himself emotion, but couldn’t this good son of his afford to?

Maverick was looking at him, balancing his plate on one hand, the bread already stored away, the mayonnaise and ham crisping in the fridge again, the knife rinsed off and drying in the sink.

“I think everybody’s just trying to find a way to fight some good into the situation,” he said. “Alright, Dad. I’m gonna go eat this and catch up on the work I missed. It was good to see you.”

Then he was gone, and everything was quiet again. Ev poured the water in his glass down the sink drain, opened up the cabinet, and put the glass back inside. His legs worked themselves out of the kitchen, through the dining room, and back in sight of his hallway, back within earshot of his flat screen’s chattering volume. Two paces from his door, he stubbed his toe in one of the craters in the tile and, through a distant dash of pain, wondered how many times his cell phone had vibrated while he had been out of the room.

BAZAAR

The Bazaar marketplace was a pounding pulse amidst a stagnant downtown, powered by the constant squirming of a neon army reclaiming their desecrated stage. If the area had been a vigil site a day or two before, then that somber prayerfulness was now gone. What Nimble and Che and the three strangers from Stippo's walked into was a verbal arms factory operating at full-blast on the plot of asphalt that was formerly hallowed ground. The prior news footage of a barren roadscape strewn with white sheets could be long forgotten; the CUF stage was brutally surviving. A protest speech was in action, and a heavysset kid with scarlet cheeks was pacing across the platform, peppering a call-and-response spell over his listeners. Nimble could barely make out what he was saying, but his audience was becoming drunk off his energy.

Farther down the strip, the market was overrun with orange shirts thrusting flyers at shoppers in fashion booths or arguing with passerby that they apprehended in the open aisle.

Their color had changed. It was no longer a fire of caution that they wore, but one of confrontation—eager for more scenery to chew up, for more terrible noise to make.

“My God,” Kat whispered in the wake of the commotion.

Che slowed his pace beside Nimble just enough to cause her to glance over at him. They locked eyes, and she could see that he was fascinated with the turbulence around him, completely attuned to it. But there was a dark playfulness in his eyes when he looked over at her and plunged a fist into his stomach, grinning as he pretended to punch himself in the gut. She could only marvel at the audacity of a joke in such a place, just as they reached the end of the chain-length where the Prayer Wall began.

Without warning, DK dropped back from the group and stopped cold. The rest of them turned to stare, uncertain of the question they should ask.

Tarro started back towards him. “What’s the problem?”

DK regarded him blankly. “I can’t go no further.”

“*What?*”

He hesitated, and Nimble saw an unidentifiable emotion spread on his face and then crumple up until there was nothing visible at all. “There’s certain places I can’t go. And I can’t go past here on Bazaar grounds.”

“Why the hell not?” Tarro flared before Che scuffed one shoe loud across the asphalt, clearing the air.

“It’s cool,” he said. “We’ll just stay close, near the Wall.”

DK held Che’s gaze from under the hood of his windbreaker, offering no thanks, as the rest of them looked back over at Tarro, who was shaking his head. “Do whatever, man.”

The Prayer Wall seemed to be the only hint that the Bazaar had experienced catastrophe. A new section had been filled in—more twine sutured to the fence, more names canonized in

marker on cardboard—and it was bleeding its tribute down onto the blacktop below. Flowing from thirteen new posters was the jetsam of youth turned into the rubble of thirteen lives: stuffed animals, basketballs, ballet shoes, friendship bracelets, graduation caps, framed photos, a whole garden of fabric flowers. It was a shrine to aching familiar faces, and perhaps that was why those who passed by either paused briefly to regard it in momentary silence or ducked away from it with eyes downcast, as if afraid of invoking the wrath of young ghosts.

Tarro followed the fence line almost to its center and stopped in front of a posterboard dusted with silver glitter. His eyes swept madly over the lettering of the name on it as he stepped forward to kiss two fingers and brush them across a photograph glued underneath.

“That’s Meridian’s,” he said softly. “She was only twenty-three. Four months younger than me. She really would’ve hated the fact that we put something like this up for her. But it’s just what you do, I guess. She would have said it was morbid. But what else do you do?”

From where she stood, Nimble could make out the image of a woman leaning back against a car, posing with her hands on her hips and one leg kicked sassily to the side. A dog was captured in mid-jump at her knee. She was smiling broadly—a V-neck T-shirt, brown hair cropped short, high-waisted jeans. And now she was in a grave somewhere.

Nimble tore her attention away to the crowd up ahead so she wouldn’t have to picture the casket, the dress, the bouquet rested in pale hands. The CUF mass shifted and surged in front of her, never calming. And then suddenly, at the edge of the fray, Wry appeared. He was in the process of unrolling a black electrical cord and winding it around the outskirts of the stage ground when he turned and looked straight at her. The feeling in her chest was at first a jab of fear at being spotted in what was his personal warground. But then his eyes bobbed back to Che, Tarro, Kat, and even DK farther away, and she cocked her head to one side, holding his gaze

strongly, as if to show him that he wasn't the only one who managed to escape the Westside each day.

He acknowledged her with a slow and discreet raise of the chin. Copying his gesture, she returned it and watched him turn back toward the stage. Just as quickly, he was swallowed up by the crowd, which naturally sifted out another body to fill the space that he had occupied. But the one who moved in his place was not sporting any orange at all, but was clad in a mossy green apron, like a wilted vine slithering unblistered through the fire. Nimble saw him again like she had that first time at the Bazaar: a disguise loaded onto something manlike and malleable, like the empty crates stacked onto the dolly that he guided smoothly around the knots in the asphalt. An intruder in the suit of a deliveryman.

Instinctively, she began to back away from his ensuing presence, but Che caught her by the shoulders, his touch jarring in the suddenly stagnant air. Tarro and Kat were paralyzed where they stood, watching him approach, as if neither one of them had truly believed their suspicions were real enough to manifest him again before their eyes.

The strip beside them still bustled with its normal rush of foot traffic, even as he propped the dolly upright and stood with one hand on his hip, basking in the protest speech that showered its sparks over the thoroughfare.

Then he smirked. "Angelic. Isn't it?"

"Alright, tell me straight." Tarro inched forward, his voice low and threatening. "Who are you and what the hell do you keep showing up for? Are you crazy or something? Because if you're trying to get a bunch of random innocent people involved in a crime, or if you think you're being funny trying to target us somehow, then you must be some kind of insane."

A rapturous smile spread across his face. “Aw, come on, I’m just spectating. I’m just surveying the current attractions. It’s an open invitation down here, is it not? They said to *c’mon down*, did they not?”

His eyes travelled as he spoke, dragging over each of their faces. Nimble pulled her gaze to the ground before he could get to her and immediately sensed him moving closer and closer until he was standing right in front of her, close enough to feel the breath of him. But there was none to be felt. There was no life in him at all.

“Do I look so suspicious? What would you expect from a face like this?”

Her body prickled coldly as she lifted her head and looked straight at him. He wasn’t smiling at all now, and she didn’t dare say what he was to her then: a monster knowing so many shapes that it could become anything it wanted.

“I don’t know,” her voice trembled.

“Good answer.” His teeth flashed as he tracked backwards to the dolly and leaned against the handle. “Maybe I’m bad news. Maybe I’m a ghost. A *specter*—” He prodded his thumb at Tarro. “You should know that word; you’re a smart cookie. Maybe I’m that. You have a Spektator here, but do you have a Spekter yet?”

“What do you want, man?” Tarro growled, his shoulders bricked together in as menacing a posture as he could create.

The specter just smiled. “There’s a lot more room on that fence left to fill.”

“You bastard, get the hell out of here!” Kat snapped, her voice saturated with angry tears. She shook a finger at the Prayer Wall. “You knew somehow! You knew, and you wanted us to see that you knew, and you have the nerve to come back down here?! We’re witnesses! We can call the police—!”

“Aw, Kitty Kat,” he leered, silencing her with one sickening grin. Nimble looked back and saw the blood rush from her face and the purse slip from her arm where she was pressing her hand against her belly. “You don’t want your baby hearing that kind of language. You don’t want people to think you’re *that* kind of woman, and especially that you associate yourself with these kinds of people. Like that banger trash back there.”

He raised his eyebrows, looking back behind her to where DK was marooned, one hand gripping the chain-link as if to either hold himself back or keep a protective grip on the whole monument. Nimble felt her stomach twisting, hating how freely everything was happening.

“And that soft little bitch right here.”

Che stiffened behind her, and suddenly he was there in front of them both, charming his poison over the shield of her shoulder.

“Hey, Che. You don’t look so good. They can see it all over your face. You cry at night, don’t you? *Every* night. Have you told them that sometimes you cry so hard that you make yourself sick? And you still can’t look at me? Where else would I be but right here?”

“Che, look away,” Nimble commanded before she could even think.

A delighted grin split the ghost’s face in half, and every lick of flame that had bloomed in her died back down. “Oh, Nimble, if you want to joke, I can joke. I can mix it up.” He began to back away, wavering in between the Prayer Wall and the crowded strip. “See, right now, that fence tells such a boring story. It’s all equal, the value of those deaths. You know how to feel, how to fall apart at those. You know how to mourn a kid—even a punk and a rioter.” He grabbed hold of the dolly, wheeling it along with him as he neared the human current. “What could be more tragic? What could be worth more? How far does precious little life go, before it stops?”

It seemed too choreographed, too theatrically-orchestrated to really be happening before their eyes. Nimble watched as he laid a rubber-soled shoe out into the strip so neatly that the

elderly woman rounding the side of him tripped over it without even a stumble to try and catch herself. The progression of her fall was so fluid—making her eyeglasses, her hair, her shoulder bag float—until his arms slipped around her and snatched her from the air.

“So sorry, ma’am!” he sang horribly. “Are you alright there? That was completely my bad!”

“Oh, no harm done!” the woman panted, chuckling raggedly. “I should really be watching where I’m going, shouldn’t I? Old age makes you clumsy.”

He laughed too loudly. “Yes, ma’am, I’m just glad to see you’re okay! Have a good one.”

And he let her go. She passed by Nimble as a blurred pedestrian, a semi-forgotten face already. Their bodies synced side by side for a fraction of a second, and she wanted to reach out and touch her, grab her away. But the next second misaligned them, and the woman was lost behind her.

As quickly as she was gone, the ghost had kicked the dolly onto its back wheels and steered it out into the flush of the crowd, escaping. As if snapping out of a dream, Tarro broke into a sprint, and it wasn’t until he had caught him on the other side of the strip that Nimble realized they had all been following on his heels. He thrust an arm out to yank the aproned shoulder around and instead scowled into the face of a stranger, a slack-mouthed delivery boy with a patchy shave. He regarded Tarro in dazy oblivion, his eyes muddied with the heavy violet of berry, before shoving him away hard. As he lurched his dolly back out into the fray, the top crate on the stack—now full to the brim—jostled, sending a single lemon rolling across the blacktop and onto the sunken grate of a storm drain.

Tarro whipped around, his breath sputtering in fury and confusion. Kat was looking between them all with crazed, watery eyes. It was Che who shuffled forward and pointed down at the lemon. He stared at Nimble with a murky, receded expression—a nighttime expression—but

he was speaking to all of them when he said weakly but surely, “That came from a grocery store.”

The heavier stream of the crowd was against them, flooding into and around them, and they had to fight their way through it back down the length of the Prayer Wall to where DK waited, squinting off into the distance behind him with one hand jammed halfway into his waistband, feeling for a vanished weapon.

“Ya’ll see where she went—that old lady? She turned past the candy wheel, but then I lost sight of her down one of them side streets.”

A sequence of silence passed between all of them as they wavered towards the next line that would be irreversibly crossed if anyone dared to speak. Nimble glanced over at Che’s grayed face, at his hands hanging in his pockets, his wrists hidden.

Then Tarro decided it. “He was a delivery guy, that’s what he was. We all saw it, we all got it.” He peered down the strip to where the south gate opened back up into downtown. “So where’s the closest supermarket?”

DESIREE BLVD.

When Nimble envisioned Spekender at night, she always saw it through a window, from the inside of the minivan that her family no longer owned, awash in the blue glow of its dashboard console. She smelled the stuffy leather of the seats, her brothers doused in cologne, the spicy fragrance of the to-go boxes from the restaurant they had all dined in that evening. From her backseat view, she saw the headlights jettisoning out through the windshield as the car pulled over onto a side street, and her father leaned against the tug of his seatbelt, and her mother doubled over in the passenger seat as a bout of pregnancy nausea worked through her. The radio was playing softly and, to its mystical murmur, Nimble studied the nightlife beyond the glass as if she were peering into a tank at a nocturnal aquarium. The safe capsule of the car turned the act of looking into a thrill. She believed in the barrier that it set between her compact world and the vast, weird one existing simultaneously outside of it. Somewhere down in the dark were masked faces and purple eyes and illustrated skin and deadly fire and singing sirens. Somehow, it had always been both an enchanting and terrifying truth to her that deep-sea creatures cruised with their lights dimmed after the sun disappeared.

But now the minivan was gone and so was her family. The streetlights dotting the Southside strained to a sulfuric orange glow, and now she was out in it, unmoored and shipless. She, Che, Tarro, Kat, and DK had been up and down and across the whole city on their feverish mission, hitting every Northside health food co-op, all the grab-‘n-go’s posted around the Great Winston campus, and every grocery store to the east and west of the Bazaar to no avail. No one was sure what they were looking for, besides an old woman with an indiscernible face. No one had any rational plan besides the guilt of knowledge that propelled them through Spekender first in Tarro’s secondhand crossover and then on foot after it overheated halfway back to downtown from the Eastside. When the daylight left and the air dipped with an icy chill and the only place left to search was the Southside, DK mentioned the Penny Plus on Desiree Boulevard.

Tarro laughed dubiously. “You do know where that is, right?”

DK’s eyes cut through the dark of the street that they were walking down. “Scrup, you wanna trust that I know the jurisdiction of my territory? I ain’t ‘gon get you killed tonight. You can do that on your own.”

A low-fendered car snaked past them, music bumping within the walls of its cab, and Nimble saw DK’s head dart down to his shoulders. But the car passed without stopping, and, once it was gone, he gradually uncoiled himself, although his gait had lost all of its surefootedness. *Banger ride!* she thought with the fearful ecstasy of a child spotting a wild animal in captivity for the first time. It made her wonder exactly how close they were to the Banger District.

Led by DK, they moved forward amidst iron-barred package stores, lounges, pawn shops, sagging buildings gutted of their interiors and cordoned off by wire fencing with NO TRESPASSING signs. At last, they came to a sprawling parking lot where a sign reflected in bleary orange and red off of rain puddles and the windshields of the few cars scattered in front of

a flat building: Penny Plus. A night crowd of customers moved lethargically in the bright yellow glare of the front windows, and the sight made Nimble feel oddly exposed in the dimness of the parking lot.

“Listen,” Kat’s voice wavered as they made their way across the blacktop. “That old woman—if she’s not here, what are we gonna do then? Look, it’s getting late, and I don’t know about you—”

“Then we can try gas stations and convenience stores and stuff next,” Che suggested.

“But what if—do you think we *missed* her somehow?”

No one knew how to answer that. A response to such a likely possibility would unavoidably raise questions about the logic of what they were currently doing. And what *were* they doing? Strangers themselves hunting for another stranger, staking out the food suppliers of the city in order to do what? What were they doing running at whatever unholy angel had appeared to them that day, treating them to some insane enlightenment of evil?

A shopping cart rattled down the opposite side of the aisle that they walked down. A mother, glassy-eyed and exhausted, was pushing it, and her little boy was tugging at her arm. “Momma!” he sang, and his voice seemed to bury into the flesh of the darkness and permeate it. Nimble ignored them as they passed, afraid of becoming too fixated and cursing them into an involvement in their present search.

At her side, Che laughed through his teeth. “Out here’s where you go to buy low-grade berry under some busted light pole.”

They reached the end of the aisle, and DK stopped beside the bed of a rusted pickup truck, scanning the windows of the grocery store with grave intensity. Without hesitation, Tarro blew right past him and intended to keep going, until he caught him by the shoulder and wrenched him back hard.

“Hold up, what you doin’?” DK hissed.

Tarro’s face was fixed with resolve. “This is the grocery store. It has to be this one. I mean, what are we waiting for?”

“Nah, man, we can’t just bust up in there stormin’ the whole damn store! You really wanna be that stupid? We don’t even know what’s gonna happen in there! We gotta play it down, we gotta organize some kinda plan! ‘Cause if we don’t, and it just so happens that ghost motherfucker is in there workin’ with fire, then all of us out here, we fucked. Us *and* that old woman. Or else, you ‘gon run up in there and scare her off, maker her go catch a bullet in some other parking lot.”

Kat’s eyes popped amidst rings of black where her mascara had begun to smudge. “You think he’s gonna shoot her?”

“Lady, *I* don’t know! But something’s ‘bout to go down.” He laughed bitterly. “There’s a feelin’ that you get, alright? The street, the hood, the whole environment just starts to feel off. And that’s when you know some sick shit’s about to pop off.”

Chills prickled across Nimble’s skin as the night around them quieted. All of a sudden, the parking lot was an open field. The saturated sunlight of the grocery store seemed sinister. A breeze whispered across the asphalt with an uncomfortable touch.

“Why don’t we call the police?” Kat blurted out, going shrill with hysteria. “I mean, are we stupid? Why aren’t we calling the police to handle this? A *crime* is about to take place, and we know about it! Why are we just standing around trying to will something to happen?”

“Cops can’t do shit,” Che answered matter-of-factly. “And even if they could, this isn’t just a regular crime. This is worse.”

Kat bunched her blouse in her fists. “I’m not doing this. I have a baby, for Christ’s sake.”

Nimble glued her eyes to the sliding doors, the harsh light boring into her vision, the contours of metal and glass memorizing into her psyche. Silently, she waited for the terrible thing to happen.

“I’m not letting this woman die when I know about it,” Tarro raved. “I’m not watching this parking lot on the news tonight. Whatever that lunatic is planning to do, I’m not gonna let him do it. I’m gonna be here, I’m gonna do something.”

“Alright, you strapped up?” DK challenged. “Scrup, you ‘gon pull a gun?” He paused, enunciating with a mockingly proper tone. “Have you ever held a firearm before, son?”

Then Nimble saw her: the same old woman from earlier that day at the Bazaar. The doors swiped open for her, and she walked out into the night carrying a large brown bag full of groceries.

Before she knew it, Nimble’s hand slapped onto Che’s wrist, and he ripped it away from her as if he had been burned. He glared at her almost protectively before he turned, saw it for himself, and breathed, “Fuck, there she is.”

The doors slid open again behind the woman, letting someone else out, and they all scrambled for cover behind the pickup truck. But the figure that loomed behind the woman wasn’t their ghost. It was the delivery boy that had taken his place. It was the violet-eyed guy jogging up to the woman, jerking her around, slurring through slow lips, “Hey. Let me help you to your car.”

The woman stared at him for a moment, her fear present but not arresting enough. “Oh—n-no, thank you, I believe I’ve got it.”

Then the delivery boy lunged forward, trying to back her up into the shadows, his purple eyes darting about anxiously. “*Let me* help you to your car.”

Nimble sprang up from behind the truck, opening her mouth to release a soundless scream. For an eternity of seconds, she stood in panic, urging her body to disrupt the thing that was happening in front of her. And then Tarro was standing too, barking an authoritative “Hey!” across the parking lot for her.

The delivery boy and the old woman froze, and, suddenly, that was the signal. Undecidedly, they all just knew to move and move fast, to go with all the madness that they could make.

Bellowing wordlessly, Tarro gained on the delivery boy, who took off across the lot and around the side of the building. Che scrapped after him as if to chase him down and drag him back to the scene of the almost-crime. Kat followed behind them, shuffling as quickly as she could with eyes squeezed shut in a tight grimace. The old woman, where she had initially been stunned by their abrupt appearance, was making to run as well before DK wedged himself in front of her. He straightened to his highest height, his shoulders rolled back and clicked into place, the tattoos on his hands and neck smooth and elongated.

Through the front windows, Nimble could see some of the cashiers in the store squinting outside, startled by the commotion they had caused. Immediately, she panicked at the thought of one of them coming out to investigate and compromise the safety, the secrecy, the sanctity. But DK had seen the same possibility, and he grabbed a hold of both Nimble’s and Kat’s arms, pulling them as aides to his sides as he coughed out a question to the woman: “You like living here?”

The woman gaped at the ex-banger, her eyeglasses catching the glint of the white lights overhead.

Nimble was entranced as DK started again, carefully, as not to tear the voice that tattered from his throat. “What I mean is—has it *ever* been beautiful here? People talk like these are the

worst days, like there's some basis for comparison. People talk like they got their paradise poisoned or somethin'. But I ain't never seen a day of that in my life. There ain't no way for me to believe that there was ever a moment when it wasn't ugly every night and deranged every mornin' because of what it does at night and suspicious of every foot it feels walkin' on its concrete. Suspicious enough to do anything, grow any type 'a fangs, any type 'a claws. To bite anything just to keep from bein' eat up itself."

The old woman stared at him. At last, she let out a long breath. And then she began to laugh softly, giving madness to his madness, or truth to his truth.

"Young man, don't hate this place where you live," she replied, hesitating for only a moment before she spoke again. "It's just as scared too."

She nodded, confirming it, with a shaky and second-thought, "T-thank you." Then she steered her shopping cart around them and out into the parking lot. They all watched her load her groceries into her car, get in, and drive away, while the night resumed itself without a hitch. For a long time, no one moved. They just stood where they were, bewildered and overpowered. It all felt so anti-gravity. It all felt so mysteriously supernal.

"Okay," Tarro said. "Okay." He pointed a visibly shaking hand at the distant street where the woman's car had driven off. "There you go. We did it."

Che followed his gaze. "That delivery guy was trippin' balls. He must've been on a shitload more than just berry. He looked out of his mind."

Kat was breathing heavily. "My husband should already be home from work. I've gotta get us home."

Nimble looked down at the hands that cradled her belly. *Us.*

"I would offer to drive you if my car wasn't shot," Tarro said. "But I'll walk with you to a bus stop and make sure you get uptown, if you want. It's, uh, it's Kat, right?"

“Yeah, Kat. Sorry—I’m not good with names . . .?”

“That’s okay. It’s Tarro.”

They smiled an awkward, nervous formality at each other. Then Che’s hand clapped down hard on Nimble’s shoulder, and she whipped around to see his eyes backlit blue in the dark like the lettering on the Penny Plus sign above them.

“Hey, you good walking back?” he asked.

“Yeah,” she said immediately and then stopped, taken aback at the confidence in her voice.

“You sure?”

“Yeah,” she said again and let herself smile. “Yeah, I’ll be fine.”

Everyone began to disband, scattering through the parking lot with dumfounded and daring expressions on their faces. Out of the corner of her eye, Nimble glimpsed DK stalking towards the street beyond the parking lot, and, suddenly, there was no way she could misspeak, no way she could ruin her strength.

“DK! Are you gonna make it okay?”

He turned, frozen within the beam of her voice. “Yeah, I’m straight.” There was a beat, and then he muttered. “Night, Edison.”

Grinning wildly, she dashed out of the Southside, leaving the light of the Penny Plus behind her, feeling a lift in her stomach, a live wire beating in her bones. She breached the domain of downtown, winding through the Business District, weaving well around the perimeter of the Bazaar that pulsed abnormally with its colorful fire. At last, running full-speed towards the Westside, she let it be realized: the sensation of relief. She could scream for joy in the middle of the street. She could spin cartwheels and somersaults, dancing to silent music. She could return home and gorge herself on the richest, greasiest food that Royce had to cook up. For that night,

at least, there could be no triumphant ghosts. For that night, she could breathe, and, because of that, an old woman would not die.

SOMEWHERE

(Radio static) (Radio static) (Radio static) (Radio static)

(Beep) (Beep) (Beep)

(Radio static) (Radio static)

Audio: “Morning, kids. We’re all going to die. But I guess now it’s safe to say that you’re pretty set on your mood of departure—or, at least, the percentage of you ascribed to activism. And, as of this morning, it looks like you’ve transcended it. Transcended it? No, let’s use another word. I don’t want any of my listeners mistaking my energy towards this topic for joy—or *derision*, for that matter. It is what it is, kids. Learn that quickly. And it was only a matter of time before this happened.

“Spekender is a particular kind of monster that feeds on its own young. It’s not as if you didn’t already know this. It’s not as if you’re unaware that you’re living in a fantastical hellscape, which is either loudly or quietly burning at you every day. Your generation’s overall attitude—the rage, the cynicism, the disillusionment—it’s an environmental hazard. And it has no belief in anything but conflict. Conflict for conflict. We’ve seen it for decades with the banger gangs and,

most recently, the Aztec schism which has reconfigured the whole system's fidelities. The Children's Disaster was a precursor. It was a catalyst. This movement has been underground for a *while*. Now one of the worst things to ever happen to this city has brought it out. And whose fault is that?

(Radio static) (Radio static)

"The culprit's not listening; he's hiding. I assure you of that, or else we wouldn't be having this conversation. But to those of you who don't know, to those who just woke up, let me enlighten you on the status of your golden generation.

"At approximately eight A.M. this morning, a sizeable group of CUFs sporting neon yellow shirts congregated on the front lawn of City Hall. After attracting an assembly of press, media, and government employees from inside the building, a spokesperson from the group mounted the front steps with a bullhorn and formally announced he and his company's secession from the Citizens Urban Forge. They are referring to themselves as Citizens Urban *Fight*, as is apparently better-suited to their more radical agenda.

"So there you have it, kiddos. There's an answer. *An* answer. Fight or Forge? Be wise with your demise. Speaking of which, it's important to note that there has been no official response or retaliation directed towards this new company from their mother group, Citizens Urban Forge. Yet the morning is still young. My Eyes will be watching.

"As expected, our paper tiger has also failed to address the split thus far—or, rather, train his housecats Chalice and Starick to purr a meaningless statement at a camera for a fish bone at the end of the day. Maybe that's where all our tax dollars end up. Nevertheless, it's curious that he hasn't at least issued some kind of comment, considering the fact that his eldest son—an active member of Forge for quite a few months now—was among those spitting in the grass of his workplace this morning. One would assume that a more urgent sense of responsibility would kick

in. Guess not. If you can't care about your own kid, why would you care about anyone else's? Honestly, though, it wouldn't surprise me if the mayor doesn't even know about this yet, along with a lot of other obvious developments in this city. I think he deserves to know just how safe and beautiful Spekender has become in his absence, and how honorable it is to drop a solution from the sky and then hide from it in case it explodes upon impact, and how rapidly crime statistics are disintegrating thanks to the battalions of invisible policemen and women patrolling the streets. They're really cleaning up just like he said they would. Security sure feels like the eyes of God."

(Radio static) (Radio static)

"One more speculation, kids. My brain can't help it; this is obviously my one reason for living. And if it doesn't reach the ears of anybody with official power, then it might as well reach the ears of those with as much power as belief can grant. Here's a close reading of the signs. If there's a division in one place, there'll be a communion in another. And if two parties share a common interest in effectiveness over helplessness and brutality over feeling nothing at all, then it's a hell of a match made in heaven. But there's a catch to loving conflict, kids. You can really only enjoy it if you're inflicting it on something that's very close to you."

(Radio static) (Sigh)

"And speaking of conflict, you know what comes next. Three more. I hope you don't recognize their names. And I certainly hope you do.

"First: fatal beating, Damien Ritter, twenty-seven. His pulverized body was discovered this morning around seven by his landlord, who had come to collect rent at his apartment complex on Rushwater Drive, Southside. He appeared to have been attacked with some sort of industrial tool, as there were multiple fragments of metal embedded in his skin. Ritter worked as a bagboy at the Penny Plus grocery store, also in South Spekender, and he was known to be

heavily involved in black-market dealings of the popular psychoactive drug known as berry. My guess as to what happened is he was in debt with his dealer, and he was unfortunate enough to suffer the consequences.

“Second and third: the shooting deaths and burnings of Metta Shelley, sixty-two, and her daughter Endra Claiborne, thirty-four. Around three A.M. this morning, firefighter responded to a house fire on Caper Circle near Spekender Middle School. After the blaze was extinguished, the burned bodies of Shelley and Claiborne were recovered in the rubble. It was determined that their causes of death were not attributed to the blaze but, rather, to multiple gunshot wounds each to the head and chest. This hits home particularly for me, as Metta Shelley was a retired radio personality best known for her popular morning show that ran for two decades, which I grew up listening to. My Eyes have learned that the frays of our police department are treating this as a case of arson in addition to a double homicide. And to that, I say *great*. What a drastic decision to determine the obvious. But your job is to solve crimes, not perfect technicalities. So, next time, show my Eyes an active investigation instead of another thin excuse. These are human beings who have been murdered, lest you forget, so **PRODUCE SOME JUSTICE, YOU—**”

(High-pitched tone) (Radio static) (Radio static) (Muffled movement)

“—the hell—*come on—!*” (Radio static) “—my audio back—”

(Muffled bang) (Radio static)

“Okay. Okay. We’re back. Anyway, there’s your herald. There’s your knowledge. Now pick your angle. Either way, do not sit idly by, kids. Do not subscribe to the lie that the mayor is making everything fine. Do not maintain your innocence, because you don’t have any. I’m sorry for it, but you don’t have any anymore.

“This is the Spektator.”

(Radio static) (Radio static) (Radio static) (Radio static)

STIPPO'S

That morning, Nimble snapped off her portable radio, stashing it back behind the winter coats in her closet, and coursed through a house that had yet to rise from its slumber. She heard only the thudding of her heels on the street as the sky brightened to a dirty swash above the Westside, the Bazaar, the Business District, until the buildings around her shrunk down into the Amberka residential squats. She bounded into the backlot that was so signature to her now, and there was Che sitting on top of the dumpster, his back bent under a two-sizes-too-big Spek High class shirt, as he hung a stare at the fence boards across the gravel clearing.

Slowly, she crept towards him, feeling every bad thing that she had been running away from immediately seep back into her like a shadow in changing light. Che spit out a breath that plummeted to the ground, and suddenly the trademark green of his shirt looked completely sick. She had hoped so badly that he didn't know, that he hadn't turned on the Spektator that morning, that they could last out the victory from the night before for forever.

“I feel like shit,” Che said.

Nimble stared at his hands gripping the dumpster, his bony arms taut like suspension cables. “I thought—that, that we did it right—”

“*We did*,” he snapped without looking at her. “That old lady’s fine because of us. I don’t get why the fuck I feel like we let somebody die.”

His eyes crinkled shut, very tightly, as if he was experiencing a great cold pain. Nimble moved closer, needing to put forth some warmth for him, needing to catch him if he fell over frozen. She blinked and suddenly saw the face of a delivery boy with eyes weeping purple.

“He was probably fucked anyway, you know?”

It sounded like the death of a joke cracked between his teeth.

“He woulda overdosed or somethin’,” he went on, tears wobbling in his eyes. “Or just offed himself. So. *Fuckin’*. Stupid. He got in deep with some pushers. That’s why he needed to rob that lady, ‘cause he needed the money. *Fuckin’* idiot tryin’ to settle his debt, and he’d probably have just gotten popped off later in the week too. Goddamn dumb scrup.”

“Che, are you really a banger prospect?”

He turned to look at her, his eyes vast and weaponless, the tears evaporated from them. There was a second of freefall, and then he said, “Nah. But it’s probably where I’ll end up. There’s some Metros I screw around with sometimes, and we’ll smoke and get high or whatever. They could hook me up if I wanted.”

Nimble swallowed. “*Do* you want it?”

His gaze slipped over to the fence across the lot again, burrowing into the peepholes in the wood. Then, abruptly, he hopped down from the dumpster, hiking his pants up. With a short chuff of a laugh, he swaggered past her and through the narrow space in between the two duplexes. Nimble watched him go with a frustration clawing at her chest.

“Stippo’s doesn’t open until way later,” she bristled, following after him to the yard in front of the duplexes.

“Yeah, but you know that everybody’s gonna already be there,” Che replied, his shoe scuffing a decided path down the sidewalk. “We gotta talk about what to do next.”

She glared at the names on the back of his shirt that squiggled with his movement. “If we do this, it’s just gonna happen again.” Already, she wanted to drag him back to the dumpster, sit him back down, and make him cry his fear out the way she wanted to. She hated how quickly he could conjure strength. She hated how she had to trap every soul she had ever seen onto her.

Che stopped walking and turned to face her. “This is a real thing now. We’re bitches if we just do nothing.”

Before she could say anything in response, a volley of car honks sounded from the road beside them. A truck was pulling onto the grass, tires bumbling over the curb and jostling the driver behind the windshield to a double-visioned blur. Then the passenger window rolled down, and Kat was the one shouting at them from inside, “Get in! I’m on the way to Stippo’s!”

Che bulleted to the truck, forcing Nimble to follow along. She hoisted herself up into the passenger side while he slid into the back and leaned forward to stick his head in the gap between the two front seats. Kat veered onto the road again and gunned the accelerator, smacking the steering wheel with her palm in intervals of chaotic rhythm.

“We just chased him off! We just chased that guy off without even thinking twice about it! That sick bastard, he tricked us! He knew we would do that! God, I feel horrible! *God*, he killed that delivery guy just because he knew we wouldn’t suspect it!”

“You think he killed him?” Che said.

“Well, he caused it anyhow! I don’t know the logistics; I just know that he *made* it happen!”

A curse half-formed itself in her mouth, and her face suddenly scrunched around it as she slapped her hand down on the dome of her stomach. “Hey, it’s okay, it’s okay,” she cooed

through gritted teeth. “I get it—too much. Jeez, I’ll calm down. You don’t have to kick so hard about it.”

Nimble stared down at the rounded bump, at the button of a navel beneath her shirt dress. In the bobble of the truck, it was impossible to tell if there was movement underneath it, yet she swore she saw the fabric stretch upwards as if prodded by a small foot. Dreamily, without warning, a question murmured from her lips.

“Is it a boy or a girl?”

Kat glanced over at her, eyes twinkling. “Girl. First kid. Whaddaya think?”

She confessed it freely, with near urgency. “I was gonna have a sister.”

There was a moment of silence before Kat asked carefully, “What was her name?”

Nimble was acutely aware of Che hovering next to her, staring straight ahead but soaking up every word. Saying her name was like running her finger across a stranger’s urn. “Savory.”

“That’s gorgeous,” Kat beamed. “It’s spicy. I like it. I may take inspiration. This little booger doesn’t have a name yet.”

Nimble allowed herself a small smile. “You don’t even have any choices picked out?”

“Nope. I’m still waiting to hear the right one.”

“What about your husband?”

The grin vanished from Kat’s face. “He . . . he’s really busy with work a lot of the time. He doesn’t have a preference.”

A fine mist began to coat the windshield as silence set in throughout the truck. Nimble watched it layer on top of the glass, dotting in every free space until it had obscured their view and Kat had to flip the wipers on. A few minutes later, they were turning into the empty parking lot behind Stippo’s.

Tarro and DK were standing at the back of the building under the dripping brim of the awning, their arms crossed to ward off the cold spray of the drizzle, their faces grim as they watched the truck pull up beside them. The moment the engine died and the doors popped open, they came to life.

“Look at this,” Tarro said, brushing past DK to point at a stark-white flyer taped to the darkened window of the restaurant.

“Hold on, I gotta get out of the car,” Kat grunted as she slowly lowered herself out of the truck, clutching the door for support. She took her arm and eased her the rest of the way down as Nimble rounded the front of the truck and stood in front of the flyer, squinting narrowly at the black type.

“The public is cordially invited to attend a press conference tonight at the Spekender Bazaar. Discussion will be concentrated on recent affairs that greatly concern the wellbeing of all Spekenderites. Come support the great leaders of our city and inform yourself on current plans of action. Event begins at ten P.M. at the performance stage directly facing the candy wheel.”

“Facing the candy wheel.” Tarro shook his head. “Not to mention there’s a landmark Prayer Wall even closer.” He scowled at the flyer like it was a bloody handprint on the glass. “There’s been nothing on the news or in the paper about this at all. And certainly not the radio, or else the Spektator would have exploited it to no end. And who holds an official press conference outdoors at ten o’clock at night in one of the seediest areas of the city? In the exact spot where thirteen kids were murdered?”

“Ain’t none ‘a those flyers anywhere in the Southside,” DK added. “Only here. That’s meant for us.” He spat into a puddle on the ground. “That’s where we supposed to be tonight.”

Nimble's head spun and respun the words she had just read, trying to decipher the horrible clue, the gruesome catch in them. Then Che vocalized everything she had been fending off: "You think he's gonna try to kill a government person?"

She slammed her foot down onto the concrete, glowering at him with the same appalled self-protectiveness that he had used on her the night before. The rest of them stepped back at her outburst, but Che remained where he stood, shrugging with his hands in his pockets.

"It doesn't say anything about your dad, okay? It could be anybody. That's why we gotta go tonight."

Tarro let out a sharp sigh of agreement. "And we're definitely not letting what happened last night happen again. This time, we're gonna be vigilant. We're gonna cover all our bases, and that means everyone has to be on top of things. Nobody's dying tonight because of us."

"I don't even know what I'm gonna do to get out of the house tonight," Kat muttered.

Across from her, DK spit out a laugh and looked at Tarro with eyebrows raised, running a hand over the stubble on his jaw. "Ay, don't be preachin' to us like we committed some kinda mortal sin. *You* can get all heavy over that scrup from last night. Far as I'm concerned, that's not my problem. What happened was some junkie got his head bashed in like all the nameless junkies before and behind him. If we had caught him, he prob'ly woulda killed one of us. It was not *our* *fault*. I ain't havin' this on my conscience like I looked the scrup in the eye and watched the life leave him."

Without her consent, Nimble began to feel the whole day rush at her and collide into night, into the place where the romancing darkness turned devious. The colored light would be falsities. The music would be a ploy. It would all be rigged already, and she would condemn her whole world just by setting one foot on the blacktop.

Tarro took a menacing step forward. “Look, man, don’t you dare try to deflect this, okay? That guy’s dead, and it’s on us. You deny that, and you’re running away from responsibility, and that’s pretty damned cowardly.”

DK didn’t back away. “Cowardly? Bitch, that’s how you sleep at night! You start lettin’ every death you know affect you, and watch that guilt eat you alive—”

“I can’t go there tonight!” Nimble’s shaking voice wailed above their argument. “I just can’t, okay? Not at night! I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I can’t do it!”

DK stared down at the ground, Tarro turned away in exasperation, Kat laid her hand on Nimble’s shoulder, her face sculpting into a concern so distinctly maternal that it was almost intoxicating. But it was Che who spoke against her panic with a simple offer of peace.

“Hey, what about if I walk there with you tonight? We can get some food before or just chill until we have to go.”

The idea exited her mouth before she could stop it—a need to burn him like sage all over the curse of her house. “What if you just came home with me to eat dinner? Then we can go after.”

He blinked at her for a moment. “Yeah, that’s cool. Do I have to, like, wear something or . . . ?”

The momentary comfort afforded her one halfhearted joke. “Yeah, suit and tie for some spaghetti and Kool-Aid.”

Everyone, even Tarro, managed to laugh softly or crack a smile as Che punched her playfully on the arm. “Alright, smartass, I’ll wear what I want.”

A current of wind billowed beneath the awning, and a corner of the flyer came untaped from the window, flapping in the breeze like a waving hand.

“That settles it,” Tarro said. “We’re doing this. We’ll meet at the Prayer Wall at nine-forty-five on the dot, fifteen minutes before. And we’re not letting him dupe us again. We’re gonna be smarter this time.”

Just then, the crackle of tires over gravel cut into his spiel, and they all turned to see a police car pull into the lot at a prowling pace. The decal spread across its side glinted dark blue at them as it came to a stop beside Kat’s truck.

“Cool,” DK sighed under his breath.

The driver’s side window rolled down, and a mustached policeman peered out at them. “How you folks doing today?” he asked, loud enough for it to be unfriendly. “Any of you happen to be employees at this establishment? Or do you want me to ask why you’re here loitering before operating hours?”

Tarro dipped his head down, hiding his derision. “We’re leaving, officer.”

“That’s what I would suggest,” said the policeman, his eyes scanning over all of them. He stopped on Nimble, and she knew in absolute sureness that he recognized her. In his expression was a disgusting mix of actual hatred and mild pity. Unabashedly, she returned his gaze: *Go ahead, call my dad, do it.* But he didn’t say anything else. He just let his window roll back up and watched them disperse through the black tint, indifferent to yet another Edison kid wandering the city for a semblance of family.

CITY HALL

Backstage in City Hall's auditorium, the dark dusty wings vibrated with frantic crew and assistants and lightning operators and sound technicians trying to manhandle old machinery into behaving properly. Beyond the curtains and the small stage, the noise of media personnel roared into a verbal upheaval of impatience as they waited to watch the mayor's first public address in months write their inflammatory headlines for them. Said-mayor was waiting as well. He was the only immobile object in the wings, hunched over in a metal folding chair with his elbows on his knees, a microphone clipped to his tie, and a livid fire thrashing under his skin.

That morning, Ev had switched off the clock radio beside his bed and stepped into a shower of scalding water. Ten minutes later, he had barreled down the left-hand hallway that his children occupied, passing the series of their empty bedrooms until he came to the second-to-last one down the line, to a door left ajar like a busted jaw. He swatted it open and stood on the threshold of Wry's den, resenting the recklessness of the room: the clutter like contraband, the piles of dirty clothes like caches of weapons. Every bit of him so incapable of preventing it.

“Ev, c'mon.”

Jenner was pacing in front of him, rubbing a static of rare nervous energy across the bald patch on his head. “Brother, this is a risk if there ever was one! Just let me scribble down some kind of outline for you. We’ll slap a sticky note to the podium where those pricks out there will ever even see it!”

A soundman bustled in between them, feeding a tight coil of orange cord across the floor.

“We can even drag the prompters out! I’ll get one ‘a those tech guys to program some cues in, and you can read straight off the monitor. Nobody can fault you for trying to be professional.”

Earlier that day on the ride downtown, Jenner had filled him in with the official report of what had transpired on City Hall steps that morning. Ev had listened without interjection, letting his head paint one scene and burn through to the next, constantly returning to the image of his own modern teenager’s arsenal that he had meticulously scoured for any remaining scrap of boyhood. *You held my hand all those first days of school. You used to rub my beard because you liked how scratchy it felt. That night, after it happened, we cried together. It was just us.*

Now, he raised his simmering eyes up from the floor and leveled them with Jenner’s. His advisor strained out a smile.

“Ev, you know I trust you. But I’m begging you today of all days not to screw yourself. God bless it, this is being televised.”

Just then, a young man with a plastic mediator pass hanging around his neck approached them both, skimming a finger down the list on the clipboard in his hand. “Everything seems to be all set, sir. I’ll go out first and introduce you, and then you should be good to go.”

Jenner started to give him more pointers, but Ev had already boxed out the backstage chatter. He watched the mediator walk out to the podium in the center of the stage, grasping it

by its sides and waiting for the commotion to die down before he spoke into the probe of a microphone plucked between his fingers.

Slowly, Ev raised up from the chair, shoulders squaring, muscles tightening, stomach boiling. His mind tapered out slim and vertical, knowing only one blade of thought. Onstage, the mediator mouthed his name and gestured an outstretched arm toward the wings. Then he moved out of the dark and into an arresting grill of spotlights. There was a time when he could have neutralized a roomful of raucousness with utter artistry, but this auditorium was sour with its silence. So it would be; if they were uninterested in warmth, then he would give them heat. He would give them the beating they knew he couldn't.

A cluster of TV cameras and monitors tracked his every move with buglike optics of blue and red and green, their operators staring stone-faced through the viewfinders. The toes of his shoes bumped the podium. His hands lay flat on the polished wood.

“Good afternoon. Thank you all for coming on such short notice. I'm sure you're aware of the event which occurred this morning on the front lawn outside—*as am I*. And I intend today to address the group that calls itself Citizens Urban Fight.”

He looked deeply into the monstrous eyes of the cameras below, and he delivered his flames with the discipline of a father.

“I denounce this group wholeheartedly, just as I denounce any organization that intends to use violence and destruction as a means to force their agendas into action. This is a savage and dishonorable excuse for social activism, and I will not stand for the promotion of any more of it in our city—*especially* not from our children. And make no mistake; these agitators may live and die by the delusions of their self-constructed ‘change-maker’ personas, but they are still very much children. They are not rebels. They are not vigilantes. They are not politicians. And they are not banger gang members. *They are children*. They have been *misinformed* in thinking otherwise.

But if they insist on believing that they can somehow transcend the law, then alright. I'll oblige. The first illegal action attributed to their cause surfaces, and I'll kill it. I will shut it down. No matter if it's a sole individual acting on a whim or a chain of conspirators all the way to the top—as far as I'm concerned, the entire party is guilty. If you want to behave like criminals, then you will be treated as such, according to your actions. To every individual that associates themselves with Citizens Urban Fight, consider this your official warning. I don't see a group that is at all interested in positive influence; I see a mob invested in fear-mongering and terrorism. I don't see a community that abides by any code of honor or integrity; I see a band of hooligans that has turned to compassionless cruelty. I don't see a guiding light for a better justice system, a better city, or a better future at all; I see a digression that implicates a greater tragedy than the one that occurred at the CUF stage not even three days ago. *We cannot* surrender to the very crimes that we are fighting to end. You are mistaken if you think that you can control this city, and you are mistaken if you think that tormenting the government into submission is in any way possible or justifiable.”

He paused, glaring at the faces behind the searing lights. “Try it and see what happens.” Then he lowered his head and cleared his throat, embers cracking and popping in his spent voice. “Thank you. There will be no questions.”

He walked away into the wings with a wall of quiet crashed behind him. Backstage, the crew was fixed to their respective positions, eyes glued to the man in the suit so black that it appeared to be charred. He dropped back down into his chair, whirling like a madman.

In an instant, Jenner was at his side, clapping him heartily on the shoulder, howling his approval. “That was killer, chief! What more could I ask for? You said it all, brother! Hell of a comeback this could make, hell of a comeback!”

Around him, the end of his speech had finally caught up with everyone. Soundboards were being powered down, wires and cables were being unplugged, bulky equipment was being rolled away on carts. Ev stared down at the patch of floor between his feet and tried to work, tried to connect a piece of lint with a white scuff mark, tried to see the fallen facts and figures before him. The same soundman from before shambled past him wheeling the podium into the wings, and Ev hardly even registered his comment: “Good call. Pity the flak you’re gonna get for it.”

A kaleidoscope funneled in his mind, an ever-spinning gem of yellow and orange. He was blinded by its solar flares. He was blinded by visions of Wry so bright, so helplessly bright that he was stuck in it, unable to stop burning.

“Now you gotta be proud of yourself, right?”

His thoughts jerked to a halt. Something tremendously wrong clipped onto his nerves.

“You got back out there, and it was like you never left! You looked those dirty muckrakers in the face, you served ‘em hell, you didn’t miss a beat! They’re gonna be speechless in tomorrow’s papers! C’mon, that’s gotta feel empowering, right?”

Ev squeezed his eyes shut and opened them again. He had to keep welding one thought to the next. He had to keep thinking of Wry, of his children.

“Wools was right,” he said hoarsely. “These kids are vulnerable now. Somebody’s bound take them in, and it’ll be the bangers. They’re gonna come down from the trees and jump on top of these kids. All these CUFs, they’re gonna go in thinking that it’s a partnership, but it’s not. It’s an indoctrination. These gangs will knead them into one conglomerate, and then it’s just adding to their empire.” He looked up at Jenner. “They will rob this city away, and there’ll be no way we can hold them back. And if anybody’s gonna move first, it’ll be the Metros. I promise you, it’ll

be Guerrara and the Metros and the Aztecs that have sided with them. The Pandas will try to pitch their proposal, but it'll be the Metros that get them. Those kids will fawn at their feet."

Above him, Jenner crossed his arms and smirked. "You know, it's never been confirmed that Baj Guerrara has ever had anything to do with the bangers. He may be a smart bastard, but I don't take him for a dirty one."

Ev stared at him. "Jenner, this is bad. This is not a comeback. This is not a chance for us to act like we're on top again. The bangers may not own all the crime in Spekender, but they're the biggest shareholders by far. We take them out, and—" He pressed his thumbs into his temples. "I don't—I don't care what Safe City is doing, I don't want any updates, I don't want reports on how useless it is! I know it's not good! I know! But maybe this will be. I want to meet with Baj Guerrara."

Jenner licked his lips, stunned out of his good humor. "And talk about *what?! How to quit drug-running and shooting people?*"

"To recruit them. Using Safe City."

"You want to hire criminals as cops? What the hell are you saying?"

"On the one hand, it's a collapse right at the epicenter of Spekender's crime. On the other hand, it restocks the police department with individuals who have sufficient, albeit unorthodox, experience with law enforcement. With more officers who intimately know criminal patterns to control the remaining crime, we'll have more than enough time and bodies to prepare for future waves. We can get a promising outcome, a preservative outcome."

The wings were starting to empty out as the crew packed up their supplies to leave. The last few stragglers booted down the last of their equipment and slipped out the stage doors, and, as soon as everyone was truly gone, Jenner changed. He hunkered down and thrust a face drained of all humor into Ev's, and somehow it was what Ev had been anticipating all along.

“You listen to me, and you listen well,” his advisor growled. “How in God’s name do you not understand that nobody is behind you just to be behind you anymore? The campaign days are over. You cannot just pull ideas out of your ass and expect them to take on credibility. *Money*—does this concept mean anything to you? Every single fantasy that you have, every time you get a sudden burst of energy and decide to go full-throttle into saving the world—it all takes money! And you’re talking about asking a bunch of bangers over for a beer? What, you have some foolproof incentive to win them over? You gonna go rile yourself up for a few hours and preach them a sermon on why they should join forces with the good side? Well, there is no good side and bad side, my friend; there’s only the power and whoever’s currently taking it. And you *don’t have it*. Ev, you have been gone, alright? You have been hiding. You cannot just waltz back into this administration and take everything back! This game has been running without you!”

The lightning in Ev’s throat rashed out of his mouth. “And look where we still are.” He looked deeply at his advisor. “I have to do my job. *I have to do my job.*” It was only a whisper. “I don’t want to sleep anymore while this city dies beside me.”

Jenner loomed over him, their noses inches away, their knees almost grazing. He looked like he was ready to hit him, and Ev almost willed it: *Go ahead, swing, swing.* He felt like he was his high school self, transported back to a battlefield of a basketball court. He felt like he was his son. But when the blow didn’t come, he sprang up from his chair so forcefully that its legs squelched backwards across the floor. He was almost to the stage doors when an echo scraped against the walls at him.

“It’s a shame your boy is mixed up in all this.”

Ev’s reply was barely audible through the doors that swished shut behind him.

“He’s not a boy anymore.”

WESTSIDE

“C’mon, let’s go.”

And it was spoken. At the command of Che Dupriest, Spekender unfurled its concrete petals and let its strange blooms show. With school hours already decidedly forgone and the image of a night-shrouded Bazaar shoved to the back of her mind, Nimble stepped out from behind Stippo’s alongside him, and together they took to the city.

It became a day of doing nothing at all, going everywhere with no one destination in mind, buying nothing and taking nothing and making nothing. Bridges, underpasses, gardens, slabs of concrete, unwound spools of potholed streets—any place with open-air access was their urban gallery. Nimble could hardly believe the perfection in the danger of it. These were the routes that passers took. This was where bangers went to exchange unsavory wares. This was how urchin delinquents shot the breeze, roaming aimlessly, *‘fucking around.’*

“See that?” Che would comment as he pointed to a spot atop a wall or in the corner of an alley. Nimble would squint into nowhere, dizzied and directionless, until the secrets revealed themselves: prisms caught in the trees in Millionaire Park, as if some celestial artist had crowned the branches with string and beads and broken glass. Signatures scrawled in a narrow crevice between two buildings, a thousand-named ledger, a tattooed tablet. Tides of garbage at the edge of shopping plazas and empty bilge bottles encircling dumpsters like fairy rings. Frescoes on the walls of abandoned businesses: crest and creed spray-painted into murals of cherubs and vampires and great samurai pandas and grimacing green warriors.

Out in the back alley behind the symphony theater, Che pulled Nimble over to the cover of a group of trashcans right as the stage door swung open and the sigh of a far-away orchestra poured into the air. A ballerina flounced out on its crescendo to the small concrete platform outside the door, a cell phone clutched in her crocheting hands. With the tulle of her skirt fanned like a birdwing, she twirled absently to the fleeing music and then leaned against the ladder of the fire escape to finish typing out her message on her phone. Nimble was fixed to the pale satin of her toes almost levitating from the concrete—so close that she could see the goosebumps pearling the dancer’s slender arms.

“They do that sometimes,” Che whispered through a smile. “I guess whenever they get breaks. Usually, more will come out, and they’ll stretch and eat candy and just talk or whatever. It’s kinda cool to watch.”

Nimble looked at him, seeing for the first time diamonds in his eyes, and suddenly the understanding struck her: *Do you love this place?* And she believed it. The ballerina and the soft sonata and Che’s glittering gaze carried her through the rest of the day, until the sky blackened above her and a murky moon rose up over the treeline of the Westside. Then it was her turn to take him down her secluded paths, to activate an infrared paradise on the dusky outskirts of the

city. But what was the moon above her flat house but the emblem of a fantasyland gone too dark to trust? What tribute could she tempt him with from a dugout devoid of all treacherous beauty?

They approached the lights of the foyer knifing into the yard, and Nimble swallowed hard. "I'm really sorry if this gets awkward." She thought of her brothers inside, of the possibility of Wry at the table in his new yellow hazards, looking for someone to attack.

Unfazed, Che stepped over a skeletal shape crumpled in the grass. "Nice bike."

It was the best breath she could take as she pushed the front doors open and ushered him inside. But as she led the way around the corner and into the dining room, there was no Wry. There was Arla and Lasso and Maverick, as per usual. And there was also her father.

The breath knocked out of her as he popped up from his chair and stared wordlessly, his face like a furnace with its hatch ripped off. It scared her how nakedly she saw the brain in hell inside his head.

"This is Che Dupriest," she managed to squeak out. "Is it okay if he eats here?"

Her father was lost for only a second more before his voice cracked the silence with overwrought thunder. "Sure, sure! Absolutely!" To Nimble's astonishment, he lunged forward and clasped Che's hand. "How are you doing, Che? Ev Edison. Good to have you here."

Arla rose hastily from her seat, flickering a theatrical grin between both of them. "Oh, we're so delighted to have you tonight! I'm, uh, I'm *Miss Arla*, Mayor Edison's secretary. Do you eat spaghetti, dear?"

Nimble heard Lasso stifle a snicker with a bite of garlic bread. She turned automatically to her father, expecting a haywire rebuke to come blasting out. But he was back in his chair, one leg draped over the opposite knee, one hand rubbing pensively at his bottom lip.

Beside her, Che bobbed like a cork in the hypertension of the room. "I eat anything."

Arla beamed. "Well, you sit tight, and I'll go get you a plate."

Her father's voice loosed like an arrow and thwacked into the back of Wry's chair. "Take that seat right there by Maverick, Che. That empty spot is fine."

Nimble's customary fear leapt out and latched onto her as she followed Che around the table, pulling her own chair out beside him. Her father's eyes darted to hers and then away again, but in their brief connection, she knew she had seen him hate what he had just said.

"Hey, man, what's up," Maverick was saying, slapping Che's palm with his. "I remember you from school. We're in the same grade, right?"

"Should be, if they haven't failed me yet."

"How's Spek High holding up?"

"Still pretty crappy, dude."

As they riffed back and forth, Nimble leaned closer and closer into the long space between her and father's downcast stare. Failing to notice her, his eyes moved side to side, chasing an invisible assailant, and she needed to know that whatever it was would not end him that night. She desperately hoped that by bringing herself right to him, by bringing Che with her, that she had not also brought death in on her clothes, on her breath, in the unshakeable face of a shapeshifting ghost.

The rest of the meal was an unwieldy scale: courteous pleasantries on one side, crushing silence on the other. Her father sunk deep into his meditative madness as everyone else's plate, except for Nimble's, turned white again. When Arla retired back to the kitchen and her brothers began to leave the table, she stood and motioned for Che to follow her. Together, they left her father sitting alone in his feverish state and retreated down the left-hand hallway.

The minute Nimble closed her bedroom door, she was hyperaware of the fact that Che was now in her realm. Now was the time to dazzle him. Now she wanted him to see everything and spin all the gold from the junk piles scattered around her compressed getaway. Like she

hoped he would, he went straight for her stacks of CDs, squinting at the titles on their spines with his hands wedged in his pockets. Pride rose like mercury in her chest as she awaited his review.

“You can borrow some if you want,” she offered impatiently. “I usually get them from garage sales or from my brothers if they don’t want them anymore. I can’t play them too loud, though, or Arla would hear all the language and kill me.”

His lips lifted with a laugh, but his eyes tracked a lonely path across her rug as he plopped down on the edge of her bed. Her stomach bottomed out.

“Hey, I’m sorry if dinner was weird,” she started. “I mean, like—my dad is just like that sometimes. And Arla usually isn’t that happy, like to the point where it’s annoying. And Wry—well, he wasn’t even there. I don’t think he’s gonna come back for a while.”

“It’s cool,” Che said. “The food was good.” He glanced over at the digital clock on her nightstand. “We should get going soon. It’ll take us a while to get downtown, and Tarro’ll have a fuckin’ seizure if we’re late.”

He chuckled softly at himself. Nimble’s heart began to hammer. Suddenly, she wondered how it would be to tell him everything, to explain to him in all its horrible detail how her world came to be so broken.

“Hey, can I ask you something real quick?”

That was all she needed. He could ask her for any secret, and she would relinquish it: the cursedness of mornings, Saturdays, mothers, sisters. But when she looked over at him, he was raising his shirt. He took it by the hem bunched in his lap and drew it up slowly. She saw the loose band of his jeans first, the scrunched plaid of his boxers, the pale worm of his belly, before he stopped. Right above his navel were three swollen gashes crusted with dried blood. Three lines perfectly horizontal, as if he had tried for precision.

He was staring down at them. “Does this look infected to you?”

The desire to look away was immediate, and she did. The time on the clock behind her was only one minute's difference.

"No, I don't think so," came out as a full sentence. The rest she struggled to deliver coherently. "Did you—put, put some—did you disinfect it?"

Silence. "No, not yet."

"Okay. Well. I think that if you do that, it'll—it'll be fine. Be fine."

When she glanced over at him, his shirt was down, and he was looking back at her, his eyes deep and treading. Then, as if a switch had flipped, he stood up from her bed and started towards the door. "We should get going. Do we need to, like, sneak out? And, hey, can I borrow a jacket or something? I swear I'll give it back. It's just gonna be cold as shit out there."

Nimble gaped at him. "We can just walk through the front door. No one will care."

As if in a dream, she walked to her closet and yanked an old sweatshirt down for herself. Everything else hanging on the rod was so horribly dainty, bought for a girl much different than the one she was now.

"You can take one of Wry's," she mumbled, pushing past Che out into the hallway.

Her older brother's bedroom door had been left halfway open for ransacking, as if in official declaration of his abandonment. Before that, she had only seen small glimpses of the inside of his room, but now she stepped all the way into the fallout of it and ripped up a hoodie from the floor, shaking out a Great Winston logo with a sea-green eel winding through the holographic letters.

"Yeah, the Bazaar's the best at night," Che was saying from the hallway. "The rides are more fun when all the lights are on. The food gets cheaper, too. It's like Spekender's wonder of the world. You gotta experience it at least once in its prime."

As he spoke, Nimble caught her reflection in the mirror above Wry's cluttered dresser, and the impulse to throw something at it and crack it suddenly careened through her mind. But, even if the evidence of her adding to his disorder was the hardest hit she could deal him, it still wouldn't confess her bravest offense: that she had harvested from his ruins and given a use to what he had deemed useless for himself.

Che's voice was different the next time he said something. "This isn't gonna be like the Penny Plus. I think I know who that guy is now, okay? I think I know. And, fuck that, it's not gonna be the same."

In the frame of the mirror, she snatched the words out of the air and mouthed them back to herself, back to the haunt waiting for her down at the Bazaar. Like Wry would.

Fuck that.

She watched her face slacken for a few seconds. Then she stepped out into the hallway and slammed the door shut behind her, sealing the air from the room for the undisclosed eternity that would come.

PARLO ST.

At half-past nine near the north entrance of the Bazaar, Tarro tucked his hands in his coat and walked from the public lot where he had parked his crossover down the strip of fast food restaurants and convenience stores that lined Parlo Street. He hugged the wrought iron fence beside him, eyeing the asphalt expanse within where the Bazaar sat like an aurora borealis on a rumpled black sea. As he neared the intersection, his gaze shifted to the stone archway up ahead displaying the marketplace's true name—SPEKENDER PUBLIC EVENT GROUNDS—and then down to DK sitting on the sidewalk curb with his legs stretched out in the street, the symbols on his shoes illuminated in the headlights of passing cars.

“Hey,” Tarro said as he approached, the word steaming out on his breath.

DK turned his head to acknowledge him, clutching his windbreaker around his body.

“Have you seen anybody else around yet?”

There was a pause. “Nah, man. If I had to guess, they prob'ly already in there.”

The stoplights strung out over the street burned red, and the traffic came to a halt so close beside him that his frayed laces almost touched the front tire of a black-tinted sedan.

Tarro frowned. “You know how easy it is to get hit sitting on the side of the road like this?”

DK smirked, leaning back on his hands, his whole body lounging out on the concrete. “Look—*Tarro*, right? Now I know you ain’t ever brought your ass down here after dark before, so I’mma explain it to you metaphorically, like it’s a trashcan. Ya’ll got trashcans on that prestigious college campus of yours, don’t ya’ll? So pretend the Bazaar’s one big trashcan. And, for every trashcan, there’s about a hundred cockroaches swarmin’ and crawlin’ up and down and all over the place.” His smirk evaporated. “Down here, at this trashcan, every cockroach is a banger.”

The stoplights turned green, and the traffic below became a whoosh again. DK kept his feet in the street even as a diamond-hubcapped truck swerved dangerously close, its lowered windows spilling the distinct round of banger music.

Tarro needed in a breath. “Alright, so you can’t go in—”

“I can go in to a certain point,” DK corrected him. “But I’m just sayin’, if you don’t want no unnecessary bullets comin’ at you or that pregnant woman or Edison or Skinny Scrup . . .”

“You don’t have a hat or anything to cover up with? Or a more substantial jacket?”

“Not unless you wanna find it in your heart to donate to charity.”

Tarro sucked in his cheeks and surveyed the multicolored chain of businesses on the other side of the street, nodding at one directly across from them. “Well, there’s a gas station right there. Maybe they sell clothes or something.”

DK stared up at him in steely silence. Finally, he pulled his legs back onto the sidewalk and stood up without protest. They waited for the crosswalk to clear and a few more cars to pass before they hustled out into the street. Halfway to the other side, Tarro glanced back at the Bazaar behind them and raised his voice over the nearing rush of the traffic. “So, what are you, a rapper?”

DK grinned inside the collar of his windbreaker. “Nah, man, I’m Spekender’s renegade mayoral candidate. I’m ‘bout to oust Edison.”

“I’m being serious. I’m talking about what you said to that old woman last night. It sounded like poetry.”

“Those were just my thoughts, man.”

They cut across the parking lot of the gas station and down the middle of the pumps, where baggy-eyed men and women braced against the cold and watched the numbers on the fuel meter race upwards. As they approached the building, a kid with an orange-and-green bandana tying back his dreadlocks held the door for them when he stepped out, and DK visibly tensed. The moment they were inside, he shielded himself behind a keychain display and peered through the bars on the front windows at the kid, who was squeezing into a car packed with Aztecs.

Tarro watched him as he sifted through a small rack of Great Winston apparel. “What banger gang were you in?”

“What you in grad school for?” DK answered without turning around.

From the next aisle over, a little girl in a puffy coat toddled in between them both, squealing with delight as her older sister scrambled to chase her down. Outside, the banger ride revved its engine and pulled out of the parking lot, its headlights bathing the storefront in LED moonlight.

“I’m in the business program,” Tarro muttered.

DK scanned the candy on the shelf in front of him, picking up boxes and shaking their contents. “Why you say it like that?”

“*DK.*”

He turned to see Tarro holding up a teal hoodie with the Great Winston logo emblazoned on the breast. Quickly, he shook his head and snatched the hanger from him with a box of jellybeans still in one hand.

“*Mm-mm*, nothin’ blue,” he murmured, shoving it back on the rack. “Here, this one’s good.” He pulled out a nondescript gray hoodie and held it up to appraise it, sighing. “Why do you hate your life, man?”

Immediately, the hoodie was swatted to one side, Tarro’s palm was smacking into DK’s shoulder, and he was hissing, “*Don’t fucking ask me something like that!*” They fumbled for only a couple of seconds, clutching each other’s collar, their jackets rustling furiously, before they froze in a contained struggle.

“Listen,” DK’s voice hushed, his eyes wide and biting. “You go up in there tonight, you square up with that scrup, and you got a thought in your head that you ‘gon avenge somebody or die tryin’? All that’s gonna happen is the last thing, and ain’t nobody gettin’ any type ‘a justice from that. Somehow or another, he knows us. He knows you, and he knows about your girl, and he’s gonna fuck with you about it until you pointin’ your gun at yourself instead of him. And he’ll make it make sense too.”

He let go of Tarro’s coat and pushed him back all in one motion. The hoodie crumpled to the floor. Behind them, two Fight girls donning yellow T-shirts under their jackets slipped by, too hypnotized to their phone screens to notice the dissipating tension.

As DK bent to pick up the hoodie, the box of jellybeans rattled in his hand, and Tarro swallowed a deep breath. “Meridian used to buy jellybeans. She would keep a jar of them in her kitchen, for when guests came over. She was always having these dinner parties and get-togethers with friends. But, really, she would just end up eating most of them herself late at night when she got hungry.”

He allowed himself a wisp of a smile, grinding a fist into his palm as if to knead it back into a hand again. DK studied the box briefly before holding it out to him. He turned it over once, then again, and gently placed it back on the shelf.

“I’m studying business,” he repeated, turning to walk towards the cashier’s line.

“Meridian liked to make little knickknacks and do these abstract paintings every once in a while. With her art degree and my business one, we were going to open up a store that sells that type of stuff, you know? Home décor and everything. Could’ve gone great in the Arts District.”

At the cash register in front of them, a shriveled old man with muddy teeth plopped a bottle of soda down on the counter and pointed a bony finger at the cigarette display on the wall. DK slung the hoodie over his shoulder and cleared something deep in his throat, glancing behind him and to his side before settling his eyes on the floor.

“Used to be a Panda.”

Tarro watched him out of the corner of his eyes. “What happened?”

DK’s voice dipped so low that Tarro had to strain to hear him. “Somebody didn’t get popped when they were s’posed to. So I got it instead.”

The old man scraped his items off the counter and shambled away. “Next customer, how you doin’ tonight,” the cashier smacked her lips without looking up. She scanned the hoodie’s price tag as soon as DK laid it down. “Eight ninety-nine.”

“How do you know that that guy is what he is?” Tarro mumbled as he flipped his wallet open. “*Whatever* he is.”

The cashier snatched the money from his hands, feeding it into the register with a disinterested urgency. The two men looked at each other, their faces sickly and gleaming in the green-tinted fluorescent lights above the counter. Tarro took his change, DK took the hoodie, and they turned to leave.

Halfway to the door, a trio of Gypsies barged into the store, cackling and cursing at each other. Before DK could stealth out of sight, Tarro grabbed him by the arm and jerked him down

a potato chip aisle, bringing them face to face. The veins in his eyes were a watery red, the muscles of his jaw jammed mid-churn under his skin.

“If this thing lasts long enough, if I get the chance to, I’m gonna kill that son of a bitch.”

DK stared at him a moment before tugging the hoodie over his head and smoothing it over his windbreaker. “Scrup must’ve dealt out a lot of grief to know how it works so well.” He shoved his hands in the front pocket and held them out unseen to Tarro. “Much appreciated, man.”

Outside the store, the headlights of another banger ride washed over the front windows as it pulled into the parking lot. Farther out on Parlo, a police cruiser shot past both the gas station and the Bazaar entrance, its cab and lights dark, going nowhere in particular.

BAZAAR

The night her father won the mayoral election, Nimble remembered falling into the shallow end of a swimming pool. When the ballot results rolled in and the phone rang with the official news, the back veranda of the Spekender Country Club had erupted into jubilation. Campaign team affiliates, sponsors, donors, aristocratic club members and their plus-ones swarmed into a huddle that popped and undulated like the surface of sparkling water, floating her father like a lemon wedge on top. News crews swept cameras and boom poles high over the frenzy. The club's waitstaff wheeled out silver carts loaded with crystal and premium bilge. Her mother and brothers leapt into the air, hugging each other. And, in their euphoria, somebody's arm connected with Nimble's shoulder. She sucked in a single breath, and then cool chlorinated water had roared into her ears.

There was a moment before her sandals tractioned themselves on the tile and her body glided upwards, where she opened her eyes submerged and witnessed a phantasmal celebration overhead. Like the burnout of a supernova, human shapes bloomed into pyrotechnics that filled the sky but were doomed to fall from it, crashing with the pop-boom of corks being pulled from bilge bottles. Though nobody then could have known, it was the simultaneous creation and destruction of a momentous display of living that would never be seen again.

Now, in much the same way, Nimble closed her eyes and opened them again to the dying luminescence of the Bazaar's nightlife. She sucked in a breath not of water, but of the sweet haze of berry smoke. Another one brought in the heavy musk of bilge, cut with the spoiled citrus of human sweat. The taste was eye-watering. She fought to keep sight of Che in front of her, but he was bleary in her vision, weaving through the dense crowds with the graceful fluidity of a near-hallucination.

Ahead of them, a never-ending party burned on. Men stumbled out of bar tents, their throats slick with liquor. Sludge girls rotated around the strip like long-lashed carousel horses, their heart-shaped hips stirring the air. University students poured from dance clubs, crooking their arms too tightly around each other's necks, braying incoherent lyrics to thudding remixes. Passers paced on the outskirts of the strip or huddled around burn barrels on the concrete flatlands beyond the marketplace, taking long pulls from dirty bottles with eyes like shot-out light bulbs.

Through the gaps in the moving bodies, Nimble could spy the archangels of the chemical garden—Metros, Aztecs, Pandas, Gypsies, and all their variants occupying every empty alcove and bower. Scattered around them like unruly cherubim was her ilk: minors of both the school system and the street obtaining their weekend thrills in the one place that was dangerous enough to be desirable.

“Looks better all lit up, right?” Che laughed over his shoulder.

Nimble squinted up at the candy wheel creaking its ancient ragtime jingle, below which Spek High kids formed a rider line that ran to the south end of the strip nearby. But something else that was immersed in its light caught her eye. Tucked in a corner between the wheel and a knockoff jewelry booth, mostly obscured from the roving eyes of most passerby, was a band of Metros. Their formation was a tight fortress, but, as she moved past it, the lookouts on the outer

ring shifted just enough for her to glimpse two men standing in the middle. One had his back to her, but the one whose face she could see was relaxed beneath his blue paint as he smoothed his sandy hair back and parted his lips to speak.

“Made it.”

She whipped around to see Wry’s hoodie suspended in front of her, Che standing still inside of it, his face aglow with the heavenly psychedelics of the vigil candles clustered at the base of the Prayer Wall. Beside him stood the rest of them, each of their postures a different expression of desperately wanting to be somewhere else. DK was ducking away from the strip traffic with his face shrouded in his hoodie. Kat flinched at every merrymaker that passed by while she pinched her coat over her belly. Tarro stood with his arms folded and his back to the chain-link, as if he was guarding it.

“Have you seen him yet?” he asked Nimble and Che, his derisive eyes darting behind them to the area beside the Wall.

Che shook his head coolly, even as he looked past Nimble to view the scene that Tarro was scowling at. Nimble’s ears locked onto the frequency of their commotion before she even turned to witness the storm for herself. On the CUF grounds, pacifists in their cautious orange and militants in their hazardous yellow converged. Small rocks and pieces of trash missiled from one side to another as they shouted at each other, trampling scraps of old police tape underfoot. The stage above them sat empty and forgotten, a microphone stand overlooking the mayhem with sad solidarity. But, to the rest of the Bazaar, they seemed to be just another free attraction of the night—some kind of percussive concert, or a color-coordinated interactive rave.

“The second that guy shows up, we’re gonna mob him,” Tarro said suddenly.

Nimble spun back around to ogle at him in disbelief, but he kept talking.

“Rush him, grab him, tackle him, hit him over the head with something, whatever you have to do. Just get him out of the Bazaar, get him in the dark. Once that’s done, leave him to me and DK. We’ll take care of him. The rest of you just get out of here. Nobody will even think twice if we just commit to it. Everybody got it?”

No one said anything. Che’s attention drifted toward a pack of kids passing around a purple spliff, while DK spit a dead laugh onto the ground, while Kat finally found her voice: “Are you kidding me?”

Tarro whirled to face her. “What do you wanna do, Kat? You wanna keep running around senseless? You wanna keep trying to keep up with his rigged game of who’s gonna end up in the obituaries by the end of the night? I’m not afraid of this, alright, I’m *sick* of it. And last time I checked, this strategy works just fine for the bangers, so I don’t see why desperate times can’t call for desperate measures!”

Nimble stared across the strip where the Metros had begun to loosen their vortex around the man whose back was still turned to her. She understood immediately; a show was being put on, a designer scare. She watched them circle and stalk and flash their white luminescent teeth at each other in predatory humor, and she suddenly wondered for herself what it would be like to put force behind a fist.

“If we’re gonna kill someone, then I’m done, I’m out,” Kat ranted.

Tarro was hysterical. “Kat, he’s not a man!”

“If he’s not a man, what makes you think you can kill him like one?” DK muttered, curving his face into a cluster of children’s doodles stapled to the Wall as a group of Gypsies sidled by.

Across the strip, the bangers' prey had been successfully spooked. Nimble watched him trudge defeated into the darkness behind the candy wheel, his fists balled at his sides. It wasn't until he was fully out of sight that she realized he had been wearing a suit.

"So you wanna be the murderer now?" Kat spat. "You wanna do what *he's* doing? You wanna do what's happening all around us every single day and night? Well, I guarantee you he would get a big 'ole laugh out of that, and then he would just take it and turn it into something more horrible! We can't do that! We have to be different—"

"Do you want to just let this go on?" Tarro blustered. "Do you want him to come for your husband next, for you and your baby?"

Nimble's attention was soldered to the Metro with the sandy hair, who was serenely tracking the man in the suit's departure into the distance. He turned his head slowly back towards the strip, and something in her stirred at the subtle assurance in his smile. Unmistakably, she thought, *Power*. She felt the brush of an arm beside her. *Che, look at the—*

"Did you get the joke?"

The question was right in her ear, but it was nothing of Che. When she turned, she was looking at a smile counterfeited off the one she had just seen, disgustingly smug on the face of a ghost who was propping his elbow on Che's shoulder.

DK was the first to react, rushing forward to wrestle Tarro's thrashing body back to the fence. Kat was next, spreading her arms out wide as if to act as a blockade for them both. But Nimble had been the first all along. The moment he had appeared, she felt her body go bad, felt the lust of violence squeeze into her muscles. He watched her force herself to stop just shy of moving and hiked his smile a bit higher, as if to provide the answer to an earlier query: *Easy. So very easy.*

Tarro bucked against DK and Kat, his feet grinding the ground for purchase. In his struggle, his shoe kicked a vigil candle from its holder, sending it rolling across the asphalt to the mirage of a slip-on sneaker and a body clad in a black hoodie that would soon belong to a victim.

Che was staring at Nimble with helpless eyes, all of him unplugged and drained by the arm across his shoulders and the hand with a candle of prayer tucked between its fingers.

“Welcome, city, welcome,” the ghost chuckled as he put the fat end to his lips, the flame licking upright. With inverted elegance, he closed his eyes and puffed the smoke of his manufactured breath into the cold: one, two, three.

Nimble heard someone gasp, directly followed by a keen panic in DK’s voice as he shouted, “Kat, Kat, what’s wrong, what’chu doin’?” A camera phone strobed nearby—a group of girls posing for a picture against the backdrop of the strip—and Nimble turned to see Kat’s face rendered white in the flash as she stumbled backwards in what appeared to be shock.

“Take a hit, big boy?”

The ghost waved the candle in front of Che’s bloodless face, laughter bubbling from his teeth, and Nimble succumbed to the swell of rage inside of her.

“You think you own everyone here! You think that this place is yours, like you could just snap your fingers and a building would fall! But there’s things here that you could never touch. You can’t even understand that there’s people out for a good time tonight, and they’re laughing, they’re eating, they’re dancing, they’re praying, they’re being happy! And you could never know any of that!”

The flow of the strip was a blur. DK and Kat and Tarro were undefined in her peripheral. She was looking past them all, even past Che, to the spirit who absorbed the candlelight that he held. She knew she had gotten to him, because, for the first time, she saw no trickery in his eyes, but undefiled truth: her own death.

“Nimble Edison.” Her name rotted in his mouth. “*I know who runs this city. Do you?*”

She watched as he bit the end of the candle between his teeth and slipped a deliberate prop off his back—a black backpack. He picked up each of Che’s arms as easily as lifting wooden sticks and fitted it onto his shoulders, unzipping the largest pocket.

“Alright, I’ll see your people dance. I’ll even give them the music.”

He pulled out a neon yellow T-shirt.

“Watch him, he’s going for the kids!” Tarro shouted as if to mobilize them all, but no one budged. The ghost released Che’s limp body and swaggered into the strip traffic, backing up to the mouth of the CUF grounds. Yellow shirts bombarded him and then forked around him, an unremarkable rock in their current.

He took the candle from his teeth and pointed it at the backpack on Che. “Consider that a starter pack of sorts. You have to collect the other parts and pieces yourself. Shouldn’t be that hard. Just need some nails, some gunpowder, a pressure cooker. A public area.” He laughed, shifting his attention to Nimble, who was shielding her body in front of Che. “He wants to hear the power speak, doesn’t he? Don’t you? Doesn’t everyone? You want a voice with an answer. You want to hear the change-maker. You want the last joyful noise there is. Okay. Okay.”

In one motion, the crowd of Bazaar-goers passed on, and the yellow shirts assembled around him like a remote-controlled convoy, and he folded into them, pulling his hood over his head. When he turned around again, there was another face in place of his, familiar features resolute in cold determination. Across the strip, the banger group was on the move, the sandy-haired Metro secure in the middle. Nimble watched in horror as the body that was now Wry surged forward with his fellow soldiers, his arm outstretched with a candle that had now become a gun.

She was unable to move as she waited for the fire that would surely consume her brother when it exited, the bullet that would surely pull him with it on its path of destruction. And when he squeezed the trigger, the force of it knocked her knees out from under her. Her hip thudded to the ground, and the Bazaar plummeted with her. The CUFs, the general partyers, the bangers were the rush of her fall, but somehow Wry was on the ground too. Another power had fought him down and thrown the shot haywire—someone he was still struggling against, who was bellowing into his face with a lost volume. Maverick, his anger red and wild on his face.

Then she was being yanked up by the arm and dragged to her feet. She looked up to see Che, his gaze fixated on the ground ahead of both of them, where the Metros had been toppled like bowling pins with their king in the center. Kat was lying across him, where she had pushed him out of the aim of the gun. DK and Tarro were kneeling beside her, trying to wrench her up from the ground before the bangers around them could reassemble.

But, just as quickly, weapons were pulled and pointed at all of them, and Nimble found herself staring down the barrel of a banger gun, the blue face behind it demanding an action she could not hear but still understood in the weakness of her bones. As the Metros forced them past shell-shocked bystanders, out of the Bazaar, and into the darkness beyond where a white jeep sat idling like a getaway ride, she felt as though she were still staring down the black hole of a gun, looking back through tunnel vision at Wry and Maverick scuffling on the ground and, nearby, a stray bullet melting back to wax on the cold asphalt.

SOMEWHERE

(Radio static) (Radio static) (Radio static) (Radio static)

(Beep) (Beep) (Beep)

(Muffled laughter)

(Radio static) (Radio static)

Audio: “*Morning, kids—*”

(Muffled laughter) (Background laughter)

Audio: “Oh, God, it’ll be a miracle if I can get through this segment without losing it entirely. And if you’re as sardonically gone as I am, then you already understand the humor, don’t you? Because we’re free, aren’t we? We’re *saved!* The future years of our young lives are spared sorrow and brevity! We can savor the peace as it falls upon us now that the source of our plague and pestilence has been so expertly wiped out! And *wow*, it’s a good thing I don’t give any airplay to protest songs. No, I just make polite, one-side conversation with children about the

state of our shared hell. But that's not what has the government spooked, is it? It's not the spoken word of public disapproval, but the rhythmic beat of it. The crime on trial is about as much a crime as a cry for help is—unless, of course, we're talking about a threat to a corrupt power balance. But we'll get into that soon enough. Give me a chance to rev myself up, please God.”

(Radio static) (Radio static)

“Anyway, if you flipped your TV on this morning to catch the morning murder report with a side of sitcom reruns and instead found yourself watching a live feed of the City Hall auditorium, then know that what you saw was no different than what you would've seen had the news aired as normal. What took place this morning was a killing in its own rite. The killing of something maimed and sickly, yet still technically emitting signs of life. What you saw was the official death of any shred of a connection between a governing head and its democratic body. You watched Ev Edison decapitate this city on live television—and he didn't even show up to swing the ax.”

(Chuckling) (Radio static)

“At approximately seven-thirty this morning, press and media outlets were abruptly notified that the Edison administration would be holding yet another emergency press conference, this time geared more towards the city's general crime epidemic rather than just its newly-minted child soldiers. And in place of the man made of vapor, his majordomo Jenner Chalice took to the podium to issue an edict that only took six minutes' runtime to sever the spinal cord of Spekender.”

(Radio static) (Radio static)

“He's banning banger music, kids.”

(Radio static) (Radio static)

“That’s his grand solution. That’s actually, in Edison’s mind, a logical plan of action. Because the *banger music* is what convinces everyone to pick up their guns and point them at each other. It’s mind control, right? It’s devil art! And if we just purge the city of its poison, then years of deep-set political and socioeconomic factions will just disappear like magic! Collective anger will dismantle itself! The sun will come out again, and the world will be right!”

(Muffled laughter)

“I mean, this is what was really said, kids! A direct quote, straight from the transcript so eloquently delivered by Jenner Chalice.”

(Throat clearing)

“In response to the staggeringly high statistics of banger-related crime, and, taking into consideration the best interest of Spekender’s pending restoration as a safe and beautiful city, Mayor Edison is calling for a citywide ban on the brand of music popularly known as banger music. Such material not only glorifies but also directly inspires illegal activity. It is deplorable and therefore has no place in the rehabilitation process of our great city. Effective as of now until an indefinite date, any parties or individuals caught publicly playing and/or distributing said material will face fines up to three hundred dollars and may be subject to arrest.”

“And here’s the best part. A little signature Chalice sprinkled on top, just to hit the message home: *‘And if crime in the Banger District does not shape up, then more will be banned. Hell, we’ll even ban colors if we have to.’*”

(Radio static) (Radio static) (Sighing)

“To Mayor Edison and his administration: if you lock your people in a silent world, their own thoughts are only going to get louder. And that’ll scare you worse than any banger music, I assure you of that.”

(Muffled laughter)

“This is what we’re funding now? So out with Safe and Beautiful City? This really trumps all that? I’d be lying if I said I ever believed in the likelihood of success for either one, but at least they sounded *passable*. But this? This sounds—well, it doesn’t sound like anything, because it can’t even hear itself. This government has hacked off its own ears. It can’t even hear itself think, much less anyone else.

“Honestly, with all her advocacy for the arts, both for kids like you in educational settings and local artists trying to make a living, Ari Edison would despise this. It would make her sick. And I may not be that old, but I understand enough to know that this is a vital cultural component of Spekender going down the tube. I mean, what the hell are they doing? They could be teaming up with bangers to throw benefit concerts, relief events, music-listening parties! We cannot make the mistake of eliminating the good while trying to eliminate the bad! A government cannot claim to know how to rescue its citizens when it knows nothing about what they do to try and rescue themselves every day.”

(Radio static) (Radio static) (Radio static)

“Alright. I’m done being an optimist. I’m much better at being a prophet anyway. And how’s the progression towards doomsday coming along? Let’s tally it up. What’s three more deaths to add to the count on this fine morning?”

“First: the shooting death of Elijah Kenneth-Speaks, thirty-five. At approximately two in the afternoon yesterday, he was taking his trash out in the alley behind his residence on Ivan Hollow Drive, West Spekender, when he was attacked by two masked youths. According to his seven-year-old nephew who witnessed the whole thing, they forced Elijah back inside his house at gunpoint to retrieve cash and valuables before shooting him in the head and fleeing the scene. His nephew was left to call the police and sit with his uncle’s dead body until they arrived.

“Second and third: the drive-by shooting deaths of Armez Braxton, Jr., nineteen, and Leticia Shugart, twenty-one. Last night, around twelve-thirty A.M., the two were reportedly sitting out on the porch of Armez’s grandmother’s house on Rayleaf Place in South Spekender when a silver truck pulled up to the curb in front of it. An individual dressed in Aztec colors proceeded to lean out of the passenger window and fire a total of eight shots at the porch. Both Armez, a confirmed Panda, and Leticia, a premiere dancer with the Spekender Ballet, died at the scene. Two bullets penetrated the window behind them and lodged into a wall in the living room, where two family members, one of them an infant, were sitting. Luckily—and this is the only lucky thing about the situation—those inside were not harmed.”

(Radio static) (Radio static) (Radio static) (Radio static)

“You know what? The power is nowhere, so it’s here for the taking. So listen to *me*. I have an edict to issue in response to Mayor Edison’s. I hereby ban *all* music. All sound, even. Nothing like it is allowed—no rhythm, no rhyme, no melody, no harmony, tempo, beat, percussion, cadence, lyrics, humming, whistling. Nothing. Give it a few days, Mayor Edison. Listen to the silence, and watch just how insane it makes all of us. And when everything else is off-limits, hear us sing alone to the police sirens.”

(Radio static) (Radio static)

“And I guess this would be as good a time as any to mention that there is a unity parade in the works, apparently being orchestrated by a coalition of Forge members, bangers, and citizen volunteers. So there’s that, in these trying times. Could be good, could be bad. All I can say is, they better make it a silent protest.

“I think you know my name well enough by now.”

(Radio static) (Radio static) (Radio static) (Radio static)

BANGERLAND

The bathroom was cold and yellow, lit by a single bulb over the sink which greased its raw light over the wallpaper, the shower curtain, all the alien belongings that lined the edge of a stranger's bathtub. Nimble saw it reflected like a grainy sun in the toilet bowl she had been retching into for the duration of the night before and now into the next morning. The air in the room, and the whole house really, smelled foreign and cloying, and she drummed up a figure—a potbellied, soft-headed old man called Lorry—to whom the place belonged and from whom the Metros had requisitioned their foxhole for the night. With that, she remembered someone else sitting outside only a room away. A sandy-haired banger whose true name had fueled the legends of Spek Middle's hallways and the spoken-word tabloids that her brothers used to trade back and forth.

The previous night, the first thing that Baj Guerrara had said since he dexterously cruised his jeep away from the Bazaar was, “We need a safe zone.”

“There’s Lorry on Elspire. Other end of the ’Ville. Pretty out of the way,” the Metro named Greek suggested from the backseat, where Nimble and Tarro were being held at his gunpoint.

Baj’s eyes had flashed mystically in the rearview mirror as he glanced at the ride behind them which was transporting Che, Kat, and DK. Then he nodded his approval to Greek—not at all a bloody tyrant, but a quiet imperator.

Nimble spat once more into the toilet and sank down onto her butt, yanking the sleeves of her sweatshirt up to her elbows. She felt like she had been crumpled on that dirty floor for an untellable time, feeling her body slam again and again into the Bazaar asphalt as she watched the comets discharging from the darkness in Wry’s hand, as she watched the bones of his face break and rework into the crooked smile that could tease a prayer candle into a loaded pistol.

Behind her, she heard the Metro girl—*Ciessa*—impatiently tapping her nails against the edge of the sink. In the clotted dust around the base of the toilet, a cockroach was in the process of dying, its upturned legs wriggling. Her stomach lurched at the sight of it, and she thrust her face over the toilet again, coughing hard and gutturally.

“Honey, honey, you gotta start talkin’.”

Resting her forehead on the scratched porcelain, Nimble peered upside down at Ciessa, who was staring at the first light that seeped through the square window over the radiator. Her blue paint was flaking off her face, revealing a marbled smatter of acne scars on her cheeks.

“You ain’t got nothin’ else in your system to throw up,” she snapped. “That broadcast is prob’ly over by now after how much time you wasted in here w’itch’a head in the shitter. Baby girl, I hope you know you fuckin’ with some dangerous people, and you been tryin’ our nerves all

damn night.” She smacked her lips. “You do know what they thinkin’ out there now, right? ‘Specially after what you said before you decided to lose your voice.”

Nimble closed her eyes and pictured Lorry’s living room, where they had all been prodded into the house like cattle, jabbed in the backs with gun barrels by the Metro’s inner cabinet. Greek had slung Che onto a ripped pleather couch and then grappled for Kat’s arm, which she jerked away, bleating in panic, “I’ve got a baby! Don’t touch me! *My baby!*”

Tarro let himself be pushed to the couch, his face a red burn of surrender. Behind him, Greek shoved DK to the carpet, kicking him hard in the ribs, taunting through gritted teeth, “Big bad DK! The Pandas got you like a stray bitch on a chain! Scrup, what you doin’ outside your fence, you look like fuckin’ shit, they shoulda *killed* you when they shot you, motherfucker.”

Then, all of a sudden, Greek was grabbing Nimble with an anger so electric that his fingertips felt like they were branding her, like they were the ones throwing her to the ground beside her brother. And as he did throw her to the couch, she ripped free of his grasp and railed, “*Damn you, Wry, why’d you let him turn into you?*”

The Metros froze. Greek halted mid-motion. “Hold up.” The control was loose for only a second, until he lifted his gun. “What the fuck you say?” He nudged Ciessa with his elbow. “I goddamn *told* you that was them Edison boys on the ground back there!” Then, just as he was about to snatch Nimble back up, a hand snaked in and laid itself on his shoulder, gently sweeping him aside.

Baj Guerrara knelt down before the couch in front of Nimble. His river of blue ran diagonally across his face, neither hot nor cold, and he looked her in the eye and quietly asked, “Are you Ev Edison’s daughter? Nimble?”

With hesitation, she nodded. The Metros whispered their shocked curses. Greek’s mouth widened, gasping, “Oh my *Gohhhhd . . .*”

In the apprehended silence of the room, Baj began asking introductions from all of them, meekly offering his hand to Che, who shook it with a starstruck vigor, and to Tarro, who barely grasped it with visible contempt. When he greeted Kat, it was with a strange friendliness, making small comments about the Northside and neighbors that Nimble didn't understand.

"You really leveled me back at the Bazaar," Baj chuckled softly. "Jadeon can take a look to make sure the baby's okay, if you want."

A Metro standing in the doorway of the kitchen stepped forward, unclipping a sling bag from over his shoulder. Kat's eyes popped, beginning to protest, before he pulled out a stethoscope and assured her, "Nah, serious, I'm pre-med." He grinned sheepishly. "And if you don't mind, ma'am, I could use the practice."

While he stooped over and pressed the cold speaker of the scope against Kat's belly, Baj turned to face DK, who was still being pinned to the floor by a squadron of Metros. He squatted down, holding his hand out plainly, and DK eyed it with suspicion until one of his arms was released. In a gesture that Nimble could only take for streetwise courtesy, the two bangers clasped hands hard and then snapped their fingers free.

"What's DK short for?" Baj asked.

DK kept his voice low and measured, as if the question was a test that only he could recognize. "Dexter Klaybolt. My full name. I been called DK since I was a baby."

"Pleasure to meet you. Under objectively safer circumstances than would normally be the case."

Then Baj stood and made his way to the other side of Lorry's living room. Soundlessly, he sat himself down in a sagging armchair, and the rest of the Metros gravitated around him like subjects to their king's throne. He looked straight at Nimble with eyes that seemed to x-ray

amusedly into the bones that scorched under her skin. And he issued a decree: “Nobody talks until she does. I don’t want to hear the story from anybody else but Nimble.”

And she had burned her words inside of herself, trapping them in.

Now, Ciessa fished her phone from the back pocket of her jeans and checked the time for what felt like the millionth minute since Greek had turned Lorry’s fuzzy TV set to an emergency press conference from City Hall and Nimble had dashed out of the room with a tumultuous nausea paining her gut.

“You already said his name, hun,” Ciessa said. “Can’t run it back now. I don’t know what else you think you can hold out. Your brother’s the fuckin’ face of Fight, now what you think that tells us?”

Nimble squeezed her eyes shut and took a deep breath through her nose.

“It’s just connect-the-dots. Last night, we got Chalice tryin’ to heckle us for his share when the man done know the Northside still got plenty ‘a security and shit patrolin’ all over. We got three Edison kids not even ten feet away, and then we got one takin’ shots at Baj not even ten damn seconds later! We got Chalice on some emergency broadcast bullshit this mornin’, and then we got you. So? What this look like? It look like we was ‘bout to get *double-crossed*. Fuckin’ Chalice, we shoulda cut his limp dick out the ’Ville back when he let your daddy go through with Safe City! And now he on some child soldier-type shit with his boss’s kids checkin’ off his laundry list for him! Shit, baby, now you workin’ for that scrup done fucked over your daddy? *Mmm*, that’s criminal, baby. That’s more criminal than me.”

Nimble twisted her body around, her face molded into a bewildered scowl. She uttered the first words, honest and unregulated, that she had spoken since the night before. “*What?*”

Ciessa eyed her. “So you ‘gon talk when I take you back in there?”

“Hold on.”

“You damn well better,” Ciessa muttered, wrenching the door open while Nimble flushed the toilet and went to the sink to cup a few handfuls of water into her mouth. “It’s eight in the mornin’. I wanna go to fuckin’ bed.”

The noxious yellow of the bathroom leaked out into the glaring light of the living room as Nimble stoically followed Ciessa back into the den of Metros. When they reentered, most of the bangers were still glued to the bluish glow of the TV. Baj Guerrara was sitting with his elbows on his knees, watching the screen where her father’s advisor was walking offstage away from a podium, ignoring the hectic waves of the press gathered below. As soon as he left the frame, the screen bounced to black at the click of the remote in Baj’s hand.

Nimble locked eyes with Che on the couch, his face still devoid of its definition. His hair brushed against the shoulders of Wry’s hoodie, and it was only then that she realized he was still wearing the backpack from the Bazaar, strapped like a deflated beetle shell to his back.

Greek’s laughter trumpeted against the silence. “Ay, Ci! You know what this fool say he ‘gon do? He said he’s bannin’ banger music. That’s what he said. And he ‘gon fine and arrest anybody caught bangin’ it in public. And when he was done, he looked straight up into that camera—and didn’t I say it, Baj?—he fuckin’ smiled like he thought he did somethin’, like he was lookin’ straight up in here at all ‘a us!” He wagged his gun around the room. “I wanna blast his fuckin’ brains out, man—”

“Don’t point that thing at me,” Nimble ordered.

She brushed past Ciessa to stand unmatched in the middle of the room and watched Greek’s astonishment crank into a slow violence. But the sound of Baj Guerrara’s voice forbid all fury but her own.

“A few of you go outside with Greek,” he commanded with a small smirk, keeping his eyes on Nimble. “Pull somebody’s ride out into the street. Open all the doors and windows, turn something on, and turn it up as loud as it can go. Make sure it carries.”

“‘Sho got it.” Greek brought himself to his full height as he passed Nimble. “We ‘gon make it bump all the bones under that street. Percy, Val, Jadeon, ya’ll come on. Hell, Lorry, get your ass out here too.”

Once they were all outside, Nimble aimed her gaze at Baj Guerrara, suddenly becoming a bitter negotiator. “I’ll talk if you do. Tell me what you’ve been doing with Jenner Chalice, and I’ll tell you what I know about what happened at the Bazaar last night.”

Smiling at her, he stood and took a pack of cigarettes of the front pocket of his hoodie. “We’ve been shut up in here all night long. It’d do us all good to get some air.”

He ghosted to the door and creaked it open, breathing in the daybreak, as the remaining Metros wrangled Tarro, Kat, DK, and Che up from the couch and out into the dewy light. Nimble followed Baj begrudgingly onto a small porch littered with crisp gray leaves and two metal folding chairs for patio furniture. Beyond it was what had not been visible the night before: a Southside neighborhood and its wizened houses huddled up against a poached sunrise in the mist above their rooflines. The state of the street could have been mistaken for dreamless slumber, had it not been for the truck parked sideways from curb to curb, revving its engine and, in turn, detonating a blast of banger music.

Tarro seemed too exhausted to bother protesting being pushed around as he slumped down beside DK on the floor of the porch. Kat eased into one of the metal chairs, and Che planted himself at the far end, overlooking the bangers in the street whooping and hollering along to their song.

Nimble stopped cold. “Take that off.”

He looked up, startled, and then down at himself. With a careless fatigue that she hated to watch, he shrugged the backpack off his shoulders and let it crumple to the concrete. Their eyes grazed ice against fire, but she didn't want to give him reprieve. She didn't want to comfort him.

"Hey, somebody needs to burn that," she heard Tarro comment as she followed Baj down the stump of Lorry's driveway that was overflowing with banger rides and an issue of that morning's *Decree*.

He started at a leisurely pace down the sidewalk that wrapped around the cul-de-sac of the street, as if he was only taking her along on his dawn stroll. A flock of blackbirds descended from an oak over their heads, and she watched them take up a new perch along a powerline over the Metro truck—like animal theatergoers to the wildman ritual below. But, for her, there was no savor in the music; it was only another mode of currency to steal away and pocket, to abuse and deplete. Just another cannon for a rage that had nothing else to hit but open air.

"I think you know I'm not a good man. And Ev Edison isn't either."

She turned to the Metro leader, expecting to face up an insult. But he was studying the display in the street as if it was something that he too was trying to figure out. "The colors we both claim, they're not trusty dividers. At night, we could stand halfway under a streetlight and halfway in the dark, and say we only exist in one of the two places when the city spreads through both right underneath us."

As he walked, he palmed a lighter from his pocket and cupped it to the cigarette in his mouth, sighing out smoke. He tipped both the lighter and the cigarette box towards her, but she hardly acknowledged them.

"That's how we both ended up on this lonely plane of leadership," he said, his voice so soft. "To be a person of any people at all means to set out in the name of good against evil. Or

whatever you think that is. It gets hard when you realize you have to view everything in its whole existence all the time and then decide how to label it.”

He blew out his smoke. They were rounding the cul-de-sac, now perfectly aligned with a straight-shot view of the street stretching into the distance. In front of them, the Metros were rummaging in the bed of the truck. Suddenly, a distinct pop sounded over the stereo. Someone had found a stash of fireworks. A bright burst of a bottle rocket shrieked high above the trees, coloring the sordid clouds with red.

Baj smirked, his eyes tracking the ascension of the lights. “Your dad doesn’t want his territory stolen by banger gangs; I don’t want mine raided by cops. He doesn’t want his city lost to those he considers to be glorified professional criminals on my end; I don’t want mine lost to those I consider glorified uncover criminals on his. He doesn’t want his people to keep dying; neither do I. So you can see your dad’s absence, and you can call it cowardly. Or you can call it protective instinct. You can look at me and what you know of me and call me a criminal. Or you can call me a politician. You can look at what Jenner Chalice is doing and has been doing to the government for over a year now and call it embezzling funds, colluding with illegal organizations, manipulating his employer, and abusing his power for his own gain. Or you can call it smart business.”

Nimble felt a scorching hatred drop into her stomach and stagnate. Tears boiled behind her eyes, but she wanted more than anything to be dry inside, to rip handfuls of grass from the lawn beside her and squeeze all the indifference from the dead straw.

“Nobody cares, do they?” she spat at the ground. “Is there even anything good at all?”

“Is this not good what we’re doing right now?” Baj replied. “Me and you.”

She stared through the sidewalk, into the ground, into the bones of the city. “It wasn’t my brother that wanted to kill you. It wasn’t even a man or a human at all. He’s something else. It’s

like he's got a gun with an uneven number of bullets, and he's shooting at random just to see who gets it." She sounded so sure of herself, even in her despair. "He's gonna come for me, because he came for my mom and my sister. He's coming for everyone, and he's coming for me, and he's trying to get me back to that place—that, that *day*. Then he'll kill me too."

Baj motioned to the Metros on the porch as they made their way across the street back towards Lorry's house, closing their circle around the live-wire truck. "What is it you want to do?"

Nimble squeezed her eyes shut, knowing full well the futility of the desire but desiring it all the same. "I want to kill him instead."

They stopped beside Lorry's mailbox, and the Metro leader flicked the ash off the end of his cigarette. "If you think you can't kill him, Nimble, then find something that can. And use that."

The bangers were herding Che, Tarro, Kat, and DK like an unshackled chain gang down to the street towards them, but, as Baj turned to shake their hands in a final parting gesture, Nimble turned to watch the truck behind her catapult its dying stars up to the sky. From inside the cab, a new track began—fast-paced and aggressive—and a cheer rang up from the Metros.

"One more thing," she heard Baj say distantly. "There's a convocation tonight at an old church on the Eastside. It's a shelled-out cathedral—they don't use it anymore—on Cress Drive. Eight o'clock. A bunch of students are hosting it. I'd appreciate it if you could be my representation."

"We'll go," Tarro replied, gruff but sincere.

Greek had his arm around Lorry's shoulders, his face upturned to bellow the vulgar lyrics with relish. Lorry was grinning, his gums flapping in an attempt to follow along with the song, and Greek was egging him on, bouncing the truck bed in exhilaration. Then Lorry pulled away

and broke into spontaneous movement, wriggling a current through his arms, while Greek doubled over and clapped with laughter. The rest of the Metros drew in closer, forming a circle around Lorry in the truck bed, and Nimble stared, perplexed, as Greek threw back his head and let loose a rapturous howl.

“Ciessa can take you all back to wherever you need to go,” Baj said. “It was nice to have met you all.”

Just as he turned to walk back up the driveway to Lorry’s house, Nimble forced a quick-fire question out. “Baj?”

He peered over his shoulder at her.

“Is my brother Maverick a Metro?”

He shook his head. “Maverick’s not one of mine. I tried my hand at recruiting Wry at one point in time, but he’s someone who already knows how he wants to live life. Speaking of which, when it’s a good time, do me a favor.” He smiled. “Tell your dad hey for me.”

CITY HALL

As if he were some cheap-suited investor in for an early appointment, the receptionist—a kid named Branson, prematurely balding—had lowered the phone receiver from his ear and, through a tightlipped smile, instructed the mayor to take a seat, make himself comfortable, and *Mr. Chalice will be with you shortly, sir*. And Ev had relented, skulking off to the empty waiting area directly across from Jenner’s office.

Now he was hunched over in a mesh-backed chair, his pupils drilled to the top of his eyes as he stared at the door that had been shutting him out for the past fifteen minutes. A grating techno beat looped through the overhead speakers, falling on the wax plants and magazine stacks around him in an overly-sweetened haze. Branson’s keyboard tapped along to it with tiny, bone-cracking sounds. Ev felt disembodied from his clothes, his skin. There was an energy that swirled uncatchable inside of him, reserving itself for what he was about to become once the door in front of him let him in.

Earlier that morning, after the emergency broadcast that he had never authorized ended and the news resumed its regular programming, he had stormed out of his bedroom to see Arla

still in her bathrobe, marching down the hall towards him. The furrow of her brow hooked onto the directionless of his anger, and he followed her numbly to the foyer and outside onto the patio.

“I walked out here just a minute ago to get the paper, and there it was.”

She shook her head, her slippers padding a little ways down the footpath and stopping to face the side of the house. Coming to her side, Ev beheld what she was grimacing at. Crudely graffitied in black against the peeling gray brick was a vandal’s idea of a game. A one-dimensional gallows was erected as tall as the window beside it, with a stick-figure man hanging limply from the noose. The blanks below his body had been filled in accordingly. They declared simply: B O D Y C O U N T 6

Ev studied the image with a blank face, staring down his likeness strung up by a straight black line. The paint had bled into the grout, the letters tendrilling outward like a molding flower.

“Oh Lord, do you think it was a banger gang?” Arla whimpered suddenly.

He looked at her for a moment, saying nothing, before he finally replied, “They must have done it last night or early this morning.” He glanced out past the yard at the mist hanging over the road, tauntingly quiet. “I’ll arrange for a patrol car to sit in the driveway for the next couple days. But I’m going downtown now, Arla—”

“I’ll take care of it, then,” she said. “You go on ahead to work. I just want to make sure the kids don’t wake up and see—*my goodness*, sir, where are your shoes?! You must be freezing!”

He had looked down abruptly and realized that he was barefoot, still clad in a T-shirt and pajama pants. The cold must have been seeping a dull pain into him, but all he could feel was a dark euphoria, electrified by endorphins stripped of their pleasure. A few minutes later, he was back inside, hastily knotting his tie and paging a driver to take him to City Hall.

Now, five more minutes had passed, and Jenner's door still had not budged. Branson was puzzling over something on his computer monitor, rapidly mashing the same button on his mouse. Every so often, Ev felt the kid's gaze drift over to him warily, put off by the red of his eyes and the ash of his face. The overhead speakers switched songs, but the beat of the new one bared down just as incessantly as the one before it.

—*what are you doing what are you doing what are you doing what are you*—

The memory of his advisor on his TV screen, crisp and colorized, burned back into his mind. There was his right-hand man, his confidante. Jabbing a finger into the lenses of the city's cameras, condemning with it, lying with it, *killing* with it.

Before he knew what he was doing, Ev thrust himself up from his seat and stalked across the waiting area to the closed door. Branson ejected himself from his desk chair.

"Wait, sir!" he sputtered. "He's in the middle of important business regarding your banger music ban! Did you not—aren't you supposed to be out sick today?"

Ev snatched the doorknob and twisted it hard. It caught, locked. He wrenched it madly to no avail before shoving a hand into his pants pocket for his keys, finding the master, and jimmying it into the keyhole. The door flapped open, as flimsy as cardboard, and he slammed it behind him.

Jenner was poised behind his desk, a ballpoint pen hovering over a sheet of legal paper in one hand and a cup of coffee waiting to be lifted in his other. He could have been a mannequin in a showroom, were it not for the steam curling from his coffee and the smile gradually widening on his face.

"Good morning to you too," he said.

As Ev watched the smile expand into a grin, he felt himself become a man again, an equal force to match the simpering strength in front of him, a magistrate to an infracting administrator:

You called a press conference without my consent. You issued a wildly ridiculous ban in my name without me ever authorizing it. You have done potentially irreparable damage to this city, and I should fire you for this.

But what made it out of his heaving chest was, “There’s a death threat graffitied on the front of my house!”

Jenner stifled a laugh as he reached into the interior pocket of the suit jacket draped across the back of his chair and pulled out a flask, unscrewing the top and pouring the contents into his coffee. “Bud, you’ve been racking up death threats for a while now. Got a whole filing cabinet full of ‘em in basement archives.”

Ev slammed his palms down on the desktop. He felt an unpredictable surge of madness and fear, and he suddenly realized that, in all their years together, he couldn’t say if Jenner was the kind of man to carry a gun on him or not.

“Good God, Ev,” his advisor said. “You gonna accuse me? Am I the new reason why people hate you?”

Ev sucked in a breath through his nose and gripped the sides of the desk so hard that his arms trembled. “I want you to look at me, and I want you to tell me straight. We have worked together for three years, and we have known each other for even longer. There has hardly been one day in those three years where we have gone without seeing each other’s face. Our families have eaten together and spent holidays together countless times. You owe me this much. You owe me more than this. Why were you against me meeting with Baj Guerrara?”

Jenner began to chuckle.

“Why has there been such a consistent shortage in funds for so long?”

“Look, the factors that go into finding an answer for that—”

“Whose pocket do you have your hand in?”

“Ev, c’mon, are you actually suggesting—”

“You spoke at my wife and child’s funeral!”

His voice dragged itself up the walls and reverberated back to him, sounding like a wounded animal. The air sucked out of the room. Jenner stared at him, his teeth biting the flesh of his cheek.

Without a second thought, Ev said it. “You can be out of here, just like that. I can have you gone. More than that, I can have you arrested. You will go to jail.”

The space between them supercharged with a pending collision before Jenner lowered his eyes and seemed to compose himself, intertwining his fingers on his desktop in a tight, businesslike posture.

“You know why I’m not worried about you?” he said. “Because you never stand up for long. Every time you seem to get off your ass to do something, you fall right back onto it. And then you’re down for, what, four weeks at a time? Four months? A whole fucking year and a half? You don’t have the endurance, Ev, and you know it. You lost your ability to deliver anything with lasting authority a long time ago. And don’t get me wrong; it’s sad! I don’t enjoy seeing it. But this is a city full of the worst people doing some of the worst shit imaginable who needed somebody to keep them in check—and you were out of order. Now you wanna come back . . . to what? They’re unsaveable. They won’t be reasoned with, okay? This city’s headed to hell. There’s a bomb ticking under every street, and it’s only a matter of time before the fuse gets eaten up. The truth is this: you live for yourself and your own. Nobody else, or you’re free game for everybody out there begging for a good heart to leech the life out of. Goddamn it if you wanna help people, but they make themselves very hard to help!”

“So you might as well make a profit off of it, right?” Ev shot back. “You might as well use me as your decoy while you’re at it. My God, you’ve been hoarding the money that could have saved us! People, *children*, are killing and dying by the dozens every day and night!”

Jenner shrugged. “Let them do what they do best.”

“You’re an inconceivable monster.”

Just as quickly, the good nature slid off his advisor’s face. He whipped his glasses off his face and looked up with so much pity in his eyes that Ev almost stumbled backwards in the wake of it.

“I’m sorry that Ari died. I’m sorry that your baby never got to live. I’m sorry from the deepest part of me. It was a freak tragedy that happened. There’s nothing to justify it, and I’m sorry for how that ruined you. But that time has passed. Life the bitch goes on for you, whether you want her to or not.” He knocked back a swig from his coffee cup. “Now you’re on fire for justice? Great, great. And you have no idea how to work this city anymore because you weren’t there to see it become what it is now.”

Ev backed away from the desk and stood suspended in the middle of the room. He felt as weightless as a mote of dust floating on the air, as an origami man. *How long have I been in here?* His hand grappled for the doorknob. *Do I have children? Do I have a wife? Who has been sitting in my office?*

“I’m going to bust this wide open.” It was one last try for a fight—booming and effervescent, as if it was coming from the bottom of an aluminum can. “I swear to God, by the end of the day, by the end of the weekend, you and whoever else is in on this scheme will be in handcuffs.”

Jenner shook his head. “Big dreams, asshole. Your high is gonna crash the second you walk outta that door. And who do you honestly think is more in the red here? Before you sic that hometown hero Starick and his decrepit police force on me, how about *you*? You wanna know why Spekender keeps upping the price on your head? Why your kids have criminalized themselves out from under you? Why you can’t even leave your own bedroom most days? It’s all you, my friend. Not my decisions. Yours. So good luck making your little whistleblower plan

mean anything. Me and Blair will be stretched out on a beach somewhere by then. And the sad part is, you should have been there with me.” He sighed. “Ari too, and the kids. It should have never ended up like this. But it did. It fucked up. And how can you expect to hold up to any notion of a standard in a world like that?”

The tendons of the hand that clutched the doorknob felt like they were trying to pierce his skin and escape him. He bit his breath back behind his teeth in an attempt to hold his form together. He had to get away or else vaporize.

“So I’m gonna get back to the damn banger situation,” Jenner was saying, clicking his pen against the papers on his desk. “And you’re gonna leave me to work in peace. Take the day off, why don’t you? You were probably going to anyway, had you not wrangled up the strength to turn on the TV this morning.”

In one unhinged motion, Ev threw himself out of the office. The traffic in the hallway outside halted as he stumbled past their wide eyes, past the elevator, through the door leading to the emergency stairwell. With his raggedy breath echoing back to him between cement walls, he began scrambling down floor after floor. A hand spidered out to rip the watch off his wrist, to yank loose the tie from around his neck, undoing himself.

—what have I done what have I done what have done—

He hit the ground floor and crashed through the door out into an empty corridor, moving through it liquidly. As he wound through a maze of hallways, a sound began to swell towards him: an amorphous reverb pulsing against the ancient walls of the building. By the time he realized what it actually was, he was already in full view of the lobby, stranded in the middle of an entryway that faced a swarm of protestors held back behind a skimpy fleet of security guards. A handful of teenage girls in black and pink yelled incoherently into their faces at the

forefront of the mob, and, in a flash, one of them zeroed in on him. Just as she was turning to alert the Gypsy girls beside her, he ran.

Walls melted past him as he fled, his hands thrust out in front of him to burst through a thousand doors until the building finally spit him out into the cold. An intense brightness assaulted his vision before subsiding into the white-plated sky overhead. He was out back of City Hall on a small concrete stoop that ran around the sides of the building and to the faculty parking lot behind it. A plastic picnic table sat waterlogged in the grass beneath a leafless maple tree. A soda can floated a slow circle in a puddle at the edge of the concrete. It could have been a cemetery for how sedate it was.

Automatically, he dug a hand into his pocket for his cell phone and scrolled to find Darius Starick's contact. He mashed the phone to his ear, the dial tone drilling through his skull for a couple seconds before he abruptly ended the call and dropped to his knees. The phone slipped from his grasp and clattered to the concrete. His eyes closed like heavy shades, his head hung, and he remained in that posture for a while until he could almost feel a familiar tickle at the back of his shoulders—phantom fingers running up his back and rounding out at his neck, kneading the gnarls in his muscles, the touch of her wedding band cool against his skin—

The present air gasped back into his lungs, and he choked on its reentry, snapping awake. On his hands and knees, he scuttled to the rain puddle nearby, pressing his knees into the soft mud, and violently splashed the water against his face.

All at once, his breathing evened out. He sputtered through the coppery rain running down his forehead and nose, reveling in the freeze that wiped his mind clear. In front of him, the soda can bobbed in the ripples that his hands had made.

“It’s hell in there, right?”

Ev clambered to his feet to see a man leaning against the damp wall to his right. Sharpened by fear, his eyes lighted on the man's business suit, the faded gold of his hair, his placid expression cast out over the parking lot. His body felt a silly old urge to rush forward with his hand outstretched in greeting.

"Don't mind me," the man said. "Just had to get some air. It gets stuffy in there sitting in one place all day." He smirked. "But I don't have to tell you that, do I?"

I didn't catch your name . . . Ev's mind suggested as a default. But it just as quickly disintegrated upon his tongue, neutralized by a stranger pull towards the door, a magnetic desire to be inside and somehow safe again.

"I was saying that it's a nightmare in there. All that fuss over *music*. It's hilarious."

Ev was scowling against his power now. *Who are you? What department do you work in?*

The man shrugged. "But what can you do? Especially you. Here you are trying to pull this city out of the gutter, trying to weed out the urban vermin spreading their propaganda like venereal disease—and no one even says thanks. Because maybe we're just the same as they are. Just as black."

The hair on the back of Ev's arms lifted. He stared at the man's lounging shape, unable to make words. Slowly, he raised his hand to wipe the droplets from his mouth, and the man matched his actions, mirroring him with a sinuous smile.

"Yeah, but they're all dead anyways, right? You all are, in the end."

Ev bolted. He managed to lower his chest to snatch his phone from the ground before he collided with the door, shouldering the metal with a bone-deep thud until his hands wrapped around the handle and yanked it open. The white cold shut out behind him, and he threw his back against the door as if to hold it closed. His body slid to the ground, chills shuddering through him, his pulse pounding to the beat of the protestors still distantly occupying the lobby.

All of a sudden, the phone in his hand buzzed to life. He pounded every button on the keypad and slammed the silenced box face-down on the floor beside him. His knuckles pressed into his ears, trying to inflict an inward quiet upon himself, the malformed music of the building chanting anything that could dull his supercharged senses.

—where are my children where are my children where are my children where are my children—

Repeated enough times, it sounded like nothing at all in his head.

TRANSIT

Nimble bolted upright where she had collapsed onto her bed earlier that morning in instantaneous slumber. Her back was stiff from being arched into a mound of pillows for an undetermined amount of time, maybe even the whole day. She heaved herself to the floor, knocking over a stack of nature magazines that she had intended to cut up for a collage, and felt her head start to swim. The colors of her room screamed at her in overblown gradients until, at last, her vision cleared and her balance steadied itself. Then she realized that her feet were still in their shoes. She was still in the same sweatshirt and jeans from the night before, her body trapped in a spacesuit of adrenaline and wind-smell and the berry odor that had permeated the upholstery in Ciessa's SUV.

She recalled the timeline of the morning like sequences in a dream: DK getting dropped off on a street curb still in the Banger District, Che at a dumpy white house farther up the Southside, Kat in a gated subdivision in the Northside, Tarro getting out near the university and reminding her, "Hey, quarter to eight tonight at Stippo's. I'll drive us to the Eastside."

Quarter to eight. She lunged for the clock on her nightstand and stared at the blue digits: 7:36.

"Shoot," she hissed, and suddenly it was like the years had reversed and she was late for school on some random weekday, like her brothers would be pacing in the foyer of a different

house, yelling threats up the stairs about leaving her behind. But when she threw open her door to race down the hallway and into the night, Lasso was the only one there.

She crashed into him and immediately jerked herself back, jarred into confusion. Lasso stumbled backwards from the impact, laughing, “Whoa, chill out, what’s your issue?”

At first, she could only open and close her mouth, angling herself to blow past him down into the foyer and out the door. But a noise down the opposite end of the hall—the furtive click of a lock, perhaps, or just the house’s joints popping—snapped her attention away. Lasso’s bedroom hung open like a silently snoring mouth, but their brothers’ doors were shut tight.

The heat drained from her body. “Have they been home yet?”

Lasso glanced over his shoulder. “What, you mean Mav and Wry? Wry hasn’t been around here for, like, weeks—*obviously*. And Mav just walks through walls, I guess, I don’t know. Why? *You* haven’t seen them?”

Nimble stared at their doors, thinking of the Bazaar, thinking of both of them clashing forcefully enough to make sparks in her memory.

Beside her, Lasso was chuckling. “Where do you guys go all the time now?”

She felt a strange wind come off the question and, when she turned to look at him, his face slumped somewhere between a grin and a grimace. She had never before thought of her little brother as a friendless boy, and the melancholy of it weighed on her like a quilt. Her feet began moving away from him.

“Look, Lasso, I gotta get downtown right now. I’m supposed to meet my—meet some *people* at Stippo’s by seven-forty-five—”

But Lasso was hustling right behind her, chasing after her. “Nim, wait, *I can take you!*”

She paused with her shoulder poised to ram the front doors open as he caught up with her and fought to tone himself down, feigning a casualness that hardly masked his starving eyes.

“It’s gonna take you, like, half an hour to walk it or even if you run it. I got you. You can ride on the back of my bike.”

A sharp uncertainty sliced through Nimble’s stomach, but she forced herself out onto the patio anyway. “Okay.”

Night had fallen on the wilted green world like gossamer. A pearlescent moon silvered its veil over the yard and the house and the thick tree cover, but it was hard for Nimble to see the transformed city as anything lovelier than a darkened room where the worst things imaginable could thrive in secret. Its beguilement spells were old and overused, but they could still turn their tricks. She knew that now.

Lasso’s bike glinted in the moonlight where it lay halfway on the driveway, halfway in the grass. He hoisted it upright and picked a straggling weed off the brake chain before swinging a leg over one side. Nimble straddled the back and was positioning her feet on the wheel rods when he raised up again suddenly, leaning over the handlebars to squint towards something at the end of the drive.

“Yo, is that a cop car?”

She followed his gaze to the outline of a black vehicle shielded behind a thatch of overgrown shrubbery near the street. A sliver of the moon reflected off the tweaked side mirror, and, in the dark, Nimble could barely make out the boxy hat of police lights atop of its roof.

In unspoken unison, both she and Lasso looked back at the house. The thin lines between the window blinds of their father’s bedroom glowed a yellow that denoted neither occupancy nor absence.

Then, without a word, Nimble grabbed hold of her brother’s shoulders, and Lasso pedaled past the sleeping cruiser and out onto the street. They swished through the Westside as if the houses and fluorescent-lighted business strips were just reeds bending back on either side of

their current. Only occasionally did they happen to encounter a lone pedestrian hugging the shoulder of the road, their heads hung low and unresponsive. The cars that drove by were sealed machines, whirring close and then passing along. Belaying every night insect and animal, the only other sound was the wheels chattering beneath them.

“It’s so quiet,” Nimble said.

“Yeah, it’s prob’ly because of the Spektator,” Lasso replied. “You know, he made that joke this morning about banning sound because of the banger rap ban. Duh, it was just sarcasm, but maybe people are, like, embracing it. As a form of protest or something.”

Nimble peered up at the branches interlocking above them. “You think people really care that much?”

“I mean, maybe it’s just a principle thing.”

“Do you think there’s a hell?”

Lasso let out a surprised bark of laughter as he steered around a rain-filled crater in the road. “You know, people usually ask that the other way around, talkin’ about heaven and stuff.”

Nimble was lost, looking past the houses crowded on either side of them, porch lights like dim orange campfires in the dark. “Do you think that things can leave it? And that they can come up here and come after you and do things to other people? And make other people do things too?”

Lasso didn’t speak for a minute. “Come after you why?”

“That’s what I—*I don’t know*. But, for some reason, it’s like you got cursed at some point in your life. Or maybe you were always cursed, but it didn’t catch up with you until later. But it’s been right behind you all this time, right behind you, and now it’s finally in front of you. And the scariest part is that it’s easy for you to let it get you. It’s really easy to die.”

Silence poured into the hole that her voice left in the air, and she was almost afraid that the space was sealed and that they would continue all the way downtown without talking. Then Lasso spoke.

“But what about the heaven part?”

She didn’t say anything. Now he sounded like he was on the verge of tears, angry and sharp. “Are you not gonna say anything about the heaven part?”

“What about—*what?*” she fumbled.

“If something can come *up* from *hell*, then something can come *down* from *heaven*, can it not? Like, people die all the time because of sad shit. So where’s the heaven thing? Is it like an angel or something? Like God? Like some kinda ancestor or happy ghost or what?”

“Are you talking about Mom?”

The bike sped up. She felt her brother take on another energy beneath her hands, his emotions inverting back into his body. As the trees receded to the roaming black sky and blinking skyscrapers, the Westside smudged into central Spekender. The candy wheel rose up close by, rotating like an aimless asteroid. It wasn’t until they neared the Bazaar that Nimble realized there was no music to accompany its slow spin. They passed the south entrance gate, and she stole a glimpse of the main strip, sparsely populated by a few apathetic bilge drinkers and meandering passers. No banger colors in sight. No CUFs, Forge or Fight. It was a changed world.

“He mentioned her this morning,” came out of nowhere below her.

Her heart smashed against her chest. “Dad?”

“The Spektator,” Lasso answered dully. “He said that she would’ve been really pissed about the banger ban. Like he ever knew her enough to even say that.”

Nimble swallowed dryly, dipping her chin against the wind sailing through her hair. She thought of Jenner Chalice spitting fire and brimstone on Lorry’s TV set that morning—his

pointed finger, his wild sermonic eyes. Then she thought of the banger truck, and Greek baying along to the music, unregulated and free.

“They’re really gonna go after Dad now.” Lasso sounded like he was just coming to the realization of it, astounded by the surety of his own logic. “Like really. All the banger gangs. This is the perfect reason, and he just handed it to them. Nimble, they’re gonna kill him.”

They were gaining through the Business District now, freewheeling in the dark, as his hysteria grew. “Last night, somebody spray-painted a gallows on the front of the house, okay? Arla cleaned it off early this morning, but I saw it when she was inside looking for the pressure washer! And they didn’t just draw Dad! It said *BODY COUNT* with a number 6 beside it! Okay, that’s everybody in our house! That’s all of us! This has some Baj Guerrara-type shit written all over it!”

Nimble burst into a fit of giggling.

“What?” Lasso demanded, a smile seeping into his voice, as they pulled into Stippo’s neon-lit parking lot. “What the hell’s so funny about that?” Then his signature humor fired back full-force. “Scrup, you lyin’ through your teeth! I bet you only wanted me to bring you here so you could meet up with that dude—what’s his name? Che? *Ooooh*—”

She pinched the fat at the back of his neck, sending him overboard into laughter. He reached back to swat at her hands and nearly swerved the bike into a parked car. Suddenly, with the strength warming in her own stomach, she felt an overwhelming desire to snatch her little brother up in her arms and squeeze her cheek to his, like in the photographs when they were six and four and violent with affection.

“Hey, Lass?” she said.

“Hit me with it,” he joked, coasting to a stop beside the front of the restaurant.

“If you ever come across a guy—it doesn’t matter what he’s dressed as or what he looks like—if you ever come across a guy who knows your name and knows who I am and makes you feel awful, run away from him, okay? Don’t listen to him.”

She stepped off the bike and looked at him the way she had seen her mother do so many times, the same brown in both their eyes earnest and burning. “Promise me, alright?”

Lasso kept an easy smile on his face, but, still, there was trouble in it. “Yeah, promise.”

Then he was pushing off again and pedaling towards the street, veering away from the glowing taillights in the parking lot. He held up two fingers in farewell as he zigzagged his way down the block, popping wheelies until he was only a dark dot in the distance and then nothing at all.

CRESS DR.

Nimble found Tarro's crossover parked in the very back of the lot, flashing its lights at her in a feverish disco. With a smile still lingering on her mouth, she scurried over to it, wrenched the side door open, and slid into the backseat beside Che and DK.

"Damn it, Nimble, where have you been?"

Tarro was twisted all the way around in the driver's seat, one hand furiously clawing the plush of Kat's headrest. "I said seven-forty-five, and you're almost thirty minutes late! Jesus, we had no clue if you were okay or if something had happened or what! Don't *ever* do anything like that again!"

His face was so warped with anger at her that she couldn't help but erupt once more into laughter. DK and Kat stared in confusion. Che snorted through his nose at her.

Tarro's eyes popped. "Why on earth are you laughing right now? I'm serious! You had us sitting here thinking that you had—that—"

Deep peals of her cackling filled the car, so much that she didn't think she would ever shut up. There was something so blessedly hysterical about the fact that he couldn't even say the word, that he didn't even realize how good it was to feel such a close fear to that of a parental scolding. Instead, he fed into her fit, sucking in a breath to bluster up for another outburst, when Kat stepped in to defuse him.

“She’s here now, see?” she said, close to laughter herself as she swiveled around to shoot Nimble a reassuring smile. “Now we can go.”

The streetlight outside her window beamed across one side of her face, and Nimble’s laughter died in its wake. There was a bruise like a burnt rose blotted under Kat’s right eye, as dark as a thundercloud, as large as a man’s fist. As quickly as the hilarity plummeted from her face, Che pinched her leg through her jeans hard enough for her to know to tear her eyes away. When she dared to look again, Kat had turned back around, and the car was pulling out onto the road.

As they left the Business District and headed into the Eastside, skimming past the familiar line of duplexes and its backlot refuge so swiftly that Nimble and Che barely had time to glance at each other, DK slouched in his seat until he was eye-level with the bottom of the window.

“I hope you hope where you goin’,” he muttered, his seatbelt hiked to his neck. “Cause ain’t no way we stoppin’ anybody to ask for directions. I ain’t like you; I can’t be circumnavigatin’ the city every night like some goddamn tourist.”

“You’ll be fine,” Tarro answered tersely. He gazed out at the illuminated flow of the road in front of him. “I know this area. Spek High’s just right up here. See?”

Nimble peered out the window at the smooth gray monoliths of the school that would have one day been hers to call her own, like it had been for Wry and Maverick and even her parents before her. At her side, Che lowered his head to check his phone, and she silently wondered how long both their hookies could last. Or perhaps their lives had derailed from the track of that customary existence the moment they met each other. Maybe they would live out the rest of their days in that very car on that very road, equipped always with a mission, devoted forever to a forward compulsion through the dark that they couldn’t understand.

The Eastside streets grew shadier, canopied by trees spreading their stout arms into ancient embraces. They rounded a few more corners, and the branches receded to let the moon douse the car in blue light. One last turn, and, at last, they pulled into a parking lot that could have just as easily doubled as a scrapyard. A barrier chain had once been strung across the entrance to block out traffic, but now it lay loose on the asphalt, trampled by tire tracks.

Tarro inched the car forward, letting his headlights creep over debris strewn and stacked like heaps of polluted snow. It was as if all the rubbish of the road and its accompanying ditches had dragged itself there to rust away: misshapen car parts, bent rods and studs, smashed microwaves, melted electronics. But the building that hulked in the middle of it all like a giant dead engine was by far the largest discarded piece. It was the blackened hull of a cathedral with color-flecked windows that might have, at one time, been breathtakingly vibrant but were now grimy fish scales, dull and moldering in their graven panes. A steeple strained high over the rubble like a skeletal periscope, its emaciated crucifix reaching up to the glowing moon above.

“Are you sure this is it?” Kat whispered. “It looks abandoned.”

“Yeah, this is the only church on Cress Drive,” Tarro said, warily surveying the damned castle as he guided the car around the side of it.

Nimble gazed up at its mastodon walls, its pointed spires and webbed buttresses. She felt at once gazed back at by a fossilized pain, the oldest in the city. Suddenly, from the edge of one of the stained glass windows, a ghostly silver beam hit the panes in a diamond smattering.

“Hey, there’s somebody in there!” she cried. “I just saw a light!”

Tarro parked the car in the back of the church to hide them from the road and to ensure them a quick getaway if needed, and together they walked in a huddle around to the front. They ducked under a covered entryway and stood before the main doors—two massive wooden slabs

shaped like spearheads. Attached to one of them was a letterboard encased in filthy glass, displaying a long-defunct service schedule.

“Don’t we gotta confess our sins before we go in?” Che joked quietly.

Kat smiled. “One of the many options waiting for you inside.”

Tarro glanced back at them, visibly nervous. “Well, do you think we should just walk in?”

“Hurry up, *hurry up*,” DK hissed, turtling his head back into the cave of his hood.

Finally, Nimble reached past them all and rapped her knuckles on the wood.

Immediately, the door gave, and a flashlight beam craned out to appraise them. But, just as quickly, it lowered to reveal the jovial face of a man with a wide frame swallowed up in a basketball jersey. He smiled broadly. “Ay, you guys here for the convocation?”

Nimble saw his mouth move, but his voice was absorbed into the mightier one farther behind him. She knew the sound of a choir, but this was altogether like that and entirely different from that. It was the voice of a multitude of voices tying and twining into a whole without direction, the sound of a frantic angel-ocean weaving their sighs into a storm song. All at once, she was terrified, and enthralled.

“Ya’ll can go on in!” the man grinned, barely audible. “Ay, thank you so much for coming! You’re doing a good thing for this city!”

Hypnotized, they filed through the atrium where the man was posted and into the church, where a white-blue brilliance blasted from an industrial spotlight situated on the ground. In its seawater glow, Nimble could see the scars inflicted upon the hollow body of the church. Dark gashes lined the floor where pews had been ripped up. The walls had been scraped clean from the stone they had been plastered to. The vaulted ceiling was riddled with dark holes, alongside once-ornate light fixtures that frothed down like decayed grapevines. There was a pulpit at the far end of the room, which was gutted except for a few leftover fragments of carved

wooden balustrades. A black stain marred the mangy carpet on its platform, documenting the death spot of what could have been a pipe organ, now either looted or destroyed but disappeared regardless.

Stripped of its original effects, the sanctuary was packed with people. In the spirit-whorl light, they were scattered on the ground, cross-legged in clumps, holding hands and rocking, or lying face-up and prostrate with their eyes lightly closed. They looked like saints apprehended in heavenly glow, or either downed moths caught in a bug zapper.

Nimble, Che, Tarro, DK, and Kat crept amongst them, unsure of whether or not to join, unsure of the very thing they had walked into. They made it to the far wall on the outskirts of the people and sunk down to the floor, the smell of ruminating moisture clotting the air around them. The people were singing quietly now, their mouths moving in different shapes, their voices silking and slipping—all of them as young as Tarro, as young as Wry, even.

Nimble glanced at Che, reading him to figure out if it was all real enough to be funny or if it was all too real to be anything. But there wasn't even the suggestion of a crackup on his face. His eyes were bright and his mouth slack, listening hard. This was a unknown beauty, a fresh and frightening discovery.

A young man was sitting in the center of the crowd, dressed in a navy pullover that read EELS SOCCER CLUB. He breathed slowly and evenly, and the way he did it seemed to synchronize the lungs of everyone else encircling him. As their voices stilled, the man threw his up to the rafters, his eyes squeezed shut in deep, rending ruts.

“Ohhhhhhhh keep me next to the ones I love . . .”

His song echoed in the dark space above. There was a moment of silence. And then the rest of the voices thundered behind him. In sorrow, they agreed: *“Keep me next to the ones that I love!”*

The unbridled volume shook Nimble. It stole her breath, thrumming in her chest and the cold wall against her back. It was a tangible, tossed wave, and it made her want to cry. She found herself closing her eyes and her throat humming the broken melody that the man had invented and the people had taken on. Tears tugged at the muscles in her jaw and wrung the words out like droplets from a dirty rag. As the song heightened, louder and louder, suddenly there was no darkness pretending light, no reckoning demon come to find and raze her down. There was only the lost good that she remembered, the angels given to her and their souls fragmented in her own bones. She pleaded with them all in silence: *Where are you? Where are you?* Wry and Maverick and Lasso, hoisted up from the concrete and out from their lonely rooms, the age of hate and horror cut from their bodies. *Where are you?* Arla, sweet and remorseless with nothing at all to remorse over and break her heart daily. *Where are you?* Her father, no longer newspeak from a radio, no longer a nocturnal creature in a vault, no longer a man of nothing. *Where are you?* Little baby girl, unknowable now but existing at one time as always a sister and never a sister. *Where are you? Where are you?* Mother. The body before hers. The eyes eclipsed in her own. *Can you see me here, now? What does it feel like?* And Che—

She opened her eyes to find him absent beside her. Her gaze swept over the singing man, the congregation, the doorkeeper posted in the shadows, and then higher up. Above the sanctuary, in the turrets of a sagging choir loft, Che and DK leaned over the railing to observe the scene below. Underneath them, Kat was wandering around the pulpit with a museum-like intrigue, stroking her stomach and scratching her fingernail at the dirt caked onto the mosaic set into the back wall: a jade-colored tree caught in luminescent, ruby flames.

“Alright, what did he tell you?”

Suddenly Tarro was in the space beside her, his eyes glassy, his whisper a serrated tone at her ear. “This morning—look, whatever Baj Guerrara said to you, don’t you dare take it as the

truth without thinking about it first. Okay, he's a criminal, Nimble. Remember that. He's not almighty, and he's not your hero."

Nimble stared at him. "What makes it so simple for you?"

Then she left him sitting there as she walked past the pulpit to a staircase spiraling up to the choir loft and began to climb.

ALOFT

The crow's nest of the church was just as desecrated as the rest of it, even higher as it was to heaven. The remains of ceiling medallions and insulation dusted the balcony, where risers sagged into each other and the stems of chair legs stood faithfully nailed to the floor like stalagmites. Nimble had to hop over a heap of rain-sullied hymnals to get to where Che and DK perched against the railing, looking down below. She rested her chin on the softened wood alongside them, and it was like fitting her face to the blooming throat of a gramophone. Acoustic wind funneled into her ears, amplified off the ceiling and walls at a magnificent volume.

From that height, she could see the man conducting the human orchestra without obstruction, folded like a small seed within the layered petals of his choir. When she looked over to where she had left Tarro to see if he was regarding the man with signature disdain, she saw that he was gone, disappeared somewhere below her maybe or in the pulpit with Kat.

The song began to ebb and settle itself, and DK snorted. "This one ugly place. But it feels safe."

Nimble shrugged. "World is full of paradoxes."

"Mm—*paradoxes*." He propped his elbow on the rail. "That's a twenty-dollar word."

Then he paused, serious now. "You know Tarro's only like that 'cause he's grievin'. And he don't

wanna stop, because bein' all tore up is the only thing that's drivin' him. You know you don't have to do what he tells you to."

"Yeah, I know," she answered flatly. "I know why."

"You guys think he killed Tarro's girlfriend? *Him.*"

The question pierced the wood where Che was folded over the railing with his chin resting on his hands, his backside sticking out. Both DK and Nimble looked at him, and Nimble could see the resignation pooling stagnantly on his face.

"I don't wanna think about that," she shuddered.

But Che was staring the possibility in the face, relentlessly scratching a fingernail at a splinter in the wood. "What if it's always been him, though? What if every one of them, right from the beginning of everything, was him?" It was a dust-truth to him now, a firmament. "What if he comes to everyone like this eventually?"

It was DK that raged back. "He ain't death, man. That fool is not that. He's not gonna be what meets you when you old and crusty and hobblin'. He comes by *accident*. He's not s'posed to be the end of the folks he's ended. He stole that for himself. Nah, this whole thing is not built off him comin' to get you when it's all over. That's some fuckin' bullshit if it is."

The downed choir whispered, "*Bring me in from the dark of night . . .*" As it had a thousand times before, the memory of the morning at Muscadine House played out in Nimble's thoughts. She pictured the quiet house, the moment that awakened her to all of its horrors. *He saw me all that time ago, he followed my family, he hid in my house, he moved that morning when—*

Without warning, Che swung his arms around her and DK's shoulders. She froze under the soft weight of them, like tent-pole wings pitched under her brother's hoodie. But such an embrace had to be the holiest thing. It had to be the most binding covenant, even deeper than a kiss. In that moment, it seemed as though it could never be lifted or broken.

Che began to smile, speaking in an almost dreamlike manner. “You know, for the first time in forever, just like a day ago, I started thinkin’ about what I used to wanna be when I grew up.”

“What, man?” DK asked, the corner of his mouth tweaking dryly. “And I *swear*, if you say Baj Guerrara . . .”

Che shook his head, grinning savagely. “Nah, nah, when I was a kid, I used to be really into motorcycles. Like, I had all these miniature toy bikes from the dollar store, and I would build ramps for them out of cereal boxes in my front yard and drive ‘em off and make ‘em do tricks and stuff. I don’t really know why; nobody I knew had a real bike or anything. But there was this one time where—dude, I must’ve been either six or seven—where I was standin’ outside a gas station waitin’ for my cousin to come back out from takin’ a piss. And all of a sudden, this police chase just happened right in front of me. This car came flyin’ down the street and ran a red light goin’ at least a hundred, a hundred-ten. And then, right behind it, there’s like three cops on motorcycles and six cop cars with their lights on and their sirens goin’. And I thought it was so fuckin’ cool to see somebody be able to go that fast—just them flyin’ without a car roof or anything else protecting them. They were like birds or . . . *cheetahs* or whatever. And you know in kindergarten when you have Career Day and all the kids have to sit on the floor and say what they wanna be? Well, when the teacher asked me, I just told that story. And she got so excited because she thought I wanted to be a cop.” He laughed. “But I just wanted to drive a motorcycle. I just wanted to go fast at something. I don’t think I’ve thought about that for years until just a couple days ago.”

His smile hovered a second before slowly fading down. “I think that was kinda fucked up, that my teacher thought that. Like she was proud of me in this stupid, sappy way. Proud that I didn’t say I wanted to be a skateboarder or a rapper or somethin’. She was proud of herself that

she could tell me it was good that I wanted to be a cop. But I don't think she believed it all the way. It was just somethin' cute to tell her coworkers and her husband when she got home. I think somebody like me, you can just tell from the start. You still ask them what they wanna be, like you do every other kid. But you feel like shit the whole time, because you already know. And, pretty soon, things start makin' sense for them too."

"Let me know that I'm still alive . . ." the air brooded.

"What makes you think any of that's true?" DK grunted.

Che wrung out a tired laugh, pulling his arms back in. "I don't know. That's just how my mind thinks, you know? And I'm not stupid. Everybody that came up like me is a banger now or either in jail. Isn't that how it goes?"

"Fuck that." DK's eyes embered in the dim light. "Right now, Che, what'chu wanna be? Hey, you know what I'm gonna get into?"

"What?"

"City government."

Che snickered through his teeth. Even Nimble's lips widened in a smile.

DK smirked back at them, the gag glimmering in his expression. "I'm dead serious. Imma be the next mayor, win it on the dark horse ticket." He grinned to himself. "Long as we all conveniently agree to forget my record."

"You do that, and you're gonna be at the top of a hit list."

"Scrup, I thought I was 'gon be dead in a ditch long before this. Now I'm in a church." He glanced over at Nimble. "How 'bout you, Edison? What you think?"

It came out of her almost giddily, zinging through the smile still set into her face. "I think my brothers are never coming back home."

DK's face went dark. But Che blinked calmly and surely. "Nah."

It was a ditsy, weightless thing to say it. “I think my dad is gonna die.”

“No, he’s not.”

Admitted, it was blasphemous. But it was finally the worst that could ever be spoken aloud: “I forget my mom’s voice sometimes. And that I ever even had a sister.”

That time, Che hesitated, either pruning his words or yielding to the song to tell him what to say. Then, after a few moments, he said, “I think it’ll come back. They’ll come back to you.”

A deep, drumming rhythm sounded from below them—footsteps, people coming up the staircase—and, in the moments before Tarro and Kat entered the choir loft, Che told her his fear too. Maybe DK couldn’t even catch it, it was so tight-fisted and deep-pocketed as he turned to her alone with gleaming eyes.

“I don’t want it to be like this anymore,” he whispered. “I don’t want anybody to go.”

“I’ll make it stop,” Nimble swore, seeing the very ghoul scratched onto his eyes that had strapped a bomb to his back with glee, and she wondered if it was true that she could choose to love by choosing war.

Behind her, Kat gasped suddenly, marveling at the view from above and breathing fast from the exertion of cresting the stairs. Ignoring the spectacle, Tarro moved around her and headed straight for Nimble, his hands shoved submissively in his pockets.

“I’m sorry I’m such an ass,” he said. His eyes cut back to Kat’s, as if seeking approval on something only the two of them had discussed, maybe down below in the pulpit. “The waiting just freaks me out. I wanna do something. But I shouldn’t have snapped at you, Nimble. I’m sorry for that.”

Kat smiled softly back at him, and Nimble longed to harness Che’s power, to swing her arm around Tarro’s shoulder in a congenial bridge and have it mean what it meant when he did it. But somehow she knew she couldn’t invoke that same magic twice.

“I’ll tell you,” she said instead. “I’ll tell everyone what Baj said this morning.”

Tarro accepted, moving back from the railing to the risers. He sat down cross-legged, and everyone else joined him, forming a loose huddle in the balcony wreckage. Nimble was the last to sit, taking only a single breath before she delivered the news.

“Jenner Chalice has been stealing money from the government for at least a year now. Maybe longer. He’s been doing business with the Metros too, so it sounds like they’re all getting cuts of what he’s been taking. That’s why there’s so little funds. It’s because of him.”

She lowered her head and waited for an explosion of some kind. But all she heard was Tarro’s changed voice, sounding almost injured. “All this time—the police department gone to hell, the tax raises with no payoffs, the banger gang power, the poverty increases, all the failed solutions, all the crime spikes—it was all a business? Chalice was making bank off it all?”

There were no words to be made in the next few minutes. Only breaths, long and sonorous, pressurized and flattened out. Everyone knew what this was: the sting of a year-long slap finally being felt and, at last, the recognition of the hand that dealt it out. Nimble closed her eyes and felt herself plummet straight down, but she didn’t hit the asphalt of the Bazaar. She hit the fence. The chain-link battened down with cardboard headstones painted in the ultimate colors of the living, the last blood of the dead.

Che was looking at her with a fierce intensity. Like the benediction of a heathen boy, she could almost hear him chanting inside her own head: *You know what now? We gotta bust this open! We gotta fuck him up! We gotta—*

“We have to tell my dad,” she finished for him.

They all stared at her like she was too sweet a taste amidst their current bitterness.

“Nimble,” Tarro started. “I know he’s your dad. But he’s not what he used to be. And I think a part of you still thinks that he is. But he’s not the same. Tell me honestly—if you looked

at him as a mayor who is the man that he is, do you really think he would be able to do anything about this?"

"I don't know," she answered. "He's a man who's my dad."

"What if he already knows?" DK said. "I'm just tryin' to be real here. What if he knew the whole time, and he just ain't done nothin'? And that's it?"

She said it lightning-fast, so even she herself couldn't refute it. "I don't believe that."

Kat laid a gentle hand on her knee that she immediately wanted to swat away. "Honey, I think this is the best idea we have, but what if it's exactly what we're expected to do? What if we go to your dad, and it's not your dad, but it's *him*? You know who. And what if, this time, he goes after more than just a stranger? And we walked straight into it."

The possibility was crushing, and Nimble almost gave into it before Che saved her, hugging his baggy-jeaned legs to his chest.

"I think he wants us to think that. I think he wants us to stay sketched out with everybody else and keep it just between us. We haven't tried to let anybody else in on this, but maybe we should." He turned to Nimble. "We should tell your dad. We should go to your house even, so we can catch him before he leaves for work and so nobody can listen in or whatever. First thing tomorrow, like seven A.M."

Nimble recalled the sight of her father's perpetually closed door and wondered how it would be to follow through with the old ritual, to knock with an actual desire to be let in. Could the message *something is wrong* even breach her lips without pulverizing the both of them with its past traumas? Could there be a daughter in her again and a father in him, despite the knowledge of how brittle those identities really were?

“I can’t tomorrow morning,” Tarro said gruffly. “I’ve got a three-hour exam to proctor starting at eight. I’ve got to be there early to meet with the professor and get the test booklets ready.”

A silence of ruin fell over them which no one could even muster a halfhearted solution for. Then silence was the church. The singing below them had stopped so harshly that its absence was jarring. Suddenly, an idea pulsed through Nimble’s head, free to exercise its own loudness. *He won’t be there, he never escapes*, she thought—both a despair and a relief. With that, she posed a plan: “After your test is over, we’ll go to City Hall and tell him there. We’ll find someplace secluded, like a closet or something in case somebody tries to eavesdrop. We’ll tell him everything. And we’ll go from there.”

Everyone listened and waited, silently agreeing, as Tarro stared out at her from under his set brow and finally conceded. “Okay. Meet at Stippo’s around eleven. We’ll walk to City Hall from there.”

Without another word, they all stood and made their way back down the staircase to the crashed earth below, where the convocation was quietly dispersing. Once on the ground again, Tarro led them back to the front atrium, where the jolly doorkeeper was bidding the singers farewell as they filed out into the night. His teeth shone like opals in the blue moonlight as he stuck his hand out for Tarro to shake.

“Ay, we really appreciate ya’ll coming and helping to make something like this a success! I just wanna remind you real quick about the unity parade that’s going on tomorrow at noon downtown. It’s not being widely publicized because, you know, we don’t want no police interference. But everybody’s welcome—students, Forge, Fight, bangers, concerned citizens, the whole community. Ya’ll should come on down!”

Tarro muttered his thanks and ushered them all outside and around the back of the church to where his car waited.

“That’s something we’re not going near,” he was saying as they piled in and he cranked the ignition. “We’ll take the risk to City Hall, but we are not pushing it. That parade is off-limits, and that’s the end of it.”

Someone said something in response, but Nimble wasn’t listening. She was peering up at the flank of the cathedral for one last look before they drove away, her ears roaring with the echoes of its canticles. The last time she had set foot in a church, she had been attending the funeral of her mother and sister. And this old miserly one, this crumbling edifice, seemed to know that, as if it could shine its ageless light on her and see all the deaths cradled in her body. Maybe it had smiled in knowing sadness when it had beheld them. Maybe that was what the doorkeeper had been doing, behind his cheerfulness. The whole ride back through the Eastside, she tried to remember if she had ever witnessed such a smile reveal itself on her father’s face.

WESTSIDE

The moment Darius Starick's squad car dipped off the street and nestled next to the decoy cruiser planted behind the bushes in front of his house, Ev was outside. With the cold lasering the sweat droplets off his body, he stood on the patio and barely felt anything at all, knowing that he would turn around, walk back inside with the police chief beside him, and combust into flames.

Starick would see all the evidence of his tornadic insanity once he stepped into the light. His button-up was soaked through with sweat and wrinkled from the manic sets of jumping jacks and pushups he had been doing in attempts to shake the inclination to stillness out of his muscles. There was still strawberry dried in his mustache from where he had crammed spoonfuls of ice cream down his throat and crunched ice cubes at the back of his teeth. Back in his bedroom, there were glasses of water littering the nightstands. His shower was running on full heated blast, with no one behind the curtain. At one point that afternoon, he had actually stopped and thought to himself, *So this is what it's really like to go crazy.*

The police chief walked with him inside the house, wordless as of yet. Ev was leading him down the right-hand hallway when, suddenly, his youngest emerged from the dining room. He recoiled like a snake in reverse, and it was only in the split second of their eyes flinting together that he saw his son robed in a striking kind of glory: soda can tipped back to his lips, baby fat still rounding out his cheeks, basketball socks stretched to his ankles. His wife's voice strobed from nowhere in his head towards her son: *You are beautiful!* But Lasso had always hated such sentimentality lavished upon him, as if 'beautiful' was too precious a bestowal for such a breakneck boy.

Then they had passed without comment, and Ev was pushing back the stone from his cave and securing he and the police chief inside for the secrets he was about to divulge.

Once the door was closed, Starick swept his gaze over the mess of the room and stopped at the nightly news flashing mutely on the wall. “Is that one of those multimedia TVs? The kind that takes video calls?”

Ev swallowed nervously before nodding.

The chief wavered for a moment, watching the picture, before he pointed towards the bathroom. “What’s up with that? Your shower going?”

“It’s just on.”

“You mind if we go in there to talk so the sound won’t carry? Just to be safe.”

One moment later, they had retreated into the sweltering mist of the bathroom, sealing in the humidity and the sound of their voices. Starick seated his massive frame on the lid of the toilet, unclipping his radio from his belt. He turned it off and laid it speaker-down on the sink counter. Then he looked up, ready.

Two beads of sweat trickled down Ev’s temple, racing each other, and he slicked them back into the tangle of his hair. He was heaving in the heat, his reflection bloated to a muddled shape in the steamed-up mirror. When he spoke, he couldn’t even see that his mouth was moving. He could feel himself telling, though. He could feel himself in the speech of his life, leeching the fourth floor of City Hall out of his bloodstream, rending the layers of its stately sheetrock, shouting with the vengeful spirit of all the protestors in its lobby.

He only knew it was out of him when he blinked the bathroom back into being and saw that the police chief had taken off his hat. The showerhead was still zipping behind its curtain. The deactivated radio on the counter was sheened with hot dew.

“Mmm.” Starick wiped a hand over his head, his cap dangling to the floor. “There it is. That bastard ain’t give no fucks.”

He allowed that one drop of venom to spill over before he boldered back up, addressing the madness on Ev’s face with a pity so poignant that it almost made him laugh. “Listen, sir. You were right to come to me. It was the right thing to do, and you did it. But I’m going to be painfully honest with you because I want you to know the position that we’re in. I can radio in right now, and I can have some officers pick him up on suspicion of embezzling government funds, money laundering, criminal correspondence—*the whole works*. We’ll have him for an hour, maybe two. We can question him, but the man has defenses. And those defenses will bail him out, pick him up, and then he will dirty-lawyer-up and run us into the ground. Sure, we can launch an investigation and get enough on him to make a court case. But his guys—the rest of your administration—will launch the very same investigation back on you and win it. If Chalice has been cultivating backlash against you for this long, then it’ll be a walk in the park to make you look like a real crook.”

Time ripped backwards through Ev’s head, opening up as if never before seen. Four weeks prior, Beautiful City, the CUF shooting. *I should have*— Four months prior, missed meetings, faked sick days. *I should have*— A year prior, bitter winter pinkening back into a summer city. *I should have*— And before that, the days too terrible to remember, the never-ending dead autumn, the late Saturday night when she—

“Should-haves don’t matter now. Sir, you don’t need me to sit here and tell you what you should have been doing all this time. Nobody . . .” There was a dangerous pause. “*Nobody* can know what you’ve been through and what won’t leave you alone. Nobody can know what it’s like to wake up with that every day but you.”

Ev felt a new fire start in him—horribly wrong, horribly rogue. He begged it to die down inside of him, to tame itself, to stop incinerating him.

Starick was sighing. “Sir, it’s okay. You’re not the criminal here.”

His eyes were sightless red, burning at the gun in the police chief’s belt.

“It’s okay that this is still about Ari and your baby girl.”

He lunged for the shower.

“Hey! Ev, Ev—*Ev!*”

The curtain shrieked back from its rod. His hand thrust through the scalding rain to scrape at the handle, wrenching the water off. A cloud of steam erupted at the ceiling as he flung himself past Starick to the sink, whacking the faucet on with the heel of his hand. Desperately, he shoved his face under the cold rush and drank. He gulped as hard as he could until his throat ached and a numbing freeze tickled over the crown of his head and his lungs forced him off.

He straightened back up slowly, caught in the confounded stare of the police chief. The water dripped guiltily down his mouth, his beard, his shirt—a transparent blood. Doused with it, he turned the faucet off and swatted his wet hands at the mirror, splattering the fog, just as the distinct sound of a car door slammed shut outside.

The two men froze—Ev clutching the sink, Starick clutching the butt of his gun—before they scrambled out of the bathroom and to the bedroom window. Ev flipped a centimeter of the blinds up with his thumb and squinted out into the dark to see a girl hurrying up the driveway, arms crossed against the cold. He watched her duck into the light of the foyer windows and into the house, out of sight.

“Nimble,” he breathed. “Where on earth has she been?”

The police chief was halfway to the bedroom door, his back against the wall, his weapon raised. “What kind of car?”

“Looks like a crossover. Black or dark blue, I can’t tell.”

“You know that car?”

Ev watched it zip backwards to the street and disappear past the shrubbery. “No.”

“I’m just sayin’, it’s a good idea to know where your kids are and who they’re with from now on. Look, I wasn’t going to tell you this, but we got a report of a shooting last night at the Bazaar. Some Fight kids were trying to ambush a group of Metros. Nobody was hit, thank God, and it started and ended in a matter of seconds, so there’s not a lot that’s clear. But I had several witnesses attest to seeing your two oldest boys at the scene.”

Ev turned, but all he saw was the soundless news broadcast on the far wall. Someone had been fatally stabbed. There was a social media picture, a teenaged kid flexing scrappy muscles in the reflection of a spotty mirror.

“Did you hear what I said, sir?”

KY ISBOURNE. His name was in capital type, yelling itself through the screen.

Starick took a step towards him, his voice low and rumbling. “You know I have nights where I don’t wanna do this no more? You know that? I start thinking things you’re supposed to leave out of the job, like I wish I didn’t have to go to the same neighborhoods where I grew up to go knock on some mamma’s door and tell them what happened to their baby. I wish I didn’t think about all the folks I’ve killed trying to protect other folks at the same time. I get haunted too, sir.”

The room faded away. It was Muscadine House, and the bed was messy, freshly slept in, just like it had been that morning. The bathroom light was still on, the tap still dripping. Out in the cavernous hallway, down the dark stairs, in his study on the second floor, Ev could still see in perfect detail the notepad left on his desk. His own scribbled handwriting: GREEN LIGHT GOOD! MEET W/ SCHOOL SUPERINTEN. TMRW.

He was shaking as he said it. “You ever play basketball, Chief?”

There was a pause. “On occasion.”

“The last time I played was my greatest game ever. I mean *ever*. I never played like I did then in all my life, not even as a kid, not even in my high school games. It was four on four out in the parking lot behind City Hall, and it was summertime, so it was hot. You didn’t know me back then. It was when Belham was still mayor, before I ever even thought about running for office. That day, for some reason, I was unbeatable before I stepped wrong and sprained my ankle. Doctor gave me some crutches and a prescription of extra-strength pain pills. I only took them for three days. Then I just put them in the back of the medicine cabinet and forgot about them. I still had them when we moved into Muscadine. I still have them now, right there in that bathroom.”

He felt himself smile stupidly, sickly—because it was so funny. So damn cosmically funny. Like a bedtime story with a riddled moral. But his children were not there to solve it. There were two locked up in the house. Two lost out in the world. One in limbo.

“Sir, what are you telling me?” Starick asked carefully.

Ev’s smile slipped off. He clung to the air around him, the bedroom that had only always slept him and just him, the half-empty house, the amputated Westside of the city. “*The Bazaar*,” he said, and then he was out the door, down the hall.

The police chief caught up to him in the foyer. “What in the hell are you talking about? What about the Bazaar?”

But Ev was already out in the cold, striding through the damp grass and over the twisted skeleton of a bicycle—*Lasso’s*—towards Starick’s car. He didn’t answer until they were stealthing through the Westside with downtown Spekender in their sights.

“We don’t have the money, and Jenner does. Okay.” He was hunched over the dashboard, his seatbelt cutting across his chest. “We can’t rely on any evidence that we may find to help our case. Okay. We don’t have the public behind us at all. So we have to consult the ones that do. We have to appeal to the unofficial law of the land. We have to get Baj Guerrara on our side.”

Starick’s hands were tight on the steering wheel. “Guerrara?”

“That’s why Jenner always tried to talk me out of meeting with him, because they were business partners all along. And crime pays, so it’s no wonder Jenner had a hand in it with him. If we could get him to work with us and testify against Jenner, then that’s it! We’ve got a chance! He’s in both worlds. He’s the star of Great Winston *and* the Banger District. If he can walk around in both places like that without fear, then he can talk with me without even a hesitation.”

Starick turned the cruiser towards the south gate of the Bazaar and began to crawl down the nearly deserted strip, parking alongside the lengthy row of marketplace tents.

“But why would he give up his alliances?” the police chief said. “If he’s in with Chalice, then you know he’s getting a good cut. Why would he give that up for your sake?”

Ev was halfway out of the squad car. “The satisfaction of knowing that he’s got the power over me. And also the fact that we won’t arrest him if he cooperates with us.” He cracked a smile at Starick’s skeptical laughter. “Tomorrow, first thing, we’re going to the university records office to get an address for him, a phone number, anything we can find to get in contact with him. And we *will* meet with him, Darius. We will get somewhere.”

“Wait—*tomorrow?* Then what are we doing here right now?”

But Ev was already in motion down the strip, trudging past the tents. Familiar scents of seasoned meat and sweet bilge washed over him, but there was no soundtrack behind them, no booming base coming from the dance clubs, no jingle spinning the giant candy wheel. Fleeting,

he saw himself there in his own youth, on wild weekends with his childhood friends, on dates with Ari before their marriage, on the campaign trail shaking hands with vendors and patrons alike.

The CUF stage was almost as abandoned as it had been the day of the shooting, the last time he had seen it in person. Only a few yellow shirts hung around the area, passing smokes in tight groups or drinking in quiet pairs. In an alleyway nearby, Ev found one of them standing alone in the dark, his back to the strip as he pissed against the tarp of a billiards tent.

“Hey!”

The kid spun around, hastily zipping his pants. “*Yo, what the fu—*”

“You know Maverick and Wry Edison?”

“Yeah, I fuckin’ know ‘em. Now can I take a piss in peace?”

“You give them a message for me. You tell them this, alright? Tell them that it’s okay if they hate me. It’s absolutely fine. But this will not be my crime of happiness.” He flashed a broken grin. “Because I’m not happy.”

The kid eyed him warily. “Yeah . . . okay . . .”

Then he turned from the alley and headed back down the strip towards Starick’s waiting cruiser, only faintly hearing the CUF scramble out into the open aisle and call after him, “Holy shit, wait—aren’t you Edison?”

SOMEWHERE

(Radio static) (Radio sta—)

Audio: “Alright, kids. I sort of hesitate to—”

(Radio static) (Radio static)

“I sort of just *hesitate*, really. So what I’m looking at right now—”

(Muffled laughter)

“Obviously, I’m not a sappy guy. Hopefully I have made that clear to you by now. Today there is a unity parade. There had been rumors, there had been unofficial reports, and today it’s here. And people have *shown out*. I guess I’m playing the part of route commentator right now, watching this play out onto Long Lane now, in the heart of the Arts District. I sort of wanted to see what would happen for myself—which is why I postponed going on air until this late in the morning. And, for those of you down there at the parade who are also tuning into the segment, don’t trouble yourselves to look for me. I’ve got Eyes on the ground today providing me with a killer POV. Speaking of which, yes, we’re still going to die. But today sort of almost makes you forget about that.”

(Radio static) (Radio static)

“Here’s the report I have for you today. I’ve been watching it all morning. It started in the parking lot of the Green Gate Bistro on Holifield Street downtown, where six people gathered together well before daybreak. Then it expanded to about fifteen, who came with provisions: breakfast sandwiches and coffee and stuff like that. Then more, carrying signs and a portable amp in a toy wagon. And then they kept coming.

“By sunup, the crowd had overflowed onto the sidewalks and out into the street. And, when I say *sunup*, I mean it. I mean that the sky actually thinned out enough for a faint, distant

light to fall upon our pale city. This could be our last day alive, but at least we'll have moderately agreeable weather. Ironic pleasures."

(Muffled chuckling) (Radio static)

"And if you want a real shock, then here's an overview of how the crowd looked before they began marching. It was literally—it was like the model group of people for a children's TV program! There were babies in strollers with their brothers and sisters and parents, university students making conversation with elderly people in wheelchairs, bangers side by side with rival members, Forge rubbing elbows with Fight, businessmen and women in their suits standing beside passers and drunks from the Bazaar. I'm serious, it was like lions and lambs! And by midmorning, the crowd was made up of over two hundred of them, maybe even close to three hundred by just a visual estimation.

"Then they started to move. They established their front lines, somebody unraveled a banner, somebody yelled something in a bullhorn, and they just went. They linked arms, they held hands, they lofted their signs up high, and they paraded down Holifield Street. It was impressive. It was certainly impressive, kids, I'm not even going to downplay it. They stopped traffic. Cars had to pull up onto the sidewalks and into fire lanes and onto side streets to get out of the way, they were taking up *that* much space. Lo and behold, they turned onto Guyman Street, alongside the south end of Millionaire Park, and the sun almost made a full appearance. The clouds nearly parted completely, I kid you not. So, naturally, this elicited a pretty positive response from the paraders. Someone near the front began to yell something through his bullhorn, and those around him promptly latched onto it. It was unintelligible at first, but then it gradually swept over the whole crowd until everyone was crying it out. Here's what they're chanting, kids. Here's what they're demanding towards the command center of Spekender's executive administration: *We want change*. We want change. They're as loud as ever, even right

now, as they make their way across—let’s see, what is that . . . *Parlo Street*—presumably in route to City Hall. It’s noble. It really is, and I mean that without any intended sarcasm or cynicism, though that may be hard for you to believe. It’s hard for me too.”

(Radio static) (Radio static) (Sigh)

“But you know I have to go there now. You know I have to conjecture. So what will this unity parade amount to? What does the organization of something like this mean when it’s all said and done? What does it mean to shout collectively? To *be* collective in an environment which constantly reaffirms the safety in isolation, the fear towards one’s neighbor, the lone survivalist mindset? And what do I predict will be the outcome of all this toil and trouble? What does the city’s preeminent sourpuss make of it?”

(Radio static) (Radio static) (Radio static) (Radio static)

“We’ll have to wait and see. But, God. I really hope it means something. If we’ve grown close enough for me to be able to confide that in you, let me just say that. From what I’m seeing, I really hope it means all that it can.”

(Radio static) (Radio static)

“There they go spilling over into the Business District, onto Memorial right by the municipal courthouse. Pedestrians on the sidewalk are starting to join the crowd now. The numbers may be pushing five hundred now, and they’re only going up. There they go, with two streets to cross until they hit Consolidation and City Hall. There they go . . .”

(Radio static) (Radio static) (Radio static) (Radio static)

CONSOLIDATION ST.

If Nimble closed her eyes, the sound could be the same as her memory of those gold-dipped afternoons from so long ago, at a Great Winston homecoming parade of years passed. She remembered having been young enough to be unbuckled from a car seat and, once her mother set her on the ground, hearing the festivities brew in the distance—the boom of elephants' feet, the blare of symphonic beasts, a rhapsody wild. As the band marched by, she remembered looking up at her father and how he clapped along to the beat with a pint-sized Wry on his shoulders. But no matter how she moved, she could never quite see her father's face all the way. It was always turned just a little too far to see the procession of ruffled floats and antique cars. *Look at me, look at me*, she urged him, even back then, even now with a voice from the future buried in the brass and woodwinds. *Look at me, Dad, I'm trying to look back at you.*

But she didn't close her eyes. She kept them wide open, watching Che, Kat, and DK stare up at the sky in back of Stippo's while they waited for Tarro to arrive.

"Hey." Che looked at her, a joke slanted on his mouth as he pointed up at the lost sunlight straining its haze through the clouds. "What the hell's that supposed to be?" His grin spread wide. "Told ya it would come back."

DK hummed his agreement in his throat, squinting upwards. "Well, goddamn."

Kat laughed shingly. "When was the last time you saw a sunny day, huh?" She splayed her hands on her belly, cooing, "Look, baby, look, it's gonna be a gorgeous day!"

A cool wind meandered through the parking lot, carrying with it the nearby commotion, maybe only a couple streets over. Nimble couldn't help but lean towards it: a good, angry sound. If that was the thing that was to come out of her and at her father, if that was the roaring pitch with which she would rouse him from sleep, then there was no knowing if she could unmake it a

weapon. Loaded and leveled, it might hit him and burrow impossibly deep, fatal for the future. She might kill him with it. On the first sunny day for ages in Spekender, she might kill her father.

“Hey, you good?” Che nudged her with his elbow, the ghost sun sheening over his hair.

Her breath was tight in her throat. “I feel like this might go really bad.”

He shook his head. “Nah. This is gonna matter. This is gonna do something. If you go in and say you wanna talk to him, then he’s gotta listen to you.”

The noise swelled over the tops of the office blocks, invading the quietude of the Business District. And then a rogue beat diverged from the master melody, dashing against the street and Stippo’s parking lot until it swung around the side of the restaurant and became Tarro’s feet running full-speed at them. He was panting madly, sweat glistening on his brow as his backpack thwacked against his back.

“We gotta get going *now!*” he barked. “I had to leave my car on the side of the road; the parade’s already halfway down Memorial Street, and it’s enormous! We’re gonna have to take a shortcut to make it to City Hall before they do, or else there’s no way we’re getting in!”

Instantly mobilized, Kat turned to Nimble. “Marcel Street! Take Marcel Street and circle around them! That’s the street behind where my husband works, and it’s only a street over from Memorial. And you need to run! Go, you guys, *run now!*”

“Wait—” Nimble sputtered, suddenly paralytic, suddenly very, very afraid. But Che and DK had already taken off on either side of her, and immediately she found herself scrambling after them.

“Nimble, just find your dad and tell him!” she heard Tarro call after her. “We’ll catch up with you!”

The street was practically empty, as if all the energy of downtown was being circulated into the bloodstream of the unity parade route, and they sprinted straight down the middle of it

without regard for traffic. On the edge of the Business District, DK inched ahead of Nimble and Che, swerving them onto a connecting street and then onto a shadowy backroad—MARCEL, a crooked street sign read. Between the color-drained backsides of Memorial’s law offices, they raced against the muted rush of the parade being held at bay just one block over.

As they ran, DK jerked his head around and spoke over his shoulder. “Hey, when we get there, you know a back door we can get to? Ain’t no way we gettin’ in front with all that police that’s bound to be there.”

Nimble opened her mouth, but the answer was drowned out in the sound that dropped like sudden thunder, as the row of offices cut off abruptly and the flood of Memorial Street funneled through a gap between buildings and right at them.

All three of them slowed and then stopped altogether, captivated by the sea of hundreds, maybe even thousands. A busted hydrant of protestors crashed down the open roadway beside them. A single, many-headed voice reared out from them: “WE WANT CHANGE! WE WANT CHANGE! WE WANT CHANGE!” And it was not the voice of an enemy; it was the voice of a vengeful god.

“Ay, we gotta go,” DK said, his voice tinged with fear.

Just as they turned to run again, Nimble took one last look and, suddenly, a live round of yellow streaked across the gap, like a bullet of a T-shirt. Without hesitation, she left Che and DK and bolted into the surf of the crowd.

“Wry! Wry! Stop!”

The sound of her voice was displaced from its whole, tossed and rocked into a mad vibrato by the bodies compacted against her until she was crying only in fragments. She felt someone latch onto her arm, trying to pull her back, but all she could see was the color of her brother reflected nowhere and everywhere, vanished into the masses. Then, amongst the swaying

shoulders ahead of her, she saw his familiar hood surface and be swallowed again. Keeping her eyes on the spot where she had seen him, she clawed her way horizontally across the current and thrashed out clean on the other side. Something was still holding fast to her arm, and she spun around long enough to witness Che at her side, screaming an unheard question at her with DK clambering out of the crowd behind him. Then she broke free from his grasp and began running down the sidewalk, weaving around parked cars, to where the parade curved onto what she knew by sight was Consolidation Street.

City Hall crested the end of the wimpled asphalt and front-street skyscrapers, the city's grisliest ziggurat about to be laid siege to at last. She kept it in her sights as she rocketed past stragglers on the fringes of the crowd, past a whimpering old woman marooned on the street corner, past a man trotting alongside the crowd with an open pizza box, offering slices to the protestors. The street ate up behind her as the front lines of the parade came closer and closer. Soon she was level with them, gunning past them, beating them, and then there was only City Hall standing in front of her. Its front lawn was fortified with police cars—all the police cars that must have existed in Spekender. Officers in riot gear formed a chain around the perimeter of the building, looking on through their transparent shields at the wave rolling towards them.

There was a moment of breathlessness when Nimble reached the sidewalk in front of City Hall and turned back to see Che and DK barreling after her, and, behind them, an army. Che made it to her side, grabbing her hand. Then it hit. The parade collided against the sidewalk, gushing across every unclaimed inch of asphalt, fanning long against the curb, hoisting their signs and their fists and the legion might of their voice.

As she was mobbed by the protestors, Nimble glimpsed a yellow T-shirt in front of her push its way forward—and all she wanted, all she needed was to catch Wry's arm, to hook him out of the furor and take him in with her to find their father. But before her fingers could stretch

out, his bright fire retreated. He turned away into the crowd, and what took his place where he had been was black—a black jacket and trousers, solid and siphoning all the pale sunlight from above, a cheap reproduction of what she knew was a parody of a mayor in a suit.

This time, she wanted the fight to happen. She needed no provocation. She wanted to feel him hit the concrete when she threw her weight against him. He was laughing apparition as she rained her blows down on him, tearing at an illusory face.

“I’ll kill you! I’ll kill you! I’ll kill you!” she bellowed at him without sound.

He clowned it back at her, his voice arrowing into her head, clear as day. “Then kill me.”

She felt Che and DK fighting to pull her off just as she felt the dark fire well up, the rage in her hands wrap themselves around his throat. Then there was a thump under the earth. The venom evaporated in her. Her head snapped up to behold the parade. There was something different in the crowd, something different in the police holding them back. A collective knockout of breath.

Instinctually, she turned away to the other side of Consolidation and, there, in the free air on the peripheral of the parade, standing awestricken beside a bear of a policeman, was her father. All she could do was look at him, unable to even breathe his name.

Below her, the ghost snickered through her chokehold. “Remind me some time to tell you a story about the man you think can save you.”

Then the far side of the crowd exploded in a black blast of smoke.

Nimble was slammed to the concrete from the sheer force of it, the hearing in her right ear stoppered. When she blinked up at the film of the sun, she saw that it was raining at the same time. Hunks of asphalt—of street—had shot up in a geyser and were plummeting back down.

She sat herself up and saw no trace of Che or DK or her father and the cop he was with.

Underneath her, the body that she had been ready to destroy was only a segmented swaddle of

trash bags, limp and empty. A flurry of gravel stung her eyes as she watched strange shapes fly over her, much bigger than the pieces of road. Then a foot kicked her in the ribs, and she realized that the shapes were people tripping over her as they ran for cover.

Then the right side of City Hall blew out. A landslide of walls and windows melted to the ground. Police cars were buried in the cloud of powder that fell. Officers hit the front lawn—some crawling, some motionless.

Nimble ran. Protestors spattered with blood and floured in dust knocked into her as she knocked into them, desperately thrusting herself into the escaping stampede. Above the frantic screams of the crowd, she heard the *pop-pop-pop* of firecrackers, of a celebratory night wedged inappropriately into the middle of a deadly day, and, in the quick blinks between the fleeing people, she saw what was making it. A man beside her shouted it into the air: “Somebody’s shooting! They’re shooting over there!”

The crowd went mad. Nimble was compressed into a thousand thrashing bodies as they bottlenecked in the opening between two buildings, attempting to flush themselves onto an adjoining street away from the gunfire. Nimble fought her head above the fray, gulping in a breath, and suddenly an arm lifted up like a periscope two head-lengths away and clutched at her until she grabbed hold of it. Just as the shots grew louder, she was yanked hard through the crowd and into an open space that widened into a backstreet.

It was Che tearing at her shirt, a stripe of dirt across his face, a rip in the neckline of his shirt. He wailed hysterically at her, “I don’t know where the fuck DK is! I don’t know where the fuck DK is!”

She tried to answer him and coughed up a voice gravelly with dust, so she grabbed his shirt and wrenched his ear to her mouth. “You find him! I’ll get Tarro and Kat!”

“Meet in the backlot! Eastside!” Che yelled back at her, just as a wave of people broke off from the jammed crowd and rushed between them.

Nimble tore away, sprinting with them onto the backstreet, where the injured were already huddled on the back stoops of buildings, pressing on their wounds and reaching out in futile desperation to those running past. Her eyes were fixed on one of them—a woman with the same color hair as her mother slumped against a delivery lift gate—when she collided with someone moving in the opposite direction, her elbow crunching against a hard device strapped to their chest.

She bounced off and immediately prayed, wished, demanded that it be DK, Tarro, Kat, Che once again. But the person that gaped back at her was Maverick. She stood frozen in shock at not only his sudden presence, but at the way that his face instantly changed: dutiful resolve disappearing into genuine fear. She had scared him more than the screams, more than the pummeled city.

“You need to get out of here,” he told her, his eyes scanning the chaos behind her.

“Nimble, you need to get out of here.”

He started to brush past her, but she caught him by the shoulder and wrenched him back.

“What are you talking about? *You* need to get out of here!”

“Don’t you realize that if you die, it will kill Dad? Do you understand that?”

“And what about if you die?!”

She stared at him in fury, suddenly noticing the portable camera that was harnessed over his shirt, its lens shattered from her impact. “Nimble, let me go and get out of here. You go home and make sure Lasso and Arla are okay. I’ll be there later.” He tried to pull away, but she kept a tight grip on him. “Nimble, I’ve got to go.” He pulled harder, and she held stronger, even as a

man shambled past them mashing a fountain of blood to his forehead. “Nimble, let me go, *it’s my job!*”

She slacked. “Your job?” He stared back at her, a night runner, a traveler in the dark just as she had suspected and then not at all. “You work for the Spektator? You’re an Eye?”

Maverick was peeling her fingers out of the fist they held on his shirt.

“I’m not letting you leave me.”

“It’s not safe for me to be with you—”

“Half of City Hall got blown up.”

He froze. “. . . Dad’s . . . not . . .”

She shook her head. “I saw him on the street right before the first bomb went off. I don’t know where he is now. I don’t know where, where *anybody* is—and you don’t even know what I’m talking about!”

Maverick’s mouth opened on the verge of saying something, when a drumroll of gunfire sounded behind them. Nimble looked towards the entrance to the backstreet and saw two people flop to the ground, lifeless. The next moment, her brother pulled her out of the open and threw them both down behind a heap of trash cans. His lean frame was covering her, but she could still see the blur of the gunman as he trudged past, firing at random, spewing sparks from his hand in a spontaneous frenzy at anyone that moved in his path.

Then, farther down the street, materializing from seemingly nowhere, she saw Che. He ran out from a corner and glanced once down the length of the street—unsuspecting of anything, still breathing to take off running again—and then the gun found him. It went off.

The thud of his fall flattened on top of her, under where Maverick was shielding her. He crumpled on the asphalt so far away, and she knew then that he was just a body. There was no movement to it, no seeing anymore, no hearing, no fighting. There would be no more.

Before she could even move towards the end of the street, Maverick had chained his arms around her bucking body and was hauling her away, off of the backstreet and back onto Consolidation. She watched the distance between she and Che grow longer and longer, until she saw three people emerge from around the corner that he had come running from. Tarro dropped to the ground immediately, easing one hand under Che's neck, lifting his head, and she saw the forever-open eyes, glass-blue. She saw DK smack the brick wall behind him, open-palmed. She saw Kat stare down at his body and cry out.

Then the scene was gone. The street, downtown Spekender, the whole city was gone. There was only Che's fall the whole way home, with Maverick's arm cinched tight around her waist to keep her standing, to keep her walking into the Westside. It was the fall of him the whole way.

Ev made sure that his room was as lost as it could be without having to somehow cut it loose from the house and hurl it into distant orbit. Every signal he had to down, every plug he had to pull: the radio clock by the bed, both lamps on both nightstands, the box fan in the corner, the overhead light fixture, even the electric toothbrush charging in the bathroom. The world outside almost found him on the flat screen before he snatched the remote and fired it blindly at the wall, then popped the batteries out and tossed them in a drawer.

But the largest light, even in its weakened state, still crept undeterred through the blinds, tinging the dark with its white rays. He should have tacked blankets over the windows to delete the day, to erase the image of the crowd. He should have jammed towels against the crack under the door to block out the hallway and the house that allowed him to hunker down in it while the rest of the city was crushed under every shelter they tried to take.

Standing there alone, with a shrill frequency still whining in his ears, he tried to forget the bumbling heroes that he and the police had tried to play that morning. But he couldn't forgive himself for the ride to Great Winston, the hour-long traffic jam they had gotten stuck in, the morning radio's top hits—*he had actually had the stupid radio on*. The campus had been deserted when they reached it, save for a few joggers and professorial old men. After being told to wait for a ten-minute window that lasted an hour and a half, the receptionist in the student services office—Mona, her nametag said—had eyed them suspiciously from over the top of her glasses when Starick had pitched her the cover story they had made up on the way over: a government-issued grant awarded to the university's brightest and most influential achiever.

“We received no notice of any such grant,” Mona smacked her plump lips. “I have received no information about this from the administrative board or from the university

president. You want access to Mr. Guerrara's records, you'll have to come back with some kind of form and take it up with senior leadership. Thank you."

Ev had leaned over her desk with a passion reminiscent of the way his former self would have acted and asked if she knew if Baj Guerrara had class that day.

"Well, most likely, Mr. Mayor! This is a regular operating day, after all."

Then he asked her the time and building, and she laughed heartily.

"Sir, if I can't give you access to his personal information, then how in the blazes do you expect me to be able to hand you his entire course schedule? You really want to throw the city's money out to a kid with good grades, then how 'bout you give some to the institution that made the big brain famous in the first place? That's all I have to say about it. Have a nice day, gentlemen."

He and Starick had nothing left to do but leave. Halfway back to the squad car was when the police chief's phone and radio began to chatter relentlessly. Starick had navigated his cruiser swiftly through downtown, circling wide around the unity parade route to park in a vacant lot a street over from Consolidation.

The sight of the crowd had been so peculiarly spiritual to Ev, and he didn't know why. But it had been like a ceiling fresco had fallen to the ground and come to riotous life, with a wrath so vastly arrayed that he couldn't help but feel as though he should take off his shoes to fully feel the quaking of the ground, the city's feet hatching from petrified stone. And then the street had blown. And City Hall along with it.

His own internal voice, filled with hate, threw itself against his skull. *Are you really just waiting for the casualty count? Is that what you're doing? So what's the quota for today, if you had to guess? What's the toll?*

He heard the front doors screech open through six layers of sheetrock, and he almost thought that it was Darius returned from dropping him off there and speeding back downtown to the bombsite. But then he heard the unmistakable voice of his second oldest, close and coming closer down his own hallway, calling out for his sister: “Nimble, Nimble, *Nimble!*”

He raced to the bedroom door, dropping to his knees to bring an eye to the keyhole—another portal that he had neglected to cover—and watch his daughter come into view. She staggered down the hall and sunk to the floor five feet from his door. One hand was clutching her stomach, where she was doubled over as if wounded. His hand flew to the doorknob and strangled it as he searched frantically for the vibrant proof of blood on her clothes. But there was nothing spilling through her fingers. There was nothing leaving her.

Maverick loomed into the frame of his spyhole and stopped a few paces behind Nimble, his arms hanging exhaustedly at his sides. Ev could see a busted camera strapped to his chest and the powder of concrete smeared on his jeans. He felt a violent sickness rip from his head down to his gut. *The bone dust of the city, it's on them. They were there.*

Nimble was moving oddly, enormous breaths bending and crimping her body upon entry and exit. Her back arched severely, like a cat with its fur spiked, as she knelt on the linoleum, her hands flat on the tile. Then she pressed her forehead down in anguished prayer and screamed all her horror into the floor.

Behind the door, Ev smashed himself against the keyhole, legs writhing, his own stomach skewered through. *Sweetheart*, the pain ignited.

The sound of running feet echoed down the corridor to where Maverick stood expressionless behind Nimble.

“What is it, what is it?” Lasso demanded, frozen in fear at the agonized creature on the floor that bore the form of his sister. He sounded like he had when he was a child, when he could still be cradled easily in his mother’s arms and soothed back to sleep in the dark hours of night.

Before Maverick could answer him, another set of footsteps advanced down the hall, and there was his oldest, jarringly materialized before his eyes. His yellow Fight shirt was pulled over his hoodie, and the front of it was soaked with blood, along with the knees of his pants and the palms of his hands. Ev stared at him incredulously—this soldier, his boy.

“What’s wrong?” Wry asked blankly.

Maverick turned to him, flipping his back around to contain his voice. “She just saw her friend get shot.”

Ev bit down hard, tasting his own blood. *It’s okay, it’s okay*, his lips trembled to form. *It will be okay*. Then he remembered—a young face, a night not so long before. The boy from dinner.

“*Holy shit*,” Lasso whimpered.

Wry took a step towards Nimble, and the tortured voyeur behind the door watched as he belted his arms around her waist and hoisted her up while she kicked and thrashed and snapped her body. But Wry battled with her, twisting her around forcefully, his face void even as she wailed her wordless sound into it. He held her to him in a vicelike embrace, as her body jolted with sobs and her legs crumpled beneath her. Her arms hovered just above his back—one hand hanging limply to heaven, the other drooping to hell below—as if it were a curse to touch him.

The light through the keyhole burned against Ev’s eye, and he welcomed it completely. He knew the gesture that he witnessed. He understood their shape. He remembered how to love, but his body would not obey, his hand would not twist the knob. He could not cross over. Pressed to the door, he could only watch as Nimble expended her sorrow and as Wry held her, staring

down to the window at the end of the hallway as if he saw nothing there in the sunlight seeping through.

Without warning, Ev's phone buzzed in his pocket. He scrambled across the carpet to the bathroom and dove halfway inside, answering without even checking the name on the screen.

"How many?"

For the longest time, the police chief didn't answer. There were voices shouting in the background of the call—someone demanding a stretcher, someone else's muffled cries. Then Starick spoke.

"There's twenty-nine confirmed dead so far. More than fifty injured."

Ev squeezed his eyes shut.

"It looks like the explosives for the first blast were planted in the sewage canals under Consolidation Street. The asphalt's blown to bits from two feet down, and water's just gushing up from the crater that it made. Nobody would have even seen it coming. And the one that got City Hall—those pipes are so narrow that I don't know how anybody could have planted anything down there unless they rigged something crazy and somehow floated a bomb under the building. Or unless something went wrong and City Hall wasn't supposed to get hit. Either way, the bomb blasts were the initial cause of fatalities. The rest occurred in the chaos after they detonated. Maybe because of mass hysteria, maybe because it was part of the plan—*I don't know*—but people started shooting into the crowd. We've got at least eleven people dead by gunshot wounds."

Ev's face turned over onto the tile, his cheek burning against its ice. Starick talked on, explaining rescue efforts and evacuation protocol and the possibility of more explosives and the demolished right wing of City Hall, where his office had been—the first and second floors blown out and the third and fourth heaped down in the space where they had been.

He heard the chief's breath snag. "There's one more thing." There was a pause. "Jenner is dead, sir. Along with four other government employees whose bodies we've recovered. He must have been in his office when the bomb went off. He's dead, Ev."

There was no joy in Starick's voice. Only a duty to present the data that had been collected. The message was spoken and then nothing, a vapor and then gone: his advisor was dead. Quietly, Ev waited for the evil to administer itself, for the lightheaded relief to settle a sense of victory inside him. He was acutely aware that he could smile. He was acutely aware of the possibility now of a vile hope, and he was sure that this was the kind of man he had become. But he could not stop thinking about Blair Chalice, and the officer that would drive to Jenner's house on the Northside to give her the news, and all the things that would die the moment she opened the door to receive it.

On the phone, Starick waited.

Ev rolled over, his legs splayed in the doorway as he stared up at the darkened light on the bathroom ceiling. "I cannot leave. I can't leave. I can't."

A knowing sigh simmered on the other line. "Okay, sir."

"But I will. Tomorrow. I will come down there and help you deal with this." He remembered the rhetoric that he needed, the logic he was chasing. "Put the city on lockdown, effective immediately. Businesses, schools, municipal buildings, the Bazaar, all public roadways—*close them*. For their own safety and the safety of others, no one is permitted outside starting now and ending tomorrow at noon. After that, enforce a curfew. Before seven in the morning and after ten at night, nobody is to be outdoors or they'll face arrest. Until further notice, it stays in effect."

How dare you? the voice in his head accused. *You clean man, where is the blood on you?*

But he didn't listen to it. Instead, he thought of his children through the wall, performing the very act that had just set bombs off downtown. Nimble's scream would be imbedded in the floor forever. When the moment came that he would leave the room again and walk out into the hallway, he would be tramping on top of it. The deep shriek of it would rattle his bones.

Darius seemed to sense his thoughts. "You called all your kids, made sure they're okay?"

"Yeah," Ev murmured. "They're all here."

"Good. Listen, sir. I'll take the press. I'll handle them, 'cause they're already packed at headquarters waiting on a statement. Lord knows we don't have the numbers or the energy to maintain a citywide lockdown, but we will try. But you do this tonight. You hug your kids. You and I both know that, because of today, a lot of folks will never get to hug the people they love ever again. You still got your gift. You still got 'em, by God."

The call ended. Ev lowered the phone to his side. Through the doorway, he could see the sunlight lasering in through the window blinds beside his bed, stacked like cell bars on the carpet. He crawled through them heedlessly, unburned, to sit by the door for minutes on minutes. But when he dared peer through the keyhole again, the hallway was empty. The only sign that anyone had come down his way at all was a long black scuff mark from someone's shoe that had made a desperate run towards his room, crying for an end to all the worst ends in the world.

SOMEWHERE

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(Radio static) (Radio static) (Radio static) (Radio static)

Audio: “Please.”

(Radio static) (Radio static) (Radio static) (Radio static)

“Please. I don’t care who you are now.”

(Radio static)

“I don’t care, I don’t care—if you’re even qualified anymore. If you’re even good for it.”

(Radio static) (Radio static) (Muffled sigh) (Radio static)

“Listen to me. Listen to me. If you’re out there, listen to me. *Listen* to me.”

(Radio static) (Radio static) (Radio static) (Muffled chuckling)

“And I can’t even say it, can I? All the fucking evil of life, and it’s never scared us toward each other. What a great waste. I would have really liked to compare traumas. I would have really liked to have known that it shouldn’t be so lonely.”

(Radio static) (Radio static) (Radio static) (Radio static) (Radio static) (Radio static)

“Well, they’re gone now. It’s done.”

(Radio static) (Radio static) (Radio static) (Radio static)

LIGHT

For the remainder of that everlasting day, they had camped together in the yolky light that filtered in through the foyer windows. It had been no one's idea; it was simply the brightest place in the house.

Nimble was moved only by Wry, who carried her back down the hallway and propped her on the floor against the wall. She wished he had thrown her down, but, under his stony expression, he had been so gentle, as if she was a salvage of some kind. She was not. She was a damage.

The blood smeared on his shirtfront had already dried brown. She had only noticed it when he slumped down beside her, slinging one arm over his eyes to block out the glare of puny sunlight. Then she had looked down at herself and found the imprint of it crusted on her own sweatshirt. It should not have been on her—a stranger's life drained out—but she couldn't bring herself to move, she couldn't lift her hands to scratch it off of her.

Maverick sat opposite them both. He was folded over his knees, fixated on the frayed end of one of his shoelaces, his broken camera lying beside him. Lasso had sought his solace in the corner of the foyer, mindlessly popping a balled-up piece of paper up over his head and catching it again and again.

Then Wry's phone buzzed with an incoming update. "Spekender's on mandatory lockdown until noon tomorrow," he read from it. Then he laid it facedown, smirking indignantly. "But let that fucker walk ten feet down the hall to come check on his kids."

Nimble closed her eyes, but it was only to see Che. Secretly, selfishly, privy to no one else but her, she conjured him just the way he had always been, skimming over the CDs in her bedroom, crouching in reckless glee behind the symphony theater downtown, belly-down under

the dumpster in his front-row seat to the Eastside's gun show. She knew she would never return to that backlot again. It had closed up and winked out, a pure glitch of the universe unable to ever be reaccessed. She would leave soon, yes. But not to go there.

The daylight had foiled blindingly and then began to expire. Together, she and her brothers watched an impossible sunset marble the sky. Then the inescapable dark came, and the long night looked in on them from the windows. The things her brothers began to do were blurry to her, their conversations muddled in her ears. Once the last light outside had extinguished, they retreated down the left-hand hallway and returned lugging bundles of bedclothes from each of their rooms, dumping them on the floor in a messy circle. Maverick made up a pallet with familiar pillows—*her* pillows—and she crawled onto it wordlessly.

Then her brothers ventured away through the dining room, presumably to the kitchen. She thought she could hear, from an untold distance away, the sound of cabinets slamming, silverware and dishes chiming together, someone harping loudly, “What fat-ass ate all the ice cream?”

When they had plopped back down around her on their sheets and quilts, she thought she could see them holding plates, shoveling the loot of a ragtag meal into their mouths: canned corn and nacho chips, slices of bread and a bag of marshmallows, spotty bananas and sticks of jerky, string cheese and cans of soda.

Wry sat down cross-legged, balancing his plate on his hand and holding a soda in the other, which he cracked open and placed beside her foot. His own tonic for the night—a bottle of craft bilge that he must have had to scavenge the back of the fridge to find—he dislodged from his armpit and took a long pull from. Then he held a sandwich from his plate out to her, the fluffy bread stuck together with a thin grout of jelly.

“You should eat something.”

He pinched off a corner of the bread and passed it to her. That was the terrible miracle, that she took it. That she could still need and take. Why wasn't she rendered inanimate, all systems stopped? How was she still continuing on in the absence of yet another beauty that could make the world whole?

She placed the bread on the base of her tongue and let it soak into a paste that wouldn't dissolve, not even what felt like hours later when Lasso went back down the hall for a speaker to plug Wry's phone into, and the whole foyer became a sound box for a lawless music. But, for the first time, she heard no vibrancy in it. The pop and bounce that it should have had were too flat, too slow, without dynamic, without Che. As her brothers bobbed their heads along to it, even mouthing a lyric or two, it was nothing more than a flashy dirge for her that, for every stupid simple action her body could still effortlessly perform, she could not make herself cry to. The sorrow was already out of her, but there should have been more. It should have lasted the night and the dark that had come for it. But it was done, it was purged. She already felt the mission of the next morning needing her.

"What do you think Mom's baby would have been like if she had had it?"

The question jerked her into the present, where the music was a background murmur and Lasso was stretched out on his pallet in front of her, propping his head up with one fist.

"We don't have to talk about that," Maverick whispered, trying to rescue the moment.

Nimble watched Lasso roll his eyes into the ground and keep them there, where they wobbled with tears threatening to spill down. Desperately, she needed to him to hold the question out to all of them. She needed him to kindle the forbidden.

"*You can say—*" she croaked, then coughed hard to clear her voice. "You can say her name."

Lasso stared at her for a moment, as if expecting to be instantly reproached. "*Savory.*"

“She would have been our sister,” Wry answered dryly. “That’s it.”

The room quieted after that, and Nimble almost thought that her little brother would truly let it die without a fight when suddenly he asked, “You think, when you’re dead, you can see what your life would have been like if you hadn’t died?”

Wry’s voice was steady and unflinching, lesson-teaching. “Fine, you wanna go into it? You remember the day they died? You remember getting woken up by the sirens? But me and Mav woke up before that because of Dad. He was screaming. You never knew that. You remember the paramedics running up the stairs so fast that they bumped a picture off the wall, and it fell all the way to the floor and shattered? You remember the police officers trying to get us all into the back of the cop car before we could see, but then they wheeled out the gurney anyway, and that was when we knew Mom was dead for sure because her belly was poking up under the sheet?”

Lasso glowered at him. “Yeah,” he whispered scaldingly. “I *have* to remember. Because it protects me.”

Nimble closed her eyes again. When she opened them, the foyer was full of quiet breathing, and the night had passed on. Sleep had invaded the heavy air—the only antidote for a spent fear. Lasso was snoring within a cocoon of blankets. Maverick had nodded off with his hat still on, one arm bent behind his head. Wry was still slouched against the wall beside her, his eyes softly closed. A delicate white glow streamed in through the windows, fogging the glass with tear-streaked condensation. It was still a mistake how the day after tragedy came without fail. How many ruptured Sabbaths had followed black weekends? How many normal dawns had shamelessly broken?

Her foot twitched against the soda can forgotten beside her. She picked it up and drank long from it—wan and lukewarm, but still sweet. The sugar slowly livened her limbs, and she

leaned into it for the sake of the day outside beckoning her. She knew this was the test. She knew every shadow, every gray-bottomed cloud out there was the ghost that awaited her. It was the bad air inside of him breathing against the windowpanes. And he would do it. He would draw her out, because she was going looking for him. She would meet him out there where he dwelled in trespass, and she would be alone when she ended him. No Tarro, no DK, no Kat. It would just be her and the last thing to do.

The huddled forms of Maverick and Lasso rose and fell rhythmically, but a quiet hum was emanating from Wry's direction. She looked over to see him sitting awake, the wire of one earbud trailing up into his hood, the other dangling down by his drawstrings. He stared at his shoes, absorbed in whatever he was listening to, before his eyes drifted over to hers and away again, as if he was deciding whether or not to pretend like he never noticed her at all. But then his eyes met hers deliberately.

"You wanna hear?" he asked gruffly, offering the loose earbud. "It's the Spektator." Nimble shook her head, and he ripped the other bud from his ear, winding the wire around his phone. "He just signed off anyway."

"I stood outside the door."

Wry looked at her.

"While the ambulance and police were on their way. The door was half-open. Dad was in there, shaking Mom, trying to give her mouth-to-mouth, yelling at her to wake up. I could hear him, but I couldn't go in. I couldn't reach out and push the door open."

"Thank yourself you didn't," Wry said. "It would have traumatized you."

She waited for him to say something else, to reveal to her at last the demons that that morning had given him, but he stayed silent. She wondered if he would ever let go of the way he had seen that room that quiet Saturday, or if he would hold it like a grenade against his gut until

his own tragedy finally blew him to pieces. But she was done binding hers so tightly within herself. She could not strangle it into a second death that would negate the first. Her own ghosts could not be secrets, yet they could not be surrendered by being shared. She had to see them when they visited. She had to learn them through that.

“I’m going back out,” she said.

“For what?”

“There’s some people I have to find. I’ve got other families too, just like you do.”

“What are you really gonna do, Nimble?”

She gazed out through the foyer windows at the yard and the street and the thick buffer of trees beyond. “I have to get rid of something bad.”

Wry leveled a dark smile at her. “I guess I don’t have to tell you it sounds like you’re gonna get your stupid ass killed.”

Nimble hoisted herself up from the floor, brushing the sweat-stiffened hair back from her face, scrubbing at the old tears still crusted around her eyes. “Tell Dad I went to Stippo’s if he asks.”

Her brother scowled at her. “You know, I don’t think you’re brave. I think you’re haunted.”

“You finally know me then.”

She shouldered one half of the double doors open as softly as she could, letting the cold of the morning pour past her into the foyer. Even standing there on the threshold of the day, she heard no birdsong, no insects chirruping in the woods nearby, no distant traffic skulking through the Westside. The world had gone radio-silent.

“You’re gonna come back,” Wry said behind her. “Don’t be that dumb.”

She stepped outside alone and began to walk.

DARK

Ev did not have to wake up the next morning because he had never gone under the night before. He had whiled away the darkest hours on the floor, lying on his back, wearing a threadbare angel into the carpet, as, all around him, a dream alighted before his open eyes. All through the night, he had felt the ghosts of his wife and child moving through the air.

The room was not a shrine at all. It was not the way it had been at Muscadine House, he had made absolutely sure of that. The furniture was arranged backwardly, the colors kept muted and streamlined, the toiletries on the bathroom constantly messy with intention. But, nonetheless, he felt her moving back and forth, absorbed, the hem of her pajama pants brushing past the toes of his shoes. She was just a silhouette in the thin-fire streetlight straining in from behind the window blinds, unspeaking and anxiously searching.

If you're looking for our children, they're not in here, he transmitted into the dark. *They're not with me.*

The troubled blur of her stilled for just a moment. All of a sudden, the air bordering his body became charged, and he felt a hand light on his open palm, so small and weightless. He wanted them to kill him so badly, to see Ari and their baby standing over him as righteous slaying angels. He wanted the city served its mercy finally, and for it to be sweet for them. All of them.

His suit coat molted off of him. He didn't raise his arms to let it go, yet it seemed to pass through his very skin, his bones, and away. Yielding to no one's pull, his tie unraveled itself. The callous of his button-down sloughed from him. Down at his feet, his shoes breathed off, his socks following. He was left a castaway, tattered only in dress pants. And would this be how he would take his just pain, bare and coverless? Would this be how he would commit his loving blood to theirs?

It was only when, through the window, a frail dawn slithered in on pale silvers that he realized the death he craved had passed him over. He was curled into himself like a crisp leaf, but somehow still granted alive. The empty outline in the clothes he had been wearing lay beside him, facing him in a hollow mirror image. The heavenly touch had slipped from his hand with the dark of the night, the dream returned to wherever it had come from.

He rolled himself to his knees and then to his feet, walking his dress pants in the direction of his closet. Somewhere in the back of it, the artifacts of an old life were still preserved on their hangers, and, gently, he took them down: a T-shirt plain and gray, worn sneakers, a twenty-ninth birthday present of a winter jacket with fur on the hood. He fit himself back into them, telling himself that he would go to the police department headquarters, that he would meet Darius Starick there, that together they would reckon with what had happened the previous morning. But first he would walk. Dressed like an expeditioner, he would make one final tour, a hospital journey to an urban infirmary. If it would soon lose its life completely and crumble to dust around him, then he would see it while it was still conscious. And it could despise him if it wanted. It could convict its treacherous child as its own killer, and he would stand condemned. But it wasn't dead now. His city hadn't passed yet.

He stepped out into the hallway, leaving the bedroom door open behind him, and headed down towards the foyer. The front doors were in his mind until he remembered the racket they would make, and his children asleep down the left-hand hall, and Arla quiet in her quarters. He detoured sharply into the dining room, but, in the split second that the foyer flashed into view, he saw Wry. His boy was sitting against the wall, staring fathoms down his hallway, as if waiting in resignation for the appearance of the grand enemy that would murder him too.

Then Ev was gone, through the dining room, through the kitchen, and out the side door. He wound around the house to the front yard and down the driveway and began to wade into

the Westside. To the sole onlooker witnessing his departure on foot, watching him through the foyer windows, he looked like a man disappearing into the sea—not drowning, but swimming in a very endless direction.

DOWNTOWN

Nimble came into downtown the way that she always did, under the overpass that was now devoid of passers and around the back of the Bazaar which, at that time of morning, would have been crawling with food-shoppers, before-schoolers, café-goers, and early-bird bilge drinkers. But she was the only dawn commuter standing at the mouth of the strip. It was as if she had stumbled upon a ghost town, long-since abandoned. Even after only a night of solitude, the marketplace's breathing had grown shallow. The candy wheel's colors had grayed. The skyscrapers gathered behind it were only concrete pikes meant to mark vast unnamed gravesites. Critically wounded, the city was unable to move.

There. She was ready to do it right there, to sit in the very center of the aisle and await the appointment. But the wind was carrying a noise down the strip towards her—the soft *whap* of the Prayer Wall posters flopping up and down on the fence. The city was guiding her away.

She turned to go on, setting her coordinates for Stippo's. Some fool, dreamy part of her imagined that she would actually make it to the Business District and see the deli and the parking lot behind it, abandoned save for three curfew-breakers huddled on the back stoop. By the protocol of despair, they would retreat to a safe place somewhere to embrace and implode in the way that grief was meant to be fleshed out. There would be no apocalypse hunting them, because it would have already happened. There would be no battle, only mourning. But, that day, she knew that her body would crush itself for nothing else but restitution.

Beyond the tents, the asphalt tapered into a narrow path that ran beneath the entrance gate archway and then jutted into Parlo Street, untraveled that day, as of yet, by anyone. Nimble stepped carefully onto it, peering up one lane, which stretched high into North Spekender, and then down the other, which emptied into the Southside and, finally, the Banger District. *There.* She spotted a grimy bilge bottle sticking out from the storm drain under the curb and stared at it.

Call him, something inside of her compelled. *He's already here anyway.*

She picked up the bottle, fitting it snugly in her grasp. Her feet planted and replanted themselves as she raised her arm up high and hurled the bottle down. Just as the glass shattered against the silence, she heard it.

“HEY!”

She spun around. There was someone running from the Bazaar towards the entrance gate. A blue spirit—a blue *uniform*—skimming across the ocean of asphalt, closer and closer until it translated itself into the shape of a man with a peaked cap. Police officer.

At first, her breath stopped, and she almost let herself feel something close to relief, close to gratitude. But then she saw the face flicker, contorting in its disguise, and the body slowed to a jaunty stroll onto Parlo Street. The hint of gratitude evaporated.

They considered each other in silence for a while—the ghost sharking a smile, the girl looking upon it gravely. It could no longer dazzle a fear out of her. He would have to shuck the unspeakable intentions from the jokes to terrify her now. Disregarding his own poison joy, he would have to give it to her straight, and she hoped that alone could hurt him.

“City’s on lockdown,” he finally said. “You’re breaking the law, young lady.” He stepped forward, stolen boots toeing the curb. “Pretty wild blowout yesterday. I hear some folks are still down for the count.” He tipped his hat sideways and leered like a fox spying out from under a thorn bush. “There’s no telling when they’ll be back on their feet again.”

She stared at him, bracing for the real thing, as he came close and let the smile ooze from his face.

“I’m gonna kill your whole family. I’m gonna let Wry’s own anger eat at him until he checks himself into a fatal brawl just to feel a good dose of pain and then—*lights out*. I’m gonna let Maverick have his bullet on call for the Spektator, nosing around a crime scene one night. Lasso

I'll get as a banger rookie, maybe out on the streets after initiation, maybe in a detention center after a robbery gone bad. And that old crone Arla can wallow in her sorrows until she finally ends it all—just like Che would have. Then I'm gonna kill you. But, first, I'm gonna let you see how good I can be. I'm gonna kill *the murderer*. Now isn't that justice for you?"

She knew. She had come there knowing. She couldn't be shaken if she already knew.

The shoulders of his uniform vibrated with laughter. "I'll do this. I'll let you pretend. We'll play it out in proper fashion with an old-fashioned foot chase. Rabbit and dog, like nature intended. The oldest game for the very last game, because you've been such a pleasure of a player."

She was damned to a weak voice, damned to concede. "Okay. I'll race you."

He folded his arms over a broad chest, smug with himself. "But, before that, I'll be courteous enough to give you a freebie. This is why you want me gone, right? You want it to be true that I'm not what's powering your sad, sorry, little life. You want this world of yours to be spared from its struggles because you think that everyone in it deserves that much. But maybe you don't know your world." Ghastly, he grinned. "Here's what the truth that you want is. Your mother—Ari—and her little almost-baby, Savory? I didn't kill them. *He* did. Your hero killed them. You wanna know how?"

A music began in her head. She couldn't remember where she knew it from.

"The night before they died, he had just scheduled a meeting with the school board to discuss funding increases, a major checkpoint on the agenda for the first wave of the Beautiful City Initiative. His public ratings were higher than ever. He had a new baby on the way. He was so happy. And he wasn't thinking about anything else at all when she walked into his office late Saturday night, feeling very nauseous.

“While you were upstairs in your room with your stereo and your secondhand CDs, her stomach was cramping around that baby inside of it. He told her the anti-nausea tablets were in the back of the medicine cabinet. But he didn’t tell her which side they were on or which corner they were in. He didn’t even look at her. He didn’t even think. He made it a fifty-fifty chance, and he didn’t even know it. So she took the pill bottle from the back of the cabinet on the left side. She felt so sick that she didn’t even look at the label. And then she swallowed four tablets of the high-strength pain medication that your dad had taken only once for a sprained ankle during a basketball game two years before. Then she went to bed.

“It took twenty minutes for her breathing to stop, and then her heart. Ten minutes for the baby’s. Your dad went upstairs about twelve minutes after she had taken the pills. He changed clothes, he brushed his teeth, he splashed some water over his face, and he got into bed beside her and fell asleep right away. She and the baby had been dead for six hours before he woke up early the next morning and realized she didn’t have a pulse. And when the paramedics stopped trying to resuscitate her and finally called it, he didn’t say anything to anyone. He never told your brothers or his secretary or his advisor. He never said it at all.”

His smile was no longer on a mouth. It had bled out into the air—something ancient, beady, and death-needing that had shed its mortal costume and was now exactly what it really was. Nimble looked into it and then back out again, and then she had shed herself too. She had lost what she had come there to be.

Then she turned. With the smile all around her waiting for her to split apart, she turned and began to walk down Parlo Street, ten paces, fifteen. Her eyes leveled with the gray street-horizon, the fused border between uplifted earth and crouching heaven, and she lowered herself to the asphalt in a starting position.

The thunderfalls of his boots sounded behind her, stopping right at her heels. Her breath was a speeding tide—living and dying, living and dying, in and out and in again so quickly.

“Go ahead,” the voice behind her crackled. “Take a head start. Act like you stole it from me.”

The street stretched so far, belonging now and only now to no one but her. Not the thing behind her, not the terminal city itself. It belonged to her alone, to this last life.

She began to run.

Her body returned to her as she moved. There were five seconds of flying, of her soul breaching her skin. And then it was bursting its seams, it was heaving desperate air, it was pushing itself to fire. And then the death drums started behind her. He was chasing.

A few feet ahead, another street—*Fairman Avenue*—intersected the wide road, and she hung a sharp left down it at full speed, her sense of direction skewed, her bearings suddenly muddled. Then marbled columns of some ornate castle flew by, and she jerked her head to the side to see the front entrance, to recognize the familiar façade of the Halo Hotel. *I know you, I know you.* In one bright bolt, she saw the snapshots of her life lived there: fundraisers, political dinners, the campaign gala in the ballroom, the story of her parents’ honeymoon night spent in its penthouse suite. The place seemed to reach out for her—*remember me*—and it spoke with the voice of a father, baritone from a phantom past preserved inside its revolving doors. Then the hotel was passing away, and, in the mirror of its obsidian walls, she could see a transfigured monster gaining behind her.

Impulsively, she threw herself into an alleyway between the hotel and the adjacent building, jumping trash cans while the boots behind her crashed their tin lids into cymbals. The cold light strained down at her from the break in the rooftops above, like the crystal glare of the TV on nights of old—and the father sipping coffee by the lamplight, chuckling at the sight gags

of reruns, stealing too many of his children's fruit snacks. A warm and hugging man. A belly-laughter man.

The alley opened into a sprawling blanket of vinegary grass, and she leapt into it: Millionaire Park, lacking its regular picnickers and dog-walkers and its community of passers asleep on benches. The air grating through her lungs was fire, the pain shooting down her legs was lightning, but she ran for the end of the park, for the exit in the wrought-iron fence. At the last second, she lunged at the spiked bars and she veered out of the park, and, just behind her, she swore she heard the slap of a hand against the fence—the reactionary catch of a body before a collision.

But right as she made it back out into the road—*Lowell Street*—he was constant again behind her. A dire horror missiled through her head: *I'm going to let them die*. Then she rounded a corner, a blinking traffic light, a new unidentifiable street, and she glimpsed a tall shard of a steeple high above the surrounding building-tops. A church. *The church*. It was the polished twin of the dirty cathedral in the Eastside, the grand funeral parlor that had been packed to its rafters that day with every griever in the city. As she fled past it, she saw again for the last time her mother lying still with a sister that she had never gotten to see—and even there her father's tears had been tied back. From his cue, they had not cried during the service at all. They had not known how.

In the flecked glass of the windowpanes, shiny and perfect, the devil of it all must have been clowning behind her, must have been snatching up the air between them with its claw-fingers. But all she saw was everything past the golden steeple, the city brought to its knees, her tired body coming down as well. The church gave way to a connecting street beside it, and, as she stepped, slipped, and began to collapse, she saw in her peripheral a man standing almost stupidly on the sidewalk, as if he were waiting for a stoplight to halt the invisible traffic so he

could safely cross. She felt the end behind her pounce and stretch and grab, and then she felt nothing at all as her foot dropped into the base of a rain puddle, splashing an arc of freezing water at her father, who stood there on the curb, waiting to walk.

She felt the ground slam into her hard as she scuttled down to the asphalt, her legs ceasing to move. Surely, that was death. Surely, it was through. And then there was someone flipping her over, there was sky above her and an empty street in front of her and behind her, and there was a man crying clear and loud and unbroken over the rapid beating of her breath: “Nimble!”

She looked up at her father, and he looked back at her, his eyes screaming with his voice.

“Baby, what’s wrong?! What’s the matter?! Nimble, what it is?! What is it?!”

He was raking the hair back from her eyes, sweeping his arm under the base of her neck where her heartbeat knocked feverishly. He was holding her face so tightly, so close to his own. Then he was yelling out to the absent city all around him, pleading with the padlocked buildings, “I need help! Somebody help! It’s my daughter! My daughter! Somebody help us!”

At first, there was nothing but her father’s desperate calls. Then, vaguely, Nimble became aware of another face tentatively appearing next to his, and then another and another crowding around him and crouching beside her. The street was filled with the rhythm of doors being opened to the left and right of her. A hand waved in front of her face. A call was being made—*emergency, girl, mayor, quick.*

Her father gazed down at her, scared and alive again, his humanness crowning his head like a wildman’s mane. And he was beautiful. But, past him, in the cloud layers darting across the sky, Nimble could see another world open. It shined on the tarnished city and swallowed the buildings in light, touching its angels to the unconsecrated street below. Down on the ground,

they found her and danced like flames before her eyes—liberated spirits laughing such sweet, reminiscent music into the breaking day.

SOUTHSIDE

There was only one dress in Nimble's closet. It was long-sleeved and bold red, purchased for a holiday choir concert at Spek Middle some time before, and, by some act of providence, it still fit relatively well when she pulled it over her head the morning of Che's funeral. Thus she continued the ceremonial that had begun the day after the unity parade bombing.

Once the curfew that her father issued had broken, the city walked out into itself again. It understood its amputated limbs. It regained its feeling, probing at its wounds and tenderly doctoring them as best it could. Businesses reopened. In the mornings, schools bussed their students in, and, in the afternoons, bussed them out. Government buildings flipped their lights back on and made coffee. Pedestrians strolled the streets again. The weak sun glimmered.

A couple days into the week, Nimble left the Westside the for the first time in ages, bypassing the Bazaar and instead returning to Stippo's, as she had envisioned. And, like in her vision, her people were there waiting for her. Fractured, they fell against each other on the back stoop. They reformed together and wept for their missing piece. They did what Nimble had not been able to do before, letting their sadness and their joy meld and manifest. And it was with tearful eyes of trust that she told them she believed the ghost was gone at last.

Now, in her own bedroom, she honored the victim it had taken from her. In the bottom drawer of her dresser, she dug her hands under a topsoil of pajamas and winter scarves and swimsuit cover-ups to find the plastic container stashed beneath—one of the only inheritances from the life at Muscadine that she had managed to scavenge for herself. She carefully excavated it and opened it, arranging the vials and bottles and canisters of her mother's makeup across the top of her dresser. One by one, she used them to paint onto her face the colors of a sole creed to a sole brother, the marks of a belonging that had only been once and would never be again. When the ritual was complete, she looked at herself in the mirror: not womanly but something close to it, not warlike but something having already fought.

Down the hall, her brothers waited in the foyer wearing suits that miraculously still fit them as well. Maverick and Lasso stood at the wall of windows, gazing out at the sedan idling in the driveway, sighing its exhaust fumes into the cold. Wry was turned away from the windows, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed. He looked so much like their father in his jacket and tie, free-faced without a hood to shroud him. Maybe he had returned at some point in the previous days to the CUF stage to reconvene with his own brethren. Maybe he had tuned in that very morning to the *Spektator's* frequency to see if he would finally break his now week-long silence, or else reside in static forever.

Beside him, Arla smiled at her in a blouse and skirt set. "You look very nice, Nimble."

She took the compliment with a small nod, thankful that Arla had not compared her to her mother, though she wore the remnants of her beauty all over her face. She knew, in that moment, the colors that covered her were all her own.

Brisk footsteps pattered down the right-hand hall towards them, and then her father was walking into the foyer. "Is the car here yet?" he asked, looking down to straighten the lapels of his jacket.

Then, glancing up, his eyes fell on Nimble, and he stopped halfway into the room. To her brothers and Arla, she knew he must have looked so different in the past few days—almost akin to his old self. But to her, he looked nothing like he ever had before. He was a pained and revived man, pulled out of a grave. Just like her. And, when he beheld her, he didn't flinch at the strange future decorating her face, the growing time brightening her eyes and blushing her cheeks—the time he had missed, perhaps. Such mysteries must only be gracious wonders. Such rites were holy passages.

Arla held one of the front doors open to let Maverick and Lasso and finally herself file out onto the patio. Wry pushed himself off the wall and ambled to the doorway, keeping it propped

open for the last ones left in the foyer. Her father started towards the door and looked back at her, waiting. “Are you ready to go?”

Every memorial service that the city had hosted in the past several days was engraved across his face. He had attended every single one of them, twenty-eight in total, before the press and the media and the victims’ families and everyone. Jenner Chalice’s had been conducted a couple days before then. The police chief had swung by to pick her father up, and they had gone downtown together and alone to pay their respects. She still hadn’t told him about his advisor, and she didn’t know if she ever would. She had hoped that he could be allowed to keep his memories of Chalice untainted, that he could have a friend to remember fondly too. But she knew that, sooner or later, the sour truth would be dug into and extracted.

She gestured to the makeup on her face. “Che would have made a joke that I look like a banger initiate or something. But he should have something funny at his funeral.”

She smiled a laugh into being, and her father returned it. “He should have something beautiful too.” And they walked outside together, through the door that Wry held open.

The sedan was quiet when Nimble climbed into it, smooshed in the backseat between her brothers and the door. Her father folded himself into the passenger seat and told the driver, “Southside, please. It’s at Rose Hill Cemetery.”

Through the tint of her window, Nimble watched the silver skies curve over the Westside, the world still drowsing even at midmorning on a Saturday. Cars drifted past in the opposite lane, trailed by kids on bikes and joggers with strollers and lone travelers toting their groceries home—picturesque beginnings to a slow, undictated day. Then the scenery transmuted into downtown and its skyscrapers and its blocks of storefronts doing nice, easy business. The sedan was forced to detour around Consolidation Street, which was still blocked off by police tape wrapped around sawhorses in light of its own and City Hall’s restoration efforts. The alternate

route took them through forgotten portions of central Spekender, past bygone libraries and museums and niche boutiques and the north flank of Millionaire Park, into a maze of once-frequented residential streets. Then the car took a chillingly familiar turn, and, before anyone could say anything, they were approaching Muscadine House. In silence, all of them turned to watch it wake past—the indelible mark of one of history’s disasters.

In the front seat, Ev ran his fingers compulsively through his hair, crossing one leg over the opposite knee and promptly unfolding it, shifting in his seat, pulling forward against the yank of his seatbelt. Then he did it. He reached an arm behind him, searching blindly, and Nimble caged his hand in hers, squeezing hard. Then Lasso stretched over from the back of the car and laid his hand on top of theirs. Then Maverick covered their knuckles with his palm. Arla grasped her father’s arm, bolstering it. Slowly and fleetingly, Nimble watched Wry’s finger trickle upwards and brush the back of her father’s seat, joining them in his own way. They held each other in messy-knotted cord for as long as the marred street lasted. And then they let go, riding the rest of the way to the Southside without words.

On any other day, Rose Hill Cemetery would have been a sprawling plot of rounded headstones, bony mausoleums, stiff angels with crumbling wings. Shades of white would have dulled with shades of gray and black, and funeral-goers might have tempted to mistake such melancholy for restful peace. But that morning, the dead grass had yielded fruiting blooms. A plague of vibrant blossoms was shifting and squirming and sauntering between the grave markers, packing its colors into the wrought-iron fence and yet still overflowing from the front gates. Nimble marveled at the living garden they made—blue hydrangea Metros, white lily Pandas, bird-of-paradise Aztecs, pink carnation Gypsies. All the bangers in the city, mixed.

“God,” Lasso breathed.

The driver sighed exasperatedly. “I mean, I could park a couple streets over . . .”

“That’s fine,” her father said, his eyes sweeping out over the masses. “Just drop us in front.”

The Edison family climbed out and stood there as the sedan pulled away and left them stranded in the cold. Nimble could sense Arla’s apprehension and her brothers’ enthrallment and her father’s anticipation, and she stepped forward unafraid to lead them into the cemetery. There were no police in sight, but she knew there would be no war there, that the body of the boy in the center of the crowd had neutralized the hostility that would resume as normal only beyond the scattering of the graves.

The bangers parted for her as she waded through them, nodding at her in solemn acknowledgement as if she carried with her a legacy of her own which had been circulated throughout their ranks. Her family followed in safe passage behind her to the core of the crowd, where the only civilian attendees to the funeral stood beside the gravesite, huddling for protection in their small numbers. There was a scruffy, twig-thin man who could have only been Che’s father, his hardened eyes watering, his trembling hands very obviously needing a bottle to hold onto. Nimble was glad that, at least for that hour alone, they were empty. She was glad to have Che showing her his afflicted father like she had shown him hers.

A little ways behind him was a face she recognized: Wade, standing with his mother. Nimble jerked her chin upward at him greeting. Uneasily, he returned the gesture, looking so fragile, so tadpole-young. Beside them, a sentinel of Metros was posted, guarding her own chosen family: Tarro in a suit, Kat with her hair in curls and the curve of her belly in a dress, DK in a gray Great Winston hoodie under his windbreaker. Standing directly behind them, amongst Greek and Ciessa and the rest of his cabinet, was the monarch who sustained the truce. Nimble gave him a long stare, letting it answer for the unasked question in his expression.

Baj Guerrara smiled. “Right.” He nodded towards the colors on her face. “So you got yourself blooded.”

She took her place in between her people: on one side, Tarro, Kat, DK, and, on the other, her father, her brothers, Arla. Then she was peering down at what everybody else was. A large brick of hard soil hewn from the ground, and a box slid snugly in its place. Above it, a rickety priest hovered, trying to determine when he should begin the service.

Che’s body was dressed in a suit that fit his skinny frame too well, with no signature bagginess to it at all. His hair was combed so pristinely, flattened down in refusal to the wind that trickled through the cemetery. But his face still held its scrappiness, its mellow riot. That feature could not be slathered over or slackened away.

The priest began to speak, but Nimble heard none of his sermon, none of his routine sacraments. The world rocked to the beat of the boy in the ground, to his music of rhythmic gunfire and laughing expletives and scuffling footsteps that toured the crooked attractions of his city. She never looked away from his face, not even as she fumbled her hand into her father’s beside her. The priest addressed the crowd: “At this time, if anyone should like to pay their last respects . . .”

Her bones ached, but she made herself wait as the mourners moved around her. When they were finished, she let go of her father’s hand and stepped to the precipice of Che’s grave. She felt Tarro at her right arm, Kat behind her, DK on her left.

“Hey.” She leaned over, whispering just to him. “I said I would, and I did. It’s okay. You can get better now.”

Kat began to sob. Tarro swept his arm around her. The priest looked on uncomfortably, and Nimble immediately felt the strength ooze out of her. She pivoted around, feeling her stomach flounder, feeling her knees buckle, and then DK was there. He held her upright and

walked her back through the crowd away from the open grave. Tears began to choke her, rushing to her eyes, as he crouched down beside her and looked at her with fire-lit eyes.

“Hey, Nimble, listen to me, a’ight? I’m ‘bout to tell you a story, okay?”

Fighting to breathe, she saw Wry and Maverick standing in silence together. She saw Arla holding Lasso against her chest, swaying him from side to side in a lulling hug.

“Listen, there was this one time, back when I was a Panda. We were goin’ on a run, me and three other scrups that I knew from the neighborhood. We were gonna hold up this corner store. It was me and this dude Cibo and his brother Mize and this kid named Maxwell Vance. I knew Max since birth, just about. This kid was good, he worked two jobs to take care ‘a his grandmamma, and he woulda given you the skin off his back just to help you—he was a *good kid*. But, before this run, he decided that he didn’t wanna bang no more. He wanted to start over, wanted to get away from the life so he could do better. And, deep down, I didn’t blame him. I was even sorta jealous of that, because I didn’t—I thought I didn’t have that option.”

The bangers around them began to disperse, drifting away in their color-coded tribes. Nimble could hear a metronomic *thud, thud, thud* behind her—wet dirt being shoveled into a hole.

“Word travelled to the higher-ups that Max was tryin’ to quit the game. And don’t nobody quit ‘less they dead. So they came to me, and they wanted me to go through with the run as planned. Then, when we got the money in the ride, they wanted me to pop Max and leave him there, then get in the ride and tear out. But, man, I couldn’t live with myself for that. It was bigger than poppin’ off a traitor or doin’ some kind duty, servin’ my blood. This was a good kid. So, when the time came, we held the store up, we got the money, we went runnin’ outside to the ride, and I told Max to run if he didn’t wanna end up leakin’ on the pavement. So he did. I watched him go. Next day, I got cornered behind a barber shop, and they got me twice—once in the shoulder, once in the chest. My life was s’posed to be over ‘cause of what I didn’t do. Three

days later, they got Max on the basketball court behind the community center on Jet Bailey Avenue. And his life was.”

Shades and hues blurred into each other around her, and, in the midst of them, was the cool tone of her father. He was turned towards the crowd, where Baj Guerrara slipped out of the abstract and approached him. They stood face to face for a moment, the sad kings of two different dimensions in the same world.

“That’s what happened. That’s why I ain’t a Panda no more. Every day after that, when I was on my block tryin’ to get some handouts and make some cash, tryin’ to talk myself into stayin’ safe, I wondered what I shoulda done differently for Max to get him out so he could go make a good life. But there wasn’t nothin’. There wasn’t. Sometimes you can’t do shit.”

Baj and her father looked at each other, unaccompanied by any entourage, undefended by any cavalcade. A wordless introduction occurred just in the light of their eyes, and, suddenly, they smiled as if to recognize the same cracked, hard-earned wisdom in both of them: *What a fearsome dream of a place we have here.*

“You did good,” Nimble found herself saying to DK. “You were still good.”

When he didn’t say anything, she turned and surveyed the whole cemetery as it cleared out, the color leeching back into the streets. She settled into place and saw before her the Metro leader holding his hand out to her father. He looked down at it and, in a single shift of posture, became the mayor again. Then he took the hand offered to him and shook it. Baj Guerrara smirked and moved his lips in a low remark. Ev Edison chuckled in response.

Then they let go. Baj returned to his Metros and the rest of the bangers departing back out into Bangerland to return to their respective quadrants. One of the last stragglers in the cemetery, Nimble watched her father raise his hands to his hips and shake his head, smiling

despite himself. When he turned to find his children once again, he caught her eye, and the laugh he gave to her was a most mysterious kind of music—his best, most beautiful crime.