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## Mosaico De Fantasía: A Collection of Microrrelatos and Short Stories

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MOSAICO DE FANTASÍA: A COLLECTION OF  
MICRORRELATOS AND  
SHORT STORIES

A Thesis

by

JENNIFER GUTIERREZ

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Major Subject: Creative Writing

The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

December 2022



MOSAICO DE FANTASÍA: A COLLECTION OF  
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December 2022



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## ABSTRACT

Gutierrez, Jennifer, Mosaico de Fantasía: A Collection of Microrrelatos and Short Stories.

Master of Fine Arts (MFA), December, 2022, references, 13 titles.

Art is subjective, as is the art of writing. Creating a piece of writing out of a fleeting thought is truly the most frightening yet fulfilling feeling there is for a writer. Entire universes with their own unique worlds, aesthetic verses littered with imagery to paint an intricate mental picture; each representing a brief scenario that my mind decided to fabricate out of nothingness. Though not everyone will love my work, my goal is to reach someone that might. Even if it's just one person. I want them to read my work and think "This is *pretty cool*." My process of writing is a tad unconventional because I'm a "build it as you go" writer. I do not have a solid plan in the beginning, I simply let my thoughts spill onto the page. Once I have a skeleton of what I would like to write, I begin to flesh it out and move specific parts around to build something beautiful. My collection of short stories and poems does just that. My work is a part of me; each microrrelato and short story representing different pieces of my mind, creating a whole mosaic of pure *fantasía* come to life through words.





## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my pets: Troy, Levi, Eren, Chimoltrufia, Zuko, Jedi, Bagheera, Boba Fett, and Oliver.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge and give thanks to all my many professors during my journey in the Creative Writing program. I would also like to thank those who never gave up on me despite the many times I wanted to give up on myself. Thank you for always being there for me: Mom, Dad, Kevin and Steven. I will continue to be the best I can be through my writing.



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## CHAPTER I

### CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

One thing I've always loved about art is that it is all subjective. In the article "Art Critic Alum Praises Subjectivity in Art Writing" by Cleo Spencer, they mention how "Art is one of the few arenas where a variety of responses is to be expected and where debate often arises about which response is the most valid or correct." I believe the art of writing is no different. What one person may consider the best piece of writing they have ever laid their eyes on may not exactly be the same for someone else, and that's okay. We are taught that having a difference in opinion is a good thing; it's what challenges writers to better their writing, consider a different point of view, and decide how to push their work to the next level. There are time when that I feel that some people tend to forget that it's okay to not like everything. That is what I want to emphasize with my thesis. My time in the Creative Writing program has taught me the beauty of finding what you like and don't like and embracing that not everything will be your cup of tea, and that's okay.

In total, I have written four microrrelatos, or flash-fiction pieces, and four short stories for my thesis.

"Why do I write?" The question most authors have asked themselves once in their life. It's a question that will more than likely be answered with an immensely complex response that is probably overwhelming, or personal, or grim, or the complete opposite. Truth is, there is no right or wrong answer, regardless of what others think when it comes to why a writer writes. Everyone writes for different reasons. George Orwell claims in "Why I write", "Putting aside the need to earn a living, I think there are four great motives for writing, at any rate for writing



prose... They are: 1. Sheer egoism; 2. Aesthetic enthusiasm; 3. Historical impulse; and 4. Political purpose.” In my case, I fall under the “aesthetic enthusiasm” motive to write because I love creating stories and characters. Orwell goes on to explain how aesthetic enthusiasm is the “Perception of beauty in the external world, or, on the other hand, in words and their right arrangement. Pleasure in the impact of one sound on another, in the firmness of good prose or the rhythm of a good story.” I love having the power of creating new worlds and filling them with things only my mind is able to come up with. I enjoy describing every detail of the settings, of my characters, of the situations I created for them. When I write, I feel the tension in my joints disappear. I am no longer stressed because my mind is focused solely on my writing. My job doesn’t exist, my chores don’t exist, my bills don’t exist; nothing in the external world matters when I am writing. It may not be a deep answer like most have as to why they write, but it’s enough a reason as to why I write.

Worldbuilding has always fascinated me. Authors such as J. K. Rowling with the *Harry Potter* series, J. R. R. Tolkien with *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* series, and George R. R. Martin with *A Song of Ice and Fire* series are a few of the authors whose worldbuilding enthralled me the moment I began reading. The thought creating an entire world just out of your imagination is something that I, as a writer, strive for. In her workshop, *World-Building Is a Lesson in Oppression*, N. K. Jemisin emphasizes the importance of worldbuilding by saying “I’m most interested in character. However, character is informed by culture, and culture is informed by environment. In a lot of cases, to understand the character I need to understand literally everything about their world” (Parham). The worlds and the characters we as writers create go hand-in-hand, so knowing every detail of both is key.

As a writer, research is also one of my favorite activities when creating a new piece of work. In an interview for WorldCon 75, Robin Hobbs mentions, “So, there are all these little bits that, when you’re researching something and at the time you don’t even know if that’s going to be important, but you reach a point in the story where you need that, and you say, ‘Ah-ha! I have this little piece of information. I know this is true and I can use it’” (WordCon75: Interview with author Robin Hobb). This has happened more often than not during my own research. Knowing everything about what I am hoping to write on gives me more confidence to actually use it in my writing. One example from my collection that required extensive research was is “Nebula Rising” because it involved pirates in space. When writing this story, I had to familiarize myself with pirate lingo and research what pirates wear, pirate ranks and responsibilities, requirements for a pirate crew, and the anatomy of a pirate ship. I usually keep the notes app Evernote handy on my phone to keep my findings in order. By becoming an expert on what I’m writing, I am able to truly push myself to give my all. I make sure to get as much information possible for what I am looking for in order to ensure I am being clear and specific for my readers.

I feel that as a writer, I’m pretty simple. I’m the type of writer that wants to carve out every single detail of the world I want to create to the point that I get completely lost in it. I jam pack my worlds with details that more often than not overshadow my characters and the story as a whole. For my future work, I want to be able to create a balance between the universe I am trying to create without it “devouring the characters.” For example, I feel that my short story “Black Silk” has this issue. The world I was trying to develop with shape-shifting dragons, their origins, their descriptions, it greatly overshadows my main character and his goal. I think that if I am able to find that balance, my characters will have just enough shine as the world that I invented for them instead of one outweighing the other.

When it comes to plot and characterization, I follow the basic structure needed for both without much thought. As I mentioned in my abstract, my process of writing can be considered unconventional because I'm a "build it as you go" writer. In this way, I find myself similar to George R. R. Martin as reported in an interview with *The New Yorker*, "He thinks of himself as a 'gardener'—he has a rough idea where he's going but improvises along the way. He sometimes fleshes out only as much of his imaginary world as he needs to make a workable setting for the story" (Miller, "Just Write It!"). So, when it comes to plot, I feel that this is what I struggle with the most. I mostly follow the Freytag pyramid, which is what most writers are accustomed to: exposition, conflict, rising action, climax, falling action, resolution, but even then, I find it difficult to create a solid plot for my stories. I'm a stickler for rules and rarely venture out of my norm, which I feel is something that holds me back when writing. A perfect example of this would be my short story "Touch of Emerald." I begin the story with intricate exposition about my character lost and confused in a forest and present the conflict right after, she has no memory and the sudden appearance of an unknown demons to guide her through this process. The rising action follows with her searching for clues as to why she is in this forest, then the climax comes when we discover the reasons for her being there, followed by then the falling action of what the forest signifies. Lastly, the resolution of her accepting her fate. This is where I know I must grow as a writer, I want my stories to be more dynamic, to have the readers want to keep reading. Kurt Vonnegut states in his interview with *The Paris Review*, "I guarantee you that no modern story scheme, even plotlessness, will give a reader genuine satisfaction, unless one of those old-fashioned plots is smuggled in somewhere... When you exclude plot, when you exclude anyone's wanting anything, you exclude the reader, which is a mean-spirited thing to do." (Kurt Vonnegut, "The Art of Fiction No. 64")

In turn, because my plot is basic, I feel that this also applies to my characters. I always feel like my characters are flat because I stick to what I know. I think that getting out of my comfort zone is something I have to start getting used to if I want my writing to evolve and get better. I don't necessarily go out of my way to make my characters overly complicated, but I do make sure that they have a goal in mind.

In today's age, the mixing of genres is on the uprise. Most stories now incorporate more than two genres at a time, seemingly to expand their reader range and flexibility within a book. A great example of an author who mixes genres is Cassandra Clare with *The Mortal Instruments* series. In their blog *The Writer's Workout*, Madelyn Knecht and Stephanie Stott write, "Regardless of how one feels about her writing style or series in general, Clare's work is able to cater to multiple groups at once: people interested in fantasy creatures (e.g. werewolves and vampires), people obsessed with romance, and people looking for a thriller. Clare is able to satisfy a wide range of audiences just by mixing categories" ("Mixing It Up: Writing in More Than One Genre"). One particular genre that is on the rise is science fiction, or sci-fi. With technology taking the world by storm, everyday a new advancement in the technological world seems to change the way our very world works. It will not be long before the famous "flying cars" are built and revolutionize our world ever further. Until that day, we are at a time where our craziest thoughts on future technology can be executed is: paper. Science fiction is a genre with many branches. There's sci-fi that centers on extratropical life, technological advances, time travel, parallel worlds and time frames, and many more. That is why, for my thesis, I have decided that my two of my short stories will be focused on the genre science fiction, specifically science fiction that deals with outer space travel and androids (or artificial intelligence, robots, mecha, humanoid).

While the main genre to my thesis is fantasy, it will also be a mix of sci-fi, romance and drama. Most people find love to be an overrated concept that not every story needs, but it is also one of the most popular genres. Personally, I enjoy stories that incorporate love, and I want my stories to include this genre, but the love aspect will be aimed towards an LGBTQ+ love. Even though my stories will be centered towards a more sci-fi sort of love, it will be based on an LGBTQ+ attraction, despite people being potentially put off by it. In this sense I am much like author Rainbow Rowell, who is an advocate for LGBTQ+ representation in literature. In the article “Rainbow Rowell: A Powerful Voice For The LGBTQIA+ Community”, “In an interview with ‘The Advocate,’ Rowell said that she believes everyone is a little bit queer...’It’s just a matter of which parts of ourselves we allow to come out and be seen.’” Rowell’s novels often feature queer characters and explore the complexities of identity and relationships.” The world is changing, and I think it is time that our stories to catch up with the world and involve all kinds of representation. The other element is drama. Drama is something that every person has dealt with in their life, and it is the genre that is most relatable. Drama is also what keeps a story going. When analyzing Aristotle’s, *The Poetics*, Professor John Adams writes, “According to Aristotle the purpose of Drama is to arouse in the audience feelings of pity and fear, and to purge these emotions (catharsis), thereby making people stronger emotionally.” While I do not particularly enjoy drama, it is something that will be needed in order for my stories to move along smoothly, and therefore an essential.

Starting with my first short story, *Black Silk* is a fantasy piece focusing on a person’s journey to find a rare dragon. The inspiration behind this short story comes from *How to Train Your Dragon*, *Game of Thrones*, and *The Hobbit*, each showcasing a unique type of dragon and how they were encountered. I wanted to recreate that with the small added element of shape

shifting into the mix, which ended up really tying the piece together. My next short story, “Touch of Emerald,” is another fantasy piece with a twist of real-life issues. Deforestation is something that heavily hurts my heart, and I love the concept of Hell, so I figured why not combine the two? I remember passing by a park near my home, which had recently just been burned down intentionally to make a new neighborhood. While I know this doesn’t count as large-scale deforestation, it still saddens me to see people willingly burn down a tree simply because they can. For this story, my intention was to explore the concept of Hell and how it can be perceived differently for everyone. In this case, I wanted to make Hell a calmer place compared to all the depictions we normally see and read about. I wanted this version of Hell to tie in with nature and I think it made the piece more realistic. Following this short story is “Nebula Rising,” a science fiction action piece about a young space pirate searching for a rare jewel to rule the galaxy, heavily inspired by the Disney film *Treasure Planet*. I like the idea of pirates, except I wanted to push myself further and spun this idea of space pirates. I also wanted to drop hints of LGBTQ+ feelings, in preparation for my next piece. My last short story “Cibersantuario” is a futuristic science fiction piece focusing on a world where human and androids coexist, partially inspired by the novel and film *I, Robot* by Isaac Asimov. It takes place in the distant future and focuses on spaceship repair human Juitzyl, who is working on his own spaceship to enter into a contest. His best friends, Dezkatli y Buluk, are androids who bring an android to his shop one day, but this particular android should not exist, his parts used mostly to build ships now. The themes I want to focus on are equality, acceptance, humanity and considering the aspect of androids one day being an actual part of our lives. In an interview with Bill Moyers, Isaac Asimov says, “The fact is that society is always changing, but the rate of change has been accelerating all through history. For a variety of reasons. One thing, change is

cumulative. The very changes you make, make it easier to make further changes.” (Isaac Asimov on His Faith in the Power of Human Reason). This piece did include an LGBTQ+ relationship, specifically between human and male-presenting android. I feel like the community is so underrepresented even nowadays when we are much more openly accepted, so I wanted to contribute to the community, even in this small way, with my story. I also wanted to give a nod at my Hispanic heritage by playing with my character’s names and incorporating variations of Aztec and Mayan Gods names.

Originally, I was aiming to create poems for my thesis, but poetry has never been my strong suit. Instead, I decided to create microrrelatos, which translates to flash-fiction. Much like my short stories, I wanted my microrrelatos to have a wide range of styles and techniques. I am not one to shy away from a challenge and having to keep my stories at 1000 words or less was definitely one of the most challenging things I’ve had to do in terms of writing. For my first microrrelatos “Monstrou,” I decided to create a story based on the feeling of unease with an acrostic poem thrown in the mix. I wanted to follow the genre of fantasy by detailing a monster who appears, causing the narrator to go mad. This was a struggle for me not only because it was a story based on a feeling, but because I decided to write the entire story in Spanish, which is a double whammy for me in difficulty. I wanted to emulate the fear our narrator had to endure while slowly deteriorating into a “mad man.” Similarly, my next microrrelato “Permítame,” details a conversation with a type of monster, following the fantasy genre, as well. Unlike my first microrrelato, this one has more of a conversation feel to it because I included dialogue to hasten the pace. I wanted the conversation to feel tense and eerie, with the descriptions of my monster making the reader feel uneasy. In the following microrrelato “Obsesión,” I wanted to describe a brief moment in the life of my narrator. Instead of focusing on a larger story, I wanted

this story to focus on the feeling, like my first microrrelato. I made the story short but packed with as many details to build up the feeling of obsession. I wanted the reader to feel that despite all how hard they try to suppress who they are, despite how hard they worked on being the persona they created to roam the earth, to face others, to be around others, it's not enough. Your true self will eventually seep out, even if you beg it not to. Lastly, in "Welcome Home" I wanted to emphasize the change in scenery with a microrrelato focusing on the landscape set in a post-apocalyptic world, without giving too much away. I wanted to emulate the transition between nighttime to daytime and some of the changes one can see in terms of animals and lighting. I also wanted to contrast the difference in feeling: how at night we are more in tune with our thoughts and are able to deconstruct what we feel while the opposite happens when the sun is out. We are much too busy worrying with our daily tasks that sometimes we don't make the time to sit and breathe until late at night and we begin to wonder with those "what-if's", that more often than not we repress during the day.

In all fairness, there were times where I genuinely question myself while writing this collection. I wondered, "Is anyone even going to like this?" In the article "Should Authors Be Writing for a Specific Audience?" K. M. Weiland says,

"But the simple fact is that you can't please everyone. And when you start trying to please everyone, you'll very likely end by pleasing no one, including yourself... Writing *for* an audience, instead of merely *to* an audience means you're molding your artistic vision to please whims of the public. You're risking the creativity and the uniqueness that only you can bring to your writing."



As I writer, I do believe it is important to know your audience, but it is also as a writer that I do not want to be constrained by the audience expectations.

My thesis was a struggle. Much like Emily Dickinson, at this point in my life, I write for myself, and if someday someone happens to find my stories and think they're decent enough, then *that's perfectly okay*.

## CHAPTER II

### BLACK SILK

The clouds above them thundered and roared, and in a matter of seconds, scattered drops of rain began to fall, turning quickly into a full-blown rainstorm.

“Jemmsol, slow down! No matter how fast you walk, we’re no closer to finding him!” Kaorim yells to Jemmsol, who is pushing forward through the flurry of rain.

“I feel like this is a sign, Kaorim. Like we’re getting closer,” Jemmsol yells, as he comes to a halt to let Kaorim catch up. “We’ve encountered heat riddled winds, scorching sunshine, and not one measly cloud to help ease our journey here. What are the odds that now, at this exact time that we reach this point in our journey, suddenly the rain is trying to drown us?” He continues, spitting out rain as he speaks, “He’s got to be close by!”

Kaorim turns and points to a nearby tree that looks like a suitable place to escape the downpour.

“Let’s head there and try to see if the maps tell us anything.”

They both dash through the rain, millions of water droplets, like tiny daggers, stabbing their bare faces; Jemmsol reaches the tree just a few seconds before Kaorim, who immediately drops to the ground and sprawls himself like a starfish, drenched from the rain.

Once he’s caught his breath, Kaorim peeks up to see Jemmsol giving himself a quick shake, making the rainwater cascade off his hair and body. He’s rummaging through his battered backpack, searching for the maps that will lead them to *him*. Kaorim inhales deeply before

hoisting himself into a sitting position, making sure to give his body a swift stretch before standing. He takes a knee next to the piles of books and rolled up maps Jemmsol tossed in search of a specific one.

“You know, I’m starting to think all this extra weight is what’s making your back hurt. Why did you bring all of this? We only need the one map that actually tracks his movements.” Kaorim pokes through the pile, giving them a quick skim to ensure Jemmsol didn’t accidentally toss it with the others.

“I’m not taking any chances. What if it suddenly stopped? How would we know where to go or what to do? Everything you see here serves a purpose, otherwise I wouldn’t have bothered to – Aha! Here it is!” Jemmsol lifts up a rolled-up piece of parchment that’s tightly tied with a thin, tan colored string. The piece of paper looks ancient and is heavily creased, clearly handled by many hands before Jemmsol’s. He watches as Jemmsol pulls the string off and unfurls the paper onto several of the books he had set aside, carefully tracing his fingers on the lines of trails, blobs of lands depicting roads and hills and the greenery surrounding the land, and the many red X’s he’s had to mark onto the map. He notices Jemmsol’s demeanor drop, his shoulders slowly drooping with resignation, his eyes downcast and disheartened despite how far they’ve come.

“What are you thinking?”

“He has to be close.” Jemmsol says feebly. “It says here that they hide in areas where there’s water to erase their scent and mask their aura, but I know he’s close. I can feel it.”

Jemmsol places his hand on the left side of his neck, stroking it gently down towards his shoulder. Ever since he saw *him*, met one of *his* kind, which had been presumed extinct for what was hypothesized to be a millennium, he felt his own aura shift.

\*\*\*

Tzaldreyks were a rare species of Dragon. They were known to be larger and stronger than the average Wyvern, aggressive and combative like the Vishap, swifter and covert similar to a Druk; what made a Tzaldreyk unique, though, was their ability to telepathically communicate with humans and bond their aura to them when they themselves were in their human form. No other dragon was ever identified with such an ability, despite what any work of scientific literature stated. Most dragons keep to their own kind and communicated only amongst themselves, avoiding any and all contact with humans. The Tzaldreyks were one of a kind, and it was for this reason that they were hunted down until their complete eradication from this earth.

That is, until Jemmsol happened to stumble across an old crumpled-up map with an obscure forest furiously circled, sitting in the corner of an abandoned library on the outskirts of his hometown. As a self-proclaimed dragon researcher, anything that mentioned the Tzaldreyks was considered rare. He was hesitant to take the map seriously at first, considering the state of the so-called map, but upon further inspecting it, he realized it spoke of the Tzaldreyks. More importantly, it detailed how to find “*the last of the Tzaldreyks*” in bold, black ink next to the thickly circled forest. Immediately, he pulled his notepad out from his satchel and began scribbling down the information more legibly than how it was written on the map, making sure not to skip any of the details. Satisfied with his work, suspicion began to bubble up his throat. The feeling of *this seems too good to be true* crawled its way into his mind, forcing a shiver

down his spine and goosebumps to rise on his nape and forearms. He takes a glance around the abandoned library, carefully sticking his notebook back in his satchel. He takes one more look at the map before rolling it up, tying it with string, and cradling it in his arms as if it was a newborn child, before dashing out of the library.

During the walk home, he mulled over his options, deciding that the risk was well worth it if it was true. As soon as he got home, he walked straight to his laptop and began planning the trip to find the last Tzaldreyk.

\*\*\*

The trip was going to be extensive and, based on his substantial research, exhaustive.

According to the map, he would have to take the train reach a neighboring town about a day away named *Libvienn*, which was still a good 900 miles from the obscure forest marked on the map.

The train was barren, save for the conductor who made it a point to double check if he was “*absolutely certain you want to go to Libvienn?*” as he hole-punched his ticket. Without much to do, he places his backpack on the seat next to him and settles on looking out the window, watching the world whoosh by him. He notices the towering city buildings began to dwindle down to smaller, local buildings, then suddenly into plain lands. Miles and miles of meticulously mowed pastures riddled with sheep. Jemmsol looks out his window until his eyes are heavy with sleep, the sun setting just behind one of the pastures. He begins to count, despite the speed of the train, he was still able to make out the shape of the sheep.

One sheep.

Two sheep..

Three sheep...

Four sheep....

Five sheep.....

“Excuse me, sir?”

Six sheep.....

“Uhm... sir?”

Seven sheep.....

“SIR!”

Jemmsol violently stands, knocking his head on the handrail hanging from the ceiling.

“Jesus Christ, what – what? What happened?”

“Is that seat taken?”

Jemmsol blinks, his mind still recuperating from the bump as the stranger who woke him simply stands in the aisle shifting his weight from one foot to the other, waiting for his reply. The stranger is tall, well over 6’0 feet, his head mere inches away from the ceiling, his ivory skin almost glimmering under the train’s bright lights; vivid grey eyes staring intently into his dusky brown eyes. A few seconds pass before he realizes the stranger is speaking again.

“I said, is that seat taken?” The stranger asks again, pointing his long, slender finger to the vacant seat right across from Jemmsol.

Jemmsol blinks again, this time out of sheer surprise. He takes a quick glance around the train to see if maybe more passengers had boarded while he slept but sees that the train is still as empty as when he got on.

“The whole train is empty.” He states bluntly, clearly conveying his confusion at the stranger’s request.

“I know, but it’s a long ride to Libvienn. I don’t want to be alone. Do you mind?” The stranger makes sure to add a smile this time, displaying a dazzling set of pearly, pointy white teeth.

For just a few second, Jemmsol can’t think, he feels his mind suddenly turn into static, a frenzy of feelings that he is unsure are all his own seeping into his brain, whispers whirling into his every thought, before he realizes that he’s nodding, sitting back in his seat and allowing the stranger to sit across. He vigorously shakes his head until the static subsides, his eyes darting around the train, trying to make sense of what just happened when his eyes meet the stranger’s pale grey eyes glimmering with what Jemmsol think’s looks like amusement.

“Don’t take this the wrong way, but are you all right?” The stranger asks politely, his smile still showcasing his sparkly teeth. “You look a little out of it.”

“I’m... fine. Just a bit hazy from the hit, I guess.” He says as furiously rubs his eyes, trying to make sense of the bizarre feeling that just consumed his brain.

“I’m Rothyn.” The stranger says, extending their hand towards Jemmsol.

“Jemmsol.” He says hesitantly, taking the stranger’s, *Rothyn’s*, hand into his own. He takes note that Rothyn’s hand is littered with callouses, his skin thick and rough, almost like stone, against his soft and smooth skin.

“So, mind if I ask why you’re headed for Libvienn?” Rothyn asks, cocking his head to the side as he’s getting comfortable in his seat, settling his right leg over his left.

“I’m not. It’s one of the stops I need to make before getting to my destination.”

“Oh, I see. And did you travel far? I thought it was strange seeing someone other than myself already boarded and heading in this direction.”

“Not particularly...”

“So, where is this destination of yours?”

Jemmsol hesitates, not wanting to reveal his true purpose for this journey, let alone to someone he just met. He tries to conjure up a believable excuse when the static sounds slowly begin slithering their way back into his brain. He panics, glancing towards Rothyn who looks unfazed at his growing alarm, but his piercing grey eyes never drop their gaze from Jemmsol.

“I’m conducting a research!” He blurts out, his eyes widening at the inadvertent half-confession.

Rothyn’s left eyebrow twitches, his interest clearly piqued. He stretches his legs forward, briefly nudging Jemmsol’s, switching his position to now rest his left leg atop his right.

“Research, how fancy. Is it a scientific type of research or more of a writing a novel type of research?”

“Erm, a bit of both, I guess?”



“You seem to be guessing a lot.”

“Well, why are *you* going to Libvienn?” Jemmsol huffs, feeling a tad annoyed at Rothyn’s accusing tone.

“Same as you, it’s on the way to my destination.” He says, using his slim fingers to make air quotes as he says it, as if to mock Jemmsol’s previous answer.

“And where’s your destination?”

“I’m going home.” Rothyn smiles, once again flashing his teeth, except this time the smile looks forced, nothing compared to smiles he previously shot at Jemmsol. They sit in silence, both looking out the window at the massive moon illuminating the pastures filled with the array of sleeping livestock. It doesn’t take long for Jemmsol to once again feel his eyes get heavy. He leans back into his seat, fidgeting until he finds the right spot to settle on before peeking at Rothyn.

“Do you mind if I take a quick nap?” Jemmsol asks, struggling to keep his eyes open.

“Not at all, I can wake you when we arrive.”

“I don’t plan to sleep for long, but in case I do oversleep then yeah, please wake me.”

Jemmsol tries to fight off the sleep, blinking his eyes a few more times. He blinks on last time, seconds away from losing consciousness, when he swears, he sees Rothyn’s eyes change from ashy grey to golden green under the moonlight.

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“Jemmsol... wake up. We’re here.”

He can feel the nudges and hear Rothyn's silky, smooth voice trying to wake him, but his eyes still feel heavy, refusing to open.

"Jemmsol, we need to get off. Trust me, the conductor will leave with us on. He doesn't like stopping here."

Jemmsol wills his eyelids to expose his eyes that instantly focus on Rothyn's pale face, his skin shimmering in the sunlight. Rothyn gives him a quick smile before heading down the aisle towards the train's side doors, beaconing Jemmsol to follow. He brings his hands to his face, patting it twice to fully awaken himself. He hastily grabs his backpack and stumbles out of his seat, heading in Rothyn's direction, who has already stepped out of the train, his white skin still glistening under the sun.

As soon as his feet touch the ground, the train lets out a loud obnoxious whistle, signaling its immediate departure from Libvienn. Instantly, the train's tires begin to turn, spinning in a hasten pace, as if the conductor had stepped on the gas, forcing the train to escape the town as soon as possible.

The train station is not much of a "station," it's more of a simple stop, similar to a bus stop with a worn-down metal bench and a medium sized sign that says, "*Welcome to Libvienn*" in an almost faded bold font. With sleep long gone from his system, he realizes that the stop is also barren, save for the trees and bushes surrounding the vicinity, the ground littered with what seems like millions of minuscule shameplant flowers scattered through the overgrown grass.

"Woah, I've never seen this many *mimosa pudica*! It must be the time of the year for Earth Spirits. The whole ground looks pink!" Jemmsol exclaims excitedly, bending down to graze his hand over the shameplants with caution.

“C’mon,” Rothyn says, as Jemmsol stands, bumping his shoulder with his lightly, “The way into town is through here.”

Jemmsol follows for a few steps, taking note that Rothyn is following what looks to be a trail of stepped-on shameplants, leading straight into the densely dark thicket a few feet from the train stop.

“Oh, erm – wait, I don’t think we’re going to the same place...” Jemmsol says, tentatively, averting his eyes when Rothyn glances back at him.

“Thought you were going to Libvienn?”

“I am but I – I’m not sure if this is the way?”

Jemmsol straps his backpack onto his chest and unzips it, pulling out his trusty notepad. He’s about to reach for the map when Rothyn steps closer, brazenly peeping into his backpack. He zips up his backpack briskly, deciding his notes should be safe enough to share without revealing too much, but he can’t risk showing the map just yet. He ignores Rothyn’s scrunched up eyebrows and clears his throat.

“It says here I’m supposed to go around the thicket, following the caliche trail...” He scans the area, searching for the trail, spotting it almost a mile away from the stop and the thicket. “There!”

“Don’t be silly.” Rothyn scoffs, rolling his pallid grey eyes. “There’s no point in walking so far for no reason. This way takes you straight into town. Trust me. Plus, I want to show you something.” Rothyn smiles, sharp pearly whites making an appearance once again.

Jemmsol is about to decline when he faintly hears it; the static beginning to buzz in his brain. Panic bubbles up his chest, rattling his body into submission with such force it makes him dizzy.

“Okay.” He murmurs, the feeling suddenly dissipating from his body.

He follows Rothyn, careful not to step on any of the flowers. His heartbeat quickens, booming in his ears. His steps feel light, as if he was in a trance; his vision blurring, focusing and un-focusing on Rothyn’s broad back, and his breath lodged in his throat. He manages a few more steps before he lands face first onto the ground.

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Jemmsol can sense the stare.

He groans softly, cradling his head in his right hand and hoisting up his upper body with his left. He scans his surroundings, realization sinking in that he doesn’t know where he is; the train stop and thicket nowhere to be seen. Standing hastily, he feels the stare once more.

“Uhm, hello? Rothyn?”

*So, you’re finally awake.*

Jemmsol screams at the deafening voice, plugging up his ears with his fingers.

*Sorry, I haven’t been in this form in a while. Let me – Is this better?*

It didn’t register at first, but now, Jemmsol realizes that the voice is *inside* his head – and it sounds exactly like *Rothyn*.

“Rothyn?!” He yells into the air, looking around frantically, attempting to pinpoint where he was.

Suddenly, the earth around him begins to tremble, tumbling him to the ground. His whole body jolts, the deafening vibrations from the ground rattling every bone and muscle in his body, his vision blurring with each jolt sent through his entire body. As the vibrations get closer, every neuron in his body blaring at him to run, but he can't. His body feels glued to the ground, facing the direction of the shadowy trail, pink shameplants trembling along with him, when finally, he sees *it*. The sun's rays poke through the cluster of trees, perfectly framing the culprit of the thundering vibrations.

Before him stood a creature, *a dragon*, that looked nothing like the descriptions in the many ancient texts Jemmsol so vividly remembers. The Tzaldreyks that were described in the texts all had white scales, measured around 10 feet tall and have a wingspan of only 30 feet. Yet, the dragon that stood before him had only pitch-black scales, towering well over 15 feet, and their batlike wings spread menacingly, spanning at what he can only assume to be more than 50 feet.

The dragon stops a few feet from Jemmsol; it's slenderer than described, its scales shimmering under the sunlight, like stardust. What stands out the most of the Tzaldreyk was the signature horn, one single gold horn protruding and slightly curving out from the left side of his head.

*Are you scared?*

Jemmsol can't breathe, his heart practically pounding out of his chest, realization settling in that the static feeling that spread into his mind and body was Rothyn bonding with him, mixing their auras in order to communicate in his dragon form.

The dragon, *Rothyn*, lets out small puffs of smoke from the gaps between his knife-like teeth, the smoke a bright blue color. Rothyn takes another step closer, colossal claws almost the size of Jemmsol landing mere inches away, causing his body to judder as golden green eyes peer down at him.

Jemmsol can't move, still frozen in place despite the mythical creature he so longed to find stands right in front of him. He yearns to reach out and touch the mammoth beast, caress the ancient being when all of a sudden, Rothyn breathe out a stream of blue fire, smoke enveloping the entire dragon but avoiding Jemmsol with precision.

Jemmsol coughs violently, tears welling up in his eyes from the smoke. He waves it away, trying to see what Rothyn did, when he's met with the familiar pair of grey eyes. Rothyn's alabaster skin a stark contrast to the inky black scales of the Tzaldreyk that stood before him seconds prior.

"Told you, you could trust me." Rothyn smiles, extending his hand and placing it on Jemmsol's shoulder, just below the neck. Jemmsol feels a sharp pain, like pin-needles sinking into his skin. He drops his knees, clasping his neck with both hands attempting to stop the pain, but Rothyn swats his hands away.

"It'll pass. You know, I knew there was something different about you. No one willingly goes to Libvienn. So... I might have looked through your bag when you took a nap and saw the map. Sorry." Rothyn says sheepishly, his face beet-red as he apologizes.

The pain began to slowly subside but Jemmsol remained warm, heat dispersing through every nook and crevice of his body. He raises his hands and feels his voice vanish at his view. He's *glowing*. He turns his hands from one side to the other, pulls his right arm out of his sweater sleeve and left leg out of his pants; his insides continue glowing a bright blue shade right under his skin.

“What’s happening to me?” He asks, his voice quivering as his whole body begins to shiver in fear.

“I read your notes. All of them.” Rothyn says, his cheeks still tinted red. “That map is quite special. I’m all that’s left, you know. Or at least, I haven’t met anyone else like me. I’m – I could help? I like you.”

Jemmsol exhales, his breath coming out in bright blue puffs. He wants to laugh, he wants to ask so many questions, but his voice is still caught in his throat, refusing to dislodge.

Rothyn continues, “Your notes seemed sincere. You don’t sound like all the others who try to find me. When I latched on to you, your aura felt so pure. If you let me, we can bond, and I will help you.”

Jemmsol feels the tears rolling down his cheeks, mentally agreeing to everything Rothyn is saying, but his *voice won’t come out*. Rothyn wipes the tears from his flushed cheek, his calloused fingers gently tracing the tear tracks.

“It’s all right.” Rothyn says, his voice downcast as he swipes his fingers on his shirt. “You don’t have to decide now. Whenever you’re ready, all you need to do is accept the bond. You’ll know how when you’re ready.”

Jemmsol wants to *scream*. His skin slowly transitioning from the bright blue glow back to his natural tanned skin color.

Rothyn is *misunderstanding*.

Rothyn thinks *he's rejecting him*.

“I’ll see you soon, Jemmsol.”

Rothyn’s smile is the last thing Jemmsol sees before his world goes *dark*.

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“Jemmsol, you have to stop.” Kaorim sighs, leaning onto the chair by the hospital bed. He swipes the television remote from the brown tray as he continues his lecture, “It was just a dream, you should let it go before they really do check you into a nut house.”

“Out of everyone I would hope you’d believe me. You think *this* came from a dream?” Jemmsol gestures vigorously at his injured neck and shoulder.

“I mean, obviously not, but you do realize you sound a bit insane, right?” Kaorim says, concern laced with every word as he avoids eye contact with Jemmsol, choosing instead to focus on finding the perfect show.

Jemmsol sighs, melting his body dejectedly onto his hospital bed as Kaorim changes the subject and begins talking about one of the shows. He’s going to find *him* again, no matter the cost. He takes a deep breath, closing his eyes, hoping to maybe *hear* him, *feel* him. As he lays on the bed, Kaorim’s voice begins to drift, the ceaseless beeping of his heart monitor fading, the chatter from the nurses disappearing. He exhales and all of sudden, he hears the faintest whisper whirl through his mind, a velvety voice veering swiftly from one side to the other.



*I'll be waiting.*

Jemmsol opens his eyes, the senses slowly reverting back, the noise surrounding him once more. He turns to see Kaorim still surfing through the channels on the television and finally settling on a game show.

He's made up his mind.

“Hey, Kaorim.”

“Yeah?” Kaorim says, cocking his head back briefly, gesturing to Jemmsol that he's listening despite his eyes being glued to the screen.

“Would you like to meet a dragon?”

## CHAPTER III

### MONSTROU

La primera vez que lo vi pensé que estaba soñando. No podía distinguir que era sin mis lentes, pero era grande. Se paraba justo afuera de mi ventana, su forma era grande y desigual. ¿Vi algo estirar; tal vez su mano? Alcance mis lentes y rápidamente me los puse, pero para cuando mire hacia afuera – nada.

–Estoy imaginando cosas –pensé.

La siguiente noche me asegure de dejar la luz de noche prendida alado de mi cama, por si acaso y justo antes de quitarme los lentes eche un ultimo vistazo a mi ventana: nada. Mi corina se movía un poco debido al abanico, pero aparte de eso, no había nada en absoluto. Sacudí la cabeza, me quite los lentes y deje mi cabeza caer contra mi almohada.

A la siguiente noche escuché una voz, un susurro; apenas pude entender lo que decía:

*–No prestes atención al hombre detrás de la cortina*

Rápidamente agarré mis lentes y lo pude ver, tan claro como el día. Una criatura voluminosa y monstruosa estaba esperando detrás de mi cortina. Sus dedos eran como cuchillos y rompía la tela creando rasgones hacia abajo y me quería alcanzar. Mi voz se quedó atrapada en mi garganta, mis uñas se clavaban a mi cama, mis ojos estaban pagados a esta cosa que está llegando hacia mi, cuando de repente las luces se encienden.

–¿Oye, haz visto mis zapatos? –mi hermano pregunta

El monstruo se había desaparecido ante mis ojos, como si la luz hubiera lo hubiera vaporizado.

Sigo recordando ese día. Ese es el día que pedí ayuda y la única ayuda que recibí fue que me metieron en esta habitación sin puertas ni ventanas. Sabes, una vez leí un poema sobre un monstruo que se escondía detrás de las cortinas. Dice:

“Esos **M**onstruos que ves por la noche,

**L**os que se arrastran hacia tu cama,

**L**os que te cubren la boca para que **n**adie escuche tus gritos,

Ese eres tú.

Eres **t**u propio monstruo

**P**referirías ahogarte a ti mismo en vez de pedir ayuda

**N**o le tengas miedo a la noche o a lo que esta detrás de **t**u cortina,

**T**ente **m**iedo a ti mismo.”

Y tal vez el poema tenga razón... o tal vez no. Después de todo, pedí ayuda y lo único que obtuve fue un boleto directo a la casa de locos.

## CHAPTER IV

### PERMÍTAME

–¿Como te llamas?

Su voz era suave, apenas un susurro. No me miraba a los ojos, al menos no mientras hablaba. Tomó pequeñas miradas, asomándose a través del desorden de cabello naranja que cubría la mitad de su rostro. Su cuerpo esta doblado sobre sí mismo, ligeramente inclinado hacia atrás, lejos de mí. Su cuerpo es una mezcla de un tono azul oscuro con algo de púrpura. No pude evitar mirar. Solo cuando volvió a preguntas mi nombre me acordé de responder.

–Mi nombre es Gerardo.

No pasó nada cuando respondí, pero parecía nervioso. Esta vez, se dio la vuelta para mirarme directamente, inclinándose hacia atrás y empujando su cabello fuera de su rostro. Tiene tres ojos de color amarillo brillante. Me mira de reojo, probablemente decidiendo que preguntará a continuación. Segundos después, deja escapar una risa chillona, un sonido que ciertamente no es humano. Sentí mi cuerpo temblar, de miedo o de asombro, no estoy seguro, pero ¿la cosa sigue riendo?

–¿Por qué te ríes? –le pregunto.

La cosa toma un respiro profundo y se inclina hacia atrás, doblándose hacia su posición original, pero se asegura de que su cabello ya no cubra sus tres ojos.

–Porque ese es el nombre más extraño que he escuchado, Gerardo. *Heh – Rahr – Doh.*  
Que raro. ¿Y eso que significa?

–No todos los nombres deben tener significado.

–Bueno, en mi planeta, si lo tienen.

Sonríe burlonamente, tres filas de dientes plateados afilados y brillantes. Es de otro planeta y literalmente se está burlando de mi nombre...

–Vale, ¿Cuál es tu nombre entonces? –le pregunto.

La sonrisa desaparece de su rostro. Todo su comportamiento cambia a algo más cauteloso, más alerta. Mira a mi alrededor y detrás de mí, casi como si estuviera asegurando de que somos los únicos aquí el dormitorio desolado.

–¿A quien estas buscando?

La sonrisa regresa a su rostro cuando dice dulcemente: –Solo checando que estemos solos. Mi nombre es sagrado y solo estoy permitiendo que tu lo oigas.

La forma en que habló de repente envió un escalofrió por mi espalda. ¿Por qué tendría que estar solo? ¿Debería alcanzar mi teléfono que deje tan estúpidamente debajo de la almohada? Se quedan en silencio, los segundos deslizándose en el aire, esperando que la cosa hable de nuevo. El sudor empieza a formar una cascada por su frente, goteando hacia sus cachetes cuando de repente escucha a la cosa hablar:

–Mi nombre es *mađr andlát*.

Reprimo una pequeña risa, que aparentemente se puede ver en mi rostro porque la sonrisa desaparece del rostro de la cosa.

–¿Tienes algo que decir sobre mi nombre?

No rompe el contacto visual, casi atreviéndome a decir algo.

–¿Qué significa tu nombre?

Parpadea sus tres ojos un par de veces antes de sonreír una vez más, mostrando los dientes de nuevo y susurra:

–Mi nombre significa *Muerte Humana*.

## CHAPTER V

### OBSESIÓN

Está ahí. Aunque solo sea brevemente. Un trozo de necesidad, una pizca de deseo, una poquito de arrogancia y orgullo. Negro manchando nuestra alma. Todos lo tenemos a pesar de nuestro valioso esfuerzo por enterrarlo en lo más profundo de nosotros. Es como un veneno que gotea por nuestras gargantas.

Gota tras gota.

Goteo tras goteo.

Se desliza hacia debajo de tu garganta hasta que burbujea hacia arriba para que puedas abrir la boca, amplia y dispuesta, y dejar salir tu verdadero yo. El que sale, juras que no eres tú. Ocultas la verdad cada día que ya ni siquiera te reconoces. Qué pena. Esta persona se duerme con un ojo abierto. Vive en un círculo vicioso de pesadillas interminables que lo consume por completo.

Toma lo que quiere.

Lo que ves, ¿quién es? Su pelo rojo, más rojo que la sangre que corre por tus venas. Sus ojos un tono azul profundo, tan profundo como el océano sin fondo. Cuando hablan casi suena como tú, pero cuando sonrío, cuando se ríe, puedes oír la verdad. El sonido mordaz de odio, arrepentimiento y envidia. Su voz viaja con huellas del mal que te dejan temblando en la piel. Tus huesos tiemblan y tu corazón late porque te has dado cuenta.

Ya sabes.

No hay manera de escapar de la oscuridad. La sombra extraña que parecía perseguirte en realidad te está mirando – te estás mirando en el espejo. Eres lo que sellaste del mundo. Ya no puedes contenerlo más. Quiere ser libre. Puedes rogar y suplicar, arañarte la garganta y gritar con voz ronca, pero ya no puedes esconderte.

Ah, no lo creo.



## CHAPTER VI

### TOUCH OF EMERALD

I'm lying on the ground, the dirt cushioning my aching body. As soon as I open my eyes, I realize I don't know where I am. I dig my palms into the dirt and lift myself into a sitting position. My head is pulsing, every bone in my body screaming for me to stop moving. I look around and I'm greeted by the sight of dozens of trees surrounding me. I don't hear any sounds of birds or wildlife, just the air blowing through the trees. I ignore the burning sensation coursing through my body as I stand, my legs trembling, threatening to send me tumbling down. I manage to lean on one of the towering trees when I hear it.

*"But Daddy, why can't we just cut it? It's just a tree."*

A whisper. The faintest of sounds is uttered into the silence of what I now think to be a forest. I glance around, hoping to see someone, anyone that can help me.

"Hello?"

*"We can't cut it down, baby. This tree has been on our property for years."*

I can still hear it. A soft murmur possibly a few trees down. I look around once more, the wind blowing several leaves toward my bare feet. It's almost as if the wind is calling me, beckoning me to follow the trail of dead leaves. I take a deep breath and push myself off the tree, my legs finally feeling sturdier with each step I take.

"Hello?" I repeat as the whispers turn into hums of a tune; I think I've heard before.

*“Trees are the kindest things I know.*

*They do no harm, they simply grow.*

*And spread a shade for sleepy cows.*

*And gather birds among their boughs.’*

*C’mon, sing with us honey!”*

I quicken my pace, the trees slowly forming an opening as I walk. The humming is getting louder and now I’m positive I can hear water. I walk faster, the light coming from the opening causes me to squint my eyes when I enter.

There’s a river. But more importantly, there is a person in the river. I’m about to yell when I feel my voice lodge itself in my throat. The person has *wings*. I furiously rub my eyes. I look at the person once more, but the wings are still there. Four translucent, oval-shaped wings resting on the person's bare back. I take a few steps closer, swallowing down the panic that’s bubbling up in my throat.

The person is absolutely breathtaking. A silk, jade-colored skirt covered their backside and groin, leaving their thick thighs visible. Their upper body is bare, their breast occasionally hidden behind their long, kelp-like hair. Their skin has an olive-like complexion, with thin green vines and leaves decorating the right side of their body like tattoos. The wild strands of hair cascading down their neck and past their shoulders has a single braid on their right side, perfectly framing their face, piercing amber colored eyes looking right at me.

“Ah, finally. I didn't think it’d take you this long to awaken. How do you feel?”

I blink when suddenly the earth shakes. The ground all around me swirls and suddenly I'm being sucked into the ground. The dirt and grass come to life at my feet, pulling me down slowly. I panic and try pulling away, kicking and twisting my feet but I'm still being swallowed. The earth stops right above my ankle forcing me to lose my balance and land on my butt.

“Sorry about that. I didn't want you to run away once I went over.”

The person slowly makes their way toward me, and that's when I notice a small wooden bucket floating close behind, following them through the river. I try to wiggle my feet, attempting to free myself, but the ground won't budge. I try to calm my breathing when the person takes a seat right in front of me.

“I thought you might be thirsty.”

They pull the bucket forward and place it between us. They say nothing else, a small smile adorning their face as they wait for me to take the bucket. I take the bucket with caution, my hands slightly shaking as I take a small sip. The water tastes like my favorite honey and lemon tea. I quickly pull the bucket away to look inside but the water looks just like it should, like plain, clear water. I look to the person, a million questions running through my brain.

“How?”

“We know what you like, Juniper.”

A shiver runs down my spine; the air suddenly much cooler as it blows by.

“How do you know my name?”

“You were next in the book.”

The smile never leaves the person's face, a small dimple on their left cheek forming when their smile widens. I feel my heartbeat quicken; my entire body riddled with fear.

"Where am I?"

This time the person grins, pointy white teeth shining right at me.

"Hell."

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*"This tree has been here for years. Possibly hundreds of years. We need trees. They provide us shade, they allow birds to create homes, and they help us breathe. Trees are important, baby. Why do you think you're named after two of the most wonderful trees?"*

My eyes snap open, the person's face right above mine. They smile and move, giving me a moment to gather my thoughts.

"Ah, Juniper. Welcome back."

"Where am I?"

"Get up, I only have a few more hours with you. I don't have time for you to pass out again." They say as they wave their hand in my face, index and middle finger extended as they motion me to move.

"Were you – just now, were you whispering?"

The person doesn't answer, just lets a small smile rest on their face. I groan and pull myself up, my feet still stuck in the ground.

“This can't be Hell. Where's all the fire and demons and darkness? Where - where is Satan to deliver my punishment for eternity? This can't – who are you?”

The person laughs, a boisterous laugh loud enough to echo through the forest.

“It always amuses me how little you humans know of Hell. Satan has much more important things to do than to spend an eternity with you, my dear.” The person looks at Juniper, their eyes twinkling with mirth.

“My name is Asmodeus, King of Demons and a Prince of Hell.”

*Asmodeus*, stands and takes a bow, their wings coming to life, standing tall on Asmodeus' back.

“And as King, it is my pleasure to welcome you to Hell.”

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“Juniper. Get. Up. I swear, I won't be so kind next time.”

A sob bubbles out of my mouth, my body convulsing with each bawl ripping through. *This isn't real, this can't be happening*, I chant in my head. I cry until my head feels like it could explode at any moment. I pull myself up once more. I look down to see my feet have been freed from the earth. I wiggle my toes, rolling my feet and feeling the stretch of my muscles. I'm about to stand when the whispers return, startling me and making me fall back onto the ground.

“*Mom?*”

“*Please, leave. Your mother and I – we've endured enough, sweetheart.*”

Asmodeus is sitting by the river, looking bored as they wait for me to fully calm down. I gasp and try to catch my breath as I reunite with my released appendages, looking around for the source of the whispers.

“Are you done? I’m running out of time.”

I glare at Asmodeus, ready to snap back when I remember *who* and *what* Asmodeus is. I bite the inside of my cheek and give a slight nod, pulling my legs towards my chest to hug them once Asmodeus sits across from me again.

“In case you didn't hear me before, if you faint once more, I will wake you by force. Don't test my patience.” Asmodeus says giving me a stern look, their amber eyes sparkling in the light. “Now that you know who I am, let's get started. It's almost dark and you've been quite a pain to look after. I need you to recite your full name and sign it into the air.”

“Wait, why? You already know my name?”

“I do, but you need to acknowledge that you know where you are. By stating your name out loud you are verbally acknowledging you are in Hell. By signing it into the air you are physically acknowledging you are in Hell.”

“But wait – why am I here?”

“My dear, I may be a demon, but I am a fair creature. You cannot expect me to do all the work for you. Why is it that you are here, you ask? Well, that sounds like a question only you and those voices you keep hearing can answer.”

I feel tears forming in my eyes, my body paralyzed with terror.

“I can’t. I won’t. I don’t belong here; this is a lie. I was – I was a good person. I don’t belong in Hell!”

The light in the forest is slowly dimming. The river flow picking up speed, the small waves now roaring; the air whooshing by harder and colder than before. I immediately notice Asmodeus’ impatience. I sense their anger growing, but I’m taken by surprise when they move closer. Asmodeus presses to my side, the vines on their shoulder attaching to me.

“They’ll help you calm down.”

The vines make their way down my arm, onto my chest and around my neck. They begin to glow and massage, sending small waves of pleasure and tranquility throughout my body. Two of Asmodeus’ wings come around to shield me from the wind, keeping me warm despite how thin the wings are.

“Most humans are surprised when they come to Hell. They’re expecting pots of boiling people, fire, and lava everywhere, demons whipping humans that are supposed to be tied up. All these ridiculous and absurd scenarios.”

I take a deep breath, my rigid body finally going lax against Asmodeus’ solid body.

“Why is Hell a forest?”

“This is your Hell.”

“What do you mean? I’m some kind of Hell demon now?”

Asmodeus laughs once more, the vibrations from their laugh flowing through my body as well.

“No. Hell itself does not belong to you, my dear. Not yet at least. Everyone who is sent to Hell gets their own special kind of Hell. It all depends on what you did as a human.”

“Then why am I in a forest?”

Asmodeus smiles, the light finally turning into darkness. They lean away, pulling the vines away from my body.

“I need you to acknowledge now. My time is up. Any further questions you have will have to be answered by someone else.”

“But I can’t – I’m not –”

“Acknowledge. I’ve been kind enough and I’ve allowed more than I usually tolerate. I’m out of time and I need you to do as I say. State your full name and sign it in the air.”

They help me stand, a thin gentle hand steadying me when I wobble. They take a step back, the wind blowing their hair and skirt to one side.

“I know, I know, I’m going.” Asmodeus says, looking up at one of the trees. They look at me, waiting. With tears streaming down my cheeks, I do as I was instructed.

“Juniper Willow Greene. I acknowledge that I’m – that – that I’m in –”

“You have to finish, my dear,” Asmodeus whispers.

“I’m in Hell.” I rush out, using my index finger to hastily sign my name into the air.

“Welcome to Hell, Juniper Willow Greene. Good luck.”

Asmodeus bows once more and is engulfed by a small whirlwind of leaves, disappearing within seconds.



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No matter how far I ran, the forest only seems to expand. After Asmodeus had disappeared, I ran headfirst into the darkness of the forest.

*“But we need those trees, sweetheart. They’re-”*

*“Important for the environment, help us breathe, blah, blah. Seriously Dad, I know. I’m sick and tired of hearing you praise some stupid trees. I’m going to the boycott. I’ll be back later.”*

The whispers grow louder as I run. My legs are aching, my lungs screaming for more air to circulate through my body. I can’t stop, I have to get out, far away from this godforsaken forest. I run until I’m positive my feet are bleeding. Every muscle and bone in my body melting and breaking from exhaustion. I run to the last tree I can see only to discover hundreds more after it, somehow appearing out of thin air. I hear the tree leaves rustling.

“Asmodeus?”

This time, a giant man falls from the tree, gracefully landing on both his feet. He towers over me, easily over 6’ feet tall. Much like Asmodeus, the man wore only a long, emerald-colored skirt that covered most of his bottom half, an opening from his knees down showing his toned, muscular legs. His skirt went up to his bellybutton, his upper body completely bare. His skin complexion and hair are similar to Asmodeus, except his hair is short, wild vine-like strands filled with leaves and thorns spiking upward, and their chiseled face set in a permanent scowl. Unlike Asmodeus’ vine-like tattoos, the man had cracks and carvings in his skin. Miniature trees and leaves poking through the cracks. I realize the carvings are glowing, a bright golden light

shining through the man's skin. The light reflects on his equally golden eyes that are staring hard right at me.

“Who are you?”

“Asmodeus was right. You are quite a pain.”

I take a step back, but the wind pulls me forward, causing me to almost crash into the man's chest.

“My name is Azazel. I am Son of Satan and a Prince of Hell.”

He does a slight head bow but doesn't bow all the way or welcome me like Asmodeus.

“I am here to grant you your punishment. Have you discovered why this is your Hell?”

I panic. Punishment? For what? *I've done nothing wrong*, I mentally yell. I try to steady my voice and control my breathing. Azazel doesn't look as patient as Asmodeus.

“I don't – I don't know why I'm here.”

“You mean to tell me that you spent the last two weeks figuring out absolutely nothing?”

Azazel's right eye twitches, the wind blowing and howling faster and louder with each word he speaks.

“I've only been here for a couple of hours!” I yell.

Azazel closes his eyes and takes a long, deep breath, the wind slowing down.

“You've been running for almost two weeks. Time doesn't work the same as it did when you were alive. What the Hell did you do with Asmodeus? They were supposed to explain everything to you.”

I start crying, overwhelmed with questions and dread. I've been lost for two whole weeks, plagued by these whispers and never-ending trees, and I still don't know why I'm stuck here.

“Stop crying and sit down. You seem to misunderstand who we are. We are busy demons, Juniper. We don't have time for your theatrics. I've given you two whole weeks. I am willing to grant you one more, but you must find out why you are here and accept your punishment when I return. Do you understand?”

I nod, trying to control my sobs as I take a seat on the ground, my back leaning on one of the trees.

Azazel waits for my sobs turn into whimpers, squatting down in front of me and pointing his index and middle finger at my forehead.

“You have one week, understand? When I come back you have to tell me why this is your Hell and receive your punishment, all right?”

I nod once more, one last whimper escaping my lips as Azazel presses his fingers to my forehead.

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*“We will always love you, but we cannot condone your behavior in this house any longer. We wish you luck, and hope that one day God can forgive you.”*

*“You know what? Fine. Fine! I don't care what you people think. My life is going great, I just achieved something amazing in life, but that's okay. You guys continue worshipping your*

*stupid trees. I'll just keep cutting them down until you realize how useless they are compared to me!"*

*“A freak accident has taken place during today's busy workday at the site of the future apartment complex 'Brighter Future'. Reporters have stated that there was one fatality. Local pioneer Juniper Willow Greene was on site today when a massive fire spontaneously ignited. Surprisingly, only one tree, ironically the one and only Juniper tree at Salix Park, managed to fall over, accidentally crushing Ms. Greene. The fire was put out moments later but, unfortunately, it was too late to save Ms. Greene. Ms. Greene was known as the most notorious deforestation advocate, having approved the destruction of many of the city's parks. Her funeral will be taking place at Shady Oaks Funeral Home tomorrow afternoon. All are invited to attend.”*

‘Wait – What? I don't remember seeing on the news- Oh my god. Oh my – was that. Oh my GOD!’

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I'm still in the forest, right where Azazel left me. My body feels stiff, and a cloud of dust appears when I try to move. I shake my head and stretch out my legs, leaves and twigs falling off my body.

*Is that why I'm stuck here? Because I cut down a few trees?* I think as I feel the panic begin to bubble at the back of my throat.

“Do you know why you are here?”

I jump, startled by the sudden appearance of Azazel. He looks exactly the same, the only proof that time had gone by were the miniature trees growing taller in the cracks of his skin. Azazel waits for my answer, the wind blowing softly at us.

“It's the end of the week. You have to tell me why you are here and accept your punishment.”

“I don't – I'm here because I cut down trees? That can't be right. I was a good person. I did the right thing!”

“Is that your final answer?”

“Wait! No – there has to be a mistake. Please I –”

“I need an answer Juniper. Either you tell me of your own free will and come to terms with what you've done, or I force you to endure your punishment without recognizing your faults. Now, why are you here?”

“Because I – because...” I take a shuddering breath, my tears plunging to the ground. “Because I was – I was a bad person and I – I approved unnecessary deforestation.”

“Do you accept your punishment?”

“But wait, please! I don't deserve punishment! What I did I – it had to be done!”

Azazel nods and places a hand on my shoulder, his golden eyes unwavering.

“It's because you still believe that that you are here. Do you see these trees? Do you know why it seemed like they kept appearing when you ran? It's because you don't even know how many trees you've killed. This entire forest is our gift to you. This is your Hell. You will

live here for all eternity as one of these trees, reliving the pain every single one of them felt when you cut them down.”

I shake my head vigorously, collapsing to the ground. The tears won't stop falling. Azazel come closer, his hands glowing as he places one on each of my shoulders. The smallest of smiles embellishes his face.

“Juniper Willow Greene, do you accept your punishment?”

## CHAPTER VII

### WELCOME HOME

The clouds begin to break, crackle and sputter – the pale grey sky filled with prayers and dreams from down below, allowing the sun to peek and shine its bright warm beams onto what we once called *Earth*. The rays illuminating the dead grass, each blade covered in dust. The trees, scattered leaves hanging on for dear life onto the branches, shaking off the darkness of the night. The shadows quiver, receding, as if frightened to be touched by the rays of light. As the moon begins to set, so does your mind. Each question, each thought that had circled your mind begins to fade. When will they come? A tear rolls down your cheek. Will today be the day? Another. Will I live to see another day? Each tear cascading as the cold air shifts to warm. This is it. The sun, it's bringing what little life is left back to its wake. Cyborgs of the night begin to disperse and deactivate, syber spiders stealthily cease spinning their webs, online owls ominously observing as they power down. There they go. The demons, filled with envy and rancor at those who are allowed to roam in the daylight, to come forth and bask in the heat. You get up, shake off the night from your body and prepare. The buzzing in your mind begins to quiet down all the voices. Maybe today is the day. The sun fills you with the hope of finally escaping this hapless haven someday.

## CHAPTER VII

### NEBULA RISING

Captain Jaae stands at the ship's hull, staring out into the abyss, as the large boat-like ship soars through the sea of stars, skillfully weaving its way past the array of tiny asteroids floating nearby. He catches a glimpse at a bright blue planet in the distance, taking out his pocket telescope from his coat to get a better look its surroundings. His long, black coat covers most of his figure, but his tricornered hat with a large red, exotic bird feather makes him stand out from the rest of the crew who are hard at work around the ship. He looks out into the twinkling space sea when he sees a heard of star lions headed their way. He's about to turn his telescope's head to zoom in when his view is suddenly blocked.

“So, were you hoping for some action instead of some space kitties?” Zukai, his first mate, says as he pokes the Captain's telescope to the side, grinning at his scowl.

“At this rate, I'm more than okay with just some cats. I don't think the ship can take any more damage.”

“Damage? You mean losing two solar sails and a part of the bowsprit? That sounds like a regular day to me.”

“Ha ha.” Captain Jaae says unamused at his first mate's attempt at humor.

They both lean forward, arms resting on the ship's railing as they watch the star lions pass through the stars and further into the darkness.



“You know, I think you should let Aliouss do it. I doubt Rholsfyre will mind, considering the way he’s been sailing lately.

“Sink me, again with this?” Captain Jaae mutters as he hangs his head.

“Yes, again, Jaae. He’s part of the crew now, and if he says he can do it we should listen.”

“Captain.” Captain Jaae snaps.

“What?”

“On this ship, I am the Captain.” Captain Jaae says as he straightens himself and adjusts his coat, looking directly at Zukai.

“Well, yes, but...”

“But nothing. Regardless if he says he can, he’s still not ready.”

“Oh, so now it’s just what you say goes? The rest of us don’t matter?” Zukai says incredulously, gaining the attention of the crew members nearby.

“That’s not what I’m saying. I’m saying that I do not think he is ready. As Captain of Ship Exodus, it is my job to make sure everyone is safe on this ship, which means giving someone who has only travelled with us for three months free reign of the helm is not up for debate.”

Captain Jaae clears his throat and turns to see most of his crew has halted their chores and are now staring intently at the bickering pair.

“Is there anything else anyone would like to add?” He asks loudly, directing his full attention to the crew.

The crew members abruptly resume their chores and move about the ship, talking amongst each other as they work.

“Thought so.”

Captain Jaee walks off towards the Captain’s quarters, leaving Zukai to stare angrily out into the stars. He’s about to follow the Captain when a slim, pale boy with strawberry blonde hair stands in front of him, leaning on to his mop.

“Approaching him a good idea right now?” the boy asks, cocking an eyebrow as he rests his chin on the tip of the mop handle.

“No, I guess not.” Zukai sighs and leans back on the ships railing. “But you agree with me right, Jhordyn?”

“Never seen Ali sail before.” Jhordyn shrugs.

“I know what Captain is saying makes sense, but Aliouss is not a landlubber! He can sail just as fine or even better than that old seadog Rholsfyre.”

“Fyre isn’t that bad. Slow, but decent.”

“That should be the motto of this ship. Slow but decent.” Zukai mutters, looking back into the void. “We’ve been out here since we were 17 years old. It’s been two years.”

“Two years? You can’t be serious.” Jhordyn scoffs. “That literally nothing compared to those who have spent their whole life out here in the stars, you ass.”

“I know, but still. We had plans.”

“Plans change.”

“You don’t understand. Captain – *Jaae* – he may seem like every other Captain you’ve come across, but he’s got something that not all who search for the *Goldeum* have.”

“Which is?”

“Absolutely nothing to lose.” Zukai says, the frown gone from his face and replaced with a grin.

“Don’t be ridiculous. Everyone has something to lose even if they say they don’t.”

Jhordyn says, peeling himself off the mop and pretending to clean a smudge on the pristine deck.

“Not Captain. You may not know this, but he came from nothing and has no one. He’s all he has, ever since we were kids.”

Both boys look towards the Captain’s quarters; the crew still working loudly around the ship.

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The room is large with a back wall composed of four windows with dark grey curtains on each, giving the room a luminous glow from the starry sea of black. To the right, there are three brown bookshelves littered with all kinds of books, scrolls, several boxes, and small figurines. To the left, there are two chests, one large and one medium. The medium chest has several open scrolls and books, all written on with the Captain’s scribbles. The larger chest has two lit lanterns on it and sat next to a larger desk of equal size. In the middle of all the mess was a larger colorful map.

As Captain Jaae enters the room, he immediately leans onto the door, taking a long, deep breath. He walks towards his desk and places his hat onto the chair's back. He pulls out the chair and lets his body melt on to the plush material.

"You're okay. You're okay. You're okay." He chants to himself, palms covering his eyes to deter the incoming headache. He takes one more breathe before he focuses on the map laying on his desk.

The map is composed of seven different star systems and planets. Each one has notes made by the Captain next to it, giving him vital information of what clues, or not, they happen to find. He reaches for a pen and marks a big "X" onto one of the planets just a few clicks away from their current location.

"There goes system number four. Another damn dead end." He huffs.

He begins mapping out a new route to a different system, making additional marks all over the large map.

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The ship continues sailing peacefully through space. The sea of stars illuminating their way when a sudden *boom* blasts near the ship, slamming all the crew to the left side of the ship. Captain Jaae rushes out of his quarters, whipping his door open and rushing out onto the deck next to his first mate.

"What is it?" He asks, catching his breath and eyeing the cloud of smoke near the ship.

“Some idiots just opened a portal a few clicks away from the ship.” Zukai says to the Captain, but his gaze stays glued to the dark cloud. They look out into the direction of the boom, but the smoke shields the portal as well as whoever just opened it. “I can’t see a damn thing.”

“Neither can I.”

Captain Jaae runs towards the ratlines and begins to climb up the crow’s nest. He sees something sticking out from the puffs of smoke, and he quickly take out his pocket telescope to see it more clearly.

“Oh no.” He whispers, voice practically quivering.

Poking out from the cloud of smoke is a black, tattered flag, with an image of a white skull wearing a gold eyepatch and to gold swords crossing underneath it. Captain Jaae pulls out his sword and jumps right as a cannonball soars through, destroying the crow’s nest. He whistles in code loudly, loud enough to match the falling pieces of wood that come tumbling down.

“Move! Move! Right now, move!”

He runs towards the cannons along with his crew, lighting them up one by one and firing cannonballs at the smoke. Out of the dark clouds appears a ship similar to their own, except this ship has the words SHIP LOTTO carved on the side. Ship Lotto sails closer towards Ship Exodus until it’s only a few feet away. Instantly, Ship Lotto launches massive magnetic chains connecting both ships, pulling them together side by side. Crew members from Ship Lotto being swinging onto Ship Exodus, roaring yells and tings of swords heading closer. The Exodus crew draw their swords and being swinging at the incoming strangers, defending their ship.

Captain Jaae dashes towards one of the magnetic chains and begins to strike it with his sword. He pulls out his gun, firing two bullets at the chain when he hears the similar sound of gunshots aimed right at him. He ducks and turns to see the Captain of Ship Lotto, Captain Hartdowl, his massive frame engulfed by smoke and towering over the rest of his crew, standing a few steps away, gun firmly grasped and ready to fire once more. Captain Jaae rolls behind the main mast, checking his gun for the remaining rounds. He aims and shoots at Captain Hartdowl's leg with his right hand, missing by an inch, and swings his sword with his left, evading his enemies attack. He runs towards the quarter deck, ducking and maneuvering through his crew who is brawling with their rivals. An enemy crew member slams into Captain Jaae, sending him tumbling to the ground. He loses his sword but shoots his gun as he moves to hide behind a wide, brown barrel, bullets bombarding the crew member right in the chest. He searches frantically for Captain Hartdowl, checking his gun once more, when suddenly – BANG!

“I warned you, boy.” Captain Hartdowl growls, gun smoking at the tip.

Captain Jaae grabs onto his shoulder to stop the blood that's dripping onto the deck floor, dropping to his knees as pain rattles through his entire body. He watches as Captain Hartdowl checks his gun, similar to what he had done mere seconds ago, and points it once more at Captain Jaae, except this time it's pointed straight at his head.

Captain Jaae smiles, his vision begins to tunnel, pitch-black zeroing in on his eyes and the shouts, the clangs of swords, the roaring gun shots, and fading into high pitch ringing in his ears, until – *silence*.

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Captain Jaae lays in a small, twin sized bed covered with a white bed sheet and a baby blue duvet. He looks pale, paler than usual. A bright green bandage and several gauzes cover half his chest and most of his left should and bicep.

He slowly wakes, looking around the brightly lit room. He's about to get up when a tan, older man walks into the room. He's short, about 5'6 in height, wearing plain dark jeans and a white long sleeve sweatshirt. His hair is thin and slicked back, except for a few strands of hairs that frame his square shaped glasses. He enters the room fully, a tall glass of water in his hands.

"Finally, I was beginning to doubt my skills." The older an says with a gentle smile, but concern clearly present with his words.

"How long have I been asleep?" He asks, his senses slowly waking on high alert.

"About a week." The older man says as he drags a wooden chair that was by the entrance towards the bed, taking a seat right next to the Captain. "It's been a while since I've done such extensive work. Not a lot of ships brave enough to dock on P5, you know."

"What's P5?" Captain Jaae asks, hesitantly accepting the glass of water the older man thrusts at him.

"You're on Penttdox-05, kid. On System 5."

Captain Jaae looks at the glass, to the man, to the door, mentally weighing his options before settling his gaze back on the glass."

"I don't blame you." The older man chuckles, "It gets tricky to decide who you can and can't trust once you become Captain, huh? Definitely not something I miss."

"You're a Captain?"

“Was. Ever heard of the ship “Lady Luck?””

“Erm, I – no, I’m sorry.” Captain Jaae replies sheepishly.

“Figured. The universe is vast, after all. I was Captain for “Lady Luck” for 16 years.”

“16 years?” He sputters, the glass in his hand tilting, spilling a small stream of water on to the duvet and sheets.”

“16 whole years.”

Captain Jaae steadies the glass, wiping off the water from the bed and waves his hand clean. He picks at the spot, feeling the damp material between his fingers to see if anything would happen, flicking his eyes briefly towards the old man.

“Relax,” The older man says, “I promise, if I wanted to kill you, it would’ve been done the minute that those loudmouth brats dragged your bloody body all over my pub, hollering for help.”

It is in that moment that Captain Jaae is slammed with the memory of the fight, his crew, his ship, the fight against Captain Hartdowl – the blood dripping from this arm.

“Don’t look so worried, kid. I fixed you up as best as I could. Not saying I’m an actual doctor by any means, but I did pick up a few things during my time on Lady Luck.”

“I don’t remember anything after getting shot...”

“That’s normal. The loss of blood made you pass out.”

“Where is my crew?”



“Out front. Had them tend my bar for the past week as payment since apparently you can’t pay for my exceptional services with truinis.”

“Bar?”

“You’re in my pub, kid. No hospitals in P5, unfortunately.”

“Wha – no hospitals?”

“None. Penttdox-05 is much too violent for a hospital. It’s be ransacked withing hours, so the feds thought it best that people deal with their own injuries or travel to our neighboring planets.”

“Did a guy with silver hair – was there a guy with silver hair with my crew?” He says, tentatively, worry woven into his question.

“Why? He special?” The older man raises his right bushy brow, a teasing smile blooming on his face.

“Not like that – he’s... well – yes, he’s my first mate.” The Captain stammers, face flushing a rosy, red tint spreading like wildfire onto his pale cheeks and ears.

“Oh, now that’s interesting.” The older man says, the teasing smile never leaving his face. “Yes, he’s one of the brats that brought you in. I’ll get him.” He says as he takes the glass from Captain Jaae, heading for the door, leaving it slightly ajar as he exits.

Captain Jaae swings his legs over the bed, letting his bare feet touch the floor for the first time in a week. He tries to stand but struggles, his body not accustomed to his weight yet, and sits back down on the bed. He’s about to try again when the door suddenly swings open.

“You look terrible.” Zukai says, eyeing the Captain as he walks in, offering a comforting pat to the Captain as he settles back on to bed.

“Thanks.” He replies dryly.

“Well, at least you look better than after the fight.”

“What happened after I knocked out?”

“It was... It was pretty bad, Jaae.” Zukai sighs, taking a seat in the chair the older man had placed right next to Captain Jaae’s bed, lifting his right hand to begin listing off the damage. “After you got shot, Jhordyn chopped Hartdowl’s hand before he got to shoot you in the head, Rholsfyre got shot in the arm as he was trying to steer the ship away, Verhn and Sohlahr got pretty banged up by Hartdowl’s boatswains, and Xuluuch lost his left eye fighting off the powder monkeys. Leonz, Aliouss, and the rest of the gang got off with some scrapes and bruises only, thankfully.”

“And you?”

Captain Jaae watches as Zukai leans back on the chair and lifts his t-shirt, exposing his broad sculpted chest that’s adorned with a long, crimson cut starting from his ribcage going all the way up to his collar bone. It’s scabbed over and smeared with dense, clear cream.

“Hartdowl’s first mate’s got a good swing.” He says, bitterly.

Captain Jaae reaches out, running his fingers across Zukai’s gash, his face twisting with guilt as he gently spreads the cream from one side of the cut to the other.

“It’s not your fault.” He shrugs, placing his hand over the Captain’s and giving it a firm pat.

“For real. Dumbass here jumped in front of that sword for you.”

Captain Jaae and Zukai turn towards the door to find Jhordyn leaning on it with his arms crossed, glaring at them both. He’s sporting a bruised left eye and a swollen lower lip.

“I didn’t *jump*.” Zukai says, rolling his eyes as he pulls his shirt back down, glaring back at Jhordyn.

“Right. Let me rephrase, dumbass here practically *flung* himself in front of that sword for you.”

“Is that true?” Captain Jaae asks.

“You’re the Captain. I’m the first mate. It’s my job to protect you.”

Captain Jaae extends his hand towards Zukai, not saying a word. Zukai takes his hand and helps him into a standing position, steadying him when he wavers to the side. Once Captain Jaae has his footing, he pulls Zukai into a hug, careful not to hurt either of their wounds.

“I owe you my life.”

“Don’t be stupid. I’d take a sword for you anytime.”

“Literally.” Jhordyn mutters, looking away from the pair.

Captain Jaae takes a tentative step, ensuring he’s stable enough to walk towards Jhordyn. He walks slowly towards his crew mate, Zukai right beside him, hand ghosting against the small of the Captain’s back, and extends his hand.

“You don’t seem like the hugging type.” He says softly. “Thank you. Zukai told me what you did. I am forever grateful.”

Jhordyn takes the Captain's hand, giving him a firm handshake, looking anywhere but him when his eyes meet Zukai's glinting gaze.

"You didn't have to tell him." He aggressively whispers.

Zukai only shrugs in response, flashing him a quick, mischievous grin.

Captain Jaae fixes his bandages, walking out of the small room and down a narrow hallway. He hears music getting louder with each step. As he rounds the corner, he can hear talking from the open door he assumes leads to the older man's pub.

The pub is larger than he expected. The place is lightly dimmed, with wide wooden lanterns hung all across the ceiling. There's a row of square shaped tables lining up the right side of the pub, with a few scattered bar stool tables in the middle of the pub, and the entire left side of the pub was a bar. The left wall of the pub had a floor to ceiling mirror all across with several shelves of liquor of all varieties and shades lined up against it. The bar had tall bar stools lined up along it, the paint looking slightly worn. He takes a look around and realizes how barren the place is, save for his crew members who are scattered about, some behind the bar, some busing tables, and others mopping up the floor.

"Captain!"

A young, short boy, no older than 16, with copper colored skin and golden red hair, drops his mop and darts towards Captain Jaae. He's about to swing his arms around him when Zukai steps in front of him, causing the boy to barrel into his chest instead of the Captain's.

"You know better than that, Aliouss." Zukai says at the young boy sternly, poking his forehead with his index and middle finger, pushing him away.

“It’s fine, Zukai.” Captain Jaae says, peering his head over Zukai’s broad shoulder and smiling down at the boy. “How are you, Ali?”

“I’m fine, a bruise here and there, but nothing I can’t manage. But, Captain, you? Are you better? Are you still hurt? Will you be able to sail? Are we leaving soon?”

“Slow down,” Captain Jaae chuckles, stepping around Zukai and finally facing Aliouss and the crew members that have gathered around them. “I’m doing much better now.”

“You’re welcome, kid.” The older man chimes in from behind the bar as he cleans a clear glass with an old rag.

“How much do we owe you?”

“None. Your boys done more than enough for my pub.”

“Please, you were more than generous. Let us repay you somehow.”

“How’s about you this: stop by every once in a while. As you can see, not many people stop by my pub. I’d love to have someone’s ear to talk off, maybe even hear about your own travels.”

“Done. We dock on Penttdox-05 every fifth of the solar month.”

The older man steps out from behind the bar, a small, metal door swinging back and forth as he exits. He heads towards Zukai first, shaking the boy’s hand briefly before heading to Captain Jaae, shaking his hand with both of his own.

“Don’t forget, kid. An old man like me gets lonely every now and again. Have a drink with me before you head out, yeah?”

Captain Jaae is taken aback by the request, casting a quick glance at his crew, before nodding and shooting Zukai a knowing look.

“All right, boys. It’s time. Head for the ship!” Zukai says loudly, gesturing with his hands for them to speed up the process.

One by one the crew begins putting their belongings away, making sure to leave the pub spotless for the older man. They exit the pub, each thanking the older man in a flurry of waves and hollers as Captain Jaae takes a seat next to the older man in one of the bar stools.

“I’ll be outside.” Zukai says softly, giving the older man one last nod before heading towards the front door and shutting it softly.

The older man reaches over the bar, pulling out two tall empty glasses and placing them on the bar top, then reaches over again to pull out a thin yellow bottle, a strange language written on the label.

“It’s all right, it’s just 1.3% alcohol. I mostly buy this to mix other drinks with since the flavor is so sweet.” He says, pouring the Captain’s drink first, bright magenta liquid swirling into the clear glass. The older man fills up his own glass and takes a swift swig, gesturing for Captain Jaae to do the same. “Like I said, if I wanted to kill you, I would have done it long ago.”

Captain Jaae brings the glass to his lips, the sweet smell wafting straight into his nostrils. He takes a tentative sip that instantly turns into a giant gulp.

“This is *amazing!*” Captain Jaae exclaims, taking another drink.

They sit in silence, hearing the distant shouts and sirens of the outside world. The older man clears his throat, covering it briefly with a closed fist.

“So, how’d you manage to become a Captain as such a young lad?” He questions, taking a small sip of his drink, pink drops collecting at the corner of his pursed lips.

“I’m not *that* young.” He says, tapping the rim of his glass with his index finger. “I was first mate to a lousy Captain. That’s all.”

“Oh? And what became of this lousy Captain?”

“He almost got us *killed*.” Captain Jaee growls, flicking his glass halfheartedly. “I talked it over with the crew and we came to an agreement. The Captain didn’t care about us. We decided our ship would flow best without him and *I* was the one chosen to lead it. *A mutiny*.”

Captain Jaee looks solemnly towards the pub’s entrance, Zukai’s silhouette outlined through the door’s stained-glass window. He takes another drink, feeling the familiar buzzing of alcohol causing static in his brain. He rattles his head, giving his cheeks a firm pat, the buzzing slightly subsiding.

“But I – it was for the good of the ship! I never wanted it to get to that point. I trusted him and he – he just stopped caring about everything. Not the ship, not the crew, not our *dreams*,” He huffs, “He saw us as disposable, as *pawns*. Our dreams, they no longer mattered. That’s no way for a Captain to captain his ship.”

“Sounds pretty lousy.” The older man comments, his chunky fingers balancing his glass on the edge of the bar, a small puddle of alcohol remaining inside. “So why you? Why not the silver haired brat? From what I can tell, you’ve known each other for quite some time.”

“He would’ve been a great Captain, right?” Captain Jaae says, his smile resurfacing onto his cherry-colored cheeks. “But he voted for me. It was – It felt overwhelming. I never knew so many people felt that way about me. The support was... unprecedented.”

“Much like your mutiny, I supposed?” The older man asks, brow cocked in question.

“I’m not proud of it. Out of my endless list of regrets, this is the most prominent that I have. I still think about him. Not a day goes by that my old Captain doesn’t cross my mind.”

“Why’d he go mad?”

“He thought he was running out of time to find the Goldeum.”

“Ah.” The old man exhales, “The Goldeum. It’s been a while since I last heard about that gem.”

“Yeah, well, he’s not the only person scouring the galaxy for it. His actions were inexcusable.”

“I agree. Our crew is our family, and family goes above all else.”

“Aye, Captain.” Captain Jaae raises his glass, grinning at the older man, who coughs bashfully at being referred to as *Captain*.

“No one has called me that in a long time. You’re all right by me, kid.” He raises his glass and clinks it with Captain Jaae, both taking a drinking of the little remaining alcohol. “And don’t regret it. Your crew, they respect you, immensely. That kind of trust is hard to come by, and the fact that they were all willing to follow you, lay their life on the line for you, goes to show you were always meant to be Captain of the ship.”



“I – thank you.” Captain Jaae says just as a boisterous horn is heard in the distance, signaling the ships pending departure.

The front doors swing open, Zukai standing at the entrance, ducking his head into the pub and gesturing for Captain Jaae to follow.

“It’s time, Captain.”

“Right.” He says, placing the glass on the bar top and stands, adjusting his bandages and coat to comfortably rest on his shoulders. He extends his hand towards the older man instantly take it, clasping it firmly. “We’ll be back on the fifth.”

Captain Jaae heads for the entrance just a few steps away from the door when he abruptly halts. He pivots back towards the older man, Zukai taking notice and taking a step into the pub.

“I forgot to ask,” Captain Jaae says once he’s face to face with the older man, “What’s your name, Captain?”

“I thought you’d never ask. The name’s Captain Hartdowl.” The older man smiles briefly before making a hat tip gesture.

Captain Jaae and Zukai simultaneously freeze at the name, the blood draining from their face.

“Come again?” Captain Jaae asks, hesitantly.

“Well, I suppose I can’t really call myself a *Captain* seeing as I no longer have a ship or crew. Plus, I’m sure my boy’s probably out there using our name, now. Call me Jaouqx, instead.”

“Erm, all right... Thank you for everything, Jaouqx.” Captain Jaae clears the ball forming at the base of his throat and shakes Jaouqx hand once mor before joining Zukai.

“Have a safe sail, kid. Try to stay out of trouble. Same goes for you, brat.”

Captain Jaae and Zukai exit the pub, allowing the door to shut fully before exhaling a long, heavy breath.

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“What are the odds...” Zukai mumbles as they trek down the road, heading towards the ship ports.

“You really didn’t know?”

“No! I didn’t even know where we were landing! I told Aliouss to sail us to the closest port, which just happened to be here on Penttdox-05.”

“You let Aliouss sail?” Captain Jaae sighs, massaging his temples.

“He had to! Rholsfyre got shot!”

“Right, right. Let’s just – let’s just not speak of this until the fifth. Or ever for that matter.”

“Agreed.”

They continue walking down the barren street, side by side, as the twin moons illuminate their path to the port a few blocks from the pub.

“So, what the old man have you doing the whole week?”

“He let me run the bar.”

“You? You can’t even handle your alcohol.”

“So! Running a bar doesn’t mean I drink anything.” Zukai says accusingly. “I’m apparently an excellent bar keep according to old Hartdowl.”

“And the others?”

“Just around the bar,” Zukai says. “You know, Jhordyn wasn’t too happy about doing grunt work for someone who wasn’t you.”

“When is he ever happy about doing any kind of work.” Captain Jaae scoffs.

“He was also pretty worried about you. Considering he went as far as to maim Hartdowl.”

“Oh, so you’re saying you wouldn’t have done the same?” Captain Jaae teases.

Zukai bumps Captain Jaae’s uninjured shoulder softly, smiling when the Captain bumps his right back.

“You know I’d give my life for you.”

“I can’t tell if you’re joking or not.” Captain Jaae sighs as he stares up at the twin moons, their brightness shining down on his pale face, cheeks dusted with shades of pink.

“The scar on my chest says otherwise.”

They reach the end of the street, shoulders still bumping into one another. The Exodus ship floats in the sky just a couple of feet away, tied down to the dock by several chunky twine ropes. They can hear the crew hollering at one another as they prepare the ship for takeoff.

“I’m sorry. I should have been more careful...”

Zukai steps in front of Captain Jaae, facing him. He's only slightly taller than him, but his broad frame blocks his view of the ship. Zukai tilts his head forward, resting his forehead right onto Captain Jaae's, his long silver locks mixing with the Captain's sage-colored hair.

"I'd never hear the end of it from Leonz or Xuluuch if they saw us like this." Captain Jaae murmurs, nuzzling into Zukai's forehead and brushing his hair off his eyes.

"Are you kidding? Why do you think I stepped in front of you? I can hear them now:

*"A Captain must never show any sign of weakness! A weak Captain makes for a weak ship!"* They say in monotone unison, snickering once they finish reciting their gunners' infamous quote.

They stay standing in place for a few more minutes, drinking in each other's presence, basking in the sound of the wind and the shine of the twin moons, until a loud whistle is heard coming from the ship.

"That's Khym and Maksshim's last call. You know how they get about punctuality. Wouldn't put it past them to leave even me behind."

Zukai lifts his head slowly, keeping his warm, brown eyes fixed on Captain Jaae, who keeps his eyes closed just a bit longer.

"Are you sure you're okay to sail?" Zukai asks, tentatively.

Captain Jaae takes a deep breath, blinking his eyes open and looking past Zukai. He fixes his coat with his good hand to cover his bare chest, his bandages barely peeking out from the open buttons of his shirt.

"There's no time to feel anything but okay."

The pair continue their short trek towards the ship, a long, wooden ramp lifting with them as they board. Once they're on deck, the crew automatically stops, waiting for the Captain to give the signal to launch.

Captain Jaae and Zukai make their way up to the quarter deck, where Aliouss is nervously gripping the helm. Captain Jaae gives him a quick once over before nodding and turning towards the crew, leaning onto the railing that's right across the helm.

"You all have my thanks and apologies for the events that happened these last two weeks. As your Captain, I will do my best to ensure it will never happen again. We set sail once more for the *gem of grandeur*, soon the Goldeum will be ours!"

Captain Jaae pulls out his sword from his scabbard, raising it as high as he can with his good arm. The crew erupts into a roar of *hoorah's*, raising their own swords and guns up high in the air along with the Captain's. He shifts in place, pointing his sword at a pair of corral-skinned boys with loosely tied ponytails, standing near the helm.

"Khym, Maksshim, call it."

The boys bolt to their position near the main mast. On one side of the mast, a large green lever with unique symbols carved into the side, and on the other, a red lever with similar symbols carved into the opposite side.

"Engaging artificial oxygen!"

"Engaging artificial gravity!"

The entire ship is engulfed in an invisible blanket of thin air and a light weight can be felt all throughout the ship. The rope is pulled in from the dock; slowly, the ship begins to float up

into space, one by one the solar sails expand, widening, making the ship float faster into the stars.

“This time.” The Captain says, “This time we’ll find it.”

“I hope so, too.” Zukai replies.

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The ship sails through the space silently, weaving through the debris floating nearby. Zukai has set up a makeshift table out of a gun powder barrels, placing two next to each other. On one barrel he has a small map, similar to Captain Jaee’s, and on the other a cup of ink and some lined papers

“What you doing?” Jhordyn asks as he plops down next to Zukai, taking a bite from a circular, purple fruit.

“Budgeting. That week at the old man’s pub really set us back from our funds.”

“How much?”

“About 6,00 truns...”

Instantly, he hears Jhordyn cough noisily, a piece of his fruit landing onto the barrel with the ink and paper. He flicks the chewed up fruit back at him, grunting in disgust.

“Why the hell did we lose much?” Jhordyn hisses.

“Well... don’t tell Captain, but I had to pay the old man for shelter and protection.”

“Didn’t old man say he was cool with us crashing?”

“Yeah, but Penttdox-05 isn’t exactly the friendliest of planets. I wanted to ensure we were extra cautious considering the Captain’s condition, even if it meant dipping into our money.”

“So, we’re screwed, is what you’re basically saying?”

“Well, no – no, not yet! I will figure this out.”

“And I have two heads with seven eyes.” Jhordyn deadpans.

“Wh – What?”

“Exactly. Just talk to Captain. I’m sure he’ll know what to do.”

“Always the Captain with you.” Zukai teases, “It’s starting to sound like you might have a little crush going on.”

Jhordyn doesn’t say anything, choosing instead to focus on Zukai who continues to play with number on his papers.

“You know, it’s not like I really care or anything but... do you like Captain?”

“Like him?” Zukai asks, cocking an eyebrow at the abrupt question.

“You know, like, *like him* like him...”

“Why?”

“No reason... it’s not like I care or anything. Just wondering.”

“*Right.* You sound a lot like you don’t care.” Zukai says suspiciously, a mischievous smile emerging onto his chiseled cheeks, “He is pretty great, isn’t he?”

“Yep. Great. He’s amazing.” Jhordyn exclaims, a dismissive hand waving off Zukai’s question.

“I don’t think I ever got to ask, but how’d you meet Captain?” Zukai asks as he scribbles more numbers onto the page, briefly dipping his pen into the cup of ink.

“Met him on Andryd-04”

“Wait, was I there?” He asks, pausing and tapping his pen pensively onto his bottom lip.

“Of course, why would you remember a dirty, desolate and dying wasteland.” Jhordyn says, kicking the barrel lightly, causing some ink to spill out of the cup and sprinkle onto the papers.

“Relax.” Zukai chuckles, smearing the ink on the page with his slender fingers, “I didn’t say any of that. I just don’t remember.”

“Yes, you were there, you ass. With Captain.”

“Oh. I guess my eyes were just trained on Captain, then.” He winks at Jhordyn, rubbing his fingers onto his faded jeans to get rid of the ink staining his skin.

“Whatever.” Jhordyn huffs, staring off onto the direction of the Captain’s quarters. “And you? How’d you meet him?”

“We grew up together on Eriyst-01. We’ve known each other forever now.”

“That why you like him?” Jhordyn mumbles, eyes still fixed at Captain Jaae’s quarters.

“No. I like him because he’s my friend. Might sound a bit corny, but he’s my best friend, and I know he’s the one. He’s going to be King.”



“King? In this space bucket? Captain’s dreaming.” Jhordyn says, tearing his eyes from the Captain’s direction and back at Zukai, who continues looking down at his pages, scribbling his notes along the lines.

“Then why’d you join us?”

“No reason...”

“Damn, I really can’t find a way out.” Zukai sighs, throwing his head back, rolling his shoulders as he gives a long exhale. “Either we don’t eat for a few weeks or we dock somewhere and make some quick coin.”

“I told you. You’d best ask Captain what to do.”

“Yeah, not like I have much choice now.” Zukai chuckles defeatedly, standing from his makeshift desk, grabbing his stack of papers and making his way towards the Captain’s Quarters.

“Wait!” Jhordyn squawks, clearing his throat at Zukai’s wide-eyed stare as he stands a few feet away from him.

“Yes?”

“I really don’t care if you like Captain, but he’s not going to be King.”

“Oh?” Zukai says, arching a brow at the sudden outburst. “So, who is?”

“Me.”

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Jhordyn sits at a round table with three other crewmates. The table is littered with small circular cards and coins, each with a distinct symbol and color. To his left sits a slender boy,

physique similar to his own, with shoulder length bloodred hair tied loosely into a half pony and almond shaped eyes with slit thin pupils. To his right is slim boy, shaggy brown hair and obscuring his eyes, but his luminescent baby blue skin shines brightly, tiny dimples framing the corners of his sly smile. And sitting right across from him is a muscular boy, bright turquoise hair cut into a fauxhawk and owl-like eyes staring at his cards.

“4 on 7, Luuch. You in or out?”

“I’m out.” Xuluuch groans, running a slim hand through his hair and adjusting his hair tie.

“Sohl?”

“I’m out too.” Sohlahr says, tossing his cards onto the table, the sly smile transforming into a frustrated frown.

“That leaves you, Vee.”

“I’m in.” Verhn howls, pushing his stack of coins forwards towards the center of the table. Jhordyn follows, gripping his cards tightly. He looks at Verhn, who stares right back, his wide eyes glinting with glee, before they slam their cards onto the table simultaneously, knocking the coins stacks and scattering them around the cards.

“38!”

“39!”

“Goddamnit! How! You’re cheating aren’t you!”

“How would I cheat?” Verhn asks, rolling his round eyes and flicking his cards at Jhordyn. “You’re literally sitting right in front of me.”

“You’re doing something. Every time just one up, there’s no way. Highly suspicious.”

“Or, counterpoint,” Verhn says as he starts collecting his coins, “You suck.”

Jhordyn pounces onto Verhn, tipping the table over and sending all the coins and cards to the ground. The two boys continue to roll around the floor throwing punches and hurling insult at one another until they are suddenly drenched with freezing water.

“Enough! What the hell are you guys doing?” Captain Jaae yells, tossing the bucket to the floor.

“Jhordyn doesn’t know how to lose, apparently.” Sohlahr says boredly, leaning on a post with Xuluuch leaning on the opposite side.

“Bull. Back home I was the champ at Austentel!”

“Well, you’re not at your home anymore, farm boy.” Verhn spits, “Learn to deal with it.”

“I told you to stop calling me that!”

Jhordyn is about to lunge himself once more at Verhn, but Captain Jaae steps between the boys, Sohlahr and Xuluuch holding back Verhn.

“I said enough.” Captain Jaae snaps, the air in the room thickening at his stern tone.

Jhordyn huffs as he dusts off his clothes, shooting a glare at Verhn before glancing somberly at the Captain, walking away towards the steps leading back up to the deck of the ship.

“Why? Just, why? What’s the issue with you and Jhordyn?” Captain Jaae asks, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“He’s the one that’s always on that damn high horse of his. I don’t even know why you let him join us in the first place.:

“Have you even tried to get along with him? It’s been months since he’s joined.

“Yes! We all have! Captain, I’m not the only one who feels this way.” He gestures at the two boys who had maneuvered their way back to the table to clean up the others’ mess.

“Is this true?” Captain Jaae asks, peering over at the pair.

Sohlahr stops gathering the coins and stands from his crouched position, clearing his throat while brushing his long locks away from his face.

“I think he’s just too different, Cap. He’s not like us.”

“And who are we, exactly?”

“I mean... he’s just – I don’t know how to explain it?”

“He’s a nice kid, Captain.” Xuluuch chimes, arms full of cards and coins, “But... we’re all here for one reason and I don’t think he shares that.”

“We’re all here for you, Cap. We want you to be King.” Sohlahr adds. “And well, Verhn heard him say something that –”

“I overheard him tell Zukai that he’s planning on becoming King. What if he tried to steal the Goldeum once we find it?” Verhn says, the question weighing heavily out in the open.

“You’re wrong,” Captain Jaae says, “You’re all wrong. *He saved my life.* You all were there when this happened.”

“But what if that was his plan? Captain, I hate to say it, but how did Hartdowl know exactly where our ship was? We’ve never had anything like that happen until that kid joined us.”

“Verhn’s got a point there, Cap.” Sohlahr says, handing Xuluuch his stack of cards and coins to place back onto the upright table.

“Enough. Verhn, if you’re not sure, don’t go around spreading doubt over someone who is crew. You of all people should know this coming from Tescrox-03.”

“But Captain –”

“I will talk to Jhordyn myself. For now, I want all of you to keep your comments to yourself and steer clear of him. I don’t need any of you aggravating him more than he already is.”

Captain Jaae walks away from his crew members, his coat causing a wind hard enough to blow some cards off the table as he heads back up to the deck of the ship.

“You think... Would Jhordyn really do that? Sohlahr asks, picking up the fallen cards.

“I don’t know.” Verhn sighs, “But there’s no possible way for Hartdowl to know our exact location. Rholsfyre is too careful. He would never leave a trail.”

“Technically, Aliouss was the one leading the way. Rholsfyre’s been too last about flying lately.” Xuluuch pipes in, taking a seat back by the table.

“Even so, Rholsfyre has his little special codes to hide our tracks from the Capitol and the feds. No one in the any system should be able to know where we are.” Verhn says, taking a seat to Xuluuch’s right.

“I don’t think Jhordyn would. He seems like – he seems to really like Cap.” Sohlahr says taking a seat across from the pair, poking at the coins on the table.

“We all like the Captain, Sohl.”

“No. I mean he seems to *really* like him.”

“Oh...”

The boys go silent, knowing glances exchanged amongst each other.

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As Captain Jaae emerges from the lower deck, he immediately begins scanning the ship in search for Jhordyn, walking from the deck to the head of the ship and back, throwing his head back in frustration at the suddenly vanished boy.

He leans on the ship’s masts, crossing his arms with a huff, when a thought crosses his mind. He peers up the sails, his eye catching a glimpse of long legs swinging back and forth from the edge of the mainsails mast. Captain Jaae swiftly makes his way up the ratlines, gripping the rope tightly as he climbs, quietly hoisting himself on to the mast and walking towards Jhordyn. He takes a seat next to the glowering boy, taking note of his determined demeanor to avoid looking at him.

“You know,” he says, lightly bumping Jhordyn’s shoulder, “The crow’s nest is a lot less dangerous.”

“Leez was using it.”

“Ah. Leonz does love watching the space life when they graze through.”

“Probably turning it into a love nest for him and Vee, more like it.” He mumbles, returning the bump to the Captain’s shoulder.

“Or that.” The Captain laughs, relieved that Jhordyn didn’t seem as upset as when he left the lower deck. “You know...”

“Don’t. I know they don’t like me.” Jhordyn cuts in, “I can’t make them. And I won’t. If you’re here to tell me to try, well, I have. They just don’t like me.”

“Have you actually tried, though? Simply talking to them isn’t going to cut it for this bunch, unfortunately.”

“Yes...”

“Jhordyn, have you forgotten who I am?”

“No... Captain.” Jhordyn sighs, resignation clear as day with his tone.

“Exactly. It’s my job to know everything that’s going on in my ship. Especially if it’s amongst my crew.”

“I don’t know what to do.”

“Well, have you gotten to know everyone?” The Captain asks, emphasizing *everyone*.

“Of course, I have.”

“Oh, so you are aware of the fact that Verhn’s planet was destroyed during a coup gone wrong?”

Jhordyn goes stiff, the artificial air hitting his flushing cheeks. "I... no."

"There was a world-wide group that tried to overthrow the reigns from the inside, but within that own group there was doubt and misunderstandings, and that ended up trickling down all over the world to the point that total chaos ensued. The Capitol thought it best to simply rid themselves of Tescrox-03, so they sent in the feds.

"How'd Vee escape?"

"His family knew some people on the inside who were part of the coup and were able to send out a signal. Luckily, his family still used some old pods that immediately redirected to Eriyst-01 when that signal was activated. Verhn was on his way home from doing some work on a neighboring moon. He was rerouted to the outskirts of mine and Zukai's hometown. That's where we first met him."

"I... I didn't know that. So, he's all alone?"

"Of course not." The Captain grins, "He has us."

"But –"

"What I'm trying to say is, he has his reasons for being the way he is. As do all of us. I'm not telling you to feel sorry for him, or to change the way you see him. I'm telling you this so that you can understand why he's so distrusting. He'll warm up to you eventually, if you actually try. Gods know it me and Zukai tried our damnest to get him to open up after years of trying.

"But is not just Vee." Jhordyn whines, exasperated, "It's everyone. No one trusts me."

"Well, you didn't think I was going to tell you everyone's story myself. You'll still need to talk to Verhn to apologize. Plus, this is something you have to hear directly from the source.



“I guess.” Jhordyn sighs, looking back out into the jet-black space.

“Try. I like you, Jhordyn. And I’m not just saying that because you saved me. I think you’re a good fit here on my ship and I want my guys to think so, too.

“Zukai likes me.” Jhordyn says under his breath.

Captain Jaae laughs boisterously, startling Jhordyn from his gloomy air. He catches his breath after a few seconds, wiping a lone tear that had trickled down his eye.

“Zukai likes you, yes. But to be fair, Zukai likes everyone.”

“Do you like Zukai?” Jhordyn asks tentatively, continuing to stare out into space.

“I do. Zukai’s my first mate and my best friend. He’s been with me since we were lads.”

“But do you like him, like him?”

“I don’t – I don’t think I understand your question…” Captain Jaae says, clearing his throat.

“Nothing,” Jhordyn waves him off, “Never mind.”

Captain Jaae stretches before standing, make sure to balance himself on the mast before jumping on the nearest ratline to begin his trek down to the deck.

“Captain,” Jhordyn says, hastily, leaning his body forward to look straight at the Captain.

“And you? Do you like me?”

Captain Jaae is holding onto the ratlines, the artificial oxygen blowing through the ship, tousling the Captain’s soft sage-colored hair as he smiles brightly at the question.

“I do.”

## CHAPTER IX

### CIBERSANTUARIO

Son días como este en los que Juitzyl desearía tener el sueño pesado. Se queja cuando oye una fuerte disputa a unos metros de distancia.

*–Eso no puede ser bueno. –piensa.*

Alcanza su teléfono móvil, un trozo de plástico fino y transparente que está en la mesita de noche junto a su cama. Es el modelo más reciente, ya que su último teléfono sufrió una muerte prematura en una de sus raras escapadas de borrachera. Toca la pantalla un par de veces hasta que aparece la fecha y la hora. 04-08-2101, 06:52am. Las discusiones empiezan a ser más intensas y Juitzyl cree oír también que se están lanzando objetos. Suspira y rueda hasta el borde de la cama, balanceando los pies hacia el suelo. Accidentalmente golpea a su perro, Almendra, que sólo gruñe en respuesta.

*–¡Qué perro guardián eres! Hay gente en nuestra casa, tú. –Le da un ligero empujón al perro con los dedos de los pies y sonrío cuando lo único que hace Almendra es soltar otro gruñido bajo.*

Juitzyl se restriega el sueño de los ojos y alborota su pelo rojo cereza. Se pone perezosamente los primeros pantalones de ejercicio y la primera camiseta que encuentra y se dirige a la cocina. En su camino escucha un torrente de maldiciones. Está seguro de que son Dezkatli y Buluk. Luego oye un golpe y un *–¡Vete a la mierda!* –mal susurrado. Juitzyl gira los

ojos y acelera el paso. Escucha los gritos con más claridad. Al entrar a la cocina, recibe un golpe en la cara con lo que cree que es una cuchara.

—¡Santo cielo! ¡Dios mío, Dios mío! ¿Estás bien? Ay, dios —

—¡Mira lo que has hecho, idiota! ¿Juitzyl? Oye, Juitzyl ¿estás bien?

—¿Yo? ¡Estaba dirigiéndola a tu cara fea! ¡Tú eres el que se agachó! En serio Juitzyl, lo siento tanto, tanto, tanto, tanto...

Juitzyl levanta la mano izquierda, indicándoles a ambos que paren, mientras usa la mano derecha para sobar suavemente el lugar donde fue golpeado. Permanece de pie mientras masajea el lugar un poco más hasta que el dolor empieza a desaparecer. Suspira y finalmente mira a la pareja. Están preocupados y nerviosos. Buluk se retuerce ansiosamente las manos y Dezkatli lo mira con desprecio. Definitivamente, algo está mal.

"¿Por qué rayos están levantados tan temprano? Y... espera, qué demonios, ¿no les quité a los dos la llave del apartamento?".

No le contestan de inmediato, intercambiando una mirada preocupada entre ellos hasta que Dezkatli suspira y se adelanta.

" Es posible que hayamos encontrado a otro de nosotros y lo hayamos llevado a tu taller cuando se ha apagado. Y cuando digo nosotros, me refiero realmente a Buluk".

" ¡Ey!"

Juitzyl suspira mientras Dezkatli se da la vuelta y provoca una nueva discusión con Buluk, que realmente no quiere escuchar.

Se dirige a las escaleras de la esquina del apartamento que conectan con su taller de abajo y empieza a bajar. Cuando Juitzyl llega al fondo, oye el traqueteo de la puerta de entrada.

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A Juitzyl se le ocurre, un poco tarde, que no preguntó nada concreto sobre el *bot*.  
¿Funciona mal? ¿Es peligroso? ¿Necesita ayuda? Otros pensamientos pasan por su mente hasta que ve una figura alta que intenta desesperadamente abrir la puerta de su taller.

—¿Hola? —dice.

La figura se gira bruscamente, pegándose a la puerta. Cuando Juitzyl se acerca, no puede creer lo que ven sus ojos

La figura alta es un I0114, uno de los primeros humanos artificiales que se crearon. Juitzyl recuerda haber oído hablar sobre la primera generación. Eran extraordinarios. Fue la primera generación la que lo empezó todo, los primeros androides que se crearon fueron los que provocaron el movimiento que cambió el mundo entero a lo que es ahora. Aunque, Juitzyl también recuerda que todos los androides de la primera generación fueron emitidos para ser destruidos de inmediato.

Eran los primeros de su tipo, pero los que los estaban creando estaban dando tiros en la oscuridad. Juitzyl recuerda el horror que presenció en la televisión anticuada de su abuelo cuando los androides de la primera generación se descontrolaron, y estuvieron a punto de demoler todo el edificio del A.I.T., hace tantos años.

El droide mira a Juitzyl con aprensión. Si es posible, Juitzyl cree que se presiona más contra la puerta.

–Por favor, déjame ir. Yo... necesito salir. Tengo que irme cuando salga el sol.

Juitzyl no responde, demasiado estupefacto para encontrar las palabras adecuadas. Tarda unos instantes en ordenar sus pensamientos, pero para ese entonces Buluk y Dezkatli han bajado a trompicones de su apartamento y están a su lado. El androide parece asustado.

*El androide parece asustado.*

–*Cómo es posible...* –piensa.

–¡No puedes irte! Estás herido y nuestro amigo puede ayudar a repararte. Es un especialista de androides".

A estas alturas, Juitzyl por fin ha encontrado su voz y responde con un suspiro. –  
¿Cuántas veces te he dicho que sólo soy un *mecánico* de naves Buluk, no soy –

–Putra madre, podríamos meter a Juitzyl en graves problemas. ¡Es un puto *gen uno*!

–¡Eso a quién le importa! ¡Está herido y necesita nuestra ayuda! Por favor, Juitzyl, sólo dale una mirada rápida al *gen uno*. Es inofensivo.

–¿Cómo chingados vas a saber si es inofensivo o no?

Buluk y Dezkatli se enzarzan en una nueva disputa, pero Juitzyl oye al androide decir algo en voz baja. Ya no está pegado a la puerta, pero su mano sigue en la chapa. Juitzyl da pequeños pasos hacia él. El androide es mucho más alto que Juitzyl, una cabeza entera. Está lleno de golpes y rayones por toda su capa exterior visible y su color parece diluirse a un tono más claro. Su ropa está destrozada pero su expresión ya no es de miedo, sino de incertidumbre.

–¿Qué dijiste? Hace un momento, te escuché

El androide mira de Buluk y Dezkatli – quienes afortunadamente han dejado de discutir – a Juitzyl.

–Mi... mi nombre no es *gen uno*. Me llamo Ketzal".

–Vale, Ketzal. Mi nombre es Juitzyl".

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Juitzyl rebusca de una caja de herramientas gigante a otra. Está seguro de que su kit especial está en una de estas malditas cajas. El androide – Ketzal – se sienta en el banco de trabajo de Juitzyl, moviendo despreocupadamente las piernas. Después de convencerlo de que no quería hacerle daño, Ketzal accedió a seguir a Juitzyl a su estación de trabajo. Por lo general, Juitzyl tiene piezas de naves y otra maquinaria sobre su banco. La última vez que tuvo un androide acostado en él fue Buluk y antes de él, Dezkatli. Recuerda vívidamente esos dos días.

–¿Estás bien?

Juitzyl salta al oír la voz de Ketzal, casi dejando caer la caja que había sacado debajo de otra caja de herramientas.

–Lo siento, no quería asustarte. Es que tus niveles emocionales se elevaron. –dice el androide.

–¿Estabas... escaneándome?

Ketzal afirma tímidamente con la cabeza y desvía la mirada. Juitzyl no sabe qué decir. Estudia a Ketzal un poco, sus hombros tensos y su incapacidad para mirar a Juitzyl. Retira la mirada una vez que ve a Ketzal inquieto en su lugar.

–Por favor, no vuelvas a hacer eso. Es de mala educación escanear a la gente sin su permiso.

Juitzyl vuelve a buscar en la caja. Sonríe cuando ve lo que busca.

–¡Sabía que estaba aquí! Vaya, realmente necesito limpiar un poco este lugar. –dice avergonzado mientras observa el desastre que es su estación de trabajo.

Vuelve hacia Ketzal, quién afirma con la cabeza mientras observa el taller de Juitzyl. Arrastra un banquito plateado con él y toma asiento al otro lado de la mesa. Se desliza hacia delante hasta situarse frente a Ketzal y le indica con un gesto que se quite la camiseta.

Cuando Ketzal se levanta la camiseta, Juitzyl no puede evitar el jadeo que se le escapa al ver los daños de cerca. Todo su cuerpo tiene una capa exterior de aleación con memoria de forma que, según Juitzyl, está hecha para parecerse a la piel, pero no tiene los moretones que aparecen en la piel humana. La capa exterior de Ketzal estaba descolorida y, en algunos lugares, completamente destrozada. La rótula de su hombro derecho parece haber sido arrancada y recolocada varias veces, y la capa externa de su antebrazo estaba hecha pedazos. La mitad de su pecho fue pateado, la abolladura lo suficientemente profunda como para perforar uno de los pulmones artificiales del droide.

*–Debe dolerle hasta respirar. –piensa Juitzyl.*

–¿Qué pasó?

Juitzyl pasa la mano sobre la abolladura del pecho de Ketzal. Mira de cerca la rótula del hombro. Parece que los cables se conectaron con prisas y la rótula no estaba bien conectada a la cuenca, pero Juitzyl puede arreglarlo. Baja hasta el antebrazo y roza con los dedos la aleación.

Hay trozos que sobresalen y se ven los cables internos y los músculos de aire. Es como si su brazo hubiera pasado por una máquina trituradora.

–Los humanos aún recuerdan. En cuanto ven mi cuello, sé que tengo que marcharme.

Juitzyl mira hacia el cuello de Ketzal, una banda gruesa, de color blanco, con una pequeña cajita en el centro. La caja tiene tres luces, dos luces pequeñas en cada esquina y una luz un poco más grande en el centro. Sin embargo, fue el color lo que llamó la atención de Juitzyl. Los collares de Buluk y Dezkatli mostraban diferentes tonos de rojo, el de Buluk un poco más oscuro que el de Dezkatli, pero el de Ketzal brillaba con un verde intenso.

–Es difícil ocultar esta cosa, –señala Ketzal hacia su cuello. –Normalmente me pongo un par de capas para ocultar la luz. Por eso quería irme en cuanto saliera el sol. Así es más difícil que se note, pero algunos todavía lo notan. Saben lo que significa.

Y Juitzyl también lo sabe. Pasa los dedos sobre la caja, la luz brillante brilla a través de las puntas de sus dedos. El verde era el color que se daba a los droides que debían ser dados de baja inmediatamente. Recuerda el frenético murmullo de Dezkatli y el collar de Buluk parpadeando peligrosamente entre el rojo y el verde.

–Tus emociones se elevaron de nuevo.

Juitzyl deja de trazar la caja y mira a Ketzal. Sus ojos son tiernos, y sus labios de color rosa suave se juntan en una tímida sonrisa.

–Yo... yo no puedo apagar mis escáneres. Están integrados en mis ojos. Las estadísticas simplemente aparecen.

–Tendré que revisar eso también entonces.



Juitzyl se agacha para recoger la caja que había estado buscando y la coloca sobre el banco. Oprime un botoncito en la parte superior y la caja se expande hacia arriba en tres compartimentos, cada uno de ellos lleno de numerosas herramientas y otra maquinaria pequeña.

–¿Me cuentas por qué te pones triste cuando trabajas?

Juitzyl se endereza y mira a Ketzal. Sus cejas oscuras están perfectamente anguladas para adaptarse al diseño de su cara, sus ojos almendrados y su nariz simpática se encuentran a la distancia justa, y sus labios son gruesos, pero el labio inferior parece haber sido cortado repetidamente. Tendrá que revisar eso también. Juitzyl se toma un momento para apreciar el rostro de Ketzal. Está casi seguro de que quien programó el microchip de la apariencia de Ketzal debe haber utilizado algún tipo de Dios mitológico como referencia.

Ketzal sigue mirando a Juitzyl con lo que parece ser genuina curiosidad, su cabeza inclinada hacia un lado con la misma tímida sonrisa que ha mantenido desde que siguió a Juitzyl a su área de trabajo. Juitzyl no entiende cómo este androide puede parecer tan... tan humano a pesar de ser uno de los primeros de su especie. Incluso Buluk y Dezkatli seguían teniendo problemas para entender varias emociones humanas.

–Necesito que te acuestes de espaldas y te duermas por unas horas. Tengo que abrirte el pecho para sacar esa abolladura y tengo la sensación de que tendré que reconstruir todo tu brazo. Tu piel – la capa exterior – parece que también necesita un bombeo inmediato para recolorarse.

Ketzal obedece. Se recuesta y Juitzyl observa cómo el cuerpo de Ketzal comienza a aflojarse. Uno por uno sus extremidades comienzan a aflojarse. Juitzyl mira los ojos de Ketzal, cuyo color se va oscureciendo poco a poco. Mejor se lo cuenta antes de que se duerma completamente.

–Los dos que te encontraron. También son androides como tu. Yo... pues supongo que los salvé.

Juitzyl observa como los ojos de Ketzal se abren ligeramente, pero es demasiado tarde. Ha entrado en modo de sueño.

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–¡Pero han pasado dos semanas enteras! ¿Por qué no se despierta? –se queja Buluk mientras toca la cara dormida de Ketzal.

Juitzyl tampoco está segura. Le dijo a Ketzal que sólo necesitaba unas horas, no semanas. De acuerdo, le dio más tiempo para trabajar en todo el cuerpo del androide. Sigue apretando un tornillo en forma de estrella en su nave cuando Buluk se sienta en el banquito de al lado.

–¿Cuándo vas a dejar de trabajar en esta cosa? –dando una ligera patada a la nave.

–Cuando termine con ella.

Juitzyl empuja un poco más el tornero. A decir la verdad, ha trabajado más en su nave estas dos últimas semanas que en los últimos dos meses. Quería vigilar de cerca a Ketzal por si de repente se reiniciaba y por alguna razón no recordaba nada, así que ha pasado la mayor parte de su tiempo trabajando en la nave. Se alegra de haber trasladado su estación de trabajo más cerca de sus naves unos meses antes. Ahora nunca está muy lejos de Ketzal.

–Además, Dezkatli dice que ya casi termino. Sólo necesito algo para superar el estúpido refuerzo de PRH de ese imbécil. Lo juro, ¿de dónde diablos saca todo ese material? Te apuesto lo que quieras a que es probablemente todo ilegal.

Buluk encoge los hombros, claramente desinteresado por la bronca de Juitzyl. Juitzyl observa cómo Buluk se tapa el ojo izquierdo y examina la nave. Juitzyl sabe que lo está escaneando. Espera pacientemente el análisis; como ahora Bo sólo puede escanear con el ojo derecho, tarda un poco más. Después de un par de minutos, retira la mano y sonrío a Juitzyl.

–Le ganarás a ese imbécil. Comparé uno de mis viejos escaneos de su nave con el tuyo. Le llevas 6,8 de ventaja si logras parchear tu procesador de velocidad y amplificarlo con algo.

–¿Algo? ¿Qué algo?

–No estoy... seguro. –Buluk encoge los hombros de nuevo. –Lo siento Juitzyl, mi escáner no muestra nada específico, sólo que definitivamente te falta algo.

–¿Has intentado un intensificador de UMD?"

Juitzyl y Buluk se asustan por la voz grave. Se voltean para ver a Ketzal, sonriendo a ambos y luchando por levantarse en el banco de trabajo.

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–¿Dos semanas enteras? Vaya, mi sistema ha debido de estar muy sobrecargado para anular mi temporizador y poner uno nuevo.

Tras el inesperado despertar de Ketzal, Juitzyl se aseguró de examinarlo centímetro a centímetro antes de permitir que se levantara y recorriera el taller con Buluk.

–¡Pero ya estás mejor! Te lo dije; él dice que no lo es, ¡pero Juitzyl es una *especialista* de androides! Mira esto... –Juitzyl observa cómo Buluk aleja su plato de cereal vacío y se inclina hacia Ketzal, con los ojos azules brillantes fijos a los grises claros. –Me arregló el ojo. Todavía

está un poco alterado, antes tenía los ojos grises como los tuyos, pero puedo ver. No me molestan las fracturas y ya no veo a los demás con el símbolo de tiro al blanco.

Juitzyl sonrío ante la sonrisa que le dedica Buluk. Nunca llegó a arreglar las fracturas alrededor del ojo izquierdo de Buluk. Recuerda cómo Buluk lo rechazó cuando le ofreció arreglarlo hace un par de meses, afirmando con emoción: *—¡Dezkatli dice que las pequeñas grietas del lado parecen una nube de tormenta y las dos grietas de la parte inferior de mi párpado parecen un rayo!*

—Bueno, será mejor que me vaya. Le dije a Dezkatli que sólo saldría por unas horas. Se alegrará de que te hayas despertado. Pasaremos mañana a saludar. —Buluk da un último abrazo a Ketzal, que sonrío ampliamente y devuelve el abrazo con entusiasmo.

Juitzyl cree que el hoyuelo que aparece en el cachete izquierdo de Ketzal cuando sonrío es bastante adorable. Ketzal es diferente a la mayoría de los androides que ha conocido. Es torpe y tímido, innegablemente guapo y bellamente esculpido. Juitzyl sale de su estupor cuando oye a Buluk gritar un último adiós cuando sale por la puerta.

Ahora sólo están él y Ketzal. Después de dos semanas completas de tener al androide descansando en su mesa de trabajo, Juitzyl no está seguro por qué se siente tan nervioso. ¿Debería volver a preguntarle cómo se siente? Se ve mucho mejor. Su piel es ahora de un color caramelo parejo y no tiene ninguna marca ni abolladura. Las articulaciones a las que les faltaba la aleación estaban ahora conectadas al resto de sus articulaciones. Ya no había huecos que demostraran sus cables y circuitos internos. Ahora Ketzal podía mover su cuerpo libremente sin preocuparse de que su aleación se trabara o de que pareciera que llevaba un traje de armadura completo. Juitzyl podría jurar que hizo que Ketzal pareciera aún más humano que él mismo.

–Tu ritmo cardíaco está aumentando. –Ketzal vuelve a sonreírle. –Esta vez no son mis escáneres. Supongo que lo arreglaste. Pero tenemos sensores que nos dan señales de pulso. Como precaución de seguridad.

–¿Cómo te va a proteger saber el ritmo cardíaco de alguien?

–Nos permite saber si alguien con un ritmo cardíaco errático querrá hacernos daño a nosotros o a alguien con quien estemos o...

–¿O?

Ketzal hace un gesto de rechazo y se pone de pie. Estira sus extremidades y Juitzyl no puede evitar mirar un poco cuando la camisa de Ketzal se levanta. Juitzyl se levanta también, sin dejar de mirar a Ketzal mientras camina por el taller. Realmente no ha limpiado mucho a pesar de su propio regaño por el desorden. Había estado demasiado ocupado trabajando en su nave y esperando a que Ketzal se despertara. Ketzal camina un poco más hasta llegar a la nave de Juitzyl. Juitzyl ve que sus ojos se iluminan un poco más. Probablemente lo esté escaneando.

–Esta nave es muy rápida. Todas las piezas que tiene son increíbles. ¿Compites?

–No. –Juitzyl se ríe.

Camina y se pone al lado de Ketzal. –Hay una competición cada año para la *Nave espacial más rápida*, pero tiene que ser construida aquí en la Tierra. Tiene que beneficiar a los humanos para viajar al exterior. También hay un premio importante que aumenta cada año. Me presenté el año pasado con un... amigo, pero no gané.

Ketzal se acerca y pone la mano en la nave.

–Es extraño. Mis cálculos muestran que deberías haber ganado en comparación con el ganador anterior. He accedido a sus diseños. ¿Quién es Cixin Mondragón? –El rostro de Ketzal se retuerce cuando suelta la mano.

–El que ganó. En fin... –Juitzyl se aclara la garganta y se sacude la tierra imaginaria de sus pantalones. –¿Por qué no descansas un poco? Puedo prepararnos algo para comer más tarde, ya que no querías cereal.

Ketzal afirma con la cabeza y sigue a Juitzyl de vuelta al banco de trabajo.

–¿Aquí vives?

–No, este es mi taller. Yo vivo en el apartamento de arriba con mi perro.

Ketzal alza la cabeza en dirección a Juitzyl. Juitzyl está confundido y un poco preocupado cuando Ketzal camina a gran velocidad hacia él. Sigue siendo más alto que Juitzyl, prácticamente le sobrepasa.

–Yo... ¿puedo conocerlo? Tu perro, quiero decir. Es que... me gustan mucho los perros".

Si Juitzyl no entendía al androide antes, ahora está aún más confundido. Hasta donde él sabe, los primeros androides fueron creados estrictamente como maquinaria. Entender y expresar emociones no debería ser posible para ellos. Aún así, aquí estaba Ketzal, un androide de primera generación parado en su taller expresando su adoración por un animal. ¿Cómo podía Ketzal sentir algo? Juitzyl recoge el plato de cereal vacío y se dirige a las escaleras.

–Es un perro viejo, pero le encanta jugar.

–¿Cómo se llama?

–Almendra

Juitzyl está a dos pasos de distancia cuando oye una risa ruidosa detrás de él. Se voltea para ver a Ketzal agachado agarrándose el estómago y riéndose. Ketzal se estaba *riendo*.

–Lo siento. No quise reírme, pero es un nombre tan adorable para un perrito.

Observa cómo Ketzal se endereza para limpiarse una lágrima de la cara. Juitzyl frunce el ceño y trata de ver discretamente la cara de Ketzal. Revisó su procesador facial, no había ningún rastro de conductos lagrimales incluidos en su diseño. Cuando Ketzal recupera el aire, se dirigen hacia las escaleras. Juitzyl trata de contenerse para no preguntar, pero es una pregunta bastante importante.

–E-Estás... ya sabes... –tartamudea Juitzyl. No quiere que Ketzal malinterprete sus intenciones. Respira profundamente antes de continuar: –¿Te vas a quedar conmigo?

Al llegar a la parte de arriba de la escalera, se oye el ruido de unas patitas de perro que caminan hacia ellos. Ketzal se agacha de inmediato para acariciar al pequeño perro, que mueve la colita con alegría y le lambe la cara. Juitzyl sonrío, hacía tiempo que no veía a Almendra tan emocionado. Se dirige al fregadero donde deposita el plato. Ketzal sigue riendo y se tumba en el suelo con Almendra meneándose sobre su estómago. Levanta la vista, con los ojos brillantes y la sonrisa dirigiéndose a Juitzyl desde el suelo.

–Si me dejas, quiero quedarme contigo.

Juitzyl siente que la sangre se le sube a los cachetes, su corazón late con fuerza. Sacude la cabeza, respirando profundamente antes de ponerse a trabajar.

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–Tu pulso se ha elevado de nuevo.

Juitzyl alza la vista cuando se acerca Ketzal, con una taza de helado de vainilla en una mano y un mecha-choco-pop en la otra.

–Perdón. Sólo estaba pensando. Gracias.

Acepta la taza y hace desaparecer sus nervios mientras Ketzal toma asiento a su lado en el banco profusamente grafitado. Están en el parque, a unas tres cuerdas de su apartamento. Ketzal había sugerido que se tomaran un descanso, ya que estaba *–escuchando físicamente cómo su cerebro se derretía de aburrimiento* –en el taller de Juitzyl.

Ketzal se ha estado quedando con Juitzyl desde hace un mes. No estaba seguro de cómo sería tener a un extraño andando por su casa, pero llegó a encontrar la presencia de Ketzal tranquilizante. Ketzal le ayuda en el taller con los envíos y los clientes. Afortunadamente, alcanza los lugares altos a los que Juitzyl nunca llegaría sin su útil escalera de bolsillo. Su apartamento también está mucho más limpio ahora que Ketzal le exigió que le permitiera hacer algo.

*–Prácticamente estás escondiendo a un fugitivo, Juitzyl. Quiero merecer mi lugar aquí. Al menos dame algo de trabajo -comentó Ketzal, ajustando sus ojos para dirigirle a Juitzyl los ojos de cachorro más tristes que pudo reunir.*

Entonces, Juitzyl aceptó. Ketzal incluso hace algunos de los quehaceres que Juitzyl evita. Almendra también había aceptado por completo a Ketzal en su casa e incluso había adquirido la costumbre de salir de la habitación de Juitzyl a mitad de la noche para acurrucarse con Ketzal en el sofá.



La presencia de Ketzal era agradable, pero también era una fuente de nervios. Juitzyl tiene que estar constantemente en alerta por si alguien que entra a su taller reconoce a Ketzal o ve accidentalmente su collar. Hasta ahora, han sido cuidadosos y han estado seguros. Pero, ahora mismo, sentados en un espacio abierto donde pasan cientos de personas y androides, Juitzyl se siente más nervioso que nunca.

–No pasa nada, Juitzyl. Nadie nos está poniendo atención. Vamos, al menos enséñame tu sonrisa bonita.

Juitzyl se sonroja ante la selección de palabras de Ketzal. Parece ser algo recurrente con el droide. Siempre encuentra la manera de decir algo que hace que la cara de Juitzyl se sienta como si estuviera en llamas.

*–Juitzyl, ¿por qué tienes una sonrisa tan bonita?*

*–Juitzyl, el lunar que tienes arriba del labio es adorable.*

*–Juitzyl, ¿por qué ya no sales del baño sólo con una toalla alrededor de la cintura? Tu cuerpo no está feo.*

Mira a Ketzal y le dirige una pequeña sonrisa. Ketzal se ríe ligeramente y muerde su mecha-choco-pop. Observa cómo una lengua rosa brillante sale de los labios de Ketzal para lamer una gota de helado que se había escurrido por un lado de su labio. Sacude la cabeza y decide que una cucharada de helado apagará el fuego que siente que intenta encenderse en el fondo de su estómago. Ketzal sigue comiendo su helado, con un comportamiento tan tranquilo como el viento que sopla en el parque. Juitzyl no lo entiende.

No entiende cómo Ketzal puede estar tan relajado. Si él fuera un fugitivo, no está seguro de qué sería capaz de permanecer tan tranquilo. Se siente mal por recordarle repetidamente a Ketzal que se deje las bufandas puestas cuando están con los clientes o comprando la comida, pero Ketzal nunca se queja. Simplemente sonrío y busca la mano de Juitzyl para darle un breve apretón.

La primera vez que Ketzal le apretó la mano, Juitzyl pensó que su corazón se iba a salir del pecho. Ketzal se había preocupado de que lo había electrocutado por error y que había provocado que su corazón se volviera inestable, pero eso no era totalmente correcto. Juitzyl había sentido la más pequeña vibración y su corazón se había sentido tan lleno. Ketzal le había mirado fijamente con los mismos ojos grises y amplios que el primer día que se conocieron. Juitzyl no sabe cuándo ocurrió, tal vez en el preciso momento en que Ketzal se acercó a él, pero Juitzyl piensa que Ketzal es el ser más deslumbrante que ha conocido.

Juitzyl es devuelto de sus pensamientos internos por la mano de Ketzal que se mueve frente a su cara.

—¿Juitzyl? ¿Holaaaaa? ¿Estás bien?

—Ah, sí - estoy bien, lo siento.

—¿Entonces qué dije hace unos segundos?

*Maldición.* —Bueno, es que - creo que debemos irnos, Ketzal. Es peligroso y Buluk y Dezkatli van a llegar en un rato y el taller es un desastre. Tal vez deberíamos...

—Dime cómo los salvaste.

—No creo...

–Vamos, a lo mejor te calma los nervios pensar en otra cosa. Cuéntame.

Al contrario, sus nervios estarán más agitados. Odia pensar en esos dos días. Juitzyl pica su helado con la cucharita. Respira profundamente y echa la cabeza hacia atrás para mirar al cielo.

–¿Juitzyl?

–Encontré a Dezkatli en el callejón junto al taller. No entendí por qué alguien tiraría uno de los robots más nuevos en ese momento, pero en cuanto lo traje dentro del taller lo entendí.

–¿Qué tenía de malo?

–Sus extremidades no fueron cuidadas adecuadamente por su familia anterior. Dice que ese día salieron a pasear, pero creo que simplemente borró todos sus recuerdos anteriores antes de que...

Juitzyl se congela cuando siente que Ketzal se recarga en él.

–Continúa. Sólo quería descansar los ojos.

Voltea ligeramente la cabeza, observando rápidamente el rostro de Ketzal. Efectivamente, tiene los ojos cerrados. Juitzyl respira de nuevo e intenta calmar su corazón. No necesita que Ketzal note que su pulso ha vuelto a subir.

–Lo dejaron cuando se encerró de nuevo. Cuando se cierra, los brazos se doblan, pero no las piernas, así que cuando lo encontré, le faltaba la pierna derecha y le habían abierto la espalda.

–Algunos humanos se comportan fatal con los de nuestra especie. murmura Ketzal, su cara se tuerce en una mueca.

–Lo sé. –suspira. –Arreglé lo que pude y, en cuanto recapacité, le permití quedarse conmigo.

Juitzyl sonrío al recordar que Dezkatli casi le quebró las costillas de un abrazo cuando le dijo que no se encerraría nunca más.

–¿Y Buluk?

Juitzyl finalmente se apoya en Ketzal, quien se mueve para poder tener una posición más cómoda.

–Dezkatli y yo estábamos buscando un taller que recibió mi cargamento por error. El taller estaba en los alrededores de una base militar. Recuerdo haber leído sobre algunos bots antiguos que se entregaban a los militares como apoyo voluntario. Dezkatli lo notó vagando por un parque muy parecido a este cerca de esa base. Cuando nos acercamos, lo encontramos luchando consigo mismo. Buluk tenía su cañón de brazo fuera con su ojo de batalla apuntado y listo para disparar, excepto que no lo hacía.

Juitzyl puede sentir el cambio de marchas de Ketzal y las pequeñas descargas de aire que emiten sus músculos en su interior. Es casi como si todo su cuerpo estuviera zumbando y Juitzyl llega a encontrar los movimientos relajantes.

–¿Pero no puedes desobedecer una orden directa en modo de combate? Esa fue una de las primeras funciones que nos examinaron en el laboratorio.

–Yo también pensé que iba a disparar hacia nosotros, pero no lo hizo, –Juitzyl encoge los hombros como puede y continúa: –Se tiró al suelo boca abajo y suplicó ayuda. Ahí fue cuando

vimos que alguien le había clavado un enchufe de descarga eléctrica en el lado izquierdo del cuello, junto al collar. Le estaba quemando el interior y lo tenía atorado en ese estado.

–¿Es por eso que sus ojos cambiaron?

–Eso es también lo que sobrecargó su procesador facial. Estaba empezando a romper su cara, pero Dezkatli logró apagarlo. Lo trajimos al taller y creo que trabajé en él más horas que en ti.

Juitzyl escucha a Ketzal tararear. –Suenan como que han sufrido mucho.

*Hablando del diablo. O, en este caso, hablando de los demonios y aparecerán.*

El teléfono de Juitzyl suena varias veces. Saca el aparato y toca el panel frontal. Múltiples mensajes de Dezkatli y Buluk inundando la pantalla. Juitzyl palidece. Se endereza abruptamente, causando que Ketzal caiga a un lado.

–Creo que es hora de irse. Ahora mismo.

Le pasa el teléfono a Ketzal, que sólo se ríe de los mensajes. Ambos se levantan y comienzan a caminar hacia la entrada del parque. Juitzyl tira su vaso de helado derretido en un basurero cercano. Se está sacudiendo las manos cuando unos fuertes brazos lo envuelven de repente por detrás. *Ketzal lo está abrazando.* Siente que los latidos de su corazón aumentan a cada segundo, y trata desesperadamente de calmarlos. Se queda lo más quieto posible hasta que Ketzal lo suelta.

Excepto que no lo hace. Extiende uno de sus brazos hacia arriba, con el teléfono de Juitzyl en la mano.

–¡Sonríe!

Juitzyl está seguro de que su cara está roja como una remolacha. Logra soltar una sonrisita antes de oír el disparo de la cámara varias veces. Ketzal se aclara la garganta y suelta a Juitzyl. Está seguro de que puede ver algo parecido al sonrojo en la cara de Ketzal.

–Sólo quería darte las gracias. Por compartir. Gracias por confiar en mí. Eres una persona increíble, Juitzyl.

Ketzal le entrega el celular, sonriendo con esa sonrisa radiante que siempre consigue revolver las entrañas de Juitzyl. Observa cómo Ketzal lo rodea y empieza a ir en la dirección por la que llegaron.

Juitzyl no se mueve de su lugar. Necesita unos segundos más para asegurarse de que su corazón no explote de repente.

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–¡Gracias! Por favor, vuelvan a venir.

Juitzyl suspira al ver cómo Ketzal saluda con entusiasmo al anciano que sale del taller. Se supone que debería estar trabajando en su nave, revisando el ala derecha para ver si hay algún daño desde que Ketzal dejó caer accidentalmente una caja llena de tornillos de 16 libras sobre ella, por lo que sólo se sorprende un poco cuando Dezkatli le da unas ligeras palmaditas en la espalda.

–Se ve bien. Aprende rápido. –Juitzyl tararea de acuerdo mientras Dezkatli se inclina un poco más cerca de su oído. –Entonces, ¿cuándo le vas a decir que te gusta?

Juitzyl empieza a ahogarse con el aire. Ketzal se voltea y los mira con preocupación, pero Juitzyl le hace un gesto con la mano de que continúe con el cliente. Sigue tosiendo por unos segundos más y espera a que Ketzal esté más lejos de ellos.

–¿Por qué dices esas cosas? –sisea Juitzyl.

–He estado observando tus escaneos. –Dezkatli cruza los brazos y se recarga en la nave.  
–Tus niveles hormonales entran en frenesí cada vez que estás cerca de él y tus niveles de dopamina y norepinefrina iluminan tu cerebro como un árbol de Navidad. Sabemos que te gusta.

–Em, ¿cómo que nosotros?

–Buluk también lo ha visto. Es una maravilla que Ketzal no ha dicho nada.

–Pero yo no...

–Sí, te gusta. –Dezkatli responde inexpresivamente. –Sabemos que te gusta bastante. Esas fotos que se tomaron de los dos pasando el día en el parque eran muy simpáticas.

–¿Hackearon mi teléfono? Dezkatli, ¡qué rayos!

–Tranquilízate. Yo no he hackeado nada. No podía encontrar mi teléfono, así que desbloqueé el tuyo para llamarlo.

–¡Eso es hackear!

–Deja de gritar, –Dezkatli rueda los ojos, inclinándose hacia delante y susurrando, –Mira, entre tú y yo, lo escanéé una vez y no es igual que Buluk y yo. Fue construido de manera diferente.

–No sé de qué estás hablando y no me importa, resopla Juitzyl. –Tengo que terminar esta nave para el mes que viene, así que por favor... déjame concentrarme.

–Bueno, pero viene para acá y he hecho todo lo posible para mantener a Buluk callado. O se lo dices tú o el próximo tiempo... ¡Ey! ¡Amigo! ¿Cómo va todo?

Juitzyl suspira y empieza a guardar sus herramientas. No va a terminar de revisar nada hoy por lo visto. Oye a Dezkatli hablando con Ketzal sobre un nuevo juego que Buluk ha adquirido de su vecino, Setsu.

–Deberías visitarnos por un rato. Setsu es un idiota y Buluk necesita un nuevo compañero de juegos ya que, según él, soy "totalmente inútil". Tal vez alejarte de este taller y del viejo gruñón de Juitzyl te haga bien... ¡OW! –grita Dezkatli, sobándose el lugar donde le pegó un tornillito.

–Vuelve a llamarme viejo y te desmontaré las dos piernas la próxima vez que decidas echarte una siesta aquí.

–Bueno, ya me voy. Imbécil. –refunfuña Dezkatli.

Juitzyl mira a Ketzal que tiene los ojos fijos en la figura de Dezkatli que se retira. Justo antes de salir del taller, Dezkatli se detiene y echa una última mirada penetrante a Juitzyl.

–Estaba hablando en serio, Juitzyl. La próxima vez no podré detenerlo.

Juitzyl le hace un gesto para que se vaya.

Tiene que *pensar*.

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Ha pasado una semana completa desde la revelación brutal de Dezkatli sobre los sentimientos de Juitzyl. Desde ese entonces, Juitzyl se ha dedicado a arreglar su nave. El otro día dio una vuelta en la nave y se dio cuenta de que uno de los motores no funciona bien. No puede ganar el título con un motor defectuoso.

Juitzyl había invitado a Ketzal a ayudarlo hace un par de días. Por lo visto, Ketzal tenía un buen número de preguntas aún guardadas en relación con la nave.

*—¿Por qué pasas tanto tiempo arreglándola?*

*—Juitzyl, ¿no es la nave lo suficientemente rápida sin el conjunto SQ?*

*—¿Funciona con un 62DL4?*

*—¿Cuándo fue la última vez que arreglaste este sistema de serpentinas?*

*—¿Son esos los WT6?*

*—¿Por qué está tan sucio esta ala interior, Juitzyl?*

*—Tu pulso sigue aumentando, ¿seguro que estás bien?*

No hace falta decir que Juitzyl no ha invitado a Ketzal a ayudarlo con la nave después de ese día.

Está metido de cabeza en uno de los compartimentos de la nave cuando oye un fuerte golpe en el metal.

*—¿Juitzyl? ¿Estás ocupado?*

Asoma la cabeza y ve a Ketzal, cambiando su peso de un pie a otro. Su pelo se ha vuelto más brillante, más sano que el suyo. Las tiras plateadas no parecen tan dañadas como cuando se conocieron. Juitzyl se pregunta cómo se sentiría al pasar los dedos por ellos.

Se deshace de ese pensamiento antes de responder: –Eh, no, ya... ya he terminado.  
¿Necesitas algo?

–Hay un hombre que está preguntando por ti. ¿Dice que son amigos cercanos?

Juitzyl frunce el ceño. Los únicos amigos que tiene aparte de Bo y Dezkatli es la linda pareja que le vendió el taller y el apartamento, pero ya no vivían cerca de esta zona. Baja la escalera y se sacude el polvo. Sigue a Ketzal hasta la entrada del taller, pero se detiene cuando de repente se voltea para mirarlo.

–Este hombre... me da una sensación mala.

Juitzyl rueda los ojos. Ketzal siempre dice que tiene ciertas “sensaciones” con la gente, pero Juitzyl se empeña en decir que eso no puede ser posible. Cuando rodea la esquina, ve a la última persona que pensaría estaría en su taller.

–Juitzyl. Así me imaginé que seguirías manteniendo este taller asqueroso.

El hombre es más o menos de la altura de Juitzyl, con el pelo negro azulado peinado hacia atrás y fuera de sus gruesas cejas y sus ojos redondos de cierva. Tiene puesto un traje negro impecable y se pasea con confianza por el pasillo principal. Mira alrededor de el taller, totalmente indiferente al ceño fruncido que le está lanzando Juitzyl.

–¿Qué haces aquí, Cixin? –Juitzyl intenta mantener la voz firme.

Cixin examina el contenido del pasillo, ignorando por completo la pregunta de Juitzyl. Una vez que llega al final del pasillo, se dirige de nuevo, esta vez mirando directamente a Juitzyl y a Ketzal, que se encuentra detrás de Juitzyl.

–¿Sigues trabajando en tu nave?

–¿Qué te importa? ¿Vienes a robar ésta también?

–Sigues con eso, ¿es en serio? –Cixin burla. –Los dos trabajamos en ella Juitzyl.

–Pero tú te llevaste todo el mérito y sólo firmaste con tu nombre en todos los planos de diseño que presentamos.

Siente que su rabia aumenta cuando Cixin simplemente encoje los hombros.

–Pero me disculpé.

Juitzyl está a punto de lanzarse contra Cixin cuando siente la mano de Ketzal sobre su hombro, manteniéndolo firme. Mira a Ketzal, quién le sonrío.

–¿Es tuyo?

Vuelve la mirada hacia Cixin, que ahora se encuentra frente a ellos. Juitzyl se prepara mentalmente para hablarle de forma civilizada. *Puedo hacerlo. Puedo hacerlo. Puedo hacer*– el tiempo parece detenerse cuando Cixin extiende la mano para tocar a Ketzal. Juitzyl siente su mano saltar hacia adelante, agarrando la mano de Cixin a centímetros del cuello de Ketzal. Se asegura de apretarla con fuerza.

–No lo toques. –Juitzyl dice, el veneno goteando de cada palabra.

–Se supone que hay que sacrificarlo, ¿no? –Juitzyl ve como la sonrisa de Cixin crece mientras continúa: –Había oído que tenías la costumbre de recoger bots que debían ser dados de baja y los arreglabas. ¿Qué le pasaba a éste?

–Eso no es asunto tuyo. –Juitzyl afloja su agarre y suelta la mano de Cixin.

–De acuerdo, ¿qué modelo es? Es simpático. Puede que pida que me construyan uno que se parezca a él sólo para mí.

Considera la posibilidad de mentir y decir que Ketzal es uno de los modelos más nuevos, pero Cixin se daría cuenta. Está a punto de responder, pero Ketzal se le adelanta.

–Soy un I0114. Modelo número 354I.

Juitzyl ve que los ojos de Cixin se dilatan, los puntos conectándose a la vez. Cixin se aclara la garganta y se endereza la chaqueta del traje.

–Primera generación. Ya veo. Así que te has enterado de mis planes.

–¿Planes? ¿Qué planes?

Observa con atención cómo Cixin se mete la mano en el bolsillo y saca un pequeño chip. Se lo muestra a Juitzyl y a Ketzal para que lo vean. Juitzyl sabe exactamente dónde ha visto uno de esos chips antes.

–No puede ser... –Juitzyl susurra, un escalofrío recorre su columna vertebral.

–Le saqué esto a uno de ellos, –Cixin señala a Ketzal, –Se llama chip CAD. Son los chips más rápidos que se han construido. Demasiado rápidos, de hecho, por lo que probablemente dejaron de fabricarlos después de que esas cosas se volvieran locas.

Juitzyl siente que Ketzal se pone rígido detrás de él.

–Si le sacas esto y sustituyes tu chip RCD por un CAD, podrías tener una oportunidad contra mi nave. Tendremos que enfrentarnos y ver qué nave sale adelante, pero sería una cuestión de diseño y capacidad ya que ambos tendríamos un CAD.

A Juitzyl le parece repugnante la sonrisa de Cixin. La forma en que habla de Ketzal como si no estuviera justo detrás de él le enfurece. Necesita toda su fuerza de voluntad para mantenerse en su lugar y no arrancar la sonrisa de un golpe.

–No te preocupes, no sienten nada si se duermen. He guardado un recuerdo del bot al que se lo quité.

Extiende su brazo derecho y se sube la manga. Un collar fino de color crema con una pequeña caja salen a la vista. Las luces son verdes.

–Miklantek era un encanto. Le dije que durmiera para que me ayudara a ganar. Debí gustarle mucho porque lo hizo. –Cixin se ríe.

–Creo que es tiempo que te vayas, –dice Juitzyl mientras da un paso cauteloso hacia adelante y se coloca lo más alto posible frente a Ketzal, tratando de protegerlo de cualquier forma posible de las maliciosas palabras de Cixin. –No dejes que la puerta te golpee al salir. Mejor dicho, deja que lo haga. No me importa.

Juitzyl oye a Ketzal sofocar una risita.

–Esto estuvo genial. Deberíamos juntarnos más seguido. –Cixin se embolsa el dinero y se dirige a la puerta. –Te veré en las preliminares, Juitzyl.

–No, no nos veremos, piensa.

Juitzyl le echa una última mirada a Ketzal cuando Cixin ya ha salido por la puerta. Se aclara la garganta y se excusa con el pretexto de terminar con su nave ya.

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Juitzyl despierta durante la noche al oír pequeñísimos gemidos. Baja la mano para acariciar a Almendra, pero se da cuenta que el perro ha desaparecido. Se asoma y oye los gemidos que vienen de la sala de estar. Suspirando, Juitzyl se levanta y se envuelve en una cobija. Se arrastra hasta la puerta y ve a Almendra lloriqueando en las escaleras que suben al techo. Cuando se acerca, ve que la ventana que va al techo está abierta. Juitzyl mira hacia el sofá. Ketzal no está allí.

Sube las escaleras lentamente y, al llegar arriba, ve a Ketzal. Tiene una camiseta de tirantes gris y unos pantalones de pijama azules y peludos con huellas de gato por todas partes. El viento sopla y Juitzyl se da cuenta de que no puede dejar de mirar mientras Ketzal cierra los ojos y echa la cabeza hacia atrás, su collar iluminando la parte de abajo de su cara mientras disfruta del aire fresco de la noche.

–Sé que estás ahí Juitzyl. Tu corazón está latiendo a toda velocidad.

Juitzyl aprieta la cobija alrededor de su cuerpo mientras se aproxima a Ketzal. Toma asiento junto al androide, que no abre los ojos.

Pasan unos minutos antes de que Ketzal hable con calma: –Si vas a hacerlo, hazlo rápido. He sentido tu pulso desde hace tiempo, Juitzyl. Ahora entiendo por qué me has permitido quedarme contigo todo este tiempo. Si realmente quieres mi chip CAD yo... yo no te detendré.

–Yo... qué... –Juitzyl trata de tragar el nudo en la garganta. Se aclara la garganta y pregunta: –¿Cómo... cómo has podido pensar eso? ¿Es esa la clase de - la clase de persona que crees que soy?

–¿Por qué otra razón latiría tu corazón como un motor eléctrico cada vez que estoy cerca?  
–Ketzal mira a Juitzyl: –Desde que llegó Cixin... eres diferente. Me has ignorado durante los últimos dos días, pero tus latidos no dejan de sonar.

–Eso no es... no es por eso Ketzal.

–¿Entonces por qué?

Juitzyl quiere que el suelo se lo trague entero. Siente que su cerebro podría evaporarse en cualquier momento y que su corazón podría romper una arteria de tanto latir, pero no puede permitir que Ketzal piense que es un monstruo.

–Dezkatli dice que fuiste construido de manera diferente. ¿Es... es verdad?

Observa a Ketzal cerrar los ojos de nuevo. Sonríe una pequeña y triste sonrisa. Juitzyl decide entonces que no le gusta para nada esa sonrisa.

–Yo conocía a Miklantek. Era unos meses mayor que yo. Supongo que es... era. Era lo que llamarías mi hermano. Él estaba ahí cuando los humanos empezaron a hacernos daño. Los que vinieron antes que yo siempre estaban muy asustados.

–¿A qué te refieres con hacer daño?

–Hubo un androide creado justo antes que yo. Se llamaba Xibal. Era un androide especial.

Ketzal tiembla. El aire se estaba acelerando, haciendo que se sintiera mucho más frío que antes. Juitzyl topa el hombro de Ketzal y abre los brazos, haciéndole un gesto para que se incline y comparta la cobija. Ketzal abre los ojos, pero en lugar de eso, recuesta la cabeza en las piernas de Juitzyl y vuelve a cerrar los ojos. Juitzyl intenta no pensar mucho en eso y cubre a Ketzal con parte de la cobija.

–Tenía una gran presencia de ánimo y presentaba muchos talentos que los androides anteriores a él no tenían.

–¿Y eso no significa que es bueno? Eso significa que la tecnología estaba mejorando, ¿no?

–Sí, y no. Él era bastante sorprendente. Los humanos se dieron cuenta rápidamente de sus habilidades y empezaron a estudiarlo. Lo destrozaban y lo reconstruían una y otra vez para ver si cambiaba. A veces se iba por días y volvía en pedazos. Intentábamos arreglarlo, pero se lo llevaban, aunque estuviera gravemente herido. Un día, simplemente no volvió. Fue horrible.

Juitzyl ve que las lágrimas gotean de la cara de Ketzal. Duda, pero con calma se agacha y le limpia las lágrimas.

*Es aceite.*

Ketzal se pone rígido, pero no lo rechaza.

–Yo no era especial. Querían saber por qué un androide anterior a mí tenía muchos más conocimientos y talento si yo era la versión más reciente. Me sentía tan inservible. Las cosas que me hicieron. Yo sólo... no podía... no podía cambiar lo que era.



–Tú sigues diciendo que sentiste cosas, pero yo... he querido preguntar. La primera generación... fueron construidos para ser máquinas que caminan. ¿Cómo puedes... sentir?

–¿Cómo crees que fuimos hechos?

Ketzal se remueve para estar de espaldas, pero con la cabeza aún recostada en las piernas de Juitzyl.

A Juitzyl le sorprende la pregunta, sobre todo porque nunca ha pensado mucho en cómo se construyeron los androides de primera generación. El primer androide que ayudó a arreglar fue un androide de tercera generación llamado Gerry en el taller de su abuelo.

–Pues... Dezkatli es un 2B9N, un androide de la novena generación, y está construido con aleación sintética y músculos hidroaéreos. Buluk es un 2A4N, uno de la quinta generación, fue construido con un tipo diferente de aleación sintética. Nunca lo había visto antes. Era casi... bueno, casi humano.

–¿Y los androides de primera generación?

Juitzyl boquea ante la mirada fija que le dirige Ketzal. No puede mirarle a los ojos.

–No... no estoy seguro...

–Tócame, –dice Ketzal, moviendo el brazo hacia Juitzyl. Juitzyl se sonroja ante la selección de palabras de Ketzal, pero hace lo que le pide.

Toca el brazo de Ketzal con las manos. Después de unos segundos, se da cuenta de lo que siente y al instante retrocede ante la textura.

–Me habrás reparado y dejado que te toque, pero descubrí que nunca te diste cuenta de cómo se siente mi aleación.

–Se... se siente como la piel h-humana.

–En aquel entonces no tenían mucho para seguir. Nuestra capa exterior a la que te refieres como "*piel*" fue creada y diseñada para imitar la naturaleza de la piel humana. Los sensores se combinan con una antigua fórmula para la primera aleación sintética de memoria que se asemeja a la piel humana. Nuestros músculos pueden estar basados de aire, pero están formados para copiar y reaccionar como los músculos humanos. Nuestro cerebro es casi idéntico al de un humano. Está diseñado para imitar el proceso exacto para pensar y sentir como un humano.

Juitzyl examina la cara de Ketzal. Está de espaldas a Juitzyl, pero puede ver las lágrimas que caen sobre sus cachetes.

–Entonces, sí, Juitzyl. Soy capaz de sentir cualquier tipo de emoción. No soy un robot sin corazón que se puede destrozar y volver a armar. Soy una *persona*. Soy una persona como tú. Soy... soy...

Juitzyl decide que ya ha oído suficiente. Apresuradamente jala uno de los tirantes de la camiseta de Ketzal y lo voltea para verlo con la otra mano. Los ojos grises y relucientes de Ketzal miran fijamente a los ojos castaños de Juitzyl.

–Entonces tienes que saber. Tienes que saber por qué mi corazón... por qué late de esta manera. No latía así porque quería m-matarte. Mi nave - no significa nada para mí comparado a ti. Ketzal, jamás será tan importante como tu vida. Yo... yo sólo...

Juitzyl puede oír su pulso. Es ensordecedor. Se agacha y, dudosamente, da un beso sobre el cachete de Ketzal. Ketzal sigue mirándole, con los ojos grandes y resplandecientes, pero ya no llora.

–Yo... yo... creo, –tartamudea Juitzyl, con sus ojos llorosos, –Yo... creo... que te quiero.

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–Espera... Espera, Ketzal, al menos deja que me ponga un parche para el dolor de cabeza.

Tras la confesión de Juitzyl, Ketzal se había lanzado hacia él y le había dado accidentalmente un cabezazo a Juitzyl. Se disculpó profusamente, pero lo más importante es que jaló a Juitzyl para que se pusiera de pie y prácticamente lo arrastró de la muñeca por el techo y lo bajó hacia su recámara.

–Se te quitará solo. –dice en voz baja.

Una vez en la recámara, Ketzal lleva a Juitzyl a la cama y está a punto de subirse con él cuando Juitzyl lo detiene.

–¡Espera! Cierra la puerta. Si va a pasar algo, no quiero que nuestro hijo lo vea.

–¿Nuestro hijo? pregunta Ketzal, burlonamente.

Juitzyl se pone colorado. Se da la vuelta y entierra la cara en la almohada. Oye la risa de Ketzal y los pasos que se dirigen a la puerta. Cuando oye el clic, se asoma y ve a Ketzal al borde de la cama, todavía con la sonrisa.

–No quería... sólo...

–Juitzyl.

Levanta la vista completamente para ver a Ketzal mirándole de una forma que nunca había visto antes. Sus ojos son intensos y miran directamente a Juitzyl. Traga aire cuando siente que la cama se hunde. Ketzal se sienta frente a él y retira la almohada. Juitzyl tiene toda su ropa puesta, pero nunca se ha sentido más expuesto.

–Creo que yo también te quiero.

Juitzyl siente que su corazón se acelera. Está seguro de que Ketzal también puede.

–Creo que te he querido desde hace tiempo. Quería creer que tu corazón latía alarmantemente rápido a mi alrededor porque sentías lo mismo. Pero después de lo que pasó con Cixin, no estaba tan seguro...

Juitzyl se extiende y pone su mano encima del cachete de Ketzal. Ketzal se acurruca en él y le besa la palma de la mano. Sus labios son tan suaves como parecen.

–Tú me salvaste. Y no tenías que hacerlo. Me dejaste entrar en tu casa y a tu vida. – Ketzal dice, mientras se acerca y pone su frente junto a la de Juitzyl: –Cada día que he pasado contigo he descubierto cosas nuevas sobre ti. Tus costumbres, tus mañas, lo que te gusta, lo que no. Me... me enamoré de todo sobre ti.

Juitzyl nunca se ha sentido así. Siente que todo su cuerpo vibra y su visión empieza a ser borrosa. Cierra los ojos y exige que las lágrimas desaparezcan. Nota que Ketzal se mueve a su altura y se sorprende alegremente cuando siente que le da un beso en cada ojo.

–Te preocupas por los demás más que por ti mismo. Eres un hermoso ser humano con un corazón generoso. Ni siquiera te das cuenta de la maravillosa persona que eres, Juitzyl.

Esta vez es Ketzal quien pone su mano en el cachete de Juitzyl. Cuando abre los ojos, ve que Ketzal sigue sonriendo y observando a Juitzyl como si fuera el sol, la luna y todas las estrellas que brillan en el cielo.

Nadie lo había mirado nunca de esa manera.

–Te quiero. –Ketzal se fija en los labios de Juitzyl y luego vuelve su mirada a sus ojos. –  
Por favor, deja que te lo demuestre.

Si es posible, Juitzyl cree que su corazón se va a salir físicamente de su pecho.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Jennifer Gutierrez was born May 17, 1994 in McAllen, Texas and resided in Alamo, TX. She is the oldest of three children from Jose David Gutierrez and Elizabeth Gutierrez Hernandez. Jennifer earned her High School diploma from Donna High School in 2012, and her B.A in Creative Writing with a minor in Spanish from the University of Texas – Rio Grande Valley in 2017. Jennifer received her M.F.A. in Creative Writing from University of Texas – Rio Grande Valley in December 2022.

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